

AP GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS FREE RESPONSE QUESTION TIPS

- The Free-Response Questions (FRQ) are geared toward a 25-minute response. The topics are more focused and, in considering the scope of the topics, require less lengthy responses.
- Take time before writing to recognize what the subject of the prompt is. The prompt may ask about one topic, or a connection between topics. Be sure to address all parts of the prompt.
- Pay close attention to what the question requires you to do. The question may ask you to “list,” “discuss,” “describe,” “explain,” etc. Be sure to do what the question asks you to do. In some cases, a combination of activities is required (i.e. “list and explain,” etc.)
- You do not need to address both sides. Build a case for one side and defend it with all of your might.
- Support your answer with relevant evidence and examples. Examples should be as recent as possible: CONTEMPORARY!
- Answer the question completely.
- Unless the question asks for only a list, it should be assumed that some thoughtful analysis is required to answer the question completely. A “list” may not even need to be in complete sentences, but it usually must be accompanied by substantial analysis. Again, be sure that you do everything the question asks you to do.

UNDERSTAND THE INSTRUCTIONS AND ACTION VERBS

Students may be asked to list, discuss, describe, explain, analyze, etc.; these are not all identical tasks. Also, the question may call for more than one task, such as both to identify and explain. Students should understand that some tasks are more complex than others. For example, composing a list may not even require a complete sentence, but **students may need to write several paragraphs for a satisfactory discussion**, including **well-developed examples** as support, in order to adequately explain some phenomenon. Here are some of the most common action words used in past free-response questions: a

- **List/Identify:** Listing or identifying is a task that requires no more than a simple enumeration of some factors or characteristics. A list does not require any causal explanations. For example, a student might be asked to list or identify three characteristics Presidents consider when making appointments. Such a list, which could be bulleted or numbered, and might include party, race, gender, etc.
- **Define:** A definition requires a student to **provide a meaning for a word or concept. Examples may help to demonstrate understanding of the definition.** Students may be instructed to note the term's significance as part of the definition.
- **Describe:** A description involves providing a depiction or portrayal of a phenomenon or its most significant characteristics. Descriptions most often address "what" questions. For example, if students are asked to describe reasons for the decline in voter turnout, in the description **they must do more than simply list facts - they must actually describe the reasons.** For example, students may explain that the expansion of suffrage led to decline in overall voter turnout because once voting was made available to more individuals, the overall percentage of those voting declined.
- **Discuss:** Discussions generally require that students **explore relationships between different concepts or phenomena. Identifying, describing, and explaining could be required tasks involved in writing a satisfactory discussion.**
- **Explain:** An explanation involves the exploration of possible causal relationships. When providing explanations, **students should identify and discuss logical connections or causal patterns that exist between or among various political phenomena. HOW or WHY**
- **Compare/Contrast:** This task requires students to make specific links between two or more concepts or phenomena. **They should understand that it is important to note similarities AND differences** between the concepts or phenomena under consideration.
- **Evaluate/Assess:** An evaluation or assessment involves considering how well something meets a certain standard, and as such generally requires a thesis. **It is important to identify the criteria used in the evaluation. If no criteria are explicitly given in the question, students should take care to clearly identify the ones that they choose to employ. Specific examples** may be applied to the criteria to support the student's thesis. Evaluation or assessment requires explicit connections between the thesis or argument and the supporting evidence.
- **Analyze:** This task usually requires separating a phenomenon into its component parts or characteristics as a way of understanding the whole. **An analysis should yield explicit conclusions that are explained or supported by specific evidence and/or well-reasoned arguments.**
- **Focus on Writing a Clear, Concise, and Well-Supported Response**
Students **should marshal evidence** to document and **support their statements** and **make use of concrete examples** to demonstrate the main points of their arguments. They should **explicitly define important terms and use the clearest, most direct terms possible. A direct, clear answer is likely to earn more points than a vague, rambling, ambiguous response.**
- According to the College Board's Test Development Committee, “Free-response questions on the AP Government and Politics Exam are a more appropriate tool for *evaluating a student's ability to use analytical and organizational skills.*”
- Each question is graded individually with a designed rubric with a maximum number of points that can be obtained. An overall scoring system that combines both the multiple choice and free-response portions of the exam is determined by professional statisticians resulting in a candidate's final score (0-5).

- Take no more than five (5) minutes to brainstorm, organize, and complete a brief list or outline will help a candidate focus on the essentials of the question. Most of the free-response questions will begin with a statement that identifies the topic of the response then will proceed to inform the candidate of the task(s) they are to perform.
- Read the question carefully and underline/highlight the *directives*. *Directives* are statements that identify what the candidate must do in addressing the topic provided. Hints of *directives* and the tasks to be performed will most likely contain these words:
 - Identify
 - Explain (how and why)
 - Identify and explain
 - Describe/discuss
 - Give two specific explanations (or some other number)
- Focus on the words/language that follows the *directives*. This will be the specific task(s) that the candidate will be assessed on. In other words, this is what the candidate is to write about. A candidate may be asked to write about trends, patterns, relationships, demographics, institutions, obstacles, characteristics, impact, and/or significance. A candidate may also be asked to provide or support their explanations with specific examples.
- Brainstorm- Candidates should make a list of everything that comes to mind associated with the topic
- Organize and outline- This does not have to be formal or complete. Keep in mind that no more than five (5) minutes should be spent on this entire process.
- Re-read the question and re-examine the outline to be sure that none of the tasks required have been omitted
- Because of the time limits, one-hundred (100) minutes total for the four questions, a candidate will be instructed to spend approximately one-fourth of their time (25 minutes) on each question. In many cases, a candidate will be able to recognize and quickly respond to two or three. **RESPOND TO THESE QUESTIONS FIRST!!** This will enable a candidate to acquire and use more time for those questions that are more difficult and/or less familiar.
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DOS AND DON'TS

- In order to maximize a candidate's potential to receive the highest possible score on each free-response question, a list of **DO's and DON'Ts** follows. Keep in mind that a candidate's free-response answers will usually be looked at by no more than one or two readers when final assessment is determined. By following these reminders, a candidate can minimize or eliminate any potential physical or psychological distractions to a reader that can result in a lower score.
 - **DO** use correct grammar, sentence and paragraph structure- although readers will be instructed not to consider these items when grading, a well organized and written response is psychologically better to read than one that is poorly organized, disjointed, and poorly worded **DO** answer all four questions- Credit can only be earned by responding. Leaving a free-response question blank only lowers an overall score.
 - **DO** respond to all parts of the question- In order to obtain the highest possible total on each rubric design, a candidate has to do this. It does not matter that a candidate is able to discuss, explain, identify, etc. only one part of the question adnaseam and omit another part hoping that the reader will be impressed and forget about the omission
 - **DO** support your explanations, identifications, etc. with specific evidence to demonstrate competence with the topic. General textbook information may not always suffice
 - **DO** write in a style that you are comfortable with. Trying to be too sophisticated, wordy, or using impressive, yet unfamiliar, vocabulary takes too much time, is distracting to the reader, and often results in omitting parts of the question.
 - **DO NOT** editorialize. Respond to what the question is calling for without injecting phrases like, "I believe, it's my opinion that, or I think that."
 - **DO NOT** "data dump" by dropping as many names, facts, dates, events, etc. A candidate only needs to respond to what the question is calling for in order to maximize points. Going beyond and trying to impress the reader with your overwhelming knowledge of a subject can be distracting
 - **DO NOT** use historical examples. The questions a candidate are to respond to deal with contemporary political institutions and processes. Examples and evidence to support should come from as many contemporary political institutions and processes as possible.