

Free Response Question Guide

AP Government and Politics

The first priority for students is to understand exactly what tasks a question is asking and then to perform them. Students should then focus on writing a clear, concise, and well-supported response to the question. When appropriate, they should provide examples to support their responses. To this end, it is critical that students understand the instructions and action verbs that are often used on the AP Exam. Students may be asked to list, discuss, describe, explain, analyze, and so on. These are not identical tasks. Furthermore, the question may call for more than one task, such as both identify and explain. Students should realize that some of the tasks are more complex than others. For example, composing a list may not even require a complete sentence, but students, to adequately explain some phenomena, may need to write several paragraphs, including well-developed supporting examples. The following list of commonly used action verbs will help students understand the exact tasks that they will be required to perform.

- **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, 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 of voter turnout, they must do more than simply list facts—they must actually describe the reasons. Students may explain that the expansion of suffrage led to a decline in overall 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 should be required tasks involved in 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.
- **Compare/Contrast.** This task requires students to make specific links between two or more concepts.
- **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 or well-reasoned arguments.