

AP U.S. Government and Politics

AP Exam Tips: FRQ

Name:

Section:

Directions: The following are suggestions by the College Board (the organization that puts together the AP Test) on how to do well of the AP U.S. Government and Politics Test.

Read the Questions Carefully

This applies to both multiple-choice and free-response questions. For multiple-choice questions it is important for students to read the question carefully to look for words such as "NOT" and "EXCEPT." For free-response questions it is important that students respond to ALL PARTS of the question being asked. Understanding what is being asked and responding with specific evidence is a very useful skill. Long, involved descriptions full of random facts about a specific concept or political phenomenon are neither encouraged nor rewarded in the grading process; students must be taught to "read for the guidelines" in order to make sure both their information and presentation clearly and completely answer the actual question that is being asked.

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:

- **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.

- **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.