

How to Write A Solid AP Psychology Free Response Question

- 1. Read before answering.** Carefully read both of the questions before you start to write anything. Decide which question you are more comfortable with and answer that one first. Watch your time carefully because you have only 50 minutes to answer both questions.
- 2. Determine the question's intent.** Contrary to what you may have read, the free-response section does not always include a question on experimentation. So, do not try to turn every question into a methodology question and set up an experiment.

3. Follow the questions within the question. It may be helpful to underline key verbs or phrases in the questions that identify what exactly the question is directing you to do. Note that if a question asks you to *explain* or *apply* a specific psychological concept to an understanding of a person's behavior but does not ask you to define the term, you should not waste your time defining the term. For example, one of the free-response questions on the 2006 AP Exam asked students to explain how the foot-in-the-door technique may influence someone's decision to buy a car. Those students who defined *foot-in-the-door* lost valuable writing time because the question did not ask them to define this term.

4. **Make a list.** Spending a few minutes on prewriting is beneficial. Immediately after reading the question, jot down the key definitions, ideas, examples, terms, researchers, or experiments that will be part of your answer. Organizing your thoughts first will lead to a much more coherent and structured response later.
5. **Check it off the list.** Cross off the bullet points or different parts of the question as you answer them. This will ensure that you do not forget to address any of the tasks the question has given you.

6. **Maintain order.** You should answer each of the components of a free-response question in the order in which it appears within the question. Resist the temptation to begin your essay with your most salient point or the point you know best. Instead, begin by writing on the first concept that appears in the question and then move on to the next. By following the order of the concept that appears in the question you are less likely to overlook one. Using this strategy to organize your response makes it Reader-friendly by providing needed context for what you have written.

7. **Write to the points.** Read each question carefully to determine its point value and then focus on writing to these points. The free-response questions are evaluated with very specific scoring guidelines. Readers award points only for what is correct; points are not deducted for incorrect information. However, this does not mean you should write down anything and everything that comes to mind. The information you provide must relate to the question. Figure out how many points the essay will be worth and then write to each of those points.

8. **Avoid contradictions.** Although points are not deducted for incorrect information, you will not be awarded points for directly contradictory information. For example, you will not receive credit for defining negative reinforcement as both “taking away a negative stimulus to increase an animal’s behavior” and “imposing a negative consequence to decrease behavior” in the same essay.
9. **Write legibly.** If an essay cannot be read, it cannot be scored. Do not scribble out a mistake, but rather draw a single line through it. Readers do not read and score any writing that is crossed out with a single line.

- 10. Write an essay.** Use complete sentences and paragraphs to respond to the question. Readers do not score any information that is in outline form or answers that are presented solely as lists.
- 11. Skip the introduction and the conclusion.** A formal introduction and conclusion are not necessary because your essay is scored only for its ability to respond to the specific points in the question. An introduction and conclusion rarely hit on any of the key points of the question and thus waste valuable writing time.
- 12. Demonstrate your knowledge.** Use psychological language and concepts in your answers. **Underline those terms for ease of spotting.

13. Be specific. Avoid making vague statements. For example, when asked to indicate the value of diagnostic labeling, you might be tempted to write, “They are helpful to psychologists,” an answer that is insufficient. Instead, you should fully explain each point and use specific examples to illustrate them. A correct response would be, “Diagnostic labels can be useful to psychologists because they help mental health professionals communicate with each other about specific disorders.” It is a good idea to assume that the Reader is *not* an expert on the topic, and therefore, everything must be explained thoroughly.

- 14. Use your time.** Use all of the available time for the free-response section. If any time remains after you have finished writing, reread your answers and make sure they are legible, clear, and actually answer the question that has been asked. If you discover there is something you need to add, do it. Sometimes these last-minute revisions can earn you points. If you need to add a substantial amount of information, you can simply draw an arrow off to the side of the page, or insert an asterisk and refer the Reader to the end of the essay.
- **Always answer both questions!!!!!!**