

## How to write the AP Psychology essay

Every year around the beginning of June, high school and college psychology teachers gather at a university for one purpose; to grade AP psychology essays. These readers are assigned to one of the two essay questions and go through careful training to ensure they grade your writing fairly and consistently. Readers go through several reliability checks during the reading to make sure each essay is read fairly. This is a unique experience for many of them, just as writing the AP psychology essay might be a unique writing experience for you.

Writing an effective essay response on the AP psychology test may require you to modify the way you usually answer an essay question. These essays are graded in a very specific way, and your writing should take this difference into account. Essay graders strive to be very consistent and objective, so the tests are graded in a systematic way. The entire grading system is set up to ensure the every student's response is given a fair reading. Understanding how the tests are graded should give you insight as to how to use your writing time best. This chapter will provide an example of an AP-style essay question and a rubric (a guide readers use to grade student responses) similar to the ones used in the grading of the tests. A fictional student response is provided with an explanation of how the rubric would be used to grade that response. Finally, some general suggestions are provided about writing AP psychology essays.

### What's in an essay

There are lots of different ways to write a quality essay. However, you have a more specific goal in mind when it comes to the AP Psychology essay—you want a good grade. Therefore, you need to know what the grades wants so that you can write an essay that will earn a good score. Let's start by taking a peek at what they say they wants from a good essay.

According to the College Board's published materials on the AP Psychology free-response questions, you are expected to do the following:

- Describe an overarching framework.
- Be specific in both of your references to and discussion of psychological principles or problems.
- Cite evidence and examples to illustrate your explanations.
- Clearly state the intent of your evidence (to support or contrast a claim)
- State your points clearly and directly.

"Huh?" you ask. Let's simplify. To get a good score on an AP Psych essay you should:

- Write an introductory sentence that is *not* a repeat of the questions.
- Use psychology terms and proper names of theories, theorists, etc.
- Define all terms
- Support everything with an example of study, preferably from your course work (*not* an example from your own personal life).
- Clearly state the purpose of the example or study (support or contrast).
- Be clear, concise, and direct—no fluff.

### What NOT to do

In addition, there are a few no-nos that the College Board implies or states outright:

- Do not restate the question in your essay.
- Do not suggest anything that can be misconstrued as unethical.
- Do not write everything you know on the topic, stay focused on the question.
- Do not spend a lot of time writing your introduction and conclusion.
- Do not begin writing until you have a clue of what you are going to write.

Beginning to get the picture? Although this may seem like a tall order, let us ease your mind a bit: each of your essays will receive approximately five minutes of the reader's time. What? All that work for a lousy five minutes? Yup. Check out how AP essays are scored.

### Sample Essay Question

Professor Reiman, a social psychology researcher, is interested in expanding on Solomon Asch's conformity research. Professor Reiman decides to place participants into a room with three confederates who know about the experiment. In the room, the group is asked to compare the size of geometric figures. The participants are randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the first group, the three confederates are introduced to the participant as introductory psychology students. In the second group, two of the confederates are introduced as introductory psychology students, but one is identified as a graduate student in perception research from a prestigious college. During the experiment in both conditions, the confederates all give the same wrong answers to some of the size comparison questions, Professor Reiman keeps track of how many times the participant conforms to the incorrect answer of the rest of the group. In this experiment:

- (A) Identify the independent variable, the dependent variable, the operational definition of the dependent variable, and at least one confounding variable control for the by the experiment design.
- (B) Explain the principal difference between Professor Reiman's study and Asch's original research about conformity.
- (C) Predict the level of conformity in the first group relative to the level of conformity in the second group based on your knowledge of Asch's research and social psychological principles. Identify what psychological principle you base your predictions on.

After reading the question, stop and think about what it is asking you. You are allowed to make notes on the question sheet, and many students find making a simple outline at this point and organizing their thoughts helpful. All essay questions imply a certain organization for your answer. Use this implied organization, do not ignore it. You might be tempted to create a unique organization for your answer. However, your reader is not giving you points based on organization, so the time you spend on this is wasted. In addition, if you answer a questions out of order, you increase the chances of the reader might misunderstand what you are trying to say. In this case, the format of the question indicates you organize your essay into three main parts: A, B, and C. You do not need to label these parts A, B, and C. (In fact, make sure you

do not just write your answer as an outline.) However, the question writer is giving you a hint about how best to organize your response. Write your essay in this organization. In addition, notice the essay does NOT ask you to review Asch's studies on conformity in detail. For the last two parts of the question, having a basic knowledge of Asch's study would be helpful. However, you could write a detailed description of this research and not answer this question directly. Do what is asked of you in an essay. Adding information the question does not ask for (even if it is accurate information) is a waste of time and will not get you additional points. Do not spend time writing an introduction or conclusion for your essay, since grading rubrics do not give points for introductions and conclusions. You may want to write your answer to these questions before going on in this chapter to the scoring rubric for these questions. When you are ready, examine the following rubric for this essay question and notice how the points are scored:

#### Rubric for Sample Questions

This is an 8-point question. Four points are possible in part A, 1 point in part B, and 3 points in part C.

(A) Identify the independent variable, the dependent variable, the operational definition of the dependent variable, and at least one confounding variable controlled for by the experimental design.

Point 1- Independent variable- The essay should identify the different introductions of the confederates as the independent variable. In the first condition, all the confederates were introduced as psychology students. In the second condition, one of them was identified as a graduate student in perception. This was the only designed difference between the groups and is thus the variable the experimenter is trying to manipulate, the independent variable.

Point 2- Dependent variable- the student should identify conformity as the dependent variable. Professor Reiman manipulates the independent variable to see how it affects conformity, the dependent variable.

Point 3- Operational definition- Professor Reiman operationally defines conformity as the participant agreeing with the wrong answers of the confederates. Do NOT award a point if the student identifies the operational definition as conformity. Conformity is the dependent variable.

Point 4- Confounding variable- the main element of the experimental design mentioned that would control for potential confounding variables is the random assignment. Randomly assigning participants to the two conditions would control for many possible subject-relevant confounding variables.

#### B

Point 5- Difference- The main difference between Professor Reiman's study and Asch's original is the inclusion of this particular independent variable. In one of the

conditions, Professor Reiman identifies one of the confederates as a graduate student in perception

### C- Predict the level of Conformity

Point 6- Level of Conformity in the first group-The student receives one point for demonstrating his or her understanding that most of the participants would conform to the group's wrong answers. Similar to original study

Point7- Level of Conformity in second group-Higher level of conformity here due to the authority figure (confederate is expert)

Point 8- Social Psychological principle- the student should identify obedience as the social psychological principle acting in this case in conjunction with conformity. Miligram.