

## FREE-RESPONSE WRITING GUIDE

### AP US Government and Politics

The free response section of the AP US Government & Politics exam is quite unlike the free response section of the AP US History exam. Consider the following differences:

	<u>APUSH</u>	<u>APUSGOPO</u>
Number of questions?	3	4
Choice?	Yes	No
Time?	130"	100"

Note that on the GOPO exam, you have one more question to answer in thirty fewer minutes! Furthermore, the types of questions will be different, as well. Whereas USH questions were analytical and evaluative, GOPO questions are more focused and direct.

### **SINCE THE TYPES OF QUESTIONS ARE DIFFERENT, THE STRUCTURE OF THE ANSWERS WILL BE DIFFERENT, TOO!**

This means that you have to train yourself to answer GOPO questions in a different manner. Fortunately, this should not be too difficult, at all! Students who took USH often find that they prefer the free response question format of GOPO.

Let's take a look at a sample GOPO question:

*The United States Constitution has endured for more than two centuries as the framework of government. However, the meaning of the Constitution has been changed both by formal and informal methods.*

- a. Identify two formal methods for adding amendments to the Constitution.*
- b. Describe two informal methods that have been used to change the meaning of the Constitution. Provide one specific example for each informal method you described.*
- c. Explain why informal methods are used more often than the formal amendment process.*

Here is how you answer the question:

1. Underline the verbs in the question that tell you what to do.
2. Jot down the letter for each part of the answer, and then do what that part of the question calls for. In other words, tailor your answer to what is called for in the verbs:
  - If a part of the question asks you to “identify” something, that can be accomplished in a sentence or two.
  - “Define” may require more than just a sentence or two; examples will help support a definition.
  - “Explain” or “describe” require even more. With verbs such as these, **avoid “minimalism.”** It is crucial to have enough support for your answer. Again, use examples to drive home your point.
3. Write in complete sentences.
4. Skip lines between each part of the question to make your answer easier for the reader to grade.
5. If the question calls for you to do something such as “Explain three reasons for ...” or “Discuss two reasons why ...,” number your responses to make your answer easier for the reader to grade.
6. Unless there is an actual question that asks for a judgment, you do NOT need to include a thesis. Most free response items ALREADY INCLUDE the thesis in the question (See the model question above)! You do not need an introduction or conclusion, either. You get ZERO points for these. Put your time and effort into answering the prompt! (AP = Answer the Prompt)
7. In effect, your task in answering free response questions is to score points rather than write a formal essay. Look again at the question on page one. How many points do you think part A is worth? Part B? Part C? Again, once you know what the question is asking for, tailor your answer to score the maximum number of points possible.
8. Even if you cannot answer all parts of the question, answer what you can! You are not expected to earn perfect scores on all four questions. If you can earn MOST of the points possible on each question, you should be in fine shape!

9. Be sure to **COMPLETE THE CIRCLE!** Readers are looking to see if you are “completing the circle,” i.e. they are examining your answer for its **completeness** to determine if you should receive credit.

Consider the following question:

*Explain how two measures taken by some states prior to the 1960s affected voter turnout among African American citizens.*

Suppose the first part of a student’s answer includes the following:

*One measure that states took was to impose poll taxes, which required citizens to pay a tax prior to registering to vote. African Americans tended to be poor, and many could not afford to pay the poll tax.*

See the problem? The student has not **COMPLETED THE CIRCLE**. The student described the poll tax, but did not explain how it affected voter turnout among African American citizens, which is what the question called for. If the student had **COMPLETED THE CIRCE**, the answer would have looked like this:

*One measure that states took was to impose poll taxes, which required citizens to pay a tax prior to registering to vote. African Americans tended to be poor, and many could not afford to pay the poll tax. Since the poll tax in effect denied them suffrage, voter turnout among African American voters was low.*

See? The student went the extra mile and firmed up the answer by linking it to what the question called for, i.e., the effect of these measures on voter turnout among African Americans. It was not enough to merely describe a measure; it was necessary to explain how the measure affected voter turnout among African Americans.

Here is a model answer for the question on page one:

a.

- 1) *Congress can propose an amendment with a 2/3 vote in both houses, and the proposed amendment can then be ratified by  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the state legislatures.*
- 2) *Congress can propose an amendment with a 2/3 vote in both houses, and the proposed amendment can be approved by ratifying conventions in  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the states.*

b.

- 1) *Judicial interpretation: As a framework for government, the wording of the Constitution can be vague, and requires clarification. This clarification can be performed by court decisions. In effect, the Supreme Court can be a “constitutional convention in continuous session.” For example, when the Supreme Court struck down school segregation in the *Brown v. Board* case, it was clarifying the meaning of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment’s equal protection clause. Although the wording of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment itself did not change with this court decision, the meaning of the Amendment changed.*
- 2) *Congressional elaboration: Again, the Constitution is broadly worded, and needs “filling in” from time to time. Congress can accomplish this by simply passing laws. For example, the Judiciary Act of 1789 laid the foundation of our federal court system. Although the wording of the Constitution did not change with passage of this law, the creation of lower courts to supplement the Supreme Court changed the meaning of the Constitution.*

c. *Informal methods are used more often than the formal amendment process simply because of practicalities. The supermajorities that are required to propose and ratify an amendment are difficult to muster. This is demonstrated by the fact that the Constitution has been formally amended only 27 times in more than 200 years. Informal methods such as court decisions and legislation do not require such supermajorities, and are therefore far easier to accomplish.*

## VERBS AND THEIR IMPORTANCE

In writing a free response answer, students should not focus on writing an essay, but instead should focus on scoring points. To maximize the number of points scored, the student should tailor the answer to what is called for in the question's verbs.

Here are the verbs that have been used on the free response section of the AP exam since 1998 :

**List:** State, or briefly identify (this can usually be done in a sentence of two).

Example: List two ways in which federalism has changed since 1994.

**Identify:** Same as "list." Again, this can usually be done in a sentence of two.

Example: Identify two ways in which federalism has changed since 1994.

**Discuss:** Write about, consider, examine. Example: Discuss two ways in which federalism has changed since 1994.

**Describe:** Give an account of, shows some understanding. Example: Describe two methods by which federalism has changed since 1994.

**Evaluate:** Make a judgment, appraise, give an opinion of. Example: Evaluate the contention that federalism has undergone substantial changes since 1994.

**Explain:** Make clear or plain, tell why/how, give reasons or causes for.

Example: Explain two reasons why federalism has changed since 1994.

**Support:** Provide reasons that back up an argument. Example: Support the contention that federalism has changed since 1994 with two arguments.

**Define:** Tell the meaning of. Example: Define federalism and ...

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Here is a chart that shows how often the above verbs have appeared on the AP exam since 1998:

	<u>98</u>	<u>99</u>	<u>00</u>	<u>01</u>	<u>02</u>	<u>03</u>	<u>04</u>	<u>05</u>	<u>06</u>	<u>07</u>	<u>08</u>	<u>09</u>	<u>10</u>	<u>TOT.</u>
List	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Identify	0	5	7	5	6	5	4	0	4	3	0	3	1	43
Discuss	3	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	5
Describe	1	2	1	1	2	0	3	6	2	6	5	6	3	38
Evaluate	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Explain	1	8	5	5	6	6	7	4	3	6	6	8	8	67
Support	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Define	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	3	1	1	5	1	0	12