

AP US Government
Albert.io Essay Writing Tips
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Answering AP US Government & Politics Free Response Questions Tips

1. Read, read, read. Use your course books and supplementary texts. Just because you've done well in your course at school doesn't mean you'll remember important details when it comes time to take the AP exam. So review your course materials as much as you can—and don't skip readings during the year! You'll find that the specifics contained in the text will help you fill in your free response question answers.

2. Practice, practice, practice. Take as many practice tests as possible. Topics, and variations on questions, are repeated year after year. Practice exams from the College Board are available [here](#). Also, work with classmates. Grade their free response answers, and vice-versa. Familiarizing yourself with what the AP graders are looking for will help you perfect your own answers come exam time.

3. Know the value of each question. The AP US Government exam is broken into two sections—multiple-choice questions and free response questions. Each section is worth 50 percent of your exam grade. Within the free response section there are four questions; each question is worth 12.5% of your exam grade.

4. Know the scoring guidelines. The AP graders are looking for two things—a thorough understanding of the material and a good argument. As far as your score goes, though, having an understanding of the material is slightly more important than having a good argument. Keep this in mind when you are writing your answers and check out the AP grading rubric [here](#) to see exactly how your answer will be evaluated.



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5. Take a couple of minutes to brainstorm about the topic. Jot down what comes to mind. Then look over your ideas to see which go well together to serve as examples in your response to the question and to determine the order in which you will present them. This, in essence, is the outline for your response. You should use any organizational approach that makes sense to you as long as you respond to the question and all of its parts. Strong organization is to your advantage. Using the question structure as your guide is often a very good approach; think carefully before doing something more creative, as it makes it more difficult for you (and for the grader) to see that you have answered the entire question.

6. Be careful. Free-response is a bit misleading. You are not free to write about whatever you choose in response to a topic. You need to provide specific answers in response to each part of the question to do well. (And fortunately, within the individual questions you will often be given choices. For example, “choose one of the three court cases listed.”)

7. Remember that you’re not writing a five-paragraph essay. You do not need to write full introduction and conclusion paragraphs that repeat information you cover elsewhere. Stick to clear topic sentences and paragraphs responding to each section of the prompt and you will do well.

8. Use the prompt to your advantage. When structuring your answer, match each paragraph to each section in the prompt. Use the language in the prompt to provide a clear answer to the question you are asked. For example, if part of the prompt reads, “Identify two forms of participation in the political process other than voting,” then your corresponding paragraph should begin, “One form of participation in the political process other than voting is...”

9. Pay close attention to the vocabulary mentioned in the prompt. For example, in the sample language above, you are asked to name two forms of participation in the political process other than voting. Now, if the prompt begins, “Citizens often choose to participate in the political process in ways other than voting,” make sure you talk about the participation of *citizens*—not interest groups or political parties. Recognizing this key distinction will help you earn an additional point.

10. Know your terminology. As mentioned in the previous tip, the vocabulary mentioned in the prompt is key to answering the question correctly. But you will also need to be facile with AP US Government & Politics terminology in order to provide full, knowledgeable answers to the free response questions. So review your flashcards or use [this](#) (AP Study Notes) or visit [Quizlet](#) to help you [review key AP US Government](#) vocab.

11. Don’t do an “info dump.” Don’t include long, involved random facts about specific concepts or political phenomena. Even if the information is correct, this will not get you extra points. You need to stick to salient, specific information that is directly related to the question asked and the point you’re trying to make.

12. Don’t get in over your head. Don’t use words and terminology that you don’t understand. Try to stick to facts and figures that you are comfortable with and confident in. If you start discussing topics that you aren’t facile with, you are prone to ramble and waste time writing stuff you won’t get any points for, anyway.

13. Pay close attention to essay prompts. The prompt vocabulary will tell you exactly what to do in your essay. Some common prompts are: 1. Evaluate or judge – discuss the value or wisdom of a belief or idea. 2. Analyze – evaluate each part of the whole systematically. 3. Identify – name something, typically members of a group. 4. Define – explain what something means. 5. Discuss – provide details and examples of something. 6. Describe – create a picture of something with details and examples. 7. Compare and contrast – point out similarities and differences. 8. Categorize – sort into groups based on traits or features. 9. Explain – tell how and why with reasons and examples. 10. Determine cause and effect – decide what leads to an event/circumstance and what results from this event/circumstance.

14. Keep your opinions to yourself. Because the AP US Government & Politics exam deals with political issues—issues that you’re likely to have opinions on—it might be tempting to express your opinions in your answers. Don’t! The AP graders aren’t interested in your position on campaign finance reform or whether or not you think the Electoral College should be abolished. The graders are only interested in concrete facts and figures about these questions—so do discuss the merits and drawbacks of the Electoral College if you are asked, but don’t advocate for its retention or repeal. Stick to fact-based analysis.

15. Pay close attention to dates and terms. If a question asks about the “modern presidency,” do not write about Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln. As you have learned, although the dynamics might be largely the same, the day-to-day realities of our political system have changed considerably since the Founding. The political realities President Obama faces are different than those President Washington faced—so, you won’t be asked to discuss campaign

finance in the context of both of their presidencies, for example. Make sure you know the proper context for the issue you're discussing.

16. Budget your time well. You should plan to budget 25 minutes for each question, for a total of 100 minutes, so that you do not have to rush on any question. For what it's worth, AP graders say one of the biggest mistakes that students make on the AP US Government FRQs is spending too much time on one or two questions at the expense of the others, or becoming fatigued after three good answers and skipping the fourth.

17. Remember that writing too much can hurt your score. Your answer is judged based on whether or not you have accomplished your task—to define, identify, describe, or explain—as laid out in the question. You earn points for accomplishing the assigned tasks. There is no need to venture beyond the scope of the question. You will not earn extra points, and, because each question is scored independently, you will not be able to make up for a question you feel you did not answer well enough by overcompensating on another question.

18. No matter what, try to answer every question. You won't lose points off your score for incorrect or incomplete answers, so it is in your best interest to answer as much as you can—even if you're not sure your information is correct or don't have enough time to provide a full answer. Particularly on the fourth, and final, free-response question, the graders are aware that you might be pressed for time and need to rush. Just write as much as you can, even if it is only a few sentences.

19. If you have extra time, check your work. This seems obvious, but there are ways to use your extra time most effectively. Most free response questions have multiple parts. First, make sure that you have answered each part of the question. Then, you can check for grammar, spelling and punctuation errors. (Remember, these are less of a problem the better the content of your answer is.)