

Preparing Students for the AP Psychology Exam

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The Advanced Placement Psychology exam is one of the fastest growing exams offered by the College Board. The average percent of change in the number of students taking this exam over the past five years is 12.4%.¹ With 238,962 students taking the exam in 2013, the AP Psychology exam is the sixth largest exam, surpassing AP Biology and AP World History,² and its growth is expected to continue. Given the work required in a college-level class, we instructors want our students to earn college credit for their efforts. There are many things you can do to prepare your students for this challenge. As a 21-year AP Psychology veteran, I'd like to share some ideas to increase your students' chances for success on the AP Psychology exam.³

First, become familiar with the exam's format and style. The AP Psychology exam consists of 100 multiple-choice questions and two free response questions (FRQs). Study the released and practice exams available at AP Central.⁴ Take these exams yourself to better understand how the test is constructed.

To familiarize your students with the format of the exam, give them half of an AP exam each time they take a test. Each of my exams is timed and consists of 50 multiple-choice questions and one FRQ. Because my classes are 90 minutes in length and are taught on a block schedule, my students are expected to complete the multiple-choice section in 35 minutes and the essay in 25 minutes, which is half the time allowed on the AP exam. Constructing your exams in this way takes the mystery out of the format, reduces anxiety about being timed, and provides students with valuable practice for the actual exam.

As you plan assessments for your students, construct questions similar to those on the AP exam. Specifically, use questions that require critical think-

ing. For example, ask students to apply information to novel scenarios, and, when writing FRQs, use concepts from a number of chapters. Also, consider giving cumulative exams. For the past few years, I have given two midterms and one final exam per term. After the first midterm, the other exams are cumulative, with 75 percent of the multiple-choice questions coming from the most recently covered chapter and 25 percent from earlier chapters in the term. I also make my FRQs cumulative by adding concepts discussed in earlier chapters.

Another important consideration in preparing your students for the AP exam is teaching them to write for the essays. Mastering the following simple steps will make your students more successful on this part of the exam.

#1: Read the question carefully. What does "identify," "discuss," or "explain" mean in the context of an essay question?

#2: Encourage your students to quickly pre-write to organize their thoughts, writing down key names or concepts to be used in their answer.

This will lead to a more coherent and well-organized response.

#3: Answer the parts of the question in the order they were asked. This will ensure that students answer all parts of the question.

#4: Coach your students to avoid vague statements and to use correct psychological terminology. While a definition alone may not be enough to score a point, it can be a valuable way to establish context and build toward an appropriate application, so encourage them to include one. Also, tell students to determine the number of items within each question that need to be answered before beginning their answer. Once that is figured, all they have to do is be sure to answer each item.

#5: Students must write in complete sentences. Outlines and bullets are insufficient and will not be scored.

#6: Since students are writing to a specific prompt, they should not typically include an introductory or concluding paragraph with general information; to insert unnecessary information wastes valuable test time.

Teach these rules early and reinforce them all year. Give students as many opportunities as possible to practice their writing. For example, take your students through the process of answering an FRQ together. Provide practice by including an essay as part of a test review. If you have large classes, to minimize correcting time, have students score each other's essays using a rubric. When appropriate, use released

AP exam FRQs in your assessments. The more practice you provide during the school year, the more confident they will feel going into the AP exam.

Give students an opportunity to use rubrics to grade essays. Use a released FRQ for an assignment or exam. Hand back the corrected FRQ with a copy of the grading rubric. After reviewing the rubric, provide pairs of students copies of sample student responses, which are included in released exams. Ask students to score the student samples using the grading rubric. As a class, compare how students scored the FRQs and how the readers scored them. Discuss the strengths of each essay and how each sample could be improved. This class exercise will provide students with valuable insights into how to write for the AP exam.

Another important aspect of exam preparation is making sure students have the knowledge needed to answer the questions. The AP Psychology Course Description, available online at AP Central, lists 14 content areas, providing the percentage of questions dedicated to each in the multi-

ple-choice section of the exam.⁵ For example, Biological Bases of Behavior accounts for 8–10 percent of the multiple-choice questions, while States of Consciousness accounts for 2–4 percent. Therefore, adjust your syllabus so that 8–10 percent of your time is devoted to Biological Bases of Behavior, while no more than 2–4 percent is spent on States of Consciousness. Once your calendar is set, stick with it!

In addition, devise a plan to motivate your students to read their textbook. For example, consider creating your own study guides, or using those produced for use with your text. Many teachers use reading quizzes, flashcards, or concept maps for this purpose. Don Leach, a retired teacher from California, has devised a method to get students reading effectively called “color-coded notes.” Students are required to purchase spiral-bound notebooks and four colored pens, each of which represents an essential question posed by the text, a key concept, definition, or a reflection of what that term means. A more complete description of this method is described in the

*AP Psychology Teacher’s Guide.*⁶ In selecting a technique to use, keep the unique needs of your students and your teaching style in mind.

As the exam draws nearer, make time for review. I give my students short, daily quizzes based on every content area, each consisting of 10 multiple-choice questions that are graded as a class. Students are encouraged to take notes and not only pay attention to the correct answers, but also to look at the other possible keys. If there are concepts or researchers they do not recognize, they are encouraged to ask questions. These quizzes are graded as participation points, so the pressure of getting a “bad score” is removed. This technique helps students discern what areas they need to concentrate on as they begin reviewing for the AP exam.

Finally, with my colleagues in my school district, we’ve developed a “Psychology Bowl.” Each April, high schools that offer an AP Psychology course send a team of 10 students to compete. The competition consists of two, 60-minute rounds. In the first round, team members sit single file

Useful Resources for Reviewing AP Psychology Content

I recommend visiting the Teaching High School Psychology Blog at <http://teachinghighschoolpsychology.blogspot.com/>. In the left navigation column, click on “AP Psychology Exam.” The blog authors have compiled many excellent resources for AP review. Here are some of my favorites:

Videos

Education Portal:

<http://education-portal.com/academy/course/psychology-101.html>

Online

AP Central (for released exams and other resource materials)

<http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/home>

AP Psychology Teacher Community (free registration to this online community where AP teachers share resources and ideas)

<https://apcommunity.collegeboard.org/>

AP Review on Twitter

<http://teachinghighschoolpsychology.blogspot.com/2013/03/the-return-of-ap-psych-review.html>

Vocabulary Sites

Quizlet exam review flash cards
<http://quizlet.com/subject/ap-psychology/>

The AP Psychology Commune

<http://appspsychology.com/>

Course Notes for AP Psychology

<http://www.course-notes.org/Psychology>

National Repository of Online Course: Psychology

<http://www.montereyinstitute.org/courses/Psychology/nroc%20prototype%20files/coursestartc.html>

Print Materials

Barron’s AP Psychology, 5th Edition (ISBN: 0764147013)

Barron’s AP Psychology Flash Cards, 2nd Edition (ISBN: 1438001533)

STUDENT CENTERED CURRICULUM FOR CURRENT ISSUES US & WORLD HISTORY

Textual
Analysis

Critical
Thinking

Multiple
Perspectives

Global
Awareness

Civic Literacy



DIGITAL AND PRINT CURRICULUM RESOURCES




THE
CHOICES
PROGRAM
at Brown University

www.choices.edu

behind a microphone. After the moderator reads a question, the first student in line has 20 seconds to answer using a white-board. The team members rotate after each question so that everyone has an opportunity to score points. The second round is faster-paced, with each student answering five questions before rotating. In this round, students use buzzers and give their answers verbally. The winning team is the one ahead in points at the end of the second round.

For the team members, who meet before the competition to practice, this is a terrific review. But what makes this a great tool is that all AP Psychology students are invited and encouraged to attend the Bowl, which is held on a Saturday morning. The questions are projected onto a screen behind the participants so that the audience can test themselves while the participants compete. My colleagues and I feel that the Psychology Bowl is an engaging, worthwhile event that is beneficial for the students as well as the teachers. As colleagues, we've enjoyed having a chance each year to collaborate and share ideas. Our collaboration has strengthened each of our courses. For more details about our Psychology Bowl, go to the *AP Psychology Teacher's Guide*.⁷

Teaching AP Psychology is a great challenge, but worth it. Take advantage of the many resources available to you at AP Central. Consider carefully the types of assessments you design. Keep the rigor and format of the AP exam in mind as you write or select multiple-choice questions and FRQs. Teach your students specific techniques to accurately and concisely answer the FRQs. Create assignments and activities that will encourage your students to read their textbook. Schedule time for review and practice. Maintain connections with fellow AP Psychology teachers and share best practices. With your help, students will be prepared for

the challenge of the AP Psychology exam. 

Notes

1. AP Central, "AP Exam Volume Changes, 2003-2013," College Board, <http://media.collegeboard.com/digitalServices/pdf/research/2013/2013-Exam-Volume-Change.pdf>.
2. AP Central, "Program Summary Report 2013," College Board, <http://media.collegeboard.com/digitalServices/pdf/research/2013/Program-Summary-Report-2013.pdf>.
3. I teach AP Psychology at Viewmont High School, a suburban school located in Bountiful, Utah, whose enrollment is 1,715 students. The minority population consists of 113 students, or 6.5%. Economically disadvantaged students, as measured by those receiving free or reduced lunch, are 14% of the school population. The ELL population at Viewmont High School consists of 20 students, or 1.1% of the population.
4. AP Central, "AP Psychology Course Homepage; Exam Information and Resources" (New York, NY: College Board, 2012), http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/courses/teachers_corner/2265.html; AP Central, "AP Psychology Product Listing" (New York, NY: College Board, 2012), http://store.collegeboard.com/sto/catalog.do?category=259&categoryName=AP*&secondCategory=291&secondCatName=Psychology.
5. AP Central, "AP Psychology Course Description" (New York, NY: College Board, 2010), <http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/repository/ap-psychology-course-description.pdf>.
6. Kristin H. Whitlock, *AP Psychology: Teacher's Guide* (New York: College Board, 2008): 17, http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/public/repository/IN070082154_Psychology_TG_web.pdf.
7. *Ibid.*: 198-199.

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