

United States Government and Politics Exam Strategies

Format – Two sections

- * 4 free response questions, 100 minutes
- * 60 multiple choice questions with 5 choices, 45 minutes
- * Each section is worth 50% of the total exam. Each free response question is of equal value, or 12.5 % of the total exam.

Free Response Questions

- * Questions try to bridge different content areas or units in the textbook. (How does legislative oversight impact the bureaucracy?)
- * Questions are direct and specific.
- * Choices are sometimes built into questions. (Three obstacles to meaningful campaign finance reform are listed: incumbency, soft money, *Buckley v. Valeo* (1976). You are asked to describe two and then explain how each obstacle has made it difficult for Congress to enact significant campaign finance reform legislation.)
- * Test designers have to also be test graders (called readers) so as not to work in a vacuum. And more importantly to see if students are *ACTUALLY ANSWERING THE QUESTION*.
- * Free response questions may be graded with a rubric of 5 to 9 points. Rubric is written out and agreed upon *BEFORE* the grading begins. Your job is to get as close to the rubric as possible. So how do I do that?

Answering Free Response Questions

- * *READ THE ENTIRE QUESTION BEFORE YOU START.* One AP guru advises “read the question once, read the question twice, read the question thrice.”
- * Spend at least 5 (no more than 7) minutes organizing or outlining or brainstorming *BEFORE YOU WRITE THE ESSAY*.
- * Be as specific as possible. You don’t want to confuse or slow down readers. Clarity is key, especially if your essay is being graded on day 6. Confusion, sloppy writing (both unnecessary verbal filler and bad penmanship) only slow your essay down in the process. The readers will not guess at what you might mean. They will simply not give you the points. “The president makes laws.” ***VAGUE, BAH!!!*** “The president approves or disapproves bills sent to him by Congress.” Better. “Congress has the power to create peace through treaties.” Two problems: The word “create” is vague. Recall the executive makes the treaties and 2/3rds the Senate (second problem) ratifies or affirms the treaties. Use the words from the original document.
- * Magic words DO NOT EXIST. Terms must be used in context correctly. Again, you will not be given the benefit of the doubt. Continuing with the above example, writing the phrase “advice and consent” and nothing else gets you, well, nothing else.
- * Knowing the concept and explaining it correctly within the context of the prompt is good. All that plus a juicy recent example, even better.

- * Use words from the question in your answer to make sure you are answering the question as asked, not the question you would rather answer or think you are answering. (Again with the campaign finance reform idea. “It is difficult for Congress to pass significant campaign finance reform legislation due to incumbency. This is true because...”) You must warrant why the argument is true.
- * Be concise. Don’t write any more than you need to answer the question correctly. Quality is the issue, not quantity.
- * Thesis statement is not needed. The prompt is the thesis. Intro paragraphs aren’t needed. Rewriting the question is not needed. Just the facts, ma’am.
- * Write *EVERYTHING*, outline, brainstorming ideas, the actual essay in the essay booklet. Everything written in the essay booklet has to be graded. You might stumble into a correct answer accidentally this way.
- * A definition *IS NOT AN EXAMPLE*. Do not confuse these. If the question asks for definition, define. Ex: A filibuster is Strom Thurmond reading anything and everything for 24 hours during Senate debate to block civil rights legislation. *WRONG*. A filibuster is the Senate practice of unlimited debate used to block the passage of legislation by holding up Senate business or holding up voting on a bill in the Senate. Much better.

Multiple Choice Questions

- * Like the free response, questions are designed to bridge concepts from different units. Some involve tables, charts or graphs. Do not freak out at these. Slowly, calmly understand what the picture means before you read the choices.
- * Questions with roman numerals: write T or F next to each option to eliminate the false ones. *THEN* you read the choices below. It will save time, I promise.
- * *KNOW THE TERMINOLOGY*. Definitional questions can be the most difficult because you may not know the terms. (Suggestion: review your note cards -- often.)
- * Should I guess? It depends. You are dinged a ¼ of a point if you guess wrong. But, the feeling of those in the know is that if you can narrow it down to two or three possible choices, go for it.

WARNING

Having said all this please be aware that you will need a great depth of knowledge about American government to have any hope of achieving a 3, 4 or the magic 5. I have not been able to cover all that you will need to know in class or in review sessions. *YOU MUST TAKE THE INITIATIVE*. You must ask if you are not clear about a concept.

My door is always open...