

## VERBS AND THEIR IMPORTANCE FRQ Honors American History

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

### Free-Response Question Tasks

The first priority for you is to understand exactly what tasks a question is asking them to perform. You should then focus on writing a clear, concise, and well-supported response. When appropriate, you should provide *examples* to support you responses.

To this end, it is critical that students understand the instructions and action verbs that are often used on the AP Exam. Students may be asked to list, discuss, describe, explain, analyze, and so on. These are not all identical tasks. Furthermore, the question may call for more than one task, such as both identify and explain. Students should realize that some of the tasks are more complex than others. For example, composing a list may not even require a complete sentence, but students, to adequately explain some phenomena, may need to write several paragraphs, including well-developed supporting examples. The following list of commonly used action verbs will help students understand the exact tasks that they will be required to perform.

- **List/Identify.** Listing or identifying is a task that requires no more than a simple **enumeration** of some factors or characteristics. A **list** does not require any causal explanations. For example, a student might be asked to list or identify three characteristics presidents consider when making appointments. Such a list, which could be bulleted or numbered, might include party, race, gender, etc.
- **Define.** A definition requires a student to provide a meaning for a word or concept. **Examples** may help to demonstrate understanding of the definition. Students may be instructed to note the term's **significance** as part of the definition.
- **Describe.** A description involves providing a depiction or portrayal of a phenomenon or its most significant characteristics. Descriptions most often address “**what**” questions. For example, if students are asked to describe reasons for the decline in voter turnout, they must do more than simply list facts—they must actually **describe the reasons**. Students may explain that the expansion of suffrage led to a decline in overall voter turnout because once voting was made available to more individuals, the overall percentage of those voting declined.
- **Discuss.** Discussions generally require that students explore relationships between different concepts or phenomena. Identifying, describing, and explaining could be required tasks involved in writing a satisfactory discussion.
- **Explain.** An explanation involves the exploration of possible causal relationships. When providing explanations, students should identify and discuss logical connections or causal patterns that exist between or among various political phenomena. **Explain** questions require a thesis statement (re-state the question in the answer), a definition, an example (supporting evidence) and a conclusion to tie it all together.

- **Compare/Contrast.** This task requires students to make specific links between two or more concepts. Compare is what it has in common and contrast is their differences.
- **Evaluate/Assess.** An evaluation or assessment involves considering how well something meets a certain standard and as such generally requires a thesis. It is important to identify the criteria used in the evaluation. If no criteria are explicitly given in the question, students should take care to clearly identify the ones that they choose to employ. Specific examples may be applied to the criteria to support the student's thesis. Evaluation or assessment requires explicit connections between the thesis or argument and the supporting evidence.
- **Analyze.** This task usually requires separating a phenomenon into its component parts or characteristics as a way of understanding the whole. An analysis should yield explicit conclusions that are explained or supported by specific evidence or well-reasoned arguments.
- 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 after reconstruction that 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 CIRCLE**, 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.

**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 ...