

# Skill Builder: How to FRQ

## Introduction to AP Writing

On most AP Exams, there are two components: Multiple Choice Questions and Free Response Questions (FRQs) - some tests call these Constructed Response Questions (CRQs). There are typically 3 FRQs, with 75 minutes to complete all three. Both the multiple choice questions and FRQs are worth 50% of the overall AP score. To earn college credit, a student must show mastery of both mediums. This mirrors college classes, where it is common for an entire final exam to be a timed writing, where the students receive questions they have never seen before and have a certain amount of time to use the information in their heads to write a formal, graded response.



## Reading the Questions

Testing is a game. As stated before, there are rules and strategies used to win the game. The first key to FRQ success is *reading and understanding the questions and prompts*. If a student does not understand the target they are trying to hit, success becomes impossible. There are two action steps to complete when first looking at the writing prompts.

# #1

**Understand the Task Verbs.** Each FRQ question contains multiple sections or stems. Each stem will start with a Task Verb. The Task Verbs direct the student to the type of response they need to provide, and it is CRITICAL to memorize and use knowledge of Task Verbs for AP and any other academic testing. Case in point:

**Lower Order Verbs** - These require short, brief, to-the-point responses; rarely more than 1-2 sentences.

- **Identify:** Provide information about a specific topic WITHOUT elaboration. Two to six words can be adequate, occasionally extending to two to three sentences. Restating the question in answering is a nice touch. *Example: Identify the building in the picture. Identify two stages of the XYZ Theory. Identify 1 country on the map.*
- **Define:** Provide a specific meaning for a word or concept. *Example: Define Space-time compression. Define Region. Define Diffusion.*
- **List:** Similar to identify. Provide brief recounting of what is being asked. 2-4 words is typically acceptable. When listing, it is recommended to provide 3 of what is being asked for, unless a specific number is given. *Example: List 3 traits of a periphery country. List 2 economic indicators.*

**Higher Order Verbs** - These require complex, in-depth responses, up to two paragraphs length. These prompts require a “because” and an “example” that gets connected back to the question.

- **Explain:** Provide information about how or why a relationship, process, pattern, position, or outcome occurs USING EVIDENCE AND REASONING. Explain always relates to cause and effect. The question will give one, and the student must go into detail about the other. *For example, Explain what caused Julie’s car to catch on fire. (This Question states the effect: the car on fire. The student must explain the cause.)*

Explaining has four components.

1. Briefly state the key point answer.
2. Provide a more thorough, elaborate description of the phenomena.
3. Write the *because*. This is the why and how of the paragraph, detailing the deeper reasoning and processes of the phenomena being addressed.
4. Provide a real world example that relates to the response with a description of how the example exemplifies the cause/effect requested. Always state things twice: first as a general theory, the second with a real world example.

Be the  
Intellectual  
Ninja...  
Write to the  
Because!



Don't be creative. Use the "Key Point > Because > Example" Formula

EXAMPLE: *Question - Explain one effect of colonization on the New World.*

Answer - One impact of Colonization was the depopulation of the Native Americans. Some estimates suggest that close to 10 Million Native Americans died because of the Europeans. This is because the Spanish transported many diseases the natives were not immune to, causing massive epidemics. One example would be small pox. When Cortez arrived in Mexico, many Aztec civilians became deathly ill, with painful sores all over their bodies. The mass casualties caused by small pox allowed Cortez to conquer the Aztecs with very few men. This led to further colonizing and further death of the Native populations.

- **Describe:** Provide the relevant characteristics of a specified topic. The standard number of descriptors is 3 unless the prompt specifically asks for a number. Again, be prepared to elaborate with a quality "because" and real world example.

EXAMPLE: *Question - Describe the architecture in the city of Paris.*

Answer: Paris has a wide variety of architecture, built in three phases. The first type of architecture is... An example of this architecture would be... This exemplifies this style of architecture by... The second type. . .

- **Compare.** Provide a description or explanation of similarities and/or differences. between two or more people, places, situations. Students must have a statement for EACH of the items being discussed, with elaboration and examples (when possible). If asked to compare two sides of a coin, the response must include statements about BOTH the heads AND tails, no matter how "obvious" the answer may appear.

EXAMPLE: *Question - Compare Apple products to Microsoft products.*

Answer: Apple products are similar/different to Microsoft products because Apple \_\_\_\_... While Microsoft \_\_\_\_....

The importance of command prompts cannot be understated. These are words that are used frequently across education for essays, as well as in multiple-choice questions. Understanding these words and knowing what they expect of you in response is half the battle to being successful in the game of education.

## #2

**Find the Unit & Theme.** When reading the question, it is easy to get caught up in all the things you might not know about the question. Instead, it is important to focus on what you DO know. One way to help call those things to memory is to look "past" the question and identify which unit(s) and big theme(s) the question is addressing. Look past Paris and see Urbanization. Look past John Deere Combines and see Agriculture. Look past Baltimore's voting map and see Political Geography. Write it down by the question so that when you get lost, it gives a point to refocus to. Always focus on what you know that you know.

### Look Out for ESPN:

FRQs LOVE to incorporate ESPN into the question. It forces the writer to place their answer in a specific context. It will look like: "Explain two Economic Reasons..." or "Describe two Social..." or "Explain one Political and one Economic effect..." If you do not specifically and adequately address the assigned ESPN in the question, you will not earn the points on the essay question.

## Planning

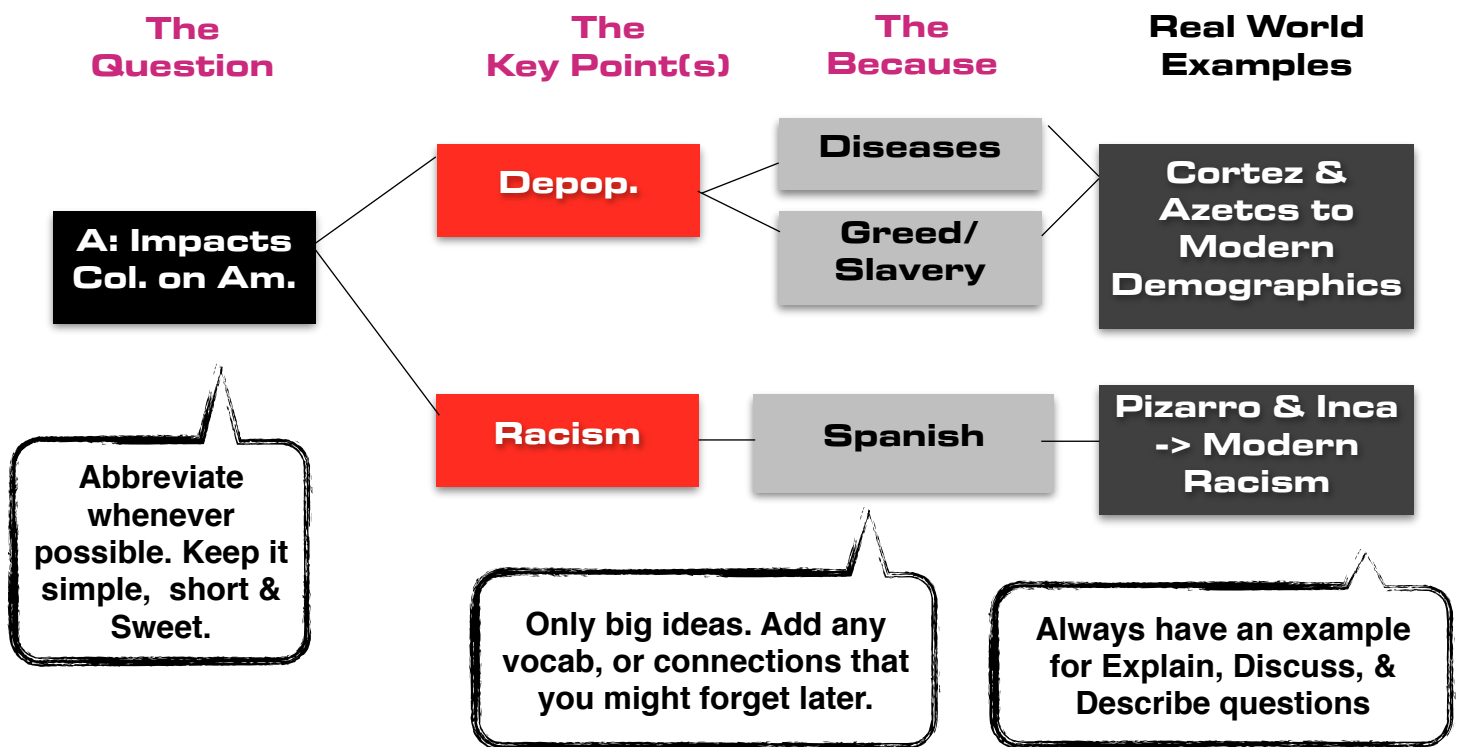
Success in timed writing begins with planning. If the brain is a spider web, that means it functions on illogical relative connection. This creates amazing creative lines of thinking, and Picasso, and cheese whiz, and Silly Putty... but, it is not good when trying to write a logical, coherent, timed, graded essay. Planning is when students put just the main ideas in a quick format, that allows them to chart the general direction of their writing. It also allows space to put down any key examples or vocabulary words that should be included.

More specifically, planning needs to have 3 levels: *the Key Point(s), the Because, and the Example:*

**The Key Point(s)** - The big ideas student need to convey to answer the question. If the question asks “Explain two reasons...” then there will be 2 key points.

**The Because** - If the question asks to Explain or Describe, there MUST be a Because. The Because provides the why and how the key point relates to answering the question.

**Examples and key vocabulary** - To achieve all the points for the higher order commands, there MUST be an example with elaboration connecting the example to the key point. Failure to do this will limit the grading potential. *The example restates the Key point and the Because.* It will seem redundant and repetitive, but that is fine. You are trying to prove that you know-that-you-know-that-you-know.



Since students are given 75 minutes total for 3 FRQs, budget 5 minutes per FRQ for planning. Plan them all 3 FRQs before writing. This is when the brain is the freshest and has the most creative energy. Start by planning the FRQ you feel you know the best first, followed by the FRQ you feel know second best, finishing with planning the FRQ you feel least comfortable with.

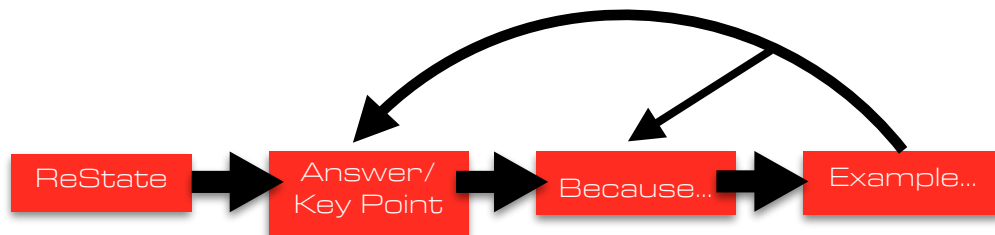
## Example of the Examples

The purpose of the example is to reinforce to the grader you know the topic as well as to thoroughly meet the demands of the long response questions. It is also a chance for you to say something in a different/better way than how you stated it originally as some people's examples "say more" than the words used in their elaboration. However, when students think about giving examples, they worry that they do not know enough about the topic to elaborate. Students feel like they must say something "new" because they do not want to repeat themselves. The general principle in FRQ writing is to *say everything twice: once as theory, once as an example.* The example does not say something new, but rather demonstrates the core ideas of the paragraph in the real world.

Using the planning displayed above, here is what a sample response could look like:

The first impact of colonization on the Americas was depopulation. This is because the Europeans brought diseases to the new world that their body could not fight off the germs. As a result, large numbers of natives died. One example of this was Cortez and the Spanish destroying the Aztecs in Mexico in the early 1500s. The Aztecs were killed in large numbers from Spanish diseases like Small Pox. As a result, the Aztecs and other local natives were depopulated from Mexico.

Notice the three parts in this answer 1) Initially, restating the question and identifying the first key point. 2) The “because/why” was addressed, clearly stating “because” to make the elaboration obvious to the grader. 3) Finally, the transition to the real world example. Proper nouns were used to demonstrate the people and specific places, as well as specifically stating the time. For this course, using the century and decade will usually suffice; knowing the exact year is rarely required. Then, the example was reconnected to the because (diseases) and the key point (depopulation).



## Scoring

It is important to understand how FRQs are scored. Each June, over 700 educators gather for one week to spend over 40 hours grading written FRQs from 8 am until 5pm for nine days. Any one grader will grade between 1,000-2,000 essays. The educators have a rubric for their question with all the “right answers.” Only what is on the rubric counts as a right answer. There is a college professor assigned to each table, who double checks certain essays to make sure they are being graded properly.

Essays are graded with a concept called elastic leniency. Elastic leniency can be summarized as: the fewer points you are likely to earn, the more lenient or flexible they are in counting an answer as “right.” The more points you are likely to earn, the more strict the standards become for what counts as a correct answer. To score at the highest levels, the essay must meet the highest standards. Anything less will be given less. Therefore, plan to the “because” with examples for all higher order command protocols to ensure the greatest chance of getting the most possible points.

Point	Requirements for Points	Threshold
<b>0</b>	<b>Sympathy</b>	Upon reading the essay, if less then 2 of 7 points, any answer that is close to correct will be given points.
<b>1</b>		
<b>2</b>		
<b>3</b>	<b>Because...</b>	Upon reading the essay, if the essay has 3-5 “correct” responses from the rubric, the standard changes. There must be a “Because,” with detailed reasoning. No “Because,” no additional points.
<b>4</b>		
<b>5</b>		
<b>6</b>	<b>Connected Example(s)</b>	If there are 6-7 “correct” responses from the rubric, the standard changes again. There must be the “Because” AND examples; specifically explained and connected back to the key point and the because. It will be re-read by a college professor to assure that it got 90-100% of the points. Otherwise, no additional points will be given.
<b>7</b>		

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, knowing how to read the question and how to plan in a way that opens up the most possible points is 95% of the battle. Do those parts well, and the writing will almost write itself. With that said, there are a few important reminders:

- Write legibly. Graders have over 800 essays to grade. Make it easy for them.
- Be structured. If the question has parts A, B, C then mark your paper A, B, C. Be the intellectual ninja. Make it painfully clear that you know, that you know what you are addressing and discussing.
- Follow the formula. Don't be creative. Make the point, elaborate, give examples, and move on.

### The Formula of Writing: Writing Stems

- The first cause/impact/theme is...\_\_\_\_\_.
- This is because...
- One reason for this is.....
- This means...
- One example is...\_\_\_\_\_. This relates/connects because...
- For instance...\_\_\_\_\_.
- Therefore...



**Steal these.**