

## IMPORTANT DISTINCTIONS

Each free-response question will, of course, be about a distinct topic. However, this is not the only way in which these questions differ from one another. Each question will also need a certain kind of answer, depending on the type of question it is. Part of answering each question correctly is understanding what general type of answer is required. There are five important signal words that indicate the rough shape of the answer you should provide:

- Describe
- Discuss
- Explain
- Compare
- Contrast

Each of these words indicates that a specific sort of response is required; none of them mean the same thing. Questions that ask you to *describe*, *discuss*, or *explain* are testing your comprehension of a topic. A description is a detailed verbal picture of something; a description question is generally asking for “just the facts.” This is not the place for opinions or speculation. Instead, you want to create a precise picture of something’s features and qualities. A description question might, for example, ask you to describe the results you would expect from an experiment. A good answer here will provide a rich, detailed account of the results you anticipate.

A question that asks you to discuss a topic is asking you for something broader than a mere description. A discussion is more like a conversation about ideas, and— depending on the topic—this may be an appropriate place to talk about tension between competing theories and views. For example, a discussion question might ask you to discuss which of several theories offers the best explanation for a set of results. A good answer here would go into detail about why one theory does a better job of explaining the results, and it would talk about why the other theories cannot cope with the results as thoroughly.

A question that asks you to explain something is asking you to take something complicated or unclear and present it in simpler terms. For example, an explanation question might ask you to explain why an experiment is likely to produce a certain set of results, or how one might measure a certain sort of experimental result. A simple description of an experimental setup would not be an adequate answer to the latter question. Instead, you would need to describe that setup *and* talk about why it would be an effective method of measuring the result.

## COMPARE VS. CONTRAST QUESTIONS

Questions that ask you to *compare* or *contrast* are asking you to analyze a topic in relation to something else. A question about comparison needs an answer that is focused on similarities

between the two things. A question that focuses on contrast needs an answer emphasizing differences and distinctions.

## **THREE POINTS TO REMEMBER ABOUT THE FREE-RESPONSE QUESTIONS**

### **1. MOST QUESTIONS ARE STUFFED WITH SMALLER QUESTIONS.**

You usually won't get one broad question like, "Are penguins really happy?" Instead, you'll get an initial setup followed by questions labeled (a), (b), (c), and so on. Expect to spend a paragraph writing about each lettered question.

### **2. WRITING SMART THINGS EARNS YOU POINTS.**

For each subquestion on a free-response question, points are given for saying the right thing. The more points you score, the better off you are on that question. Going into the details about how points are scored would make your head spin, but in general, the AP Biology people have a rubric, which acts as a blueprint for what a good answer should look like. Every subsection of a question has

two to five key ideas attached to it. If you write about one of those ideas, you earn yourself a point. There's a limit to how many points you can earn on a single subquestion, and there are other strange regulations, but it boils down to this: Writing smart things about each question will earn you points toward that question.

So don't be terse or in a hurry. You have about 10 minutes to answer each free-response question. Use the time to be as precise as you can be for each subquestion. Part of being precise is presenting your answer in complete sentences. Do not simply make lists or outlines. Sometimes doing well on one subquestion will earn you enough points to cover up for another subquestion you're not as strong on. When all the points are tallied for that free-response question, you come out strong on total points, even though you didn't ace every single subquestion.

### **3. MIMIC THE DATA QUESTIONS.**

Data often describe an experiment and provide a graph or table to present the information in visual form. On at least one free-response question, you will be asked about an experiment in some form or another. To score points on this question, you must describe the experiment well and perhaps present the information in visual form.

So, look over the sample Data Questions you see in this book and on the actual test, because you can use knowledge of this format when tackling the free-response questions. In a way, this is just

another aspect of the good science idea. The AP Biology test wants to show you what good science looks like on the Data Questions. You can then use that information when crafting your free-response answers.

Beyond these points, there's a bit of a risk in the free-response section because there are only eight questions. If you get a question on a subject you're weak in, things might look grim. Still, take heart. Quite often, you'll earn some points on every question because there will be some subquestions or segments that you are familiar with.

Remember, the goal is not perfection. If you can ace four of the questions and slug your way to partial credit on the other four, you will put yourself in a position to get a good score on the entire test. That's the Big Picture, so don't lose sight of it just because you don't know the answer to one subquestion.

## FREE-RESPONSE POINTS

Don't forget—you *only* receive points for relevant correct information; you receive *no points* for incorrect information or for restating the question, which also eats up valuable time!

## 10 WAYS TO MAXIMIZE YOUR FRQ SCORE

1. Only answer the number of subsections the long free-response questions call for. For example, if the question has four sections (a, b, c, and d) and says to choose three parts, then choose *only* three parts.
2. There are almost always easy points that you can earn. State the obvious and provide a brief but accurate explanation for it.
3. In many instances, you can earn points by defining relevant terms. (Example: Writing *osmosis* would not get you a point, but mentioning "movement of water down a gradient across a semipermeable membrane" would likely get the point).
4. While grammar and spelling are not assessed on the free-response portion, correct spellings of words and legible sentences will increase your chances of earning points.
5. You do not have to answer free-response questions in the order in which they appear on the exam. It's a good strategy to answer the questions you are most comfortable with first, and then answer the more difficult ones.
6. The length of your response does not determine your score—a one-page written response containing accurate, succinct, yet detailed information can score the maximum amount of points, while other essays spanning three to four pages of vague, inaccurate materials may not earn any.
7. Be careful that you do not over-explain a concept. Where the initial explanation gets you points, contradictions cause points to be taken away.
8. Keep personal opinions out of free-responses. Base your response on factual researched knowledge.

9. Relax and do your best. You know more than you think!

Be sure to use all the strategies discussed in this chapter when taking the practice exams. Trying out the strategies there will get you comfortable with them, and you should be able to put them to good use on the real exam.