

Tips for Answering AP Biology Free Response Questions

1. Read All of the Questions

This step cannot be stressed enough. It may be the first step but it proves to be vital when taking the AP Biology exam. The free response section of the AP Biology exam starts off with a ten-minute period that is meant to be used for reading all of the questions. Make sure you fully utilize this time for reading the questions. Planning can come later on, after you have read all of the questions. It is important to read all of these questions so that you can get your mind thinking and your ideas flowing. You can think about what each question will require of you and then start organizing your thoughts.

When you start reading all of the questions, organize all of them from easiest to hardest. You can base this off which of the subject areas you are most knowledgeable about. If you know more about the topic, then rank that as easier. However, if you don't know that much about the topic of the question, then rank it as harder. This will save you time and make it easier for you to answer as many questions as possible so you can get as many points as you can.

Another thing to look out for while you are reading all of the questions is to note the wording of the questions. AP Biology writers are very specific about the wording that they choose. Look out for words such as discuss, define, compare, contrast, and describe. An issue that is common to many AP test takers is that they do not properly read the question or they do not do exactly what the question is asking. This could cause you to lose valuable points on your AP Biology exam.

2. Brainstorm

After you have finished reading all of the questions, you need to start organizing your thoughts on paper. There will be a part of the exam that you can use as scrap paper in order to write down and organize your thoughts. You should make sure to write down any key terms that you think will be relevant to each of the questions. Don't worry about organizing them; that step will come later on. Right now it is important to focus on writing down anything you think will be important to the topic of your questions. This is vital because it will help you to remember all of the necessary steps in different processes in AP Biology. This step is important but whatever you do, make sure to not spend too much time here. You should spend about two minutes (max) on each of the questions, then move on to the next step.

3. Outlining for your Essays

This next step is a must do for your essays. Outlining your essays can help you to save valuable time on your AP Bio test. Making the time investment in creating a strong outline will keep your essay strong and focused. Best of all, you can prevent writer's block and ultimately save time on the AP Biology free response section.

This is the part in which you look back at everything you wrote down while brainstorming. Look at all of the ideas that you came up with and take the ones that you feel most comfortable with. If the question asks for two examples, pick the two strongest examples. You should make sure to take note of any keywords or key concepts that you need to include in your essay. This is very important as it will streamline the process of writing your essay. It will take about four or five minutes per essay

but this whole time investment will be worthwhile in the long run. It will make the writing portion of the exam much easier for you.

4. Develop the Ideas for your Essay

Now the time has finally come for you to start writing your essay. This is where your outline will start coming in handy. The difference between a high and a low scoring student on an AP Biology exam is that a low scoring student will just list the keywords that they think are relevant to the question. Anyone can list all of the vocabulary words that go along with mitosis, but it takes a high scoring student to elaborate on those keywords. Not only should you use the important phrases and terms, but you should explain the significance of those keywords to the question and how they relate to each other.

One more thing to keep in mind during this section is to stick to what the question asks. If the question asks for two examples, give only two examples. The test reviewers will only read the first two examples, not any more that you write. Anything extra will not count towards your score.

5. Answer Each Part of the Question Separately

This is a very important part to focus on when writing the essay. Each question on the AP Biology exam will have multiple parts to it. Some question will have two parts while some might even have five or six parts to them. Pacing yourself on the AP Bio free response is really important, so make sure you keep track of how many parts there are to each question. You could write the perfect response to one of the parts, but if you leave the other sections of the question blank, then it will not matter. The test reviewer only has a certain amount of points that they can allot for each part of the question, so it is important to focus on all parts.

AP Bio graders have a lot of tests to go through, so make it easy for them to see that you have answered the question correctly. One great way to do this is to answer each part of the question in a separate paragraph. It will be easier for both you and the grader to keep track of which parts you have answered.