

AP Biology Free Response Writing Tips

The AP Biology Exam consists of two sections: multiple choice and free response. Both sections include questions that assess your understanding of the big ideas, enduring understandings, and essential knowledge and your application of these through the science practices.

Question Type	Number of Questions	Timing
Section I		
Part A: Multiple Choice	63	90 minutes
Part B: Grid-In	6	
Section II		
Long Free Response	2	80 minutes + 10-minute reading period
Short Free Response	6	

General Tips:

- You must write in paragraph form! There is room on the test for you to create an outline to guide your answer, but outlines are not graded. That being said, perfect essay writing is not expected. There are no deductions for grammar or spelling mishaps (provided the spelling is close enough to determine the word you are trying to write).
- Diagrams are helpful. However, if you draw a diagram, be sure to refer to it in your essay. You will not earn points for diagrams that stand by themselves.
- Points are not deducted from your essay score if you give an incorrect statement. You just do not receive points for incorrect statements. However, you must be careful not to contradict yourself. If you state something correctly but then later state the opposite, you will not earn the point.

Tips for AP Lab Free Response Questions:

- AP Lab Free Response Questions will often present an experimental setup very similar to one of the AP Labs you performed. Review each of the labs thoroughly before the exam.
- Remember to always reference an experimental control. Using an experimental control in an experiment involves setting up control groups that have not been affected by the experimental (independent) variable.
 - Controls are used so that an experimenter can compare the group that has changed to the group that stayed the same. In other words, control groups are not exposed to the treatment that is being investigated so that it can be compared with experimental groups that are exposed to the treatment.
 - Control groups are useful to derive baseline measures or observations used for evaluating the effects of an experimental (independent) variable.
- In EVERY AP Lab Free Response Question, you should discuss the following information, even if the question does not specifically ask for it: (remember, you are never deducted for too much information, but keep it relevant):
 - State the testable hypothesis and identify it as such.
 - State the control group.
 - State the independent (experimental) and dependent (measured) variable(s).
 - Identify other variables being held constant. (*amount of time, temperature, etc.*)
 - State how and when data will be collected or observations made. (*measure mass every 3 minutes*)
 - State what calculation will be used. (*average 3 values for mass, write out formulas used*)
 - State how you will be confident in your results. (*repeat trials, using a large sample size, etc.*)
 - State how you will share your results. (*tables, graphs, drawings, etc.*)
 - State what you expect to happen and why. (*based on the hypothesis, what would you expect?*)
- We will do practice AP Lab Free Response Questions so that all of this will seem a breeze! Nevertheless, it is a good idea to practice on your own with an AP Biology Exam practice book to prepare.

Students who pass with an 80% or better on the multiple choice section of the test and earn 50% or better of the points on their written answers (ten points possible for each free response question), usually earn a score of “5” on the exam. An overall score of 50% combined (multiple choice and free response) usually earns a score of “3” or above.

DOS and DON'TS on Exam Day

DO THIS on Exam Day:

- **DO** use your ten minute reading time advantageously. Carefully read all of the free response questions and map out your answers. These maps will NOT be graded, but you can use them to write your responses.
 - Read the prompt thoroughly, then read the prompt again, then read the prompt, then read the prompt again, then read the prompt, then...
 - Jot down the big ideas. Make sure you clearly understand what you are being asked to do.
 - Use this time to create a mindmap or bullet points of the main terms you want to elaborate on.
 - Outline your answer to organize your thoughts.
 - Remain focused and on task.
- **DO underline the important terms** in the question such as “OR” and “CHOOSE 2” and the power verbs such as “DESCRIBE,” “IDENTIFY,” “LABEL,” “CONSTRUCT,” “DESIGN,” or “EXPLAIN.”
- **DO** use the **80 minutes** to write thorough responses to all eight questions.
- **DO** stay focused on what the prompt is requiring you to do—it is all in the format of the question and how it is worded. Pay particular attention to words like these:
 - **Discuss:** give reasoning pro and con; analyze carefully
 - **Analyze:** summarize in detail with a selected focus
 - **Explain:** clarify and interpret; give reasons for differences, analyze causes
 - **Compare/contrast:** emphasize similarities and differences
 - **Relate:** show how ideas or concepts are connected to each other
- **DO** use the outline, mindmap or bullet points that you developed during the 10 minute reading time.
- **DO** write as legibly as possible, using **black ink**. The papers are shuffled quite a bit when they are scored, and answers written in pencil may be smeared. If the person scoring your essays cannot read what you have written, then you will not earn any points.
- **DO** answer in the format of the question so that you do not slow the reader down.
 - Use the format of the free response to write your answer so that the reader has an easy time finding your responses to each section of each essay.
 - Organize the free response answers using the format of the question—write ‘1a’ then respond to 1a; write ‘1b’ then respond to 1b, etc...
 - It is best not to skip around when responding to sub-questions in one question.
- **DO** apply the language of science, show depth, elaboration, and give examples.
 - Pull, tie, link and loop together your ideas—show how ideas connect.
 - Use a scientific term and then explain what it means.
 - Write for clarity, accuracy, thoroughness, and breadth (not just factual regurgitation).
- **DO** use graphs or diagrams when it will enhance your essay response. However, unless the prompt specifically asks for drawings/graphs, every thought you hope to convey should also be put in writing.
- **DO** clearly mark your answer sheet with the free response question you are answering. Write freely on the response sheet—use several sheets as needed. Usually, the longer the answer to the question the more points you will earn! Write! Write! Write!
- **DO** answer ALL subunits of a question thoroughly—to ensure you will gain maximum points for your response.
- **DO** label all graphs correctly.
 - Include a graph title.
 - Include a key identifying lines and data points.
 - Label axes (including units).
- **DO** use the time at the end to re-read responses—underlining key concepts, checking for clarity, accuracy and thoroughness.

DON'T DO THIS on Exam Day:

- **DON'T** leave any free responses questions blank.
 - Even if the question seems odd or you draw a temporary blank, find the “main idea” being addressed and elaborate on it.
 - Remember that all students in the nation will be in the same boat with a difficult or unclear question.
- **DON'T** obsess over correct grammar. There are no deductions for grammatical imperfections.
- **DON'T** write introductory or closing paragraphs. No points are earned for thesis statements or topic sentences.
- **DON'T** ramble. Get to the point. Do not waste time describing your feelings about how glad you are that the AP College Board asked you about photosynthesis. If anything, this will annoy the reader.
- **DON'T** write only in outline format. Your answers must be in paragraph form.
- **DON'T** over-answer the sub-questions of a free response question.
 - Remember that for any given question requiring sub-question responses, each response is allotted a maximum number of points. Writing more than is necessary will not earn you more points.