

TIPS FOR THE AP RHETORICAL ANALYSIS ESSAY

FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPT: All writings are rhetorical.

Any poem, short story, novel, essay, etc., contains certain ideas or feelings. The writer wishes for the reader to *understand* his or her thoughts or feelings. In Advanced Placement parlance, the writer *conveys* certain feelings, attitudes, thoughts, or ideas. Both the multiple choice and essay section measure whether students understand the relationship between an author's choices and the author's intent. First, the student must understand what it is that the writer wants him or her to understand, think, or feel. Next, the student must recognize HOW the writer makes choices designed to get the reader to think/feel/understand as the writer does.

FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPT: The author's choices reveal the author's intent.

Writers make choices. The Advanced Placement English Language and Composition Test measures a student's ability to understand WHY a writer has made particular choices, e.g.:

- Why use that word? (diction)
- Why use that simile? (figurative language)
- Why use intentional repetition? (sentence structure)

In class, we have discussed a series of stylistic and rhetorical devices. Test-takers must understand these terms and be able to explain why and/or how a writer uses them for effect.

FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPT: The Introduction

The introduction to the rhetorical analysis essay should, like any introduction, fulfill a real purpose. Your introduction should not *merely* restate the prompt—in fact, as long as you answer the question, it is not essential to refer directly to the prompt. In any case, a strong introduction should include aspects of the following:

- ✓ A clear identification of the author's claim (even if it is implied rather than directly stated)—best in your own words, though you can use a quote to prove that your interpretation of the claim is correct
- ✓ An overview of the strategies used by the author and an overview of how these strategies are utilized.
- ✓ Relevant SOAPS elements; who is the speaker, really? What persona does he or she assume in the piece? When and where was the speech or text written or delivered? Why was it written/delivered—what did the author hope to achieve with the piece? What issue, event, etc. was the author responding to? Who was the piece intended to convince of its claim?
- ✓ An answer to the question posed in the prompt, even if you do not refer directly to the prompt in doing so.

Avoid “say-nothing” introductions and overgeneralizations:

From the 2007 exam (score 4): In Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World, Scott Russell Sanders’ position on moving continuously is obvious right from the start. He begins with examples of the people we look at as heroes and what they did. His point begins there because all of those people were ones who moved around quite often. People like sailors, explorers and cowboys were always traveling...

Some example Introductions (from essays scoring 7 or higher on the exam)

2008 (score: 9): Scientific research is made to be done methodically. There is even a widely-known “scientific method” created in the 15th century based on reason and common sense. It was created from a desire to make the unknown known. As Barry describes the scientific process, he says that uncertainty, in the world of the unknown, must be made a tool—a weapon, even—against one’s own convictions. However, that concept is very ethereal, so Barry utilizes comparison and logical hypothetical situations to convey that idea.

2007 (score:9): In response to an essay by Salman Rushdie on the benefits of moving, Scott Russell Sanders refutes “the belief that movement is inherently good” (Sanders). He claims that we should root ourselves in places rather than ideas, that we should care for the earth rather than our own selfish desires. Through his use of direct quotes, acknowledgment of the counter-argument, and informal yet respectful tone, Sanders relates his belief that we must settle down and cease our tireless moving if we are to ever “pay enough heed and respect to where we are” (Sanders).

2009 (score: 8): If all that was said on earth was interpreted by those who hear it as literal and exact, so much would be misunderstood and misconstrued. In his book The Future of Life, Edward O. Wilson illustrates the unproductive manner of environmentalists and people-first debates by highlighting their ironic parallels and similar techniques throughout his satirical work.

FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPT: Rhetorical Analysis/Style Analysis Paragraph and Analysis Structure

Generally speaking, rhetorical or style analyses ask the writer to explain how a writer uses stylistic or rhetorical devices to convey certain thoughts, ideas, or feelings. The following basic structure should be used in the analytical section of student essays:

- A. Topic Sentence: Assert that the writer uses “X” (strategy/device) to convey “Y” (meaning). Be certain to clarify the intent—this may take an additional sentence or two.
- B. Evidence: Use direct quotes (within reason—do NOT over-quote).
- C. Commentary: “This shows that...” Do not use this wording, but your commentary must explain the writer’s intent or purpose for using the rhetorical or language

device. For example: *The writer uses this word to suggest that...; By this simile, the author intends to show that...* Etc. The commentary demonstrates your knowledge or understanding as to WHY THE AUTHOR CHOSE to use this particular language or rhetorical device.

CRUCIAL: These paragraphs are not necessarily simple. Stylistic and rhetorical devices are generally used in combination. To convey a certain idea or feeling, a writer may use a combination of, say, diction, figurative language, and imagery. It would be improper to discuss these three elements separately (i.e., in different paragraphs). Thus, a single paragraph may need to explain the interplay of these three elements and how they work together to convey a particular idea or feeling.

CRUCIAL: Always address specific choices in your analysis. Do not refer to “diction” or “figurative language” in general. Talk about SPECIFIC CHOICES made for SPECIFIC PURPOSES.

DON'T TRY TO ANALYZE EVERYTHING! There is no way that you can successfully deal with every instance of every device—instead, choose the examples that contribute most to the overall effects and analyze these in detail. Greater depth of analysis using fewer examples is usually preferable to tons of examples with little elaboration.

Successful students will....

1. Demonstrate an understanding of the author's intent.
2. Identify appropriate strategies used to convey that intent.
3. Cite specific evidence to illustrate.
4. Explain how the cited evidence conveys the author's intent.

Models (from papers scoring 7+ by A.P. graders):

2007 (score 9): Having established the role of uncertainty, Barry shifts into an analogy comparing scientists to pioneers. A pioneer marches into chaos, making order with “tools...[that] do not exist.” This analogy is used to relate his continuing argument back to his thesis about uncertainty—out of chaos, a scientist, despite being uncertain and having to use nonexistent tools, must make sense. Barry finishes the fourth paragraph with a two-sentence antithesis, with almost a humorously ironic effect. The former sentence is long, elaborate, and relates the finding of the truth to a crystal that illuminates the road for colleagues. And then, quite bluntly, he provides the inverse result, which is equivalent to falling off a cliff, an image reminiscent of Wile E. Coyote, who himself is very methodical, persistent, and courageous in the pursuit of his goal. Barry's intent with the reversal is to instill, once more, the idea of fear and uncertainty in the reader.

2008 (score 8): Sander's essay was written purely in response to Rushdie's essay—therefore, he quotes Rushdie several times directly and then states his own beliefs in similar ways. For example, Sanders quotes Rushdie in saying that “to be a migrant is perhaps to be the only species of human being free of the shackles of nationalism (to say nothing of its ugly sister, patriotism)” (Sanders). Sanders asserts this statement by saying

“Lord knows we could do with less nationalism (to say nothing of its ugly siblings racism, religious sectarianism, or class snobbery)” (Sanders). In quoting Rushdie directly and repeating his syntax, Sanders not only assures the reader of his careful thoughtfulness on the issue, but also states his own belief that moving does nothing to rid us of the unfortunate aspects of humanity of which we all wish to be free. He also quotes Rushdie several other times; for example, he says, “Rushdie claims that ‘migrants must...make a new imaginative relationship with the world’” (Sanders). He then uses this quote as a counterexample to one of his main points—how can one create a new relationship with the world when they are consistently altering their place in it?

2009 (score 9): One of the most overarching points made is the way both sides use highly-strung and emotional appeals rather than statistically, scientifically, or logically-based argument. This use of pathos comes bluntly across in his diction as he calls out names on both sides, calling the environmentalists “greens, enviros, environmental wackos” and then on the opposing side calling people-first advocates “brown-lashers,” “wise users,” and “sagebrush rebels.” Side-by-side as in his book, such name-calling is stressed as childish, insignificant, and above all—unconstructive. He moves on to claim in one piece that the people-first advocates want “unrestrained capitalism with land development uber alles” and then that “the environmental wackos” only want “power” and to “expand the government, especially the federal government.” Again, such diction—especially the fascist Nazi reference of “uber alles” meaning “above all else”—is both illegitimate and juvenile—a point now clearly made by Wilson of the two groups. Childish discussion is nearly by definition unproductive.

IMPORTANT: Note how the amount of commentary far outweighs the evidence. Generally speaking, this should occur on a 2-to-1 ratio. That is, for each evidentiary statement, there should be two sentences of commentary/analysis. Remember: The graders are evaluating your analytical skills. Textual citations have no value without explanation.

THREE APPROACHES TO ELABORATION IN COMMENTARY

STRATEGY 1: DEPTH-CHARGING

1. Locate a declarative sentence—one that makes a statement or observation. Underline it (you can do this lightly in pencil on the exam if need be—just erase it later).
 - a. Try to select a sentence that is especially important to the analysis—you don’t want to elaborate on an idea that isn’t particularly useful to the piece as a whole.
2. Find a word or phrase within that sentence. Circle it.
3. Expand upon this word or phrase by adding whichever of the following seems most appropriate:
 - An example (either from the text or from outside)
 - A comparison or contrast
 - A metaphor, simile, or analogy
 - Explanation

Restatement

4. Repeat the process—you can do this in several ways; you can create another “layer” by now underlining and/or circling something in the writing you just added, and expanding upon that. You may also select another sentence in the same paragraph, or move on to another paragraph. I would advise doing this several times per paragraph.

On the exam, you can simply indicate where various additions go by drawing arrows. As long as the graders can tell where it goes, it “counts.”

The goal is not merely to add more, but to deepen the analysis by working in “layers.” This strategy is a good replacement for “what, how, why?” and “So what?” if those don’t work for you.

STRATEGY 2: THE “SO WHAT?” STRATEGY: Another strategy to improve your analysis is the so-called “so what?” approach. Make a statement of fact—then ask yourself, so what? The answer to the question would be analysis. Return to the above examples. After the concrete details, ask the question: So what? Note how what follows (commentary) answers this question.

STRATEGY 3: What/How/Why: with this strategy, you will explain three things for any example that you select:

What? What is the technique you’ve identified—that is, what is the name of the device or strategy? *Be sure to provide a concrete example either by quoting or paraphrasing from the text (quoting is usually better).* Keep your quotes short—if you are only analyzing a word, there is no need to quote an entire sentence, for instance.

Why? Why did the author use this technique or strategy—how does it help the author convince the intended audience of his or her claim?

How? How does the technique (what) create the effect (why)?

If you need a What/How/Why refresher, look at my annotated McCarthy timed write on my website.

Conclusion

Do NOT summarize.

Holistically address the author’s purpose (remember: the body addressed particular strategies—individually). Expound on the author’s intended effect on the reader. Do not reiterate strategies—talk about the combined effect [this cannot be emphasized enough: *talk about the combined effect, talk about the combined effect, talk about the combined effect, talk about the combined effect....*]. Reflect on the significance of the author’s feelings/ideas/thoughts. If the prompt asks for an evaluation of the author’s rhetorical effect, then end with such an analysis.

Model Conclusions

2009 (score 8): There are many times we don't see what is right in front of us. Edward O. Wilson takes the arguments of people-first and environmental advocates to the extreme, and puts them together to show the unproductive arguments and diction they share. He points out what was always there.

2008 (score 9): Barry’s concession that not all researchers are pioneers is done in short offerings of potential flaws, done in the hope that the net hovering over these researchers being criticized is a broad and inoffensive one. The transition to the fact that experiments do not always work is made to connect again to uncertainty. The fact that experiments fail and can be “manipulated and forced to yield an answer” is itself uncertain in its attempt to fabricate certainty. In the end, Barry managed to evince that the only certainty in science is uncertainty, and doing so using, which were most effective, very uncertain questions.

Note-Taking Strategies For Rhetorical Analysis

ANNOTATE, ANNOTATE, ANNOTATE!

Attached are several annotation acronyms. Use these to guide your annotation for rhetorical analysis.

In addition to information in the annotation acronyms, consider the following:

- A. Take time to fully understand the prompt. What are you asked to do? What **must** be addressed? Off-topic responses score a 1, essentially resulting in a failing test. Proceed with care.
- B. As you read, mark all words/phrases/sentences that connect to the purpose given in the prompt. Find textual citations as you read—don’t put yourself in a position to search for them later.
- C. For a rhetorical or style analysis: As you discern strategies (e.g., diction, syntax, figurative language. Logical appeal, etc.), write the strategy in the margin and underline/circle the evidence. After reading, you then have a list of ideas with corresponding evidence ready to go.
- D. Generate a short outline at the bottom of the page. Choose (wisely) the strategies/tools of which to write about. Determine the order/sequence. In traditional writing, you save the best for last; however, due to the time constraints of the AP tests, it is recommended that you place the strongest, most insightful points first on your outline.
- E. When you generate your outline, determine which evidence will be used to support that point. Remember: The purpose of an outline is to organize ideas. It is far easier to write when you already know what you are going to say and how you are going to support it.
- F. **CRUCIAL** (crucial, crucial, crucial!): You are NOT writing three loosely connected paragraphs. All items of analysis work together in combination to illustrate/present the author’s point. When you write, never (never, never, never!) forget this! Interconnect your paragraphs—show how the combined effect of the items of analysis reveal the author’s intent.