The Simple AP® English Language Rhetorical Analysis Essay Cheat Sheet

The Rhetorical Analysis Task

What You Get

FRQ 2: a nonfiction passage (speech, letter, essay) w/ a headnote on the writer & situation.

Prompt: "Analyze the rhetorical choices [writer] makes to [achieve a purpose]."

Timing: share the 15-min reading period, then ≈ 40 min to write this essay in full.

Row	Pts	Rewards
A: Thesis	0–1	Choices + purpose
B: Evidence	0–4	Analysis of choices
C: Sophistication	0–1	Complex understanding

What Readers Want

Analysis, not summary: explain HOW choices affect readers & WHY they serve the purpose.

Choices, not devices: any decision counts: what to include, word choice, order, tone, examples.

Audience first: every choice responds to a specific audience at a specific moment.

Prompt Clues

Underline the writer, audience & purpose the prompt names; your thesis must use all 3.

Headnote: date, place & occasion are free context for explaining why each choice fits.

Passages may be old; read for moves.

⚠ Retelling what the writer says, ¶ by ¶, is summary & keeps your Row B score low.

✓ Ask every time: "Why would THIS writer choose THIS for THIS audience?"

Reading the Passage

Map the Situation 1st

Element	Ask
Writer	Who? What's their ethos?
Audience	Who? What do they believe?
Exigence	What prompted this?
Purpose	What should readers do/think?
Context	When, where, occasion?
Message	Main claim?

Write it down: 1 line per element in the margin before you mark any device or choice.

Annotate Choices

Mark 3–5 key moves: an opening story, a shift, repetition, a concession, a closing call.

Next to each: jot the effect on the audience in a few words ("builds guilt," "shows shared faith").

Track shifts: changes in tone or method (story → data → call to act) mark the argument's moves.

Find the Structure

Divide the passage into 3–4 sections by job; they can become your body paragraphs.

Last ¶: the ending often states the purpose most directly; read it twice before writing.

Ask why here: why does this move come at this exact point in the passage, not earlier or later?

⚠ Don't hunt for device names; find the 3–4 moves that do the most work for the purpose.

✓ Annotate w/ verbs ("praises," "warns") not labels ("pathos"); verbs turn into analysis.

The Thesis (Row A)

What Earns the Point

Row A: a defensible thesis that analyzes the writer's choices & links them to the purpose.

Weak	Why it fails
"Uses ethos, pathos, logos"	List, no purpose
"Uses rhetoric to persuade"	Restates prompt
Summary of passage	No analysis
"Effectively argues"	Judges, doesn't analyze

Formula

Writer + strong verb + choices + purpose + audience: name 2–3 choices or 1 strategy.

Ex: "To rally a weary nation, Churchill pairs grim honesty about losses w/ defiant vows."

Ex: "By moving from shared faith to personal suffering, King urges moderates to act now."

Upgrade It

Show tension: "While praising the graduates, she warns them that comfort breeds complacency."

Purpose ≠ topic: "about civil rights" is a topic; "to urge moderates to act" is a purpose.

Placement: end of a 1–3 sentence intro.

⚠ "Effective" is a judgment; explain HOW the choices achieve the purpose instead.

✓ Map the situation 1st, then write the thesis; it comes out sharper & faster that way.

Choices to Analyze

Common Choices

Choice	Ask what it does
Anecdote	Humanizes, builds pathos
Concession	Builds ethos, disarms
Repetition	Urges, unifies, stresses
Comparison	Links to known ideas
Diction	Sets tone & attitude
Allusion	Borrows authority
Structure	Builds toward purpose
Questions	Provokes, implicates

Appeals, Done Right

Don't stop at "pathos": name the emotion (guilt, pride, fear) & why it moves THIS audience.

Ethos: how the writer builds trust: shared identity, credentials, fairness to opponents, humility.

Choose Wisely

Pick 3–4 choices that carry the purpose; depth on fewer choices beats a tour of 8 devices.

Quote briefly: 2–8 words per quote, then analyze single words inside it (connotation, sound).

Ex: not "King uses pathos" but "King's image of his daughter's tears makes the harm personal."

Omissions count: what a writer leaves out (blame, data, names) is a choice worth analyzing.

⚠ "Here is a metaphor" w/o explaining its effect on the audience earns little on Row B.

✓ Analyze the choices you can tie most clearly to the audience's values & beliefs.

Organizing the Essay

Two Good Structures

Structure	Best when
Chronological	Passage shifts in stages
By strategy	Choices repeat throughout

Chronological: follow the writer's moves in order (opening → middle → close); easy to plan.

By strategy: 1 ¶ per major choice that repeats through the passage (e.g., shared values).

Ex topics: (1) King claims shared ground. (2) He exposes the cost of waiting. (3) He ends in hope.

Body ¶ Template

1. Claim: the choice & what it does ("King first establishes common ground w/ his critics").

2. Evidence: 1–2 brief, embedded quotes that show the choice at work in the passage.

3. Commentary: how the choice affects THIS audience & why it serves the purpose.

4. Link: connect to the next move or back to the purpose so your line of reasoning stays visible.

Intro & Conclusion

Intro: 1–2 sentences of context + thesis.

Conclusion: why the choices matter.

2–3 body ¶s are plenty; analyzing each move in depth beats writing 5 thin paragraphs.

⚠ Don't organize by appeal (ethos ¶, pathos ¶, logos ¶); it pushes you toward labels.

✓ Show the writer's progression in transitions: "Having won their trust, King then..."

Commentary (Row B)

Row B Levels

Pts	What it looks like
4	Specific evidence + explains how multiple choices serve purpose
3	Explains some choices' effect
2	Mostly summary, some explanation
1	Summary, little or no analysis
0	Restates or off-task

Explain How & Why

What → how → why: what the writer does, how it affects readers, why that serves the purpose.

Ex: "By calling the clergy 'my dear fellow clergymen,' King claims shared standing, so his rebuke sounds like a colleague's correction."

Verbs That Analyze

Strong verbs: evokes, underscores, reframes, juxtaposes, concedes, invokes, implicates.

Avoid: "uses," "shows," "makes the reader feel"; they describe instead of analyze.

Go Deeper

Word-level analysis: zoom in on 1 word's connotation ("cage," "dear") & its effect.

Effect on audience: name the reader's reaction (guilt, pride, unease) & why THEY would feel it.

⚠ "This shows that..." + a paraphrase of the quote is summary, not commentary.

✓ Write 2–3 sentences of commentary per quote; always name the effect on the audience.

Sophistication (Row C)

Ways to Earn It

Significance: explain why choices matter given the complexity of the situation & context.

Tensions: explain how the writer handles a divided audience, a risky claim or a hard occasion.

Shifts: explain why the writer changes tone or concedes, & what that move achieves.

Context: link choices to the era (wartime, civil rights) to explain why they were risky or needed.

Limits: note where a choice might alienate part of the audience & why the writer takes that risk.

What It Looks Like

Ex: "King must condemn the clergy without losing them; his courteous diction lets him do both."

Ex: "The speech's turn from mourning to resolve mirrors what the president asks the nation to do."

What Doesn't Count

Not enough	Why
A complex vocab word	Style ≠ insight
1 nuance sentence	Must run throughout
Praising the writer	Judgment, not analysis

Thread it: name the tension in the thesis, return to it in each ¶ & explain how it resolves.

Avoid praising the writer; explain.

⚠ One clever line won't earn Row C; the complexity must shape the whole essay.

✓ Easiest route: explain how the writer balances 2 competing goals for a mixed audience.

Traps, Timing & Checklist

Top Traps

Trap	Fix
Summary	Explain effect & purpose
Device list	3–4 choices in depth
"Pathos" labels	Name the emotion & why
Ignoring audience	Tie to their beliefs
Long quotes	2–8 words, then analyze

Timing

Plan: 5–8 min reading & annotating, ideally in the reading period, then ≈ 35 min to write it.

Running late? Finish commentary in your last body ¶ rather than a conclusion; Row B matters more.

Commentary outweighs evidence: short on time? Cut a quote, never the explanation after it.

Older texts: skip archaic words you don't know; analyze the moves you do understand well.

Final Checklist

Thesis names choices or a strategy AND the purpose, & it mentions the audience too.

Every quote is followed by 2+ sentences of commentary on its effect on the audience.

Present tense for the writer's choices ("King argues"), the convention for texts.

⚠ Don't judge whether the argument is right; analyze how it works, even if you disagree.

✓ The 3 FRQs = 55% of your score; this essay counts as much as each of the other 2.