The Ultimate AP® English Language Rhetorical Analysis Essay Cheat Sheet

The Rhetorical Analysis Task

What You Get

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

Prompt: "Write an essay that analyzes the rhetorical choices [writer] makes to [achieve a purpose]."

Timing: share the 15-min reading period, then ≈ 40 min to write; the passage is about 1 page long.

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 the writer's choices work on the audience & WHY they serve the purpose.

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

Audience first: every choice is a response to a specific audience in a specific moment (the situation).

Prompt Clues

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

Headnote: date, place, occasion & audience are free context; use them to explain why each choice fits.

Passages span centuries: older texts may use formal, unfamiliar language; read for the argument's moves.

Purpose words in the prompt ("to persuade," "to honor") must appear in your thesis, in some form.

⚠ Retelling what the writer says, paragraph by paragraph, is summary & keeps Row B at 1–2 points.

✓ Every sentence of analysis should answer "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 for each element in the margin before you mark a single device or choice in the text.

Annotate Choices

Mark 3–5 key moves, not every device: an opening story, a shift, repetition, a concession, a closing call.

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

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

Find the Structure

Divide the passage into 3–4 sections by job (set up, build, concede, call to act); they can become ¶s.

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

Read twice: 1st for the argument & purpose, 2nd for the choices that build it; budget about 8 minutes.

Ex margin note: "¶3: concedes delay is risky → then flips: waiting = complicity (guilt for moderates)."

Ask why here: why does this move come at this point?

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

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

The Thesis (Row A)

What Earns the Point

Row A: a defensible thesis that analyzes the writer's rhetorical choices; it can be 1 or more sentences.

Must name choices (or a clear strategy) & connect them to the purpose; restating the prompt scores 0.

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 overall strategy in your thesis.

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

Ex: "By moving from shared faith to personal suffering, King urges white moderates to stop waiting."

Upgrade It

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

Name the shift: a thesis that traces the passage's movement often previews a strong line of reasoning.

Placement: end of a short intro (1–3 sentences) so readers find it fast; it frames all of your body ¶s.

Check it: could someone argue the writer's choices work differently? Then your thesis is defensible.

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

⚠ "Effective" is a judgment, not analysis; explain HOW choices achieve the purpose instead.

✓ Write the thesis after mapping the situation; it's faster & sharper than starting w/ device names.

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 specific emotion (guilt, pride, fear) & who feels it & why it moves them.

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

Logos: data, cause-effect, analogies; explain why this audience would find the reasoning convincing.

Choose Wisely

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

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

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

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

Order is a choice too: what comes first?

⚠ Device spotting ("here is a metaphor") w/o explaining its effect on the audience earns little on Row B.

✓ The best choices to analyze are the ones you can tie most clearly to the audience's 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); natural & easy to plan.

By strategy: 1 ¶ per major choice (e.g., shared values, vivid suffering, urgent call); good for repeats.

Ex topic sentences: (1) King first claims shared ground. (2) He then exposes the cost of waiting. (3) He ends w/ hope.

Body ¶ Template

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

2. Evidence: 1–2 brief, embedded quotes that show the choice in action in the passage itself, w/ ¶ or line.

3. Commentary: how the choice affects THIS audience & why it advances the purpose (2–3 sentences).

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

Intro & Conclusion

Intro: 1–2 sentences of context from the headnote + thesis. Skip hooks; your writing time matters more.

Conclusion: 1–3 sentences on the significance of the choices, not a repeat of the thesis statement.

2–3 body ¶s are enough; each one analyzing a single move in depth beats 5 thin, rushed paragraphs.

Cite lines briefly if useful, e.g., (line 12).

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

✓ Use transitions that show the writer's progression: "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 the audience, why that serves the purpose.

Ex: "By calling the clergy 'my dear fellow clergymen,' King claims shared standing, so his rebuke reads as a colleague's correction, not an outsider's attack on them."

Verbs That Analyze

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

Avoid: "uses," "shows," "makes the reader feel"; they describe a choice instead of analyzing it.

Go Deeper

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

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

Purpose link: end commentary by saying how that reaction moves readers toward the writer's goal.

Sentence starters: "This choice matters because...," "For an audience that...," "By doing so, the writer..."

⚠ "This shows that..." + a paraphrase of the quote is summary; ask what the choice does to readers.

✓ ≈ 2–3 sentences of commentary per quote; explain the effect on the audience every single time.

Sophistication (Row C)

Ways to Earn It

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

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

Purpose of complexities: explain why the writer shifts tone or concedes, & what that move achieves.

Style: a vivid, persuasive style throughout can earn it, but it's the hardest route to rely on by itself alone.

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

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

What It Looks Like

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

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

Ex: "Her humor disarms skeptics, but it risks seeming flippant to grieving readers, so she drops it at the end."

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 at the very end.

⚠ Row C isn't earned by a single clever line; the complexity must shape the whole essay from start to end.

✓ Easiest route: explain how the writer balances 2 competing goals for a mixed or hostile 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 (in the reading period if you can), then ≈ 35 min to write the essay.

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

Commentary outweighs evidence: if you're short on time, cut a quote, not the explanation that follows it.

Older texts: don't panic over archaic words; focus on the moves you understand & analyze those well.

Final Checklist

Thesis names choices or a strategy AND the purpose.

Every quote is followed by commentary on its effect.

Audience is named & their beliefs explained in each ¶, not just mentioned once in the introduction.

Present tense for the writer's choices ("King argues"); it's the convention for discussing any text.

Name the writer, not "the author" each time; use their name & role ("Douglass, a formerly enslaved man").

Last 2 min: check that the thesis names the purpose & every ¶ explains the effects on the audience.

⚠ Never evaluate whether the argument is right; analyze how it works, even if you strongly disagree w/ it.

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