The Simple AP® English Language Rhetorical Situation Cheat Sheet

1.A Components of the Rhetorical Situation

The 6 Components

Part	Ask
Exigence	Why write now?
Purpose	What's the goal?
Audience	Who's reading?
Writer	Who is speaking?
Context	Time, place, occasion
Message	What's the main claim?

Rhetorical situation = all 6 parts together; every choice the writer makes responds to them.
Example: King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (1963) answers 8 white clergymen who called the protests "unwise and untimely."

Use It to Read

Map first: jot exigence, audience & purpose in the margin before marking any devices.
Headnote: the italic intro often gives writer, date & occasion; read it twice, it's free context.
Message ≠ subject: subject = the topic; message = the writer's claim about that topic.
Writer's ethos: who the writer is (role, identity, reputation) shapes what they can say.
SPACECAT (study tool): Speaker, Purpose, Audience, Context, Exigence, Choices, Appeals, Tone; covers all 6 parts and more.

⚠ Listing the 6 parts earns nothing alone. Explain HOW a choice fits the situation.

✓ Formula: writer + verb + choice + purpose + audience, in one clear sentence.

1.A Exigence & Purpose

Exigence

Exigence: what inspires, provokes or prompts a writer to create a text; the spark, event or urgent problem that makes the text necessary.

Exigence type	Example
Event / crisis	War, disaster, election
Another text	An editorial, a speech
Occasion	Graduation, eulogy
Ongoing problem	Pollution, inequality
Anniversary	Gettysburg, D-Day

Find it: look for dates, "recently," replies to critics, or a problem that can't wait any longer.

Purpose

Purpose: what the writer hopes to accomplish. A text can have more than one purpose; name the main one first, then the rest of its aims.
Purpose verbs: persuade, inform, warn, inspire, honor, refute, call to action, reassure, unite.
Layered purpose: a eulogy honors the dead AND comforts mourners; it may also push a cause.

MCQ Stems

Typical stem: "The primary purpose of the passage is to..." Predict the purpose first, then match both the verb & the object.

⚠ Exigence ≠ purpose. Exigence = what PROMPTED the text; purpose = what it tries to DO. Wrong choices often swap them.

✓ FRQ thesis: open w/ the writer's purpose; it frames every body paragraph.

1.A Audience & Context

Audience

Audience: has shared AND individual beliefs, values, needs & backgrounds to weigh.
Primary vs. secondary: King writes to 8 clergymen but also to white moderates across the nation and to future readers everywhere.

Stance	Writer's likely move
Friendly	Rally, call to action
Neutral	Inform, give evidence
Skeptical	Concede, then refute
Hostile	Common ground first
Mixed	Speak to each group

Clues: direct address ("you," "my fellow..."), shared references, jargon level, the venue.

Context

Context: the time, place and occasion of the text; it shapes what can be said and how.
Occasion: the event (graduation, memorial, rally) sets the tone & length readers expect.
Constraints: limits like genre, length, venue or the writer's status; good writers work within them.
Genre matters: speech (repetition), letter (personal voice), op-ed (brief, timely), essay.
Date + place: link the headnote's date to what was happening then (1963 Birmingham, 1940 London).

⚠ Don't say the audience is "everyone." Name a specific group and what it believes.

✓ Ask: what does this audience already believe, fear or want? The choices answer it.

1.B Writing to an Audience

Choices Follow the Audience

Writers' view of the audience (values, beliefs, needs, background) guides every choice they make: evidence, order & words.
Relate to readers: writers choose words & examples that connect to the audience's emotions and values to reach their purpose.

Moves That Reach an Audience

Move	Why it works
Shared values	Builds common ground
Concession	Shows fairness
Refutation	Answers objections
Inclusive "we"	Unites writer & reader
Familiar examples	Feel real to readers
Humor	Lowers defenses

Hostile audience: agree first, delay the thesis, stay calm; King calls the clergy "men of genuine good will" before he disagrees w/ their view.
Friendly audience: claim early, use energy & repetition, end w/ a clear call to act.
Mixed audience: speak to several groups at once (a president to Congress & the public).

Explain the Fit

Template: "Because [audience] values ___, the writer [choice] to [effect] and advance ___."

⚠ Never analyze a choice in a vacuum. Tie it to THIS audience and THIS purpose.

✓ Writing MCQs: if the stem names an audience, pick the choice that speaks to THAT group.

1.B Appeals: The Modes of Persuasion

The Appeals

Appeals: arguments persuade or motivate action through appeals, the modes of persuasion.

Appeal	Builds on	Looks like
Ethos	Credibility	Experience
Pathos	Emotion	Story, image
Logos	Reason	Data, logic

Ethos: the writer seems fair & trustworthy: credentials, shared identity, conceding a point.
Pathos: stirs emotion tied to values: vivid stories, loaded words, images of home or family.
Logos: appeals to reason: statistics, facts, analogies, cause-and-effect, answered objections.

How They Work Together

Overlap: one story can build ethos (I was there), pathos (it hurt) & logos (it shows a pattern).
Balance: too much pathos can backfire w/ skeptical readers; pure logos can feel cold & distant to a grieving or worried audience.
Counterargument: answering objections uses logos & builds ethos: it shows reason and fairness.
Credibility killers: insults, errors & exaggeration lower ethos even if the logic is sound.
Pathos + values: emotion works best when tied to what readers already value (family, fairness).

⚠ Saying "this is pathos" is not analysis. Explain how the choice moves THIS audience.

✓ Use exact verbs: "evokes guilt," "builds trust," "stirs pride," not just "uses pathos."

1.B Comparisons, Diction & Credibility

Comparisons

Comparisons: similes, metaphors, analogies & anecdotes link a new idea to one readers know.
Must be shared: a comparison only works if this audience understands the reference.
Allusion: a reference to a shared text, event or person borrows authority readers already grant.

Type	Example idea
Simile	Justice "like waters"
Metaphor	Debt as a heavy weight
Analogy	Paul's mission ↔ King's
Anecdote	A short personal story
Allusion	Bible, Lincoln, myth

Diction & Syntax

Word & sentence choices shape how readers see the writer and how far they accept the argument.
Register: formal (court, lecture) vs. informal (blog); a mismatch w/ the occasion hurts trust.
Syntax cues: short sentences → urgency; long ones → build-up; questions → invite readers in.
Tone: the writer's attitude (urgent, calm, ironic) must fit the audience and the occasion.

Bias & Credibility

Word choice can reveal bias & affect credibility: "protesters" vs. "rioters" vs. "activists."

⚠ An unshared reference can backfire. Explain WHY this audience would get it.

✓ Judge diction by its effect on how readers see the writer: calm, expert, angry.

2.A Introductions & Conclusions

Introductions

Job: introduce the subject or writer; may state the thesis; orient, engage & focus readers.

Opening move	Best when
Anecdote	Needs a human face
Question	Readers are curious
Statistic	Readers want proof
Quotation	Borrowing ethos
Scenario	Topic feels abstract
Contrast	Challenging a common view

Thesis placement: early for friendly readers; later for hostile ones, after common ground.
Avoid: dictionary definitions, "since the dawn of time," or restating the prompt word for word.

Conclusions

Job: bring the argument to a unified end and engage or focus the audience one last time.
Moves: show significance, call to action, propose a solution, leave a strong image, echo the opening.
Frame: open & close w/ the same image or story so the ending feels complete and earned.

Writing MCQs

Stem: "The writer wants to conclude by emphasizing... Which choice best does this?" Reread the goal, then match it exactly.
Revision Qs: adding a line for new readers? pick background they lack, not more argument.

⚠ A conclusion that only repeats the thesis rarely beats one that shows significance.

Rhetorical Situation on the Exam

Where It's Tested

Section	What to do
MCQ reading	Purpose, audience Qs
MCQ writing	Revise for an audience
Rhetorical analysis	Choices ↔ situation
Synthesis / Arg.	Write for a reader

Weight: Skill Categories 1 & 2 are each 11–14% of the 45-question multiple-choice section.

Rhetorical Analysis Essay

Thesis: name the writer's purpose & the choices that achieve it; don't just list devices.
Commentary: for each choice, explain how it fits the exigence, audience or context.
Sophistication: explain why choices matter given a complex situation, like a mixed audience.
Synthesis: each source has its own situation; note its author, purpose & bias before using it.

Analysis Verbs

Precise verbs: concedes, juxtaposes, underscores, invokes, evokes, reframes.

Common Traps

Summary ≠ analysis: explain WHY the writer says it that way to THIS audience, not just what.
Wrong audience: analyze for the original readers and their beliefs, not for a reader today.

⚠ Avoid "the author uses rhetorical devices to persuade." It names nothing specific.

✓ Each body paragraph: choice → quote → fit to audience & context → link to purpose.