The Ultimate AP® English Language Rhetorical Situation Cheat Sheet

1.A Components of the Rhetorical Situation

The 6 Components (RHS-1.A)

Part	Ask	King, 1963
Exigence	Why now?	Clergy's open letter
Purpose	What's the goal?	Justify protest
Audience	Who's reading?	White moderates
Writer	Who, w/ what ethos?	Jailed minister
Context	Time, place, event	Birmingham jail
Message	Main claim?	Can't wait for justice

Rhetorical situation = all 6 parts together; every choice a writer makes responds to them, so name all 6 before you analyze any device, quote or appeal in the text.
Example: King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail" answers "A Call for Unity," 8 white clergymen's statement calling protests "unwise and untimely"; King answers point by point.

Use It to Read

Map first: before marking devices, jot exigence, audience & purpose in the margin; every choice ties back to them.
Headnote: the italic intro on the exam often gives writer, date, occasion & audience; read it twice, it's free context.
Message ≠ subject: subject = topic (civil rights); message = the writer's claim about it (direct action is justified now).
Writer's ethos: who the writer is (role, identity, reputation) shapes what they can say & how it's received.
Visual texts: ads, cartoons & charts have a rhetorical situation too (common in synthesis sources).

Mnemonic

SPACECAT (teacher tool, not CB): Speaker, Purpose, Audience, Context, Exigence, Choices, Appeals, Tone; covers all 6 parts plus the writer's choices, appeals & tone.

⚠ Listing the 6 parts earns nothing by itself. Points come from explaining HOW a choice fits the situation.

✓ Analysis formula: writer + verb + choice + purpose + audience ("King cites... to show moderate clergy that...").

1.A Exigence & Purpose

Exigence (RHS-1.B)

Exigence: what inspires, stimulates, provokes or prompts a writer to create a text; the spark or urgent problem behind it.

Exigence type	Example
Event / crisis	Disaster, war, election
Another text	An editorial, a speech
Occasion	Graduation, eulogy, award
Ongoing problem	Pollution, inequality
Request	Invited lecture, letter
Anniversary	Gettysburg, D-Day

Find it: look for dates, "recently," responses to critics, or the problem the writer says can't wait any longer.

Purpose (RHS-1.C)

Purpose: what the writer hopes to accomplish w/ the text. Writers may have more than one purpose; name the main one first, then any secondary aims they also pursue.
Purpose verbs: persuade, inform, warn, inspire, honor, refute, call to action, reassure, criticize, unite, entertain.
Layered purpose: a eulogy honors the dead AND comforts mourners AND may push a cause (e.g., Reagan's Challenger speech, 1986, also defends space flight).
Purpose by part: each paragraph can have its own job (set up, prove, concede, call to act); ask "why here?"

MCQ Stems

Typical stems: "The primary purpose of the passage is to..." / "In paragraph 3, the writer most likely... in order to..."
Method: predict the purpose in your own words, then match verb AND object; too broad or too narrow → cut.

⚠ Exigence ≠ purpose. Exigence = what PROMPTED the text; purpose = what it tries to DO. Don't swap them on MCQs; distractors often offer the exigence as the purpose.

✓ FRQ thesis: open w/ purpose ("To rally a weary nation, Churchill..."); it frames every body paragraph.

1.A Audience & Context

Audience (RHS-1.D)

Audience: has shared AND individual beliefs, values, needs & backgrounds; good writers address both layers.
Primary vs. secondary: King writes to 8 clergymen but also to white moderates nationwide and to history.

Stance	Writer's likely move
Sympathetic	Rally, call to action
Neutral / unsure	Inform, give evidence
Skeptical	Concede, then refute
Hostile	Common ground first
Divided / mixed	Speak to each group

Clues to audience: direct address ("you," "my fellow..."), shared references, jargon level, assumed knowledge, venue.
Writer–audience relationship: peer, expert, insider or outsider → sets how direct the tone can be.

Context (RHS-1.E)

Context: the time, place and occasion of the text; it shapes what can be said, how and by whom.
Occasion: the specific event (graduation, memorial, rally); it sets the tone & length the audience expects.
Constraints: limits from context: genre, length, venue, censorship, the writer's status, what the audience already believes; good writers work within them.
Genre matters: speech (oral, repetition), letter (personal voice), op-ed (brief, timely), essay (reflective).

Read the Clues

Date + place in the headnote → link to what was happening then (1940 London, 1963 Birmingham, 2001 New York).
Changing context: a text read today differs from 1863; analyze the original audience's view first.

⚠ Don't assume the audience is "everyone." Name a specific group and its beliefs to earn analysis credit.

✓ Ask: what does this audience already believe, fear or want? The writer's choices answer that.

1.B Writing to an Audience

Choices Follow the Audience

RHS-1.F: writers' perceptions of an audience's values, beliefs, needs and background guide every choice they make, from evidence to word choice to the order of points.
RHS-1.G: to achieve a purpose, writers make choices to relate to the intended audience's emotions and values.
RHS-1.N: audiences are unique & dynamic, so writers tailor evidence, organization and language to them.

Moves That Reach an Audience

Move	Why it works
Shared values	Builds common ground
Concession	Shows fairness, ethos
Refutation	Answers objections
Inclusive "we"	Unites writer & reader
Tailored examples	Feel familiar, real
Order of points	Easy ideas first
Humor	Lowers defenses

Hostile audience: start w/ agreement, delay the thesis, use calm diction; King opens by calling the clergy "men of genuine good will" before disagreeing w/ them.
Friendly audience: state the claim early, use energy & repetition, end w/ a call to act (rallies, commencement speeches, fundraising letters & campaign events).
Mixed audience: speak to several groups at once (a president to Congress & the public) w/ layered appeals.

Explain the Fit

Template: "Because [audience] values ___, the writer [choice] to [effect], advancing the purpose of ___."

⚠ Never analyze a choice in a vacuum. "This makes it interesting" earns nothing; tie it to THIS audience & purpose every time you comment on any choice.

✓ Writing MCQs: when a Q names an audience, pick the choice that speaks to THAT group's values.

1.B Appeals: The Modes of Persuasion

Appeals (RHS-1.H)

Appeals: arguments seek to persuade or motivate action through appeals, the modes of persuasion (Aristotle).

Appeal	Builds on	Looks like
Ethos	Credibility	Experience, fairness
Pathos	Emotion, values	Anecdote, imagery
Logos	Reason, evidence	Data, cause/effect

Ethos: writer seems knowledgeable, fair & trustworthy: credentials, shared identity, conceding a point, respectful tone, admitting limits of what they know.
Pathos: stirs emotion tied to values: vivid stories, loaded diction, images of children or home, fear, pride, hope.
Logos: appeals to reason: statistics, expert facts, analogies, cause-effect chains, anticipating objections.
Kairos (bonus term, not CB): the opportune moment; urgency tied to the exigence ("now is the time").

How Appeals Work Together

Overlap: one anecdote can build ethos (I was there), pathos (it hurt) & logos (it shows a pattern) at once.
Balance: too much pathos w/ a skeptical audience can backfire; too much logos may feel cold to a grieving one.
Counterargument: addressing objections is logos + ethos: it shows reason and fairness at the same time.
Credibility killers: insults, errors, obvious bias or exaggeration lower ethos even when the logic is sound.
Emotion + values: pathos works best tied to what the audience already values (family, faith, fairness).

On the Exam

Name the device, then explain it: what the writer does, why for this audience, how it advances the purpose.

⚠ Labeling "this is pathos" is not analysis. Readers reward explaining how a specific choice moves THIS audience.

✓ Stronger verb: say "evokes guilt," "establishes shared faith," not "uses pathos" or "uses ethos."

1.B Comparisons, Diction & Credibility

Comparisons (RHS-1.K)

Comparisons: similes, metaphors, analogies & anecdotes relate a new idea to something the audience already knows.
Must be shared: a comparison only works if the audience understands it; a sports analogy may lose a non-fan reader.
Allusion: a reference to a shared text, event or figure borrows authority the audience already grants it.

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

Diction & Syntax (RHS-1.L)

Diction & syntax shape how the audience sees the writer and how far they accept the argument: formal → authority.
Register: formal (lecture, court) vs. informal (blog, rally); a mismatch w/ the occasion hurts credibility.
Syntax cues: long periodic sentences → build suspense; short sentences → urgency; questions → invite the reader in.
Tone: the writer's attitude (urgent, measured, ironic) shown through diction; it must suit audience & occasion.
Pronouns: "we" unites, "you" confronts or invites, "they" separates; track shifts in the writer's stance.

Bias & Credibility (RHS-1.M)

Word choice may reveal bias and raise or lower credibility: "protesters" vs. "rioters" vs. "activists."
Connotation: same meaning, different feeling; a choice w/ the wrong charge can alienate the intended audience.

⚠ A comparison w/ an unshared reference can backfire; explain WHY this audience would get it.

✓ Analyze diction by its effect on the audience's view of the writer: calm, expert, angry, humble, sincere.

2.A Introductions & Conclusions

Introductions (RHS-1.I)

Job: introduce the subject and/or writer to the audience; may present the thesis; orient, engage and focus readers.

Opening move	Best when
Anecdote	Audience needs a human face
Question	Readers unsure or curious
Statistic / data	Skeptical, logical readers
Quotation	Borrowing ethos
Scenario	Topic feels abstract
Contrast	Challenging a common view

Thesis placement: early for friendly or busy readers; delayed for hostile ones so common ground comes first.
Avoid: dictionary definitions, "since the dawn of time," restating the prompt; they waste the audience's attention.

Conclusions (RHS-1.J)

Job: bring the argument to a unified end; may present the thesis; engage or focus the audience one last time.
Moves: explain significance, connect to broader context, call to action, propose a solution, leave a compelling image.
Also: suggest a change in attitude, explain implications, summarize, or circle back to the opening (frame).
Frame: open & close w/ the same image or story; the return shows what changed and feels complete to readers.

Writing MCQs (2.A)

Stems: "Which sentence would best introduce...?" / "The writer wants to conclude by emphasizing... Which choice?"
Method: reread the goal in the stem; pick the option that does exactly that job for the named audience.
Revision Qs: asked to add a sentence to orient a new audience? pick background they lack, not more argument.

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

✓ In your own essays, end by explaining why the issue matters beyond the prompt, for real people.

Rhetorical Situation on the Exam

Where It's Tested

Section	Skill	Task
MCQ reading	1.A, 1.B	Purpose, audience
MCQ writing	2.A, 2.B	Revise for audience
Rhetorical analysis	All	Choices ↔ situation
Synthesis / Arg.	2.A, 2.B	Write for a reader

Weight: Skill Category 1 (reading) 11–14% + Category 2 (writing) 11–14% of the 45-question MCQ section.
MCQ writing sets: student drafts w/ revision Qs; the stem names a goal & audience, so match both, not grammar.

Rhetorical Analysis Essay

Thesis: name the writer's purpose & the choices that achieve it for this audience; don't just list devices.
Commentary: for each choice, explain how it reflects the exigence, audience or context; that's the 1.B skill in action.
Sophistication: explain the significance of choices given the complexity of the situation, e.g., a mixed audience.
Argument essay: picture a real audience (e.g., your school board) and choose evidence they'd accept.
Synthesis: sources have their own situations; note each one's author, purpose & bias before using it.

Analysis Verbs

Precise verbs: concedes, juxtaposes, underscores, invokes, reframes, dismisses, evokes, reassures, challenges.

Common Traps

Summary ≠ analysis: retelling what the writer says earns little; explain WHY they say it that way to THIS audience.
Wrong audience: analyzing for a modern reader instead of the original audience misses the writer's real strategy.

⚠ Avoid "the author uses rhetorical devices to persuade the reader." It names no choice, audience or purpose.

✓ Every body paragraph: choice → evidence (quote) → how it fits audience & context → link to purpose.