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AP ENGLISH LANGUAGE · FREE RESOURCE

The Rhetorical Analysis Essay Step by Step

This guide teaches you to write Question 2 of the AP English Language and Composition exam, the rhetorical analysis essay. It begins with the rhetorical situation, shows you how to turn devices into choices and choices into effects, and gives you a five-minute annotation routine, thesis formulas, organizing patterns, and a method for commentary and sophistication. A full worked example on Lincoln's Gettysburg Address (reproduced) takes you from annotation to a 6-point essay with commentary to a 3-point essay. Three practice prompts and an Answer Key close the guide.

What Question 2 Is

Question 2 gives you a short nonfiction passage, usually a complete speech, letter, op-ed, or memoir excerpt of about 600–800 words, with an italicized **orienting paragraph** naming the writer, credentials, date, occasion, genre, and audience, and often stating the message or purpose in broad terms. Since 2019 the task reads: "Write an essay that analyzes the rhetorical choices [the writer] makes to [convey her message / achieve his purpose / develop her argument about...]."

The task bullets ask you to:

- respond with a **thesis** that analyzes the writer's rhetorical choices;
- select and use **evidence** to support your line of reasoning;
- **explain** how the evidence supports your line of reasoning;
- **demonstrate an understanding of the rhetorical situation**;
- use appropriate grammar and punctuation.

It is one of three essays, each scored 0–6 and each worth one-third of the free-response section (55 percent of the exam). Over recent years it has been the lowest-scoring of the three (means of about 3.3 to 3.6 out of 6 in the 2023–2025 Chief Reader Reports). The reasons are consistent, and this guide is built around them.

The Rubric in Plain Language (Question 2)

ROW	POINTS	WHAT EARNS IT
A: Thesis	0–1	A claim about the writer’s rhetorical choices . Restating the prompt, summarizing, or only naming devices earns 0.
B: Evidence and Commentary	0–4	Specific evidence from the text; commentary that explains how choices contribute to the writer’s argument, purpose, or message. A 3 requires explaining at least one choice’s contribution; a 4 requires consistent explanation of multiple choices.
C: Sophistication	0–1	Explaining the significance of the choices given the rhetorical situation; explaining the function of a tension or complexity in the text; or a consistently vivid, persuasive style.

Scoring notes worth knowing: multiple instances of the **same** choice count toward the fourth Row B point only if each is shown to advance the argument; “examining individual choices without relating them to one another” does not earn Row C.

Step 1: The Rhetorical Situation First

Before you think about a single device, answer: **who is saying what to whom, why, when, and why now?** The College Board’s “demonstrate an understanding of the rhetorical situation” bullet is a scoring criterion, and the Chief Reader Reports note that students with real historical and contextual awareness tended to perform better.

SPACECAT

SPACECAT is a two-part routine. The first half (**SPACE**) gives you the situation; the second half (**CAT**) is the analysis.

LETTER	ELEMENT	QUESTIONS TO ASK
S	Speaker	Who is speaking? What credentials, role, or persona?
P	Purpose	What does the speaker want the audience to think, feel, or do?
A	Audience	Who is listening or reading? What do they value, fear, or already believe?

LETTER	ELEMENT	QUESTIONS TO ASK
C	Context	When and where? What was happening in the world? What kind of occasion?
E	Exigence	What event or problem made this text necessary now?
C	Choices	What specific moves does the speaker make?
A	Appeals	Where does the speaker build credibility, logic, or emotion, and how?
T	Tone	What attitude toward the subject and audience? Where does it shift?

An earlier tool, **SOAPSTone** (Speaker, Occasion, Audience, Purpose, Subject, Tone), covers the same ground. Use either; the important thing is that you finish the situation before you start hunting for techniques.

Avoid the Speech-Writing Errors

The Chief Reader Reports flag a recurring set of errors in how students treat speeches:

- Writing “the author” and “the readers” for a **speaker** and **audience** who are physically present.
- Misidentifying the audience (a speech to soldiers is not a speech to “the public”).
- Ignoring the **occasion** (a eulogy, a dedication, a commencement, a press conference all carry expectations).
- Treating the text as an essay and ignoring what makes it oral, such as repetition for the ear.

Use “speaker” and “audience” for speeches; “writer” and “readers” for letters and essays.

Step 2: Choices, Not Devices

The most important idea in this guide is the difference between a **device** and a **choice**.

A **device** is a label: *anaphora*, *metaphor*, *ethos*. A **choice** is a decision the writer made at a particular place in the text, described in plain language: *he repeats “we cannot” three times and then reverses it; she begins with a story about her grandmother before she makes her argument; he moves from the specific soldiers to the abstract nation.*

Readers reward **described choices** at least as much as labeled devices. Labels alone, such as “uses ethos, pathos, and logos,” tell the reader nothing. The 2023 Chief Reader Report specifically flags students who name “ethos” or “a call to action” as the choice itself when those are really the **effects** of a concrete choice.

WEAK (LABEL ONLY)	BETTER (CHOICE DESCRIBED)
“Lincoln uses repetition.”	“Lincoln repeats forms of the word <i>dedicate</i> in nearly every sentence of the first two paragraphs.”

WEAK (LABEL ONLY)	BETTER (CHOICE DESCRIBED)
"She uses pathos."	"She describes her mother counting coins at the kitchen table, putting a specific person in front of the audience."
"He uses a call to action."	"In his final sentence he turns from the soldiers to the living, using 'us' and 'we' to assign the audience a task."

You may still use the terms, but attach them to something concrete and **only when you are sure of them**. The 2023 report also notes that unsupported syntax claims (polysyndeton named but not evidenced) hurt credibility. If you are not certain of a term, describe the move.

Kinds of Choices to Look For

CATEGORY	EXAMPLES OF CHOICES
Structure and order	begins with a story; moves from past to present; saves the main claim for last; shifts from "they" to "we"
Evidence and examples	statistics, anecdote, historical reference, an authority, a hypothetical
Diction	formal vs. plain; religious or legal vocabulary; concrete vs. abstract; words with strong connotations
Syntax	very short sentences after long ones; long sentences that build; parallel structure; lists; questions
Figurative language	extended metaphor; analogy; personification; allusion
Perspective and address	first-person plural vs. singular; direct address; shifts in pronouns
Tone	humility, urgency, irony, solemnity, and where it changes
Concession and counter	acknowledging an objection; reframing an opposing view

Step 3: The Choice → Effect → Purpose Chain

Every sentence of analysis should do three jobs:

1. **Choice (What):** name and quote the specific choice.
2. **Effect (How):** say what it does to the audience: what they notice, feel, understand, or are positioned to believe.
3. **Purpose (Why):** connect the effect to the writer's purpose *for this audience in this situation*, using "in order to," "so that," or "thereby."

A model chain: *"Lincoln repeats 'we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow' (choice), which builds a rhythm of mounting reverence before undercutting it (effect), so that the audience feels the soldiers' sacrifice as greater than any ceremony and is drawn to take up the soldiers' unfinished work instead of merely honoring it (purpose)."*

The “So What?” Test

After each commentary sentence, ask “so what?” If the answer is not yet the thesis, keep going. Compare:

- “*The repetition emphasizes the word.*” So what?
- “*The repetition makes the audience feel the weight of the dead.*” So what?
- “*That weight is what moves the audience from mourning to a commitment to the cause.*” This connects to purpose.

Commentary Starters

- “This choice positions the audience to...”
- “By doing X, the speaker makes the audience...”
- “The effect is to...; as a result, ...”
- “Here the speaker assumes the audience values ___, so...”
- “This moment sets up the later turn to...”
- “The cumulative effect of ___ and ___ is...”
- “Rather than , **the speaker** , which suggests...”

Use precise verbs: *underscores, juxtaposes, reframes, humbles, elevates, narrows, widens, softens, escalates, undercuts, invites, positions, mobilizes, dramatizes, anticipates*. Avoid “shows,” “talks about,” “uses,” and “makes the reader feel” (the last without saying what and why).

Step 4: How to Annotate in Five Minutes

You will have about 40 minutes for the whole essay. Plan roughly: **5 minutes reading and annotating, 2–3 minutes planning, 30 minutes writing, 2 minutes review.**

The Annotation Routine

1. **(30 seconds) Read the orienting paragraph and the task sentence.** Write SPACE in the margin in a few words: Speaker, Purpose (as given), Audience, Context/Exigence.
2. **(2 minutes) Read the passage once, straight through,** with a pencil. Do not underline everything. Mark only:
 - **Shifts** (a box around *but, yet, however, now, so* and changes in tone or pronoun).
 - **Patterns** (words, structures, images that repeat).
 - **Surprises** (anything that struck you as odd, bold, or contradictory).
3. **(1 minute) Chunk the passage** into 3–4 parts by what the speaker is doing: “honors the dead,” “turns to the living,” “states the task.” Write a verb phrase for each chunk.
4. **(1 minute) Choose three or four choices that matter most** to the purpose, and for each, jot the effect.
5. **(30 seconds) Write a one-sentence draft thesis** in the margin.

What to Write in the Margin

MARK	MEANING
□ (box)	Shift or turn

MARK	MEANING
Underline	A choice you might quote (3–8 words)
Circle	Repeated word or structure
!	Surprise or key idea
?	Tension or confusion
a verb in the margin	what that chunk is doing ("honors," "redirects")

Annotate **what the speaker does**, not what the speaker says.

Step 5: Thesis Formulas

The thesis must claim something about the **choices** and their **purpose**. It need not use fancy language, but it should name specific moves. Readers accept theses that describe choices in plain words ("moves from personal anecdote to collective history") as readily as ones that use terminology.

Formulas

1. **Name + purpose:** "[Writer] [verb] [specific choice 1] and [specific choice 2] in order to [purpose] for [audience]."
2. **Shift-based:** "By shifting from [X] to [Y], [writer] [purpose]."
3. **Tension-based:** "[Writer] balances [A] with [B] so that [audience] [response]."
4. **Move-sequence:** "[Writer] first [moves], then [moves], and finally [moves], thereby [purpose]."

Thesis Quality Ladder

LEVEL	EXAMPLE (LINCOLN)	SCORE
Restates prompt	"Lincoln conveys his message about the soldiers' sacrifice."	0
Names devices only	"Lincoln uses repetition, metaphor, and parallelism."	0
Describes choices, no purpose	"Lincoln repeats key words and shifts to 'we'."	borderline
Claim: choices + purpose	"Lincoln insists that speech cannot honor the dead and then turns the audience from spectators into participants, using repetition and a shift to 'we' to make remembrance a duty."	1

Also avoid the "hardened school template": "In , argues . **He asserts** . His purpose is ____" (the 2012 Chief Reader's warning). A thesis should sound like an idea, not a form.

Step 6: Organizing the Essay

Option 1: Chronological (by chunk)

Move through the text in order, tracking how the speaker's purpose and tone develop. This is often the strongest approach for speeches, because it makes it easy to describe shifts and build a line of reasoning that follows the speech's logic. The 2023 report noted that chronological responses performed well.

Structure: Paragraph 1 (intro with thesis) → Paragraph 2 (opening move) → Paragraph 3 (turning point) → Paragraph 4 (closing move) → optional conclusion.

Option 2: By Choice

Group related choices ("diction," "structure," "perspective") across the text. This can work, but it risks becoming a **device list**. Use it only if your paragraphs build on each other.

Making a Line of Reasoning

Each body paragraph's topic sentence should **advance** the previous one. Use verbs and transitions that show development: "Having established..., Lincoln next...", "This humility prepares the audience for...", "The speech's final move depends on the earlier ones because..."

Two to four body paragraphs are enough. Three solid ones beat four thin ones. A short conclusion should add significance, not restate.

The Intro

Two to four sentences: the writer, text, and occasion in one sentence; the context or exigence if it clarifies the purpose; and the thesis. No hooks, no definitions, no "since the dawn of time."

Step 7: Commentary That Explains "How"

Most essays that score a 2 or 3 in Row B identify choices but never say how they work. Here is how to move from identification to explanation.

Level 1 (identification): "Lincoln uses repetition in the second paragraph."

Level 2 (vague effect): "This emphasizes his point."

Level 3 (specific effect): "The repeated 'we cannot' builds a rhythm that makes the audience expect a final obstacle."

Level 4 (effect + purpose in situation): "The repeated 'we cannot' builds a rhythm of humility; because the audience has just gathered for a ceremony of dedication, Lincoln's refusal to claim the power to dedicate lifts the soldiers above the ceremony and, in turn, the living above mere spectatorship."

The Chief Reader for 2024 asked for "what the choice does, why the writer made it, and whether it worked." Aim for Level 4 on your most important choices.

Handling Context

Context sentences should clarify a choice. They should not be history lessons. Compare:

- "In 1863, America was in a civil war." (generic)
- "Speaking on a battlefield where thousands had died four months earlier, Lincoln cannot avoid the physical presence of the dead, and his rhetoric acknowledges it." (context tied to a choice)

Step 8: Sophistication Through Tension and Complexity

Sophistication is a single point, and it comes **on top of** strong Row B work. It is earned when your essay does one of these **consistently, as part of the argument**:

1. **Explains the function of a tension or complexity** in the text (the speaker seems to say two opposed things; the passage moves against its apparent aim).
2. **Explains the significance of the choices in light of the rhetorical situation**, such as why this occasion makes these choices necessary.
3. **Sustains a vivid and persuasive style** throughout.

It is **not** earned by a sweeping statement about "society," a single clever phrase, an ornate vocabulary, or merely hinting at other arguments. Saying a text is "complex" is not showing complexity.

Complexity Frames (from Timm Freitas)

FRAME	SHAPE	EXAMPLE
Layered	this <i>and</i> that	The speech honors the dead and redirects the living.
Contradictory	this, <i>but also</i> that	Lincoln says his words will be forgotten, yet he uses them to define the nation's purpose.
Paradoxical	this, <i>in spite of</i> that	He claims to add nothing to the ground, yet his words are what make it a monument.

A useful sentence frame: "[Writer] presents ___ not simply as ___ but as ___."

Where to Find Tension

- A statement that seems to **undercut itself** (modesty that functions as authority).
- A **concession** that advances the argument.
- A **shift** in tone or audience that seems to contradict the opening.
- A gap between **what the speaker says he is doing and what the speech does**.

Full Worked Example: Lincoln's Gettysburg Address

The Prompt

Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865) was the sixteenth president of the United States. On November 19, 1863, he delivered the following remarks at the dedication of a national cemetery on the battlefield at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, where, four and a half months earlier, a battle in the Civil War had caused tens of thousands of

casualties. Read the passage carefully. Write an essay that analyzes the rhetorical choices Lincoln makes to convey his message about the meaning of the soldiers' sacrifice and the responsibility of the living.

(This prompt was written for this guide in the style of the exam. The Address is in the public domain.)

The Passage

Text of the Address as in the "Bliss copy." Paragraph breaks are those commonly used in printed editions.

1. Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.
2. Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.
3. But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us—that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion—that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain—that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

Step 1: SPACECAT

ELEMENT	NOTES
Speaker	The president, speaking not as a general or politician but as a mourner and leader; brief, second speaker after a long oration by Edward Everett
Purpose	Given: convey the meaning of the soldiers' sacrifice and the responsibility of the living. My version: redefine what the cemetery is for, so that the crowd leaves committed to the war's cause
Audience	A mixed crowd at a ceremony: families of the dead, soldiers, officials; and a wider public who would read the text in newspapers
Context	November 1863; war undecided; deep doubt in the North about the cost; the battle's dead nearby
Exigence	A cemetery dedication; also the need to answer the question "what were all those deaths for?"
Choices	See the annotation below

ELEMENT	NOTES
Appeals	Credibility through humility; emotion through the dead; logic through a claim about the nation's founding principle
Tone	Solemn, humble, then resolute

Step 2: Five-Minute Annotation

Chunks (what the speaker does)

- ¶1 *Reaches back* to the founding and defines the nation by a principle.
- ¶2 *Brings the principle into the present*: war tests it; the ceremony is "fitting and proper."
- ¶3, **first half**: *Redirects*: "But, in a larger sense, we can not..." The ceremony cannot do what it claims; the soldiers have already done it.
- ¶3, **second half**: *Hands the task to the living*; a single long sentence that builds to "shall not perish."

Marks

- *But, in a larger sense* (the turn).
- *dedicate/dedicated* (x6), *consecrate/hallow*; *here* (x7); *we/us/our* vs. *they*.
- Short–long contrast: the first paragraph is one sentence; the final sentence is very long and held together by repeated *that*.
- ! "The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here" – a speaker undercutting his own speech.
- ? Why does he first call the ceremony "fitting and proper" and then say it cannot be done?

Choices chosen (3)

- Opening with a **founding principle** ("proposition that all men are created equal"), placed before any mention of the battle.
- Repetition and the reversal** from "dedicate" to "we can not dedicate—consecrate—hallow."
- Pronoun and verb shift** from "they" (the dead) to "us the living" and the long closing sentence built on "that... that... that..."

Tension: Lincoln says words don't matter ("little note, nor long remember") but the speech is an act of words defining what the ground means. The speech's modesty *is* its authority.

Step 3: Thesis

Lincoln lifts the soldiers' sacrifice above ceremony by opening with the nation's founding principle, then by insisting that the living cannot "hallow" what the dead have already consecrated, and he turns the audience from mourners into inheritors of "the unfinished work," using a rising final sentence to make the cause the audience's own.

Line of reasoning: (1) Establish the **stakes** (the principle) → (2) **humble** the ceremony to elevate the dead → (3) **transfer** the dead's work to the living.

Step 4: The 6-Point Essay with Commentary

Commentary in brackets is for study. In your exam essay, omit it.

On a battlefield where thousands had died only months earlier, with the outcome of the war still uncertain and many in the North doubting its cost, Abraham Lincoln had to do more than dedicate a cemetery. In his brief remarks at Gettysburg, he lifts the soldiers' sacrifice above ceremony by opening with the nation's founding principle, then by insisting that the living cannot "hallow" what the dead have already consecrated, and he turns the audience from mourners into inheritors of "the unfinished work," using a rising final sentence to make the cause the audience's own.

Commentary: *The first sentence places the speech in its situation with specific context (months, doubt) that matters to the choices. The thesis names three choices in plain language and a purpose that fits the prompt (meaning of sacrifice, responsibility of the living). It is a claim about choices, not a restatement. Row A: earned.*

Lincoln begins not with the dead but with an idea. Before he mentions the battle, he reaches back "four score and seven years" to a nation "conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." By starting with the founding, and by phrasing it in the language of birth and dedication, he gives the audience a purpose large enough to explain the carnage around them. The war, in the next paragraph, is then framed as a "test" of whether that nation "can long endure," which means that the soldiers' deaths are not losses to be counted but answers to a question about whether the principle is real. Beginning here allows a grieving audience, many of whom were doubting the war's cost, to see the dead as having died for something that is still alive and still at risk.

Commentary: *Topic sentence is a claim about what the choice accomplishes. The writer quotes briefly (not a long block), describes the choice (starting with an idea, "birth and dedication" language), and traces how "test" reframes casualties. The final sentence links the effect to the specific audience (grieving, doubting) and to Lincoln's purpose. Context is used to explain the choice rather than decorate.*

Having established the stakes, Lincoln does something unexpected: he reduces the ceremony itself. After calling the dedication "altogether fitting and proper," he turns on the word "But" and repeats the verb he has just used, "we can not dedicate—we can not consecrate—we can not hallow—this ground." The three verbs climb in religious weight, and the repeated "can not" denies them one by one, so that the speech's own ritual vocabulary becomes evidence of its inadequacy. The result is a kind of humility that functions as praise: the soldiers have already done what the ceremony cannot, "far above our poor power to add or detract." Because the speaker who can do the most in that place, the president, declines to claim any power, the audience's attention is moved from the speaker to the dead, and from the dead to what they accomplished. Lincoln can then say, with unusual confidence, that "the world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here." The contrast between "say" and "did" turns the soldiers' actions into the only monument that matters, and prepares the audience to hear that actions, not words, are what is now required of them.

Commentary: *This paragraph is the heart of the essay and builds on paragraph 2 ("Having established the stakes... does something unexpected"). It describes the choice (repeated verb, climbing weight, denial), explains effect (the ritual vocabulary shows its own inadequacy), and ties that to purpose (shift attention, prepare the audience for a task). Evidence is specific. It also begins to show the complexity Row C wants: modesty functions as praise. Row B: this is where "explains how multiple choices contribute" happens: repetition, diction, and contrast of "say"/"did."*

The speech's final move is to transfer the dead's work to the living, and here Lincoln's syntax and pronouns do the persuading. Up to now the soldiers have been "they," and the ceremony's participants "we" in a limited sense. In the closing lines, "it is for us the living" becomes "the great task remaining before us," and the audience is asked to join the dead in a shared cause. The final sentence is a single sweep, held together by a chain of clauses beginning with "that": "that from these honored dead we take increased devotion... that we here highly resolve... that this nation... shall have a new birth of freedom—and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth." The reiterated "that" keeps the sentence from resolving until its last words, so that the audience, in effect, has to wait through the whole chain to arrive at the goal; and the reply of the last clause, with its three balanced phrases ("of the people, by the people, for the people"), makes the cause sound complete and universal rather than partisan. The "new birth of freedom" also loops back to the "birth" of the first sentence, so that the end of the speech completes the circle begun at its start: the nation is not only remembered but reborn, and the audience is the midwife. In this way, a speech that began by honoring the dead ends by assigning the living a duty.

Commentary: *The topic sentence shows the next step in the line of reasoning ("final move... transfer"). The paragraph describes concrete choices: pronoun shift, repeated "that," the balanced triad, the callback to "birth." Each choice has a stated effect (delay, completeness, universality, circle) and a purpose (assign a duty). This is Level 4 commentary. The observation about "birth" and "new birth" relates two choices to each other, which is what the rubric means by relating choices rather than examining them one at a time.*

The speech thus achieves something its speaker claims it cannot. Lincoln says that his words will be forgotten, yet the shape of those words, from the founding principle, to the denial of the ceremony, to the closing assignment, is what turns a cemetery into a statement of what the war is for. His modesty is not an obstacle to his purpose but the means of it: by declining to claim the ground, he lets the dead claim it, and by giving credit to the dead, he makes the living responsible for what they started. The speech's brevity belongs to the same logic. It does not argue the war's justice so much as locate it in a promise the audience is already part of.

Commentary: *The conclusion adds significance: it names the central tension (a speaker who says words don't matter, with a speech that makes them matter) and explains its function (modesty as means, dead credited so living responsible). That is a Row C move: explaining the function of a tension or complexity, tied to the rhetorical situation. Row C: earned. Total: Row A 1, Row B 4, Row C 1 = 6.*

Step 5: The 3-Point Essay and What Went Wrong

In the Gettysburg Address, Abraham Lincoln uses many rhetorical strategies to convey his message about the soldiers' sacrifice. He uses repetition, parallelism, and pathos to appeal to his audience. This shows that he wants them to remember the soldiers.

First, Lincoln uses repetition. He repeats the word "dedicate" many times, like in "we can not dedicate, we can not consecrate, we can not hallow." This repetition emphasizes his point. It shows that the soldiers were very brave and that the ceremony is not enough.

Next, Lincoln uses parallelism. In the last line he says “of the people, by the people, for the people.” This is parallelism. It makes the speech sound better and helps the audience remember it. It also shows that the government should belong to everyone.

Lincoln also uses pathos. He talks about the brave men who died, which makes the audience feel sad. This makes them want to support the war. Lincoln is a great speaker who knows how to appeal to emotions.

In conclusion, Lincoln uses repetition, parallelism, and pathos to convey his message. The Gettysburg Address is a famous speech that is still remembered today.

Scoring: Row A 0 or borderline (the thesis names devices and an effect that merely restates the prompt: “wants them to remember the soldiers”; no claim about how the choices work). Row B 2 (specific quotations, but commentary is generic: “emphasizes his point,” “sounds better”). Row C 0. A reader might award A 1 for the effort to claim a purpose; the overall result is a 3 at best.

What went wrong

PROBLEM	WHERE IT SHOWS	FIX
Device list as thesis	“repetition, parallelism, and pathos”	Describe choices and give a purpose
Device-by-device organization	One paragraph per device, “First... Next... also...”	Organize chronologically or by purpose so paragraphs build
Vague effects	“emphasizes his point,” “sounds better,” “shows that the soldiers were brave”	Say what the audience understands or does as a result
Pathos as a choice	“Lincoln also uses pathos”	Pathos is an effect; name the detail that creates it
Mislabeled device	Calls “dedicate” repetition a way to show bravery, with no tie to the turn from ceremony to the living	Show the repeated verb as a rhetorical reversal
No situation	No mention of the cemetery, the war, or the doubt	Use context to explain choices
Summary conclusion	“famous speech that is still remembered today”	Add significance or implication
No complexity	Ignores the paradox of the speaker discounting words	Explore the tension

Notice that nearly every quotation in the weak essay is a good one. The problem is what happens after the quotation: none of the commentary uses the chain from choice to effect to purpose.

Pacing the Rhetorical Analysis Essay

PHASE	MINUTES	OUTPUT
Read orienting paragraph and task	1	Underline the purpose
Read and annotate	4	Chunks, shifts, patterns
Plan thesis and line	2–3	Thesis plus 3 topic sentences
Write	30	Intro (3 sentences), 3 body paragraphs, brief conclusion
Review	2	Check thesis, quotes, clarity

Target about 500–700 words. If you run out of time, shorten the conclusion; do not drop a body paragraph.

Checklists

Before You Write

- ☐ I know the speaker, audience, occasion, and purpose, and I can explain them in one sentence.
- ☐ I can name 3–4 choices in plain language.
- ☐ My thesis makes a claim about choices **and** purpose.
- ☐ My topic sentences build on one another.
- ☐ I have noticed at least one shift or tension.

While You Write

- ☐ Each paragraph includes a quote of 3–8 words, embedded.
- ☐ Each quote is followed by an effect and a purpose.
- ☐ I use “speaker” and “audience” for a speech.
- ☐ I avoid labeling ethos/pathos/logos as the choice itself.
- ☐ I relate choices to one another at least once.

After You Write

- ☐ I did not summarize the passage.
- ☐ My conclusion adds significance rather than repeating.
- ☐ I can point to a complexity that my essay explains.

Common Pitfalls (From the Chief Reader Reports)

1. Identification without analysis: “uses these terms to appeal to the audience.”
2. Naming ethos, pathos, or logos as a choice.
3. Claiming a device the text does not contain.
4. Thesis restates the prompt.

5. Device-by-device organization with no line of reasoning.
6. Generic effects: "to emphasize his points."
7. Treating a speech as an essay, or ignoring the occasion.
8. Examining each choice in isolation, so Row C is lost.

Three Practice Prompts

For each, locate the text in a public-domain source. The prompts below are original and written in the exam's style. Read the full text before you write.

Practice Prompt 1: Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address (1865)

Orienting paragraph: Abraham Lincoln delivered his Second Inaugural Address on March 4, 1865, as the Civil War was drawing to a close, to a crowd gathered at the U.S. Capitol. Unlike a typical victory speech, the address is only about 700 words and does not celebrate the approaching end of the war. Read the speech carefully. Write an essay that analyzes the rhetorical choices Lincoln makes to convey his message about the causes of the war and the way the nation should move forward.

Focus: How does Lincoln treat guilt (shared by both sides)? How do the shifts from "the war" to "God" to "with malice toward none" work? What does the lack of triumph do?

Practice Prompt 2: Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Declaration of Sentiments" (1848)

Orienting paragraph: Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902) was a leader of the women's rights movement. She drafted the Declaration of Sentiments for the first women's rights convention, held in Seneca Falls, New York, in July 1848. The document deliberately echoes another famous American text. Read the passage carefully. Write an essay that analyzes the rhetorical choices Stanton makes to argue that women deserve the rights of citizens.

Focus: What does she gain by modeling the document on the Declaration of Independence? Where does she change the wording? How does the list of grievances accumulate?

Practice Prompt 3: Chief Joseph, Surrender Speech (1877)

Orienting paragraph: Chief Joseph (Hin-mah-too-yah-lat-kekt, c. 1840–1904) was a leader of the Nez Perce people. In October 1877, after a long retreat of more than a thousand miles toward Canada, he surrendered to U.S. Army forces in Montana. The speech was recorded and translated by army officers. Read the passage carefully, keeping in mind that it exists in translation. Write an essay that analyzes the rhetorical choices Joseph makes to convey his message about the weariness of his people and the consequences of the surrender.

Focus: How do short sentences, repeated "I am tired" structures, and appeals to the dead and the living children work? Why does he address the officers directly while the larger audience is the public that would read the speech?

Answer Key

Worked Example Scoring

ESSAY	ROW A	ROW B	ROW C	TOTAL
6-point essay	1	4	1	6
3-point essay	0 or 1	2	0	2–3

Practice Prompt Planning Notes (Model Answers, Not the Only Valid Ones)

Prompt 1: Second Inaugural

- *Situation*: war nearly won, but the nation still divided; Lincoln refuses to gloat.
- *Possible thesis*: "By spreading responsibility for the war across North and South, and by letting Scripture and the language of judgment speak where he might have spoken in triumph, Lincoln prepares a divided audience for reconciliation by denying anyone the position of the righteous victor."
- *Choices to find*: the opening reluctance to say much ("little that is new"); the balanced sentences that equate "each looked for an easier triumph"; the biblical allusions and the shift to God's judgment; the final series of "with malice toward none, with charity for all."
- *Tension (Row C)*: a victorious leader speaks without triumph; the speech's authority comes from its refusal to claim moral superiority.

Prompt 2: Declaration of Sentiments

- *Situation*: a small convention in a society where women could not vote or own property in marriage.
- *Possible thesis*: "By borrowing the form and phrasing of the Declaration of Independence and replacing 'men' with 'man' as the tyrant and women as the oppressed, Stanton makes the audience measure the nation against its own founding promise, so that denying women's rights becomes a betrayal of American principle."
- *Choices to find*: the deliberate echo of the Declaration; "We hold these truths to be self-evident" changed to include women; the long list of grievances beginning with "He has" that builds into an indictment; the resolutions.
- *Tension (Row C)*: she uses the language of the nation's founders to condemn the nation's practice, claiming loyalty to America while accusing it.

Prompt 3: Chief Joseph

- *Situation*: military defeat, a translated speech, an audience that includes officers and, by publication, the American public.
- *Possible thesis*: "Through short, declarative sentences, a refrain of weariness, and a pivot from the fallen leaders to the freezing children, Joseph turns a surrender into an indictment, making his audience witness the human cost of a long war."
- *Choices to find*: the opening address to the chiefs; the repetition of "I am tired of fighting"; the list of the dead; the references to the cold and the children; the final line ("I will fight no more forever") and its dignity.
- *Tension (Row C)*: surrender is both defeat and an assertion of moral authority; the translation adds distance but also formal simplicity.

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