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AP ENGLISH LANGUAGE · FREE RESOURCE

Analysis Frameworks: SOAPSTone, SPACECAT, OPTIC, DIDLS, **SMELL**

Five memory tools that turn "I don't know what to say about this text" into a repeatable process. Learn what each one is for, run it once on a short passage, then copy the blank template into your notes.

How to choose a framework

No framework is magic. Each one is a checklist that forces you to notice something you might skip under time pressure. Use the one that matches the job.

FRAMEWORK	WHAT IT HELPS YOU DO	BEST USED FOR
SOAPSTone	Name the whole rhetorical situation	The 15-minute reading period; FRQ 2 and any MCQ passage
SPACECAT	Move from situation to choices to effect	Planning a rhetorical analysis essay
OPTIC	Read a visual or data source	The cartoon, graph, or photo in the synthesis sources
DIDLS	Analyze word and sentence-level style	Style questions (Skills 7.B, 7.C) and body-paragraph evidence
SMELL	Test a source's role in an argument	Deciding which synthesis sources to use and how

1. SOAPSTone: the rhetorical situation in six boxes

Speaker, Occasion, Audience, Purpose, Subject, Tone. SOAPSTone answers the question every FRQ 2 prompt asks you to answer before you can say anything intelligent: who is saying what, to whom, why, and in what circumstances?

Step by step

1. **Speaker.** Who is talking, with what credentials or stake? (Not just a name: “a sitting president at the end of a long war.”)
2. **Occasion.** What event, problem, or moment made this text necessary? This is the *exigence*.
3. **Audience.** Who is the intended reader or listener, and what do they believe going in?
4. **Purpose.** What does the speaker want the audience to think, feel, or do afterward? Write it as a verb phrase: *to persuade... to console... to redefine...*
5. **Subject.** State the topic in a short phrase.
6. **Tone.** Name the speaker’s attitude with a precise adjective (see the Tone and Attitude Word Bank).

Worked example: Lincoln at Gettysburg (November 19, 1863)

Read the opening and closing movements of the address:

“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. ... 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.”

BOX	NOTES
Speaker	Abraham Lincoln, president of a divided nation, speaking after a featured two-hour oration by Edward Everett
Occasion	The dedication of a national cemetery four and a half months after the battle
Audience	The crowd at the cemetery, but also newspaper readers across the North, who will decide whether to keep supporting the war
Purpose	To redefine what the war is for: not only saving the Union but fulfilling the promise of equality
Subject	The meaning of the dead soldiers’ sacrifice
Tone	Solemn, humble, resolute

Why this matters on the exam: an essay that opens its thesis with “Lincoln, speaking to a grieving public, redefines the war’s purpose by...” has already earned its footing on the rhetorical situation. A thesis that says “Lincoln uses repetition” has not.

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BOX	YOUR NOTES
Speaker	
Occasion	

BOX	YOUR NOTES
Audience	
Purpose	
Subject	
Tone	

2. SPACECAT: from situation to choices

Speaker, Purpose, Audience, Context, Exigence, Choices, Appeals, Tone. SPACECAT extends SOAPStone into the part of the essay that earns most of the points: the choices.

Step by step

1. Fill in S, P, A, C, E in two minutes, in the margin or on scratch paper.
2. **Choices:** circle three to five deliberate decisions the writer makes (structure shifts, comparisons, diction clusters, syntax moves, evidence selection).
3. **Appeals:** for each choice, decide whether it works mainly through logos, ethos, or pathos, or a blend.
4. **Tone:** note where the tone shifts. Shifts usually mark the best evidence.
5. Write a chain for each choice: **choice → effect on this audience → how it advances the purpose.**

Worked example: Frederick Douglass, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" (1852)

Douglass was invited to address a white audience in Rochester, New York, on the Fourth of July. His opening praises the founders; his central section turns on his audience.

LETTER	NOTES
S	Frederick Douglass, formerly enslaved, a famous abolitionist orator
P	To shame the audience into confronting the contradiction between national ideals and slavery
A	A largely white, free audience gathered to celebrate
C	1852: the Fugitive Slave Act is law; the nation is dividing
E	An invitation to celebrate independence, which forces the question of whose independence
Choice 1	He begins humbly and praises the founders, then turns sharply with "I am not included within the pale of glorious anniversary": the early praise builds credibility, then the turn exposes the audience's hypocrisy
Choice 2	He shifts from "you" and "your" to "I" and "we" to mark the distance between the audience's holiday and his reality

LETTER	NOTES
Choice 3	He asks a series of rhetorical questions that give the audience no comfortable answer
Appeals	Ethos (humility, then moral authority), pathos (indictment), logos (the contradiction made explicit)
Tone	Moves from respectful to ironic to indignant

Chain for Choice 1: the generous opening lowers the audience's defenses; the sharp turn then feels earned rather than hostile; that lets Douglass accuse the audience of national hypocrisy without losing their attention.

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LETTER	YOUR NOTES
S	
P	
A	
C	
E	
Choice 1 → effect → purpose	
Choice 2 → effect → purpose	
Choice 3 → effect → purpose	
Appeals	
Tone (and where it shifts)	

3. OPTIC: reading a visual or data source

Overview, Parts, Title, Interrelationships, Conclusion. Use OPTIC on the cartoon, photograph, chart, or graph in a synthesis prompt. Students often glance at a visual and quote nothing from it; OPTIC makes you read it like a text.

Step by step

1. **O, Overview:** what is this? Note the type, date, and publisher.
2. **P, Parts:** list the labels, figures, symbols, and axes. For a graph, read what the vertical and horizontal axes measure.
3. **T, Title:** read the title and caption as the argument the creator wants you to see.
4. **I, Interrelationships:** how do the parts connect? Look for trends, contrasts, or symbolic relationships.
5. **C, Conclusion:** state the visual's point in a sentence, then decide how it supports or complicates your thesis.

Worked example: Franklin's "Join, or Die" (1754)

STEP	NOTES
O	A woodcut published in Benjamin Franklin's <i>Pennsylvania Gazette</i> in 1754, during the French and Indian War
P	A snake cut into segments, each labeled with an initial for a colony or region; the words "JOIN, or DIE"
T	The caption is a command, with a threat built into it
I	The separated pieces of the snake cannot function; a snake was also a folk emblem of danger, and an old superstition said a cut snake could revive if joined before sunset
C	The colonies must unite for defense or be destroyed separately

Using it in an essay: "Franklin's famous 1754 woodcut compresses the argument for union into a single image: a snake that has been cut apart is harmless, but one that is joined is dangerous." One sentence like this, tied to your thesis, counts as evidence from the visual.

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STEP	YOUR NOTES
Overview	
Parts	
Title	
Interrelationships	
Conclusion	
How it supports or complicates my thesis	

4. DIDLS: sentence-level style

Diction, Imagery, Details, Language, Syntax. DIDLS is the standard memory device for style analysis. Its danger is that students list the five letters and stop. The point is the effect, not the label.

Step by step

1. **Diction:** which words stand out? Are they formal or casual, concrete or abstract, loaded with positive or negative connotation?
2. **Imagery:** what sensory language appears, and what does it make you feel?
3. **Details:** what facts or particulars did the writer *choose* (and what did they leave out)?
4. **Language:** what figurative or rhetorical language appears (metaphor, analogy, irony, understatement)?
5. **Syntax:** how are the sentences built? Notice length, order, repetition, punctuation, and fragments.

6. For each item, write the effect in one short sentence. If you cannot, the observation is not yet useful.

Worked example: Jonathan Swift, "A Modest Proposal" (1729)

"It is a melancholy object to those who walk through this great town, or travel in the country, when they see the streets, the roads, and cabin-doors, crowded with beggars of the female sex, followed by three, four, or six children, all in rags, and importuning every passenger for an alms."

LETTER	OBSERVATION	EFFECT
D	"melancholy object," "importuning," "alms": formal, civic vocabulary	Gives the speaker the polish of a respectable reformer, which makes what follows more disturbing
I	"cabin-doors," "in rags": concrete visual detail	Anchors the problem in what any citizen could see
D	The narrator counts "three, four, or six children"	The statistical tone presents suffering as an economic problem, a clue to his cold perspective
L	The word "object" treats people as things	Foreshadows the proposal to treat children as commodities
S	One long, balanced sentence with a delaying list	The calm, orderly rhythm contrasts with the misery described, which is the irony that drives the essay

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LETTER	OBSERVATION (QUOTE OR PARAPHRASE)	EFFECT ON AUDIENCE / PURPOSE
	Diction	
	Imagery	
	Details	
	Language	
	Syntax	

5. SMELL: testing a source's role in your argument

Sender-receiver relationship, Message, Evidence, Logic, Language. SMELL is especially useful on the synthesis essay, where you must decide how a source fits *your* argument.

Step by step

1. **Sender-receiver relationship:** who wrote it, for whom? How does that affect trust?

2. **Message:** what does the source claim, in a sentence?
3. **Evidence:** what does it use as support (statistics, anecdotes, expert testimony)?
4. **Logic:** is the reasoning sound, or are there gaps and fallacies?
5. **Language:** is the language neutral, emotional, or technical?
6. **Decision:** will you use this source as support, as a counterargument to answer, or as background for a qualification?

Worked example: Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (1776)

"Society in every state is a blessing, but government, even in its best state, is but a necessary evil; in its worst state an intolerable one."

LETTER	NOTES
S	An anonymous pamphleteer addressing ordinary colonists, not an elite audience
M	Government exists only because human vice makes it necessary, so it should be limited
E	General principle, then historical and practical appeals
L	Starts from a distinction between "society" and "government," then reasons forward
L	Short, quotable, plain-spoken sentences built to be read aloud in taverns

Decision for a synthesis essay on government power: use it as support for a limited-government position, but qualify it by noting that Paine was arguing against a monarchy, not against government as such.

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LETTER	YOUR NOTES
Sender-receiver	
Message	
Evidence	
Logic	
Language	
Decision: support / counter / qualify	

Practice

1. Run **SOAPSTone** on the passage from Swift above. Write one sentence of purpose.

2. Run **OPTIC** on any chart or cartoon from a newspaper or from your practice exams. State its conclusion in a sentence.
3. Choose one sentence from any practice-exam passage and run **DIDLS** on it. For each item, write the *effect*, not just the label.

Answer Key

1. **SOAPSTone (Swift)**. Strong answers name a speaker who adopts the pose of a calm, rational reformer; an occasion of widespread poverty in Ireland; a purpose of satirizing British policy and the “projectors” who propose cold economic remedies; and a tone that is ironic, detached, and horrifying by contrast.
2. **OPTIC**. There is no single right answer. A good answer names the visual's type, quotes its caption or title, identifies two relationships among its parts, and states the point in one complete sentence.
3. **DIDLS**. Check that each observation points to a specific word or structure and that each effect states what the *audience* feels or concludes. “Shows his tone” is not an effect. “Makes the speaker sound falsely reasonable, so the reader distrusts him” is.

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