

Strategies for Mastering the Rhetorical Analysis Essay

AP Language

Becky Talk, Cushing H.S.

Rhetorical analysis is difficult for many students. One of the reasons is because they may have trouble understanding exactly what tasks are asked of them. Every rhetorical analysis prompt is comprised of two distinct tasks: a concrete one and an abstract one. Look at the rhetorical analysis prompts from 2002 to 2010. The concrete task is underlined, and the abstract task is bracketed.

2002: In his Second Inaugural Address, given one month before the end of the Civil War, United States President Abraham Lincoln surprised his audience—which expected a lengthy speech on politics, slavery, and states’ rights—with a short speech in which he contemplated the effects of the Civil War and offered his vision for the future of the nation. Read the address carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze the rhetorical strategies President Lincoln used [to achieve his purpose.] Support your analysis with specific references to the text.

2003: Alfred M. Green delivered the following speech in Philadelphia in April 1861, the first month of the Civil War. African Americans were not yet permitted to join the Union army, but Green felt that they should strive to be admitted to the ranks and prepare to enlist. Read the speech carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze the methods that Green uses [to persuade his fellow African Americans to join the Union forces.]

2004: The passage below is an excerpt from a letter written by the eighteenth-century author Lord Chesterfield to his young son, who was traveling far from home. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze the rhetorical strategies that Chesterfield uses [to reveal his own values.]

2005: The following article is a mock press release from *The Onion*, a publication devoted to humor and satire. Read the article carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze the strategies used in the article [to satirize how products are marketed to consumers.]

2006: The passage below is an excerpt from Jennifer Price’s recent essay “The Plastic Pink Flamingo: A Natural History.” The essay examines the popularity of the plastic pink flamingo in the 1950s. Read the passage carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze how Price crafts the text [to reveal her view of United States culture.]

2007: In the passage below from *Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World*, Scott Russell Sanders responds to an essay by Salman Rushdie, a writer who left his native India for England. Rushdie describes the “effect of mass migrations” as being “the creation of radically new types of human being: people who root themselves in ideas rather than places.” Read the Sanders passage carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze the strategies Sanders uses [to develop his perspective about moving.]

2008: In the following passage from *The Great Influenza*, an account of the 1918 flu epidemic, author John M. Barry writes about scientists and their research. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Barry uses rhetorical strategies [to characterize scientific research.]

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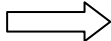
2009: The two passages below, both written by noted contemporary scientist Edward O. Wilson, appear in Wilson's book *The Future of Life* (2002). In the passages, Wilson satirizes the language of two groups that hold opposing attitudes about environmentalism. Read each passage carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze how Wilson's satire [illustrates the unproductive nature of such discussions.]

2010:

Look at how the concrete task has been worded in each prompt:

- rhetorical strategies (3)
- strategies (2)
- methods
- how the author crafts the text
- analyze the satire

However this concrete task is worded, the meaning is the same. What, then, are rhetorical strategies? I have always taught my students the acronym FIDDS, which means

figurative language, imagery, diction, details, syntax  the basic elements of stylistic analysis

Another important rhetorical strategy is the organization or structure of the piece.

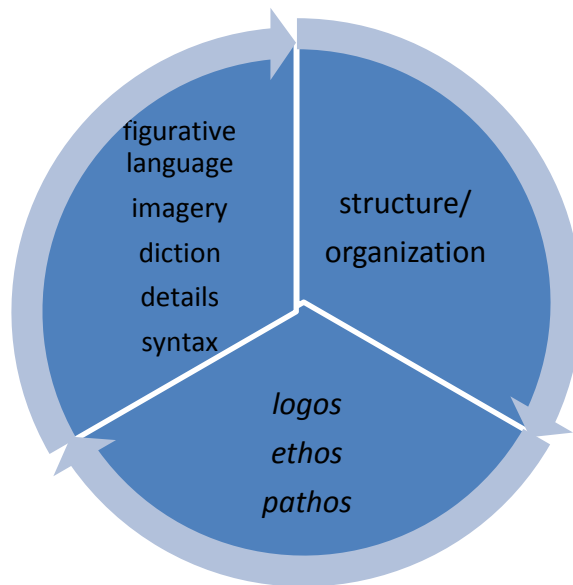
Since the passages are presenting some type of argument, we should also look at the appeals: *logos*, *pathos*, *ethos*.

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rhetorical strategies
how the author crafts the text
methods, etc.



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The concrete part of the prompt may vary in word choice, but the task is the same. Students read the passage carefully, choosing the appropriate rhetorical devices to write about.

It is the abstract part of the prompt which is more difficult intellectually. Look back at the prompts on page ----. Students should keep this part of the prompt in mind as they read the passage. They should actually answer the question the prompt is posing in their thesis statements, in the first paragraph.

Here are the questions in each prompt that students must address in their introduction:

2002: What is Lincoln's purpose in this speech?

2003: How does Green persuade his fellow African Americans to join the Union forces?

Note the differences in these two prompts.

2004: What are Chesterfield's values?

2005: How does the author satirize how products are marketed to consumers?

2006: What is Price's view of United States culture? Or, what does Price think about United States culture?

2007: What is Sanders's perspective about moving?

2008: How does Barry characterize scientific research? Or, what does Barry think about scientific research?

2009:

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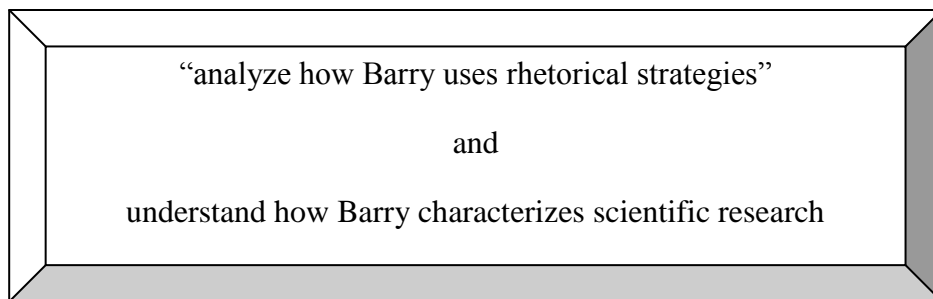
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2008 rhetorical analysis prompt:

Look carefully at your directions for writing this essay:

In the following passage from *The Great Influenza*, an account of the 1918 flu epidemic, author John M. Barry writes about scientists and their research. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Barry uses rhetorical strategies to characterize scientific research.

You essentially have two tasks, explained in the last sentence.



The second task is more difficult. You must read critically to understand how Barry sees scientific research and his attitude toward it. In other words, what is his view about scientific research? The term “rhetorical strategies” encompasses a host of devices, including the three appeals (*logos*, *ethos*, *pathos*), but the basic ones are

Diction
Imagery
Figurative language
Details
Syntax

As I read this passage to you, I want you to specifically look at and annotate two devices: metaphor and repetition.

After you read and annotate the passage, answer this question:

How does Barry characterize scientific research?

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In the following passage from *The Great Influenza*, an account of the 1918 flu epidemic, author John M. Barry writes about scientists and their research. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how Barry uses rhetorical strategies to characterize scientific research.

Certainty creates strength. Certainty gives one something upon which to lean.

Uncertainty creates weakness. Uncertainty makes one tentative if not fearful, and tentative steps, even when in the right direction, may not overcome significant obstacles.

To be a scientist requires not only intelligence and curiosity, but passion, patience, creativity, self-sufficiency, and courage. It is not the courage to venture into the unknown. It is the courage to accept—indeed, embrace—uncertainty. For as Claude Bernard, the great French physiologist of the nineteenth century, said, “Science teaches us to doubt.”

A scientist must accept the fact that all his or her work, even beliefs, may break apart upon the sharp edge of a single laboratory finding. And just as Einstein refused to accept his own theory until his predictions were tested, one must seek out such findings. Ultimately a scientist has nothing to believe in but the process of inquiry. To move forcefully and aggressively even while uncertain requires a confidence and strength deeper than physical courage.

All real scientists exist on the frontier. Even the least ambitious among them deal with the unknown, if only one step beyond the known. The best among them move deep into a wilderness region where they know almost nothing, where the very tools and techniques needed to clear the wilderness, to bring order to it, do not exist. There they probe in a disciplined way. There a single step can take them through the looking glass into a world that seems entirely different, and if they are at least partly correct their probing acts like a crystal to precipitate an order out of chaos, to create form,

structure, and direction. A single step can also take one off a cliff.

In the wilderness the scientist must create...*everything*. It is grunt work, tedious work that begins with figuring out what tools one needs and then making them. A shovel can dig up dirt but cannot penetrate rock. Would a pick be best, or would dynamite be better—or would dynamite be too indiscriminately destructive? If the rock is impenetrable, if dynamite would destroy what one is looking for, is there another way of getting information about what the rock holds? There is a stream passing over the rock. Would analyzing the water after it passes over the rock reveal anything useful? How would one analyze it?

Ultimately, if the researcher succeeds, a flood of colleagues will pave roads over the path laid, and those roads will be orderly and straight, taking an investigator in minutes to a place the pioneer spent months or years looking for. And the perfect tool will be available for purchase, just as laboratory mice can now be ordered from supply houses.

Not all scientific investigators can deal comfortably with uncertainty, and those who can may not be creative enough to understand and design the experiments that will illuminate a subject—to know both where and how to look. Others may lack the confidence to persist. Experiments do not simply work. Regardless of design and preparation, experiments—especially at the beginning, when one proceeds by intelligent guesswork—rarely yield the results desired. An investigator must make them work. The less known, the more one has to manipulate and even force experiments to yield an answer.

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How does Barry characterize scientific research?

Analyzing the Essay Paragraph by Paragraph

First paragraph:

Certainty creates strength. Certainty gives one something upon which to lean. Uncertainty creates weakness. Uncertainty makes one tentative if not fearful, and tentative steps, even when in the right direction, may not overcome significant obstacles.

Find the two contrasting ideas—(antithesis)

Where is repetition?

Second paragraph:

To be a scientist requires not only intelligence and curiosity, but passion, patience, creativity, self-sufficiency, and courage. It is not the courage to venture into the unknown. It is the courage to accept—indeed, embrace—uncertainty. For as Claude Bernard, the great French physiologist of the nineteenth century, said, “Science teaches us to doubt.”

What is the technique Barry uses to define courage?

Note the continuing repetition.

Third paragraph:

A scientist must accept the fact that all his or her work, even beliefs, may break apart upon the sharp edge of a single laboratory finding. And just as Einstein refused to accept his own theory until his predictions were tested, one must seek out such findings. Ultimately a scientist has nothing to believe in but the process of inquiry. To move forcefully and aggressively even while uncertain requires a confidence and strength deeper than physical courage.

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How does Barry use Einstein to bolster his thesis?

Fourth paragraph:

All real scientists exist on the frontier. Even the least ambitious among them deal with the unknown, if only one step beyond the known. The best among them move deep into a wilderness region where they know almost nothing, where the very tools and techniques needed to clear the wilderness, to bring order to it, do not exist. There they probe in a disciplined way. There a single step can take them through the looking glass into a world that seems entirely different, and if they are at least partly correct their probing acts like a crystal to precipitate an order out of chaos, to create form, structure, and direction. A single step can also take one off a cliff.

Barry begins developing an extended metaphor in this paragraph. What two things is he comparing in this metaphor? _____ In this metaphor, the researcher is the _____, and new knowledge is the _____.

What are the antithetical ideas?

In the “crystal” metaphor, what two things are being compared?

Fifth paragraph:

In the wilderness the scientist must create...*everything*. It is grunt work, tedious work that begins with figuring out what tools one needs and then making them. A shovel can dig up dirt but cannot penetrate rock. Would a pick be best, or would dynamite be better—or would dynamite be too indiscriminately destructive? If the rock is impenetrable, if dynamite would destroy what one is looking for, is there another way of getting information about what the rock holds? There is a stream passing over the rock. Would analyzing the water after it passes over the rock reveal anything useful? How would one analyze it?

Note that the extended metaphor continues in this paragraph. State the metaphor again. What two things are being compared?

What is the purpose of the questions?

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Sixth paragraph:

Ultimately, if the researcher succeeds, a flood of colleagues will pave roads over the path laid, and those roads will be orderly and straight, taking an investigator in minutes to a place the pioneer spent months or years looking for. And the perfect tool will be available for purchase, just as laboratory mice can now be ordered from supply houses.

Notice that the extended metaphor continues in this paragraph.

What is the effect of the researcher's knowledge?

Seventh paragraph:

Not all scientific investigators can deal comfortably with uncertainty, and those who can may not be creative enough to understand and design the experiments that will illuminate a subject—to know both where and how to look. Others may lack the confidence to persist. Experiments do not simply work. Regardless of design and preparation, experiments—especially at the beginning, when one proceeds by intelligent guesswork—rarely yield the results desired. An investigator must make them work. The less known, the more one has to manipulate and even force experiments to yield an answer.

Note the continued repetition.

What qualities does Barry value in the scientific researcher?

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Writing a Body Paragraph

Your thesis statement for the essay will be what you wrote on page 3 under “How does Barry characterize scientific research?”

Think about how you want to organize your essay. If, for instance, the devices you are going to discuss are diction, repetition, and antithetical ideas, you could write one paragraph characterizing Barry’s diction, one the repetition, and one the antithetical ideas. Or you could organize your essay according to Barry’s main ideas. However you organize, make sure you connect the devices you are discussing to meaning (how Barry characterizes scientific research.)

A well-developed body paragraph should consist of an **assertion**, **textual evidence**, and **analysis/commentary**.

- I. **Assertion:** a particular insight you have about how Barry characterizes scientific research
- II. **Textual evidence:** quotations or paraphrase from the text
- III. **Analysis:** further explanation and elaboration of the assertion

Analysis, along with your assertion, is a crucial element in each paragraph. In analysis, you explore the possibilities which connect your textual evidence to the author’s meaning. This is the place to be creative, to allow your mind to forge new ideas which express the author’s intent in using a particular rhetorical device.



BODY PARAGRAPH

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Here is a sample body paragraph containing all three of these elements:

| | |
|------------------|---|
| assertion | Barry uses antithetical ideas to illustrate the uncertainty that the true scientist must learn to accept if he/she is to make sense of the unknown. |
| textual evidence | In the third paragraph, Barry contrasts the scientist's work with the possibility that all that work could be lost with one new "laboratory finding." In paragraph four, he contrasts the idea of the "unknown," knowledge which "exist[s] on the frontier," with the "known," knowledge which has already been tried and tested. |
| analysis | The antithetical ideas Barry uses help portray the characteristics of the true researcher: a person willing to enter into the wilderness and endure the uncertainty and humility required to obtain new scientific information. A true researcher must live on the edge, in a sense—on the edge of new knowledge, on the edge of possible refutation of everything he/she had always believed to be true. To reach the "known," a researcher will be willing to experience the confusing and frustrating nature of the "unknown." |

Complete the following body paragraph, adding textual evidence and analysis.

| | |
|------------------|---|
| assertion | In the fourth paragraph, Barry uses an analogy to help explain the precarious nature of obtaining scientific knowledge. |
| textual evidence | |
| analysis | |

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This student essay earned a “9.” Below is the student’s introduction and first body paragraph. As you read the student’s essay, note the comments in the right column.

Scientific research is made to be done methodically. There is even a widely known “scientific method” created in the 15th century based on reason and common sense.

It was created from a desire to make the unknown known. As Barry describes the scientific process, he says that uncertainty, in the world of the unknown, must be made a tool—a weapon, even against one’s own convictions. However, that concept is very ethereal, so Barry utilizes comparison and logical hypothetical situations to convey that idea.

Barry begins by contrasting the strength and conviction of certainty with the weakness and fear of uncertainty to better define the term of uncertainty. He establishes direction in his second paragraph; as he lists qualities the ideal scientist should have, he ends with courage, and with courage he runs off and further defines how he will use that term. Courage, to Barry, is not “ventur[ing] into the unknown,” which is a polite way of saying “charging into God-knows-what, head down and arms flailing,” but rather the courage to face a total shattering of a character and all of one’s beliefs upon the “sharp edge of a single finding.” To be a good scientist, Barry maintains in his third paragraph, one must reject all that is unproven. This is especially difficult to do, speaking from personal experience, because the thought of the possibility that there is no after life, that all that follows this life is nonexistence, chills me to the bone and puts a rightful fear of death in my heart. Barry uses the example of Einstein to express this point of accepting a total reversal of beliefs in an attempt to persuade the reader that to face a destruction of one’s convictions requires a far greater courage, to conceive of uncertainty as an ally rather than a foe.

thesis statement

rhetorical devices student will discuss

assertion

textual evidence (paraphrase)

textual evidence (quotation)

textual evidence (quotation)

textual evidence (paraphrase)

commentary (personal observation)

commentary

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The two passages below, both written by noted contemporary scientist Edward O. Wilson, appear in Wilson's book *The Future of Life* (2002). In the passages, Wilson satirizes the language of two groups that hold opposing attitudes about environmentalism. Read each passage carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze how Wilson's satire illustrates the unproductive nature of such discussions.

THE PEOPLE-FIRST CRITIC STEREOTYPES

THE ENVIRONMENTALISTS

Environmentalists or conservationists is what they usually call themselves. Depending on how angry we are, we call them greens, enviros, environmental extremists, or environmental wackos. Mark my word, conservation pushed by these people always goes too far, because it is an instrument for gaining political power. The wackos have a broad and mostly hidden agenda that always comes from the left, usually far left. How to get power? is what they're thinking. Their aim is to expand government, especially the federal government. They want environmental laws and regulatory surveillance to create government-supported jobs for their kind of bureaucrats, lawyers, and consultants. The New Class, these professionals have been called. What's at stake as they busy themselves are your tax dollars and mine, and ultimately our freedom too. Relax your guard when these people are in power and your property rights go down the tube. Some Bennington College student with a summer job will find an endangered red spider on your property, and before you know what happened the Endangered Species Act will be used to shut you down. Can't sell to a developer, can't even harvest your woodlot. Business investors can't get at the oil and gas on federal lands this country badly needs. Mind you, I'm all for the environment, and I agree that species extinction is a bad thing, but conservation should be kept in perspective. It is best put in private hands. Property owners know what's good for their own land. They care about the plants and animals living there. Let them work out conservation. They are the real grass roots in this country. Let them be the stewards and handle conservation. A strong, growing free-market economy, not creeping socialism, is what's best for America—and it's best for the environment too.

THE ENVIRONMENTALIST STEREOTYPES THE PEOPLE-FIRST CRITICS

“Critics” of the environmental movement? That may be what they call themselves, but we know them more accurately as anti-environmentalists and brown lashers or, more locally out west, wise users (their own term, not intended to be ironic) and sagebrush rebels. In claiming concern of any kind for the natural environment, these people are the worst bunch of hypocrites you'll ever not want to find. What they are really after, especially the corporate heads and bigtime landowners, is unrestrained capitalism with land development *uber alles*.^{*} They keep their right-wing political agenda mostly hidden when downgrading climate change and species extinction, but for them economic growth is always the ultimate, and maybe the only, good. Their idea of conservation is stocking trout streams and planting trees around golf courses. Their conception of the public trust is a strong military establishment and subsidies for loggers and ranchers. The anti-environmentalists would be laughed out of court if they weren't tied so closely to the corporate power structure. And notice how rarely international policy makers pay attention to the environment. At the big conferences of the World Trade Organization and other such gatherings of the rich and powerful, conservation almost never gets so much as a hearing. The only recourse we have is to protest at their meetings. We hope to attract the attention of the media and at least get our unelected rulers to look out the window. In America the right-wingers have made the word

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“conservative” a mockery. What exactly are they trying to conserve? Their own selfish interests, for sure, not the natural environment.

*German for “above everything else”

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2010 prompt:

Benjamin Banneker, the son of former slaves, was a farmer, astronomer, mathematician, surveyor, and author. In 1791 he wrote to Thomas Jefferson, framer of the Declaration of Independence and secretary of state to President George Washington. Read the following excerpt from the letter and write an essay that analyzes how Banneker uses rhetorical strategies to argue against slavery.

5 Sir, suffer me to recall to your mind that time in which the arms and tyranny of the British Crown were exerted with every powerful effort in order to reduce you to a State of Servitude, look back I entreat you on the variety of dangers to which you were exposed; reflect on that time in which every human aid appeared unavailable, and in which even hope and fortitude wore the aspect of inability to the conflict and you cannot but be led to a serious and grateful sense of your miraculous and providential preservation; you cannot but acknowledge that the present freedom and tranquility which you enjoy you have mercifully received and that it is the peculiar blessing of Heaven.

10 This sir, was a time in which you clearly saw into the injustice of a state of slavery and in which you had just apprehensions of the horrors of its condition, it was now, sir, that your abhorrence thereof was so excited, that you publickly held forth this true and valuable doctrine, which is worthy to be recorded and remembered in all succeeding ages. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

15 Here, sir, was a time in which your tender feelings for yourselves had engaged you thus to declare, you were then impressed with proper ideas of the great valuation of liberty and the free possession of those blessings to which you were entitled by nature; but, sir, how pitiable is it to reflect that although you were so fully convinced of the benevolence of the Father of mankind and of his equal and impartial distribution of those rights and privileges which he had conferred upon them, that you should at the same time counteract his mercies in detaining by fraud and violence so numerous a part of my brethren under groaning captivity and cruel oppression, that you should at the same time be found guilty of that most criminal act which you professedly detested in others with respect to yourselves.

25 Sir, I suppose that your knowledge of the situation of my brethren is too extensive to need a recital here; neither shall I presume to prescribe methods by which they may be relieved, otherwise than by recommending to you and all others to wean yourselves from those narrow prejudices which you have imbibed with respect to them and as Job proposed to his friends, “put your souls in their souls stead,” thus shall your hearts be enlarged with kindness and benevolence towards them, and thus shall you need neither the direction of myself or others, in what manner to proceed herein.