

Claims, Evidence, and the Rhetorical Situation

AP English Language ■ Unit 1

AP English Language



What we will cover

- 1 The Rhetorical Situation
- 2 Identifying Claims and Evidence
- 3 Developing a Paragraph with Claim and Evidence
- 4 What the Exam Actually Asks



The Rhetorical Situation

AP English Language is not a literature course. It is a course in **how texts do work on readers**, and Unit 1 installs the two ideas everything else is built on: the **rhetorical situation** and the **claim-plus-evidence** paragraph.

- The **exigence** is the part of the situation that **inspires, stimulates, provokes, or prompts a writer to create a text**. It is the reason this text exists *now*.
- The **purpose** is what the writer hopes to accomplish. A text may have **more than one purpose**.
- The **audience** has **shared as well as individual** beliefs, values, needs, and backgrounds – so “the audience” is never a single uniform thing.
- The **context** includes the **time, place, and occasion** in which the text was created.
- The **message** is what the text actually says and does.

The six parts of the rhetorical situation

exigence

the problem or occasion that **prompts** the writing

purpose

what the writer wants the audience to think, feel or do

audience

who is addressed – and their values, knowledge and likely objections

writer

the speaker's position, credibility and stake in the matter

context

the circumstances surrounding the text – historical, cultural, immediate

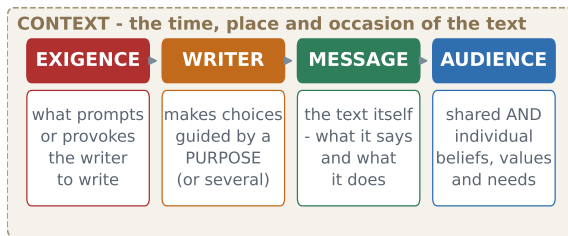
message

the argument itself, shaped by the other five

The CED names all six. A rhetorical analysis that discusses only the text and not **who it was for and why now** is missing most of the situation.

Exigence prompts the writer; context surrounds

The rhetorical situation - and the order runs left to right



*The sentence every rhetorical-analysis answer needs:
this writer, prompted by this exigence, made this choice to move this audience toward this purpose.*

Exigence prompts the writer; context surrounds everything - and every question about “choices” is answered from here

The Rhetorical Situation, continued

The most common weak answer in this course names a device and stops.

The rhetorical situation is what turns a device into an argument: *this writer, prompted by this exigence, made this choice to move this audience toward this purpose.*



Identifying Claims and Evidence

That fourth point is the most useful test you have. Ask of any sentence: *could a reasonable person disagree?* If not, it is not a claim – it is a fact, and building a paragraph on it produces writing with nothing to prove.

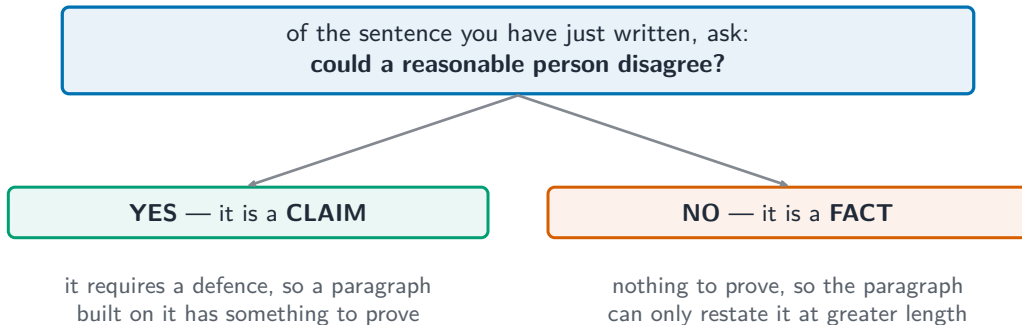
- Writers convey their positions through one or more **claims** that require a defence.
- Writers defend their claims with **evidence and/or reasoning** .
- Types of evidence include facts, anecdotes, analogies, statistics, examples, details, illustrations, expert opinions, and personal experience – a deliberately wide list, because recognising an anecdote or an analogy as evidence is itself a skill.
- Effective claims provoke interest and require a defence, rather than stating an obvious, known fact that requires no proof.

Identifying Claims and Evidence, continued

Finally, writers **relate source material to their own argument by syntactically embedding** quoted, paraphrased, or summarised material into their own sentences.

The evidence is not dropped in beside your sentence; it is built into it.

Claim, or fact? One test



A claim **provokes** and requires a defence. Run this on every topic sentence before you spend a paragraph on it

Dropped in, and embedded

DROPPED IN

The author is critical of the policy. “It has failed every test we set it.” This shows he disagrees.

EMBEDDED

Calling the policy something that has “failed every test we set it,” the author turns a disagreement into a verdict.

Same quotation, different sentence. Embedded, the evidence is doing work in **your** clause – which is what “relate source material to your own argument” means



Developing a Paragraph with Claim and Evidence

Unit 1's writing objective is deliberately small: **write one paragraph containing a claim and evidence that supports it**. Everything later in the course is an elaboration of this.

- A **claim** that requires defence – arguable, specific, and narrower than the whole thesis.
- **Evidence** chosen because it supports *this* claim, embedded syntactically rather than dropped in.
- **Commentary** explaining how the evidence supports the claim – the step students skip, and the one that carries most of the marks on the exam.

Developing a Paragraph with Claim and Evidence, continued

The single most common failure on the AP Language essays is a paragraph in which the evidence is present and the explanation is absent.

The reader can see the quotation; what they cannot see is why you think it proves your point.

The paragraph, in proportion

CLAIM

arguable, specific,
and narrower
than the thesis

EVIDENCE

chosen for *this*
claim, and
embedded in
your own sentence

COMMENTARY

how the evidence supports the
claim — and most of the marks

The widths are the point. The commonest failure on these essays is a paragraph where the evidence is present and the **explanation is absent**



What the Exam Actually Asks

The free-response section has three questions, and they use the same skills in different arrangements:

- **Question 1, Synthesis** : you are given several sources and must build **your own argument**, using the sources as evidence rather than summarising them.
- **Question 2, Rhetorical Analysis** : you are given one text and must explain **the choices the writer makes** and how those choices contribute to purpose – which is the rhetorical situation applied.
- **Question 3, Argument** : you are given a claim or a scenario and must argue a position, using evidence from your own knowledge and experience.

What the Exam Actually Asks, continued

All three are marked on a **six-point rubric** with the same three rows: **thesis (1 point)**, **evidence and commentary (4 points)**, and **sophistication (1 point)**.

Knowing that shape from Unit 1 tells you where the marks are: four of the six come from evidence *and the commentary on it*, so a plan that produces evidence without explanation caps you at low marks no matter how good the writing sounds.

Worked example – explaining a rhetorical choice

A Rhetorical Analysis prompt asks you to “*explain the writer’s rhetorical choices*” in a passage.

- **Low-scoring:** *“The writer uses a rhetorical question.”*
- **Scoring:** *“Faced with an audience that already agrees on the problem but not on its urgency, the writer opens with a question rather than a statement, forcing readers to supply the answer themselves and so to feel the conclusion as their own rather than as one imposed on them.”*

Three things earn the points: the **audience**, the **choice**, and the **effect on purpose**. Naming the device alone earns none of them.

Exam tips

- Learn the **six components** by name and use the names. Precision here is directly rewarded.
- **Exigence is not the same as purpose.** Exigence is what prompted the text; purpose is what the writer wants to achieve.
- Test every claim with *could a reasonable person disagree?* If not, it is a fact, not a claim.
- **Embed** evidence in your own sentence. Dropped quotations read as unprocessed.
- **Four of six points are evidence and commentary.** Write the commentary; it is where most lost marks live.
- Never name a device without saying **what it does to the audience**. A device with no effect earns nothing.



Unit 1 – key takeaways

1

Six components

use the names – precision is rewarded

2

Exigence

what prompted the text; purpose is the aim

3

Claim

could a reasonable person disagree?

4

Commentary

four of six points live here – write it

Check yourself

- 1 Exigence is not the same as what?
- 2 How do you test a claim?
- 3 How should you embed evidence?
- 4 Where do most lost marks live?

Answers: purpose ▪ could a reasonable person disagree? ▪ in your own sentence ▪ commentary