

Question 2

What was the intent of this question?

This year's "Rhetorical Analysis Question" asked students to evaluate the rhetorical strategies used in a piece of epideictic rhetoric, specifically a eulogy to Ronald Reagan given by Margaret Thatcher. As in past years, this year's task asked students to consider the rhetorical situation a speaker faces and to examine the choices the rhetor makes to move his or her audience to respond in a way that the rhetor desires. This task is very different from that required in analyses of literary texts: a rhetorical text is created to prompt a specific and timely action or reaction.

For students who may not have known who either Margaret Thatcher or Ronald Reagan was, the prompt supplied the information about their leadership positions ("the former prime minister of Great Britain" and "former United States president" respectively), as well as specifics regarding the date ("June 11, 2004") and audience of the address ("the American people"). Though the prompt did not tell students that this text was a speech of praise, students could quickly recognize the laudatory nature of Thatcher's work.

While the prompt did ask students to "analyze the rhetorical strategies that Thatcher uses to convey her message," this direction did not ask for them to discuss solely or primarily elements of style. To understand the strategies used by a rhetor, a student must first consider the rhetor's relationship to the audience, as well as how this relationship requires both what this specific rhetor should include — or exclude — in the speech for this specific audience. Additionally, a student must consider how the rhetor arranges the speech for the particular audience in the specific circumstances of the speech. While elements of style are certainly fodder to consider, they are not the first ingredient rhetors focus on when developing strategies to persuade audiences: style is the third canon of rhetoric, not the first or even second.

How well did students perform on this question?

The adjusted mean score was 4.38 out of a possible 9 points, higher than last year's mean of 4.04. This is the second consecutive year that students have improved the mean on this question.

Part of the reason for this improvement was students' comfort level with Thatcher's eulogy. It comprised a rich collection of rhetorical approaches that were highly accessible. Almost every student understood the rhetorical situation Thatcher faced, though some recognized more complexity of the situation than others. Students generally understood Thatcher's desire to praise Reagan and her use of anecdotes to illustrate, not only Reagan's strength as a world leader, but also his importance as a human being.

With this comfort level, some students did not necessarily read Thatcher's speech as closely as they should have. For example, lower performing essays overdramatized Thatcher's emotion, inferring that all eulogies reflect devastation. They also overstated the depth of Thatcher's feelings for/relationship with Reagan on a continuum from "Besties" to "Unrequited Lovers." Additionally, there were occasional misreadings of individual moments in the text; for example, the assassination attempt led some to sympathize with what they deduced was Reagan's suicidal tendencies.

Weaker essays tended to use what the Question Leader called the "Appeals Trilogy." For example, some students followed a formula analyzing diction, syntax, and tone. Instead of looking at specific choices that Thatcher made, students tried to fit the passage to those parameters, or students followed a very similar formula analyzing the artistic proofs (pathos, logos, and ethos) with an unbounded dedication, considering each as a discrete entity, not recognizing how words in a text can work to shape all three of these artistic proofs simultaneously. Although repetition, syntax, and parallelism frequently were cited, many writers could not tangibly explain how each revealed Thatcher's purpose. Instead, lower performing essays argued that these features "emphasized her point," "made the eulogy more relatable," or so forth. Further, rather than

talking about how repetition and antithesis worked together in cited passages, students treated each separately, seemingly not aware that they overlapped.

Overall, however, student performance has improved on this question. Most students delved into the analysis with convincing insight, and essays that examined how Thatcher intentionally structured her eulogy tended to be stronger than those that were trope driven. Students readily recognized the rhetorical situation for what it was. Those who dug deep offered a more compelling organization. Some organized their discussion around Thatcher's claim that Reagan's ideas are "clear" yet "never simplistic," revealing how Thatcher asserted a claim about Reagan's character that initially appeared mundane but then revealed it to be a more complex asset. Others examined how she demonstrated her parallel claims that Reagan was a "great" president, American, and man, revealing each to be an intentional feature of her tribute. Higher scoring essays addressed Thatcher's appeals to quintessential American values like nationalism, patriotism as opposed to using generic explanations about such ideas as ethos, etc. Addressing specific values showed a clear and convincing understanding of the rhetorical situation. Most pedestrian essays organized around the appeals and/or tropes were more descriptive than analytical. For example, the students might state something like "Thatcher said this which means that" and on to the next point. They employed circular logic. Many students not only confused ethos with ethics, they also argued that Thatcher used ethos to establish Reagan's rather than Thatcher's credibility. Likewise, they discussed pathos in terms of Thatcher's rather than the audience's sensibilities. Sometimes they struggled to identify the features that signaled each appeal. In all cases, too many essays continued the "drive by" trend: a sentence that introduced a trope followed by one example followed by a rather general explanation of its role.

Many of the papers were lengthy. Even the scores of 1 and 2 had something to say and attempted analysis, though they fell drastically short, it is encouraging to see the work that teachers are doing and students are striving to accomplish.

What were common student errors or omissions?

Although far fewer did than in years past, students tended not to recognize the rhetorical situation the rhetor faces: the audience, the exigence, and the constraints. While many students seem to follow a formula such as SOAPS, identifying the speaker, occasion, audience, purpose, and situation, the students often did not use that information to help them find support in their analyses. When they analyze texts, students need to realize that one element of a text will not work with all audiences. Within their analyses, students need to explain why a specific element of the text works (or does not work) for a specific audience in a specific situation.

Another common omission was any discussion regarding rhetorical elements outside the classical rhetorical canon of style. Too many students relied exclusively on the canon of style in their analysis. While style is certainly one rhetorical element of a writer's text, it is not the only — or even the most important element. Students need to think much more about the writers' choices pertaining to the canons of invention and arrangement.

While a discussion of style can product a strong rhetorical analysis, students tend to merely identify numerous tropes and figures, sometimes correctly and sometimes not. Identification of a text's use of tropes might be interesting and erudite information; however, the names of the tropes are of little use in an analysis. Far more important is what that trope or figure does as well as how and why that trope works for the rhetor in a particular situation. The lowest essays are lists of strategies that do not connect a strategy to the writer's purpose.

Finally, as the Question Leader noted, another common problem was students' formulaic essay construction (noting two, three, or even four rhetorical choices in simple terms), which tends to lead to mid-level essays at best.

Based on your experience of student responses at the AP® Reading, what message would you like to send to teachers that might help them to improve the performance of their students on the exam?

First, teachers need to know that they have been doing a great job improving the teaching of the rhetorical analysis essay. Though there were many formulaic responses, most of these essays nevertheless identified elements of the rhetorical situation. Teachers need to continue this good work, asking their students to think much more about how an audience might react to different choices and how the writer anticipates that audience response. For example, Margaret Thatcher probably knew her audience was not comprised entirely of Reagan supporters; therefore, an example of Reagan's actions that were very Conservative in nature would not elicit sympathy from the entire audience. She needed to find examples that a multi-partisan audience could identify with. She made choices regarding the examples to get these non-Reagan supporters to feel for him.

Teachers also must recognize that, just as they instruct their students to first think about their ideas and the idea's organization when students write (not to first use specific tropes, words, or syntax), a student analyzing a text should begin looking at the ideas in the text and considering how the writer chooses to convey the ideas to the audience. Just as Aristotle and Cicero made the canon of style the third canon of rhetoric, teachers need to teach about style after they fully discuss the first and second canons, invention and arrangement respectively.

Teachers can also find ways to have students recognize that they analyze rhetorical choices all the time when they read texting messages from friends, think about conversations in the high school hallway, or make a decision to ignore a specific commercial. Teachers can start with this level of familiarity and connect it to analyses of more academic texts.

Finally, teachers should convey the message that even if the prompt calls for rhetorical strategies, students don't need to name and define the strategies. A rhetorical strategy is the same as a rhetorical choice. Students need to describe/explain the choices' or strategies' purpose and effect while connecting the choices or strategies to the text to which they apply.

Question 3

What was the intent of this question?

The "Argument Question" asked students to utilize their knowledge of the world as well as their personal experiences and observations to support a claim in response to a given question. This year's "Argument Question" first provided a quote from 19th-century Irish author Oscar Wilde asserting the socially progressive function of disobedience before asking students to take a "position on the extent to which Wilde's claims are valid." The phrasing of the question avoided prompting students to binary responses — arguing that Wilde is "right" or "wrong" — but instead encouraged students to develop a more nuanced position on Wilde's claim.

While it does not provide sources as does the "Synthesis Question," the "Argument Question" also demands support for the claims made by students, support that is carefully discussed so that the essay's audience will understand the reasoning behind it. In other words, this question is asking students to use rhetorical strategies to convince their audience that their claim is valid. These strategies include considering the students' own ethos (How do the students show they know what they are discussing? How do the students show they share the same values as the audience? How do they illustrate that the argument will benefit the audience), logos (Is the support acceptable to the audience? Is the support relevant to the claim? Is the support sufficient for the audience and the situation?), and pathos (Do the students align the audience with themselves? Do they alienate the audience? Do they move the audience with the support?).