

The Method for the SAT Essay

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After completing this chapter, you will be able to:

- Describe the task the SAT Essay Test requires
- Map the prompt for its big picture and identify three specific features (techniques or types of evidence used)
- Recognize rhetorical features in the prompt to use in your essay
- Organize the features you choose into an essay outline
- State what the graders are looking for

The Essay Task

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

After this lesson, you will be able to:

- Describe the task the SAT Essay Test requires

The College Board has announced that **the SAT Essay is being discontinued** after the June 2021 testing administration, except in states that require it as part of SAT School Day administrations. If you are taking the SAT on a school day, ask your guidance counselor whether the Essay will be included. If you do need to sit for the Essay, read on.

The SAT Essay Test assesses your college and career readiness. The Essay tests your ability to read and analyze a high-quality source document. Your goal is to write a coherent analysis for the source supported with critical reasoning and evidence from the given text. No prior knowledge of the topic is required.

The SAT Essay Test features an argumentative source text of 650–750 words aimed toward a large audience. Passages may examine ideas, debates, and shifts in the arts and sciences as well as civic, cultural, and political life. Rather than having a simple for/against structure, these passages will be nuanced and will relate views on complex subjects. You can expect these passages to be logical in their structure and reasoning.

The SAT Essay prompt will ask you to explain how the presented passage's author builds an argument to convince an audience. In writing your essay, you may analyze elements such as the author's use of evidence, reasoning, style, and persuasion. You will not be limited to those elements listed, however.

Rather than writing about whether you agree or disagree with the presented argument, you will write an essay in which you analyze how the author makes an argument.

The SAT Essay Test will be broken down into three categories for scoring: Reading, Analysis, and Writing. Each of these elements will be scored on a scale of 1–4 by two graders, for a total score of 2–8 for each category.

This chapter will teach you what to look for in the prompt, what kinds of notes are useful, and how to impress the graders favorably.

Essay Essentials

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After this lesson, you will be able to:

- Map the prompt for its big picture, and identify three specific features (techniques or types of evidence used)
- Organize the points you'll make in an outline. Given the Kaplan Essay Template

The Basics

The **prompt**—the subject of your analysis and writing—is a speech or article by a professional writer or other prominent person. The average length is 700–750 words. That person will be arguing for—that is, trying to persuade readers of—some specific viewpoint. The good news is that the test maker will tell you, flat out, what that viewpoint is; you won't need to deduce it from the article.

Most of the time the writer will be *recommending* a particular social or government policy or a personal behavior. Sometimes the writer will be *recommending against* a policy or behavior. And other times, very occasionally, the argument will be making a *prediction* of what may or may not happen.

Either way, the assignment is the same. In 50 minutes, you need to read the prompt, analyze how it's put together, and write an organized essay explaining how the prompt works. The graders give you scores on each of those tasks—reading, analyzing, and writing.

The Format of the Prompt

It begins with a standard box of text that reads like this:

As you read the passage below, consider how [name of author] uses

- evidence, such as facts or examples, to support claims.
- reasoning to develop ideas and to connect claims and evidence.
- stylistic or persuasive elements, such as word choice or appeals to emotion, to add power to the ideas expressed.

After the introductory text box, there is a note providing the author, date, and origin of the prompt text, and the text itself. The paragraphs are numbered for your convenience, so you can refer the reader to the locations you desire (“In paragraph 3, he says . . .”). Most prompts are edited down from longer versions, and an ellipsis (. . .) is used to indicate where text has been removed. You need only consider the text that's present. Don't worry about anything edited out.

Finally, a text box explains the task. It always spells out exactly what the author's point or conclusion is and tells you what they want you to do. For instance:

Write an essay in which you explain how George W. Bush builds an argument to persuade his audience that his temporary worker program should be adopted by Congress. In your essay, analyze how Bush uses one or more of the features listed in the directions that precede the passage (or features of your own choice) to strengthen the logic and persuasiveness of his argument. Be sure that your analysis focuses on the most relevant features of the passage.

Your essay should not explain whether you agree with Bush's claims, but rather explain how Bush builds an argument to persuade his audience.

You may annotate the prompt, or take notes in the margins, or use the last sheet for scratchwork.

Important note: The graders have to be able to read your writing. They will not read or consider your scratchwork, only the essay itself. You can write in cursive or block letters, whichever is more legible for you. If graders cannot read what you have written in the essay, then they will have to disregard it, which will most likely hurt your score.

Suggested Essay Structure

Here's a structure that is an excellent basis for the SAT Essay assignment. If you understand and practice it, you won't waste time deciding how to arrange the paragraphs of your essay. The details of this structure will be discussed later in this chapter.

Paragraph 1—Restate the prompt's purpose, and then list the evidence types/rhetorical strategies you will discuss. (We recommend listing three.)

Paragraph 2—Mention one evidence type/rhetorical strategy, with examples and analysis.

Paragraph 3—Mention a second evidence type/rhetorical strategy, with examples and analysis.

Paragraph 4—Mention a third evidence type/rhetorical strategy, with examples and analysis.

Paragraph 5—Summarize the entire argument, in your own words.

Memorize this structure and use it on your practice essays. If you know the form of your essay beforehand, you just have to fill in the content on test day.

SAT Essay Timing and Scoring

Timing

You have 50 minutes to complete the Essay. Here are some rough guidelines to get you started:

- Reading: 5 minutes
- Note-taking: 5 minutes
- Analyzing and outlining: 8 minutes
- Writing: 30 minutes
- Quick proofreading: 2 minutes

Don't be concerned if you have trouble executing your first couple of attempts in 50 minutes. In fact, in your first couple of practice essays, don't worry about time constraints at all and concentrate completely on the quality of your essay. Do still time yourself on these early practice essays so you have a benchmark for how close you are to 50 minutes. After you've written a few of these, you'll be able to shave off time, especially from the reading and analyzing tasks.

Scoring

Two different graders will score your essay. Each will award you between 1 and 4 points in the categories of Reading, Analyzing, and Writing, and the two graders' points will be added together in each category. You'll get a Reading score between 2 and 8, an Analyzing score between 2 and 8, and a Writing score between 2 and 8. You'll learn more about what makes for a superior score later in this chapter.

The next lesson will focus on how to get the information you need to write an effective essay from the prompt.

Dissecting the Prompt

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After this lesson, you will be able to:

- Recognize rhetorical features in the prompt to use in your essay
- Organize the features you choose into an essay outline

The Reading—5 Minutes

Always start with the box of directions *below* the prompt, where they spell out the author's purpose (usually, as we've said, some sort of recommendation). Immediately start thinking of how you'll put that purpose into your own words. Next, jump into the prompt.

You may benefit from an initial quick skim, without note-taking. Try to *read with interest*, noting the general outline of the author's argument.

Get a casual sense of the author's tone and motives. It'll ease you into the prompt gently and lay the groundwork for your more important second pass through the material.

Exercise

Take up to five minutes to read this prompt. Remember to start with the directions box below the passage itself.

As you read the passage below, consider how Barack Obama uses

- evidence, such as facts or examples.
- reasoning to develop ideas and to connect claims and evidence.
- stylistic or persuasive elements, such as word choice or appeals to emotion, to add power to the ideas expressed.

Adapted from U.S. President Barack Obama's address to the first session of Conference of the Parties 21 (COP21), the 2015 Paris Climate Conference, on November 30, 2015.

- 1 Our understanding of the ways human beings disrupt the climate advances by the day. Fourteen of the fifteen warmest years on record have occurred since the year 2000—and 2015 is on pace to be the warmest year of all. No nation—large or small, wealthy or poor—is immune to what this means.
- 2 This summer, I saw the effects of climate change firsthand in our northernmost state, Alaska, where the sea is already swallowing villages and eroding shorelines; where permafrost thaws and the tundra burns; where glaciers are melting at a pace unprecedented in modern times. And it was a preview of one possible future—a glimpse of our children's fate if the climate keeps changing faster than our efforts to address it. Submerged countries. Abandoned cities. Fields that no longer grow. . . .

- 3 That future is one that we have the power to change. Right here. Right now. But only if we rise to this moment. As one of America's governors has said, "We are the first generation to feel the impact of climate change, and the last generation that can do something about it." . . .
- 4 Over the last seven years, [the U.S. has] made ambitious investments in clean energy, and ambitious reductions in our carbon emissions. We've multiplied wind power threefold, and solar power more than twentyfold, helping create parts of America where these clean power sources are finally cheaper than dirtier, conventional power. We've invested in energy efficiency in every way imaginable. We've said no to infrastructure that would pull high-carbon fossil fuels from the ground, and we've said yes to the first-ever set of national standards limiting the amount of carbon pollution our power plants can release into the sky. . . .
- 5 But the good news is this is not an American trend alone. Last year, the global economy grew while global carbon emissions from burning fossil fuels stayed flat. And what this means can't be overstated. We have broken the old arguments for inaction. We have proved that strong economic growth and a safer environment no longer have to conflict with one another; they can work in concert with one another.
- 6 And that should give us hope. One of the enemies that we'll be fighting at this conference is cynicism, the notion we can't do anything about climate change. Our progress should give us hope during these two weeks—hope that is rooted in collective action. . . .
- 7 So our task here in Paris is to turn these achievements into an enduring framework for human progress—not a stopgap solution, but a long-term strategy that gives the world confidence in a low-carbon future.
- 8 Here, in Paris, let's secure an agreement that builds in ambition, where progress paves the way for regularly updated targets—targets that are not set for each of us but by each of us, taking into account the differences that each nation is facing.
- 9 Here in Paris, let's agree to a strong system of transparency that gives each of us the confidence that all of us are meeting our commitments. . . .
- 10 Here in Paris, let's reaffirm our commitment that resources will be there for countries willing to do their part to skip the dirty phase of development. . . .
- 11 And finally, here in Paris, let's show businesses and investors that the global economy is on a firm path towards a low-carbon future. If we put the right rules and incentives in place, we'll unleash the creative power of our best scientists and engineers and entrepreneurs to deploy clean energy technologies and the new jobs and new opportunities that they create all around the world. There are hundreds of billions of dollars ready to deploy to countries around the world if they get the signal that we mean business this time. Let's send that signal. . . .

- 12 For I believe, in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., that there is such a thing as being too late. And when it comes to climate change, that hour is almost upon us. But if we act here, if we act now, if we place our own short-term interests behind the air that our young people will breathe, and the food that they will eat, and the water that they will drink, and the hopes and dreams that sustain their lives, then we won't be too late for them. . . .
- 13 Let's get to work. Thank you very much.

Write an essay in which you explain how President Obama builds an argument to persuade his audience that the Paris conference needs to take timely action on the matter of climate change. In your essay, analyze how he uses one or more of the features in the directions that precede the passage (or features of your own choice) to strengthen the logic and persuasiveness of his argument. Be sure that your analysis focuses on the most relevant features of the passage.

Your essay should not explain whether you agree with Obama's claims, but rather explain how Obama builds an argument to persuade his audience.

At the very least, your first pass through the prompt should have netted you the following information. The author's purpose (from the directions box): *to get the Paris conference attendees to take specific and immediate action on climate change*. Author's tone (from the passage itself): *urgently persuasive*. The context (from the bolded blurb at the beginning): *an opening speech at a 2015 conference*. Your job (from the directions box): *Explain how he puts together his argument to get them to take action*.

The Note-Taking—5 minutes

Once you have an overall sense of the prompt, you're ready to start thinking it through, taking notes as you go.

Pencil in hand, go paragraph by paragraph, asking yourself what each block of text is doing there. Why has the author included it? What does it add to the argument? How does it relate to what came before and to what comes just after? If you can identify some rhetorical devices used, note them.

Here are a couple of things to keep in mind at this stage:

1. You don't want to think about your essay as a whole. Wait a while. First get a sense of what is happening in each paragraph block. Then you can look for patterns.
2. You don't need to incorporate every single paragraph, or every single rhetorical device, into your essay. If a paragraph strikes you as filler, or unimportant, or secondary, just skip past it and don't worry about it.

Exercise

Take up to five minutes to analyze Obama’s speech paragraph by paragraph and note the main points of each paragraph as well as any rhetorical devices you observe. Remember to stay focused on the *why* of the passage rather than the *what*. When you’re done, compare your notes to the sample notes below.

Adapted from U.S. President Barack Obama’s address to the first session of Conference of the Parties 21 (COP21), the 2015 Paris Climate Conference, on November 30, 2015.

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Our understanding of the ways human beings disrupt the climate advances by the day. <u>Fourteen of the fifteen warmest years on record have occurred since the year 2000—and 2015 is on pace to be the warmest year of all.</u> No nation—large or small, <u>wealthy or poor</u> —is immune to what this means. | Scary stat!

Affects everyone |
| 2 | This summer, I saw the effects of climate change <u> firsthand </u> in our northernmost state, Alaska, where the sea is already swallowing villages and eroding shorelines; where permafrost thaws and the tundra burns; where glaciers are melting at a pace unprecedented in modern times. And it was <u> a preview of one possible future—a glimpse of </u> our children’s fate if the climate keeps changing faster than our efforts to address it. Submerged countries. Abandoned cities. Fields that no longer grow. . . . | Personal memory

Eloquent list of changes |
| 3 | <u> That future is one that we have the power to change. Right here. Right now. </u> But only if we rise to this moment. As one of America’s governors has said, “We are the first generation to feel the impact of climate change, and the last generation that can do something about it. . . .” | Can still prevent disaster: call to action |
| 4 | Over the last seven years, [the U.S. has] made ambitious investments in clean energy, and ambitious reductions in our carbon emissions. We’ve multiplied wind power threefold, and solar power more than twentyfold, helping create parts of America where these clean power sources are finally cheaper than dirtier, conventional power. We’ve invested in energy efficiency in every way imaginable. <u> We’ve said no to </u> infrastructure that would pull high-carbon fossil fuels from the ground, and <u> we’ve said yes </u> to the first-ever set of national standards limiting the amount of carbon pollution our power plants can release into the sky. . . . | How US has been doing the right thing |
| 5 | <u> But </u> the good news is <u> this is not an American trend alone. </u> Last year, the global economy grew while global carbon emissions from burning fossil fuels stayed flat. And what this means can’t be overstated. We have broken the <u> old arguments for inaction. </u> We have proved that strong economic growth and a safer environment no longer have to conflict with one another; they can work in concert with one another. | How the world has been doing the right thing.
Old view: not enough \$ to do it |
| 6 | And that should give us hope. One of the enemies that we’ll be fighting at this conference is <u> cynicism, the notion </u> we can’t do <u> anything about climate change. Our progress should give </u> us hope during <u> these two weeks—hope that </u> is rooted in collective action. . . . | Possible objection: nothing to be done
Answer: work together |
| 7 | So our task here in Paris is to turn these achievements into an enduring framework for human progress— <u> not a stopgap </u> solution, but <u> a long-term strategy </u> that gives the world confidence in a low-carbon future. | Let’s go big or go home |

- 8 Here, in Paris, let's secure an agreement that builds in ambition, where progress paves the way for regularly updated targets—targets that are not set for each of us but by each of us, taking into account the differences that each nation is facing. *Go for big targets*
- 9 Here, in Paris, let's agree to a strong system of transparency that gives each of us the confidence that all of us are meeting our commitments. . . . *Repetition pounds the call to action
Transparency*
- 10 Here, in Paris, let's reaffirm our commitment that resources will be there for countries willing to do their part to skip the dirty phase of development. . . . *Pool resources*
- 11 And finally, here in Paris, let's show businesses and investors that the global economy is on a firm path towards a low-carbon future. If we put the right rules and incentives in place, we'll unleash the creative power of our best scientists and engineers and entrepreneurs to deploy clean energy technologies and the new jobs and new opportunities that they create all around the world. There are hundreds of billions of dollars ready to deploy to countries around the world if they get the signal that we mean business this time. Let's send that signal. . . . *Must guide global economy
We have the means*
- 12 For I believe, in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., that there is such a thing as being too late. And when it comes to climate change, that hour is almost upon us. But if we act here, if we act now, if we place our own short-term interests behind the air that our young people will breathe, and the food that they will eat, and the water that they will drink, and the hopes and dreams that sustain their lives, then we we won't be too late for them. . . . *Invoking Dr. King to underscore urgency*
- 13 Let's get to work. Thank you very much. *Final, strong call to action*

Expert Assessment of Sample Notes

Here is an assessment of this student's annotations so that you can get the best sense of the process. Italicized numbers refer to paragraphs.

- 1 The student notes a "scary" statistic, thus noting an effect that the statistic is intended to have on the audience. The student further notes that the purpose of the statistic is to let "everyone" at the conference know that they will be affected by climate change.
- 2-3 Defines the second paragraph as a personal reminiscence; points out a fancy list of dire outcomes we can look forward to and a shift to the call to action.
- 4-5 Excellent one-phrase summaries of each of these paragraphs. The student is not stopping to look for patterns. (Finding patterns is part of the next step, analyzing and outlining.)
- 6 Constantly asking "Why is he saying this?" the student notes a possible objection to the action Obama is recommending—as well as the way to combat that objection, with group commitment.
- 7 The phrase "go big or go home" encapsulates what the author is implying.
- 8-11 Notes the repeated phrase and sums up each of the things Obama wants done "here in Paris."
- 12 "Eloquence plus" is one way to sum up Obama's eloquent phrases ending the speech on a high note. The president is clearly not relying just on wonky statistics and policy recommendations. He's finding poetry in the challenge to fix the global climate and deftly uses Dr. King's words for emphasis.
- 13 Student notes final call to action. Acting quickly, "here in Paris," is a running theme throughout the passage.

The Analysis and Outline—8 Minutes

Now comes the most important part—and perhaps the trickiest part—for many students just starting to attempt the essay. Now you want to organize your thoughts: to group them together into idea blocks that will demonstrate your command of structure and help you write your essay effectively.

We recommend that you plan on an introduction, a conclusion, and three body paragraphs. Each of those paragraphs should focus on *one* type of evidence or rhetorical appeal that you've located in the prompt. That implies that you should identify three types.

You can make do with only two (and, thus, two body paragraphs). But if you carefully examine the published SAT Essays that the test makers have identified as high-scoring, you will notice that most if not all of them come up with three. And if you practice this a few times, you'll get better and better at it.

The key question to ask yourself is: *As I look at the tactics used and points made, are there three categories I can lump them into?* If you can find two to three items to list under each category, you've got all the evidence you need for a very strong essay.

Here are the various features the student noted in the Obama prompt above:

- Statistics and facts showing the bad news (about climate trends) and the good news (about what the U.S. and world have already done)
- A personal reminiscence—a time when the president saw firsthand the devastation of the Alaska wilderness
- A lot of fancy turns of phrase, designed to whip up emotional responses—almost preacher-like
- Specific goals and plans the delegates can focus on
- A lot of direct thrusts; here's what we have to do; the clock is ticking; no half-measures; get moving
- Past objections (it's too big a job; we can't afford it)
- Counterarguments to those objections (the job's not too big if we pull together; there IS enough money if we play our cards right)
- Expansive visions of the future if we are successful at this Conference

There are probably a few more, or other ways to phrase them, but that's already a fairly extensive list. All you have to do now is pick out three—the three you feel most confident about and interested in—and decide the order in which to mention them. For instance:

Paragraph 2—How Obama paints a grim picture of the current, and possible future, disasters facing the Earth

Paragraph 3—The good news so far: the U.S. has done its job; the world has too, to a degree; we know what needs to be done

Paragraph 4—Obama's employment of emotional, even church-like language to rev up the crowd

That would be one way to go. Here's another:

Paragraph 2—The emotional appeal: all the impassioned language and turns of phrase, which Obama includes from beginning to end

Paragraph 3—The positive reasons he provides for taking action now

Paragraph 4—The objections that have been or could be raised and how Obama's ideas counter them

Either of those structures would be perfectly fine. (Shortly, we'll share with you a sample essay written to still another paragraph structure.) For now, we would recommend that by the end of that eight minutes of note-taking and analyzing, you will have decided on your three themes and started to assemble the order of the points you want to make in each paragraph.

A Word about the Outline

You should use whatever type of outline makes you feel most comfortable and capable as you practice the essay, but it's unlikely that you'd create a "sentence outline," in which each roman numeral, capitalized, and lowercase point is written as a complete sentence: there just isn't time.

You may find it simpler to create a topic outline. Here, for instance, is a potential outline for a paragraph describing how President Obama paints a grim picture of the situation in 2015:

First body paragraph:

- Starts with scares in ¶1
 - 15 yr. trend
 - all countries
- Alaska
 - strong mental pictures for emotion ¶2
 - children affected
- obstacles to progress
 - cynicism/inaction/lack of will ¶6, ¶11

Alternatively, you may want to skip using an outline and instead label your margin notes. You can number your body paragraphs as I, II, and III (or A, B, and C). Put an A in the margin wherever you have a point to make in your first body paragraph, B for the next one, and so on.

Or you might choose to use an "idea map"—jot down points you want to make and then connect those thoughts with arrows that you can follow as you write.

Experiment with more than one method and go with the one that works best for you on test day.

What the Graders Want

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

After this lesson, you will be able to:

- State what the graders are looking for

Student Response

President Barack Obama's address to the 2015 Climate Conference in Paris comes across as a heartfelt plea for the assembled delegates to turn around what he clearly feels is the number one danger to our planet. He wants to appeal to both the heart and the head, so he employs not just factual evidence, but also personal experience and emotional language to rev up his audience.

The statistical evidence Mr. Obama cites is of two types and serves two different functions. In his very first paragraph he points out what he must feel is a frightening piece of data that will make people sit up, the 15 years since 2000 that show an overwhelming trend toward hotter and hotter temperatures. To make sure every delegate sits up, he reminds them that every country, "large or small, wealthy or poor," will have to live with those consequences. Soon after, however, he takes pains to cite many encouraging statistics. Paragraph 4 lays out some of what the United States has done, including reduce or discourage use of fossil fuel, commit to wind and solar, urge Americans to conserve, and put caps on carbon emissions. The next paragraph emphasizes that the U.S. is far from the only nation that has made positive strides. I sense that he feels that he will energize the crowd better not by harping on the doom and gloom of his opening, but by urging the delegates to stay on the right road that the world is already on. He also anticipates any objection that turning the situation around will be too costly, by directly stating that strong economies and a better environment "can work in concert."

Mr. Obama also wants the delegates to feel the personal pain of what's at stake in climate change, so he describes a trip to Alaska, which many people think of as America's last wilderness. There he witnessed the effects of earth's warming on the population and the geography. He doesn't mention wilderness animals but images of endangered polar bears and seals and such are surely evoked by his "preview" of what could happen if climate change outpaces human efforts to turn it around. Creating unhappy mental images in an audience's mind can make more of an impact than statistics, he seems to realize, especially in the litany of sorry situations with which paragraph 2 ends.

The crisp phrases "Submerged countries" and "Abandoned cities" in paragraph 2 are in line with "Right here. Right now" in paragraph 3. They bring in the kind of rhetorical snap with which Mr. Obama surely wants to hit them between the eyes at the urgency of the situation. "Hundreds of billions of dollars" isn't a statistic, it's a bit of overstatement that implies that if we have the will, we'll have the means. The repeated "Here in Paris" in the calls to four specific actions that the Conference could take, keeps reminding the audience that he is not just interested in making them feel bad, he wants them to act. "Act here... act now" he says in paragraph 12. It comes as no surprise that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s name is evoked,

because Mr. Obama is using the same power of the pulpit Dr. King did, to get the world's sinners, meaning all of us, to mend our ways.

Mr. Obama's speech would probably end with great applause for the soaring list of the long-term issues that are at stake for later generations' air, food, water, and dreams. But he doesn't want applause, he wants results. Probably "Let's get to work" is the snappiest way he could fire up the delegates to get those results.

Graders' Preferences and Analysis

The graders are trained to understand the College Board's stated criteria in particular ways so as to reduce the possibility of personal bias. By studying many graded essays and graders' comments, we have been able to compile the following tables showing what the graders tend to reward and what they tend to downgrade.

Reading

Graders tend to reward . . .	Graders tend to downgrade . . .
Expressing the author's central idea in your own words in the introduction to your essay	Restating the central idea in the author's own words, or presenting the central idea only late in the essay
Summarizing the particulars of the author's argument in your own words	Long quotations from the prompt or restating elements of the argument largely using the author's own words
Identifying relationships between details and the author's claims	Repeating details without considering their connection to the author's claims
Accurately reporting any facts or views that you choose to mention	Factual errors or distortions of authorial views
Sorting out the key individual issues involved	Leaving out key issues or blending several key issues together

Analyzing

Graders tend to reward . . .	Graders tend to downgrade . . .
Clearly identifying rhetorical features/tactics employed (three seems to be the optimum number)	Failing to mention, or misidentifying, rhetorical features/tactics employed; or mentioning too few of them (choosing 3 seems to be very safe)
Identification of specific rhetorical features/tactics (e.g., "contrast," "appeal to . . .," "analogy," "allusions to . . .," "metaphor," "causality," "hypothetical")	Reliance on too-generic rhetorical features/tactics (for instance, "reasoning," "facts," "statistics," "word choice," "imagery")
Explaining those features' intended effect on readers	Omitting consideration of how and why those features were employed
Assessing the strength of the author's use of those features	Omitting consideration of whether the argument's points are effectively presented
Speculation as to the author's views or motives	Treating the author as an objective source of information, rather than as a person engaged in persuasion
A focus on the <i>why</i> and <i>how</i> of an argument	A focus on the <i>what</i> of an argument

Writing

Graders tend to reward . . .	Graders tend to downgrade . . .
Clear, precise assertions	Unclear or vague assertions
Following a logical organizational structure	Meandering structure or stream-of-consciousness organization
Paragraphs organized around a single idea or theme	Paragraphs that take on too many disparate elements that don't fit together
Appropriately qualified statements	Overstatements or hyperbole
Correct grammar	Grammar errors that are noticeable and fixable even within a limited time frame
Interesting turns of phrase	Clichés and boring or obvious phrasing
A variety of sentence structures	Repetitious sentence structure
Complex sentences as appropriate	Run-ons, or overreliance on short, clipped sentences
A conclusion separate from the rest	A conclusion buried within the final paragraph

Now that you've looked over the criteria, let's go paragraph by paragraph through the student essay, with commentary.

¶1 President Barack Obama's address to the 2015 Climate Conference in Paris comes across as a heartfelt plea for the assembled delegates to turn around what he clearly feels is the number one danger to our planet. He wants to appeal to both the heart and the head, so he employs not just factual evidence, but also personal experience and emotional language to rev up his audience.

¶1 The first sentence summarizes both the context (the conference) and the purpose (call to action), but in the student's own words. We get the three components that will be discussed, and in that order—facts, personal experience, emotional wording—which tells the reader that the essay will be well organized.

¶2 The statistical evidence Mr. Obama cites is of two types and serves two different functions. In his very first paragraph he points out what he must feel is a frightening piece of data that will make people sit up, the 15 years since 2000 that show an overwhelming trend toward hotter and hotter temperatures. To make sure every delegate sits up, he reminds them that every country, "large or small, wealthy or poor," will have to live with those consequences. Soon after, however, he takes pains to cite many encouraging statistics. Paragraph 4 lays out some of what the United States has done, including reduce or discourage use of fossil fuel, commit to wind and solar, urge Americans to conserve, and put caps on carbon emissions. The next paragraph emphasizes that the U.S. is far from the only nation that has made positive strides. I sense that he feels that he will energize the crowd better not by harping on the doom and gloom of his opening, but by urging the delegates to stay on the right road that the world is already on. He also anticipates any objection that turning the situation around will be too costly, by directly stating that strong economies and a better environment "can work in concert."

¶2 Noting the two different types and functions of factual evidence shows that the student has thought through and categorized the text that will be cited in the essay. Overall, this paragraph is an excellent illustration of:

- Putting the author's ideas into your own words (e.g., the 15-year trend)
- Explaining why something's been mentioned (e.g., it's frightening)
- Emphasizing the intended effect on the audience (e.g., to make them pay attention and take action)

Note the very selective quotations from the speech. That shows care and thought.

Two side notes about word choice. The repeated "Mr. Obama" shows respect, but simply "Obama" would be acceptable. And it's okay to use the first person pronoun ("I sense that...") when you make a point that you particularly want the reader to realize is your opinion. It would be unfair to say, "He feels that he will energize..." as you can't know that for a fact. If you're uncomfortable with using "I," you could instead say, "He seems to feel that he will energize..." That would have the same effect.

<p>¶3 Mr. Obama also wants the delegates to feel the personal pain of what's at stake in climate change, so he describes a trip to Alaska, which many people think of as America's last wilderness. There he witnessed the effects of earth's warming on the population and the geography. He doesn't mention wilderness animals but images of endangered polar bears and seals and such are surely evoked by his "preview" of what could happen if climate change outpaces human efforts to turn it around. Creating unhappy mental images in an audience's mind can make more of an impact than statistics, he seems to realize, especially in the litany of sorry situations with which paragraph 2 ends.</p>	<p>¶3 Here is the second of the three argument elements, connected to the previous paragraph with the simple transition, "also wants the delegates to..." Obama's second paragraph is carefully put into the writer's own words. The last sentence here shows the student's understanding that a good essay will consider the why of an author's choices, not just the what.</p>
<p>¶4 The crisp phrases "Submerged countries" and "Abandoned cities" in paragraph 2 are in line with "Right here. Right now" in paragraph 3. They bring in the kind of rhetorical snap with which Mr. Obama surely wants to hit them between the eyes at the urgency of the situation. "Hundreds of billions of dollars" isn't a statistic, it's a bit of overstatement that implies that if we have the will, we'll have the means. The repeated "Here in Paris" in the calls to four specific actions that the Conference could take, keeps reminding the audience that he is not just interested in making them feel bad, he wants them to act. "Act here... act now" he says in paragraph 12. It comes as no surprise that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s name is evoked, because Mr. Obama is using the same power of the pulpit Dr. King did, to get the world's sinners, meaning all of us, to mend our ways.</p>	<p>¶4 Here is the analysis of the rhetorical devices used by Obama, carefully arranged in a logical order. Notice that the student has not for a moment forgotten the overall purpose of the speech: to get the delegates to act. It's brought up as often as possible.</p>

¶5 Mr. Obama's speech would probably end with great applause for the soaring list of the long-term issues that are at stake for later generations' air, food, water, and dreams. But he doesn't want applause, he wants results. Probably "Let's get to work" is the snappiest way he could fire up the delegates to get those results.

¶5 The conclusion of an SAT Essay should be short. The graders already know what you think of the prompt. Finding a new way to summarize the whole, that doesn't sound redundant or clunky, takes practice and is never easy. This student has noticed that the main theme is encapsulated at the very end in the words "Let's get to work," which fortunately allows for a reminder of the prompt's purpose. Such a reminder is crucial to a good conclusion.

This conclusion is solid. But the good news is that if the rest of the essay is strong, a weak or problematic conclusion will likely not make a big difference to your scores.

Summary of Graders' Analysis

Reading

This student manages to put both the central idea in paragraph 1 (Obama's desire to spur the conference into action), and the summary of the whole argument in paragraph 5, *into the student's own words*, which is crucial to scoring well in this category. There are no inaccuracies in the reporting, and every reported detail relates to some key point Obama is trying to make. (Example: "Hundreds of billions" in paragraph 4, is recognized as more of a booster point than a hard statistic.) Finally, the student wisely minimizes direct quotations. The brief phrases quoted are few in number, but always relevant to a point the student is making. (Example: The four two-word phrases mentioned in paragraph 4 as examples of "rhetorical snap" designed to grab the delegates' attention.)

Analyzing

The student mentions three broad rhetorical features in paragraph 1 and is always aware of how they're meant to affect readers. (Example: The Alaska trip is cited as a way to get the listeners emotionally engaged in the scientific dilemma.) The student speculates plausibly on Obama's motives (example: the reasoning as to why Obama keeps repeating "Here in Paris"). The reader leaves with no doubt that the student thinks Obama has argued strongly, which is not the same thing as the forbidden step of taking a side. (One can admire the strength of an argument whether or not one agrees with it.)

Writing

The overall structure follows the (1. Facts 2. Emotions 3. Rhetoric) structure promised by paragraph 1. Each paragraph properly takes up one of those, in order. The essay contains no notable grammar errors and the sentence structure is pleasingly varied, with a good mix of simple sentences and complex ones. There are some evocative turns of phrase ("appeal to both the heart and the head"; "rev up his audience"; "the doom and gloom of his opening"; "hit them between the eyes"; "get the world's sinners, meaning all of us, to mend our ways"). Finally, the conclusion, which appropriately summarizes the whole speech in new language, is correctly set apart from the rest of the essay.

Next Steps

Try the SAT Essay prompt in the "How Much Have You Learned?" section of this chapter.

How Much Have You Learned?

We're leaving you with an additional prompt and, to extend your skills, a set of notes and outline that a student prepared from it:

As you read the passage below, consider how George W. Bush uses

- evidence, such as facts or examples.
- reasoning to develop ideas and to connect claims and evidence.
- stylistic or persuasive elements, such as word choice or appeals to emotion, to add power to the ideas expressed.

Adapted from U.S. president George W. Bush's address from the East Room of the White House on January 7, 2004.

- 1 Many of you here today are Americans by choice, and you have followed in the path of millions. And over the generations we have received energetic, ambitious, optimistic people from every part of the world. By tradition and conviction, our country is a welcoming society. America is a stronger and better nation because of the hard work and the faith and entrepreneurial spirit of immigrants.
- 2 Every generation of immigrants has reaffirmed the wisdom of remaining open to the talents and dreams of the world. And every generation of immigrants has reaffirmed our ability to assimilate newcomers—which is one of the defining strengths of our country. . . .
- 3 During one great period of immigration—between 1891 and 1920—our nation received some 18 million men, women and children from other nations. The hard work of these immigrants helped make our economy the largest in the world. The children of immigrants put on the uniform and helped to liberate the lands of their ancestors. One of the primary reasons America became a great power in the 20th century is because we welcomed the talent and the character and the patriotism of immigrant families.
- 4 The contributions of immigrants to America continue. About 14 percent of our nation's civilian workforce is foreign-born. Most begin their working lives in America by taking hard jobs and clocking long hours in important industries. Many immigrants also start businesses, taking the familiar path from hired labor to ownership.
- 5 As a nation that values immigration, and depends on immigration, we should have immigration laws that work and make us proud. Yet today we do not. Instead, we see many employers turning to the illegal labor market. We see millions of hard-working men and women condemned to fear and insecurity in a massive, undocumented economy. The system is not working. Our nation needs an immigration system that serves the American economy, and reflects the American Dream. . . .
- 6 Today, I ask the Congress to join me in passing new immigration laws that reflect these principles, that meet America's economic needs, and live up to our highest ideals.

- 7 I propose a new temporary worker program that will match willing foreign workers with willing American employers, when no Americans can be found to fill the jobs. This program will offer legal status, as temporary workers, to the millions of undocumented men and women now employed in the United States, and to those in foreign countries who seek to participate in the program and have been offered employment here. This new system should be clear and efficient, so employers are able to find workers quickly and simply.
- 8 This program expects temporary workers to return permanently to their home countries after their period of work in the United States has expired. And there should be financial incentives for them to do so. I will work with foreign governments on a plan to give temporary workers credit, when they enter their own nation's retirement system, for the time they have worked in America. . . .
- 9 Some temporary workers will make the decision to pursue American citizenship. Those who make this choice will be allowed to apply in the normal way. . . .
- 10 The citizenship line, however, is too long, and our current limits on legal immigration are too low. Those willing to take the difficult path of citizenship—the path of work, and patience, and assimilation—should be welcome in America, like generations of immigrants before them. . . .
- 11 This new system will be more compassionate. Decent, hard-working people will now be protected by labor laws, with the right to change jobs, earn fair wages, and enjoy the same working conditions that the law requires for American workers. Temporary workers will be able to establish their identities by obtaining the legal documents we all take for granted. And they will be able to talk openly to authorities, to report crimes when they are harmed, without the fear of being deported.
- 12 ... [O]ur country has always benefited from the dreams that others have brought here. By working hard for a better life, immigrants contribute to the life of our nation. The temporary worker program I am proposing today represents the best tradition of our society, a society that honors the law, and welcomes the newcomer. This plan will help return order and fairness to our immigration system, and in so doing we will honor our values, by showing our respect for those who work hard and share in the ideals of America.

Write an essay in which you explain how George W. Bush builds an argument to persuade his audience that his temporary worker program should be adopted by Congress. In your essay, analyze how he uses one or more of the features in the directions that precede the passage (or features of your own choice) to strengthen the logic and persuasiveness of his argument. Be sure that your analysis focuses on the most relevant features of the passage.

Your essay should not explain whether you agree with Bush's claims, but rather explain how Bush builds an argument to persuade his audience.

After reading through the President Bush prompt, you may want to consult the following notes and outline before writing your essay.

Student's Three Elements/Devices

1. Praises past and present contributions to immigrants

- Statistics and generalizations
- Paragraph 3: Long tradition, back when 18 mill were welcomed. Grateful for svc in WWI and WWII (immig. kids).
- Paragraph 4: Continues today, 14% of workforce. Many start as employees and end up employers.

Effect: Puts facts behind rhetoric about immigrants—makes their contributions concrete & real

2. Anticipates and rebuts criticisms

- Critics might say too costly, out of control bureauc. Paragraph 7: he wants “clear and efficient.”
- Expects temp workers to go back, but critics might worry about their welfare back home. Paragraph 8: we’ll help smooth it out.
- Critics might say “you’re not talking about citizenship.” Yes he is: there are provisions for those who want to stay (Paragraphs 9–10).

Effect: Note he gets all of those out of the way before going on to list advantages in Paragraph 11. He really wants listeners to accept his plan so polishes off potential objections first.

3. Uses rhetoric to connect plan to fundamental values

- Early as Paragraph 2—U.S. welcomes immigrants
- Paragraph 5 details current probs w/system, but a solution, same Paragraph, demanded by “Amer economy & Amer dream.”
- Paragraph 12: conclusion evokes “the best tradition of our society,” “honor[ing] the law,” & “shar[ing] in the ideals of America.”

Effect: Wants to make his reform plan a moral imperative, not just a practical one. Implies whether you’re worried about economy or fairness, this plan speaks to your concerns.

Student's Opening Paragraph

To “sell” his immigration reform plan unveiled in early 2004, President Bush goes beyond the strict, narrow topic of the temporary worker to persuade the audience that immigrants in general need to be congratulated and protected. To do so, he praises their past and present contributions, anticipates and rebuts objections to his plan, and uses rhetoric to connect his plan to fundamental values of the U.S.