

CHAPTER 7

Reading: Rhetoric

Rhetoric: The Author’s Craft

The word “rhetoric” carries several meanings, as you may know—especially if you’re involved in speech or debate. One common definition, perhaps the best known today, is “lofty and dishonest language.” That meaning is often associated with pronouncements by politicians who are seen as using words to dodge controversy, hide their true position, or prop up a weak argument. The fact that words such as “empty” or “mere” often precede “rhetoric” suggests that the term has a negative connotation for many people.

“Rhetoric,” however, has another, broader, more positive meaning, and that is “the study of writing or speaking.” Rhetoric in this sense stretches back at least to Aristotle and the ancient Greeks, who helped make rhetoric a formal practice with defined rules and conventions. It’s in this second sense that the SAT uses the term. Rhetoric questions on the Reading Test assess how well you understand the choices that authors make in structuring and developing their texts. Paralleling what we did with Information and Ideas in Chapter 6, we’ll turn now to the kinds of Rhetoric questions you’ll find on the Reading Test.

Questions in this category are of five main types:

- **Analyzing word choice:** Understanding how an author selects words, phrases, and language patterns to influence meaning, tone, and style
- **Analyzing text structure:** Describing how an author shapes and organizes a passage and how the parts of the passage contribute to the whole
- **Analyzing point of view:** Understanding the point of view or perspective from which a passage is told and how that point of view or perspective affects the content and style of the passage
- **Analyzing purpose:** Determining the main rhetorical aim of a passage or a significant part of the passage, such as a paragraph



REMEMBER

Rhetoric questions assess your understanding of how and why the author develops the passage in a particular way. Understanding the author’s purpose or point of view is often of central importance to correctly answering Rhetoric questions.

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Questions that ask you to analyze word choice aren't assessing your vocabulary knowledge per se. Rather, these questions assess your skill in determining the impact that particular words and phrases have on the meaning, style, and tone of a passage.

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As you read a passage on the SAT, you'll want to shift back and forth between a focus on the specific content of the passage (the "what") and the structure of the passage (the "how"). Text structure questions require a broader, more abstract, rhetorical understanding of the passage.

- **Analyzing arguments:** Examining the claims, counterclaims, reasoning, evidence, and stylistic and persuasive techniques an author uses in an argument

We'll consider each of these subcategories in the sections that follow.

Analyzing Word Choice

Questions about analyzing word choice are—with Information and Ideas questions about determining the meaning of words and phrases in context—key elements of the Words in Context subscore. In contrast to word/phrase meaning questions, Analyzing Word Choice questions focus less on definitions and more on the rhetorical impact that particular words, phrases, and language patterns (such as repetition) have on the meaning, style, and tone of a passage. While there's no standard phrasing to these types of questions, they'll generally call out certain words, phrases, or sentences and ask you to consider the purpose or effect of this language.

Analyzing Text Structure

Text structure questions on the Reading Test come in two basic forms. One kind will ask you to characterize in some way the overall structure of the passage. In a few cases, this may be as simple as just recognizing the basic organizing principle of the passage, such as cause-and-effect, sequence, or problem-solution. In most cases, though, such questions will be more complicated and shaped by the content of the individual passage. You may, for example, have to track how the structure shifts over the course of the passage, meaning that the answer will be in two or more parts (as in "the passage begins by doing *x* and then does *y*").

Let's examine the wording of one such question. The literature passage this question is based on and the explanation for the answer can be found in Chapter 9. Our real interest now is only the format and wording of the question and the approach you'd need to take to respond to it.

- Over the course of the passage, the main focus of the narrative shifts from the
- A) reservations a character has about a person he has just met to a growing appreciation that character has of the person's worth.
 - B) ambivalence a character feels about his sensitive nature to the character's recognition of the advantages of having profound emotions.
 - C) intensity of feeling a character has for another person to the character's concern that that intensity is not reciprocated.
 - D) value a character attaches to the wonders of the natural world to a rejection of that sort of beauty in favor of human artistry.

To answer this question (or one like it), you'll have to both think abstractly (moving beyond just understanding the plot to being able to characterize the structure of the passage as an author might) and identify the major change in focus that occurs in the passage.

The other kind of text structure question asks about the relationship between an identified part of a passage (such as a phrase or sentence or a particular detail) and the passage as a whole. You may be asked, for example, to recognize that a given detail serves mainly as an example of a particular point the author is trying to make—or that it adds emphasis, foreshadows a later development, calls an assumption into question, or the like. You’ll again have to think abstractly, considering not only what the author is saying but also the main contribution that a particular element of the passage makes to furthering the author’s overall rhetorical purpose.

Analyzing Point of View

When the Reading Test asks you to consider point of view, it’s not usually simply a matter of understanding what’s often called “narrative point of view”—whether a passage is told from, say, a first person or a third person omniscient perspective. This can be part of it, but on the Reading Test, “point of view” is a broader term that also includes the stance, attitude, or bias of the author, narrator, or speaker. Point of view questions are found not just with fiction passages but with passages of all sorts.

Point of view questions generally identify themselves by words and phrases such as “perspective” and “point of view.” The answer choices frequently offer characterizations of the author, narrator, or speaker. Consider, for instance, the following question from the Barbara Jordan speech we discussed in Chapter 6. (Remember: The passage, additional sample questions, and answer explanations can be found in Chapter 9.)

The stance Jordan takes in the passage is best described as that of

- A) an idealist setting forth principles.
- B) an advocate seeking a compromise position.
- C) an observer striving for neutrality.
- D) a scholar researching a historical controversy.

In this case, you have to figure out the stance, or perspective, that Jordan brings to the speech she delivers. To decide on the best answer—which in this instance is choice A—you’ll want to both form an overall impression of Jordan and confirm (or modify) that impression based on specific elements of the passage—what Jordan says and how she says it. You might note that Jordan describes her faith in the U.S. Constitution as “whole,” “complete,” and “total” and that she claims that “the powers relating to impeachment are an essential check in the hands of the body of the legislature against and upon the encroachments of the executive.” Her description of her faith in the Constitution strongly suggests idealism, and her claim about impeachment powers can be seen as setting forth a principle. As with questions about analyzing text structure, questions about point of view may ask you to note how the perspective from which a passage is told shifts over the course of the text.



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For every SAT passage you read, get in the habit of asking yourself, “Why did the author write this passage?” Or, put differently, “What point or message was the author trying to get across by writing the passage in this way?” Considering such matters as you read the passage will help you with many of the questions you’ll be asked.



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Keep a sharp eye out for evidence, contrast, and conclusion keywords when reading passages that are argumentative in nature. These keywords will help you analyze the content and structure of the passage. Evidence use can be signaled by keywords such as “for example” and “because” as well as references to statistics, surveys, and case studies. Contrast keywords include “however,” “despite,” and “on the contrary.” Conclusion keywords include “therefore,” “as a result,” and “thus.”

Analyzing Purpose

Questions about analyzing purpose are like questions about text structure in that you’ll have to think abstractly about the text—not just understanding what the text says but also what the author is trying to achieve. In Analyzing Purpose questions, you’ll consider the main purpose or function of the whole passage or of a significant part of the passage, generally one or more paragraphs. The word “purpose” or “function” is often used in such questions, while the answer choices often begin with or include rhetorically focused verbs such as “criticize,” “support,” “present,” or “introduce.”

Analyzing Arguments

The Reading Test includes passages that are primarily argumentative in nature. Such passages typically include one or more claims, or assertions, that the author attempts to convince the reader to accept through the use of reasoning (analysis), evidence (facts, statistics, expert testimony, case studies, and the like), and stylistic and persuasive elements (vivid imagery, appeals to emotion, and so on). Arguments also sometimes include counterclaims, or assertions made by those whose opinions are different from or opposed to those of the author, which the author may discuss and attempt to pick apart in order to show that the author’s own position is stronger. (Confident, fair-minded authors will often take it upon themselves to point out the weaknesses of their own position and the strengths of the positions of others. On the Reading Test, though, you’re usually seeing only part of an argument, so counterarguments won’t always be present.)

Practically speaking, you probably won’t approach Analyzing Arguments questions much differently than you would similar questions about other kinds of passages. A question that asks about the central claim of an argument, for example, is a lot like a question about the main idea or theme of another sort of passage. You’ll have to decide on the primary assertion (main point) that the author is making in the argument and distinguish that from secondary assertions (minor points) and details. Analyzing Arguments questions differ from other kinds of Reading Test questions mainly in that they use words and concepts such as “claim,” “counterclaim,” “reason,” and “evidence” to direct your attention to some of the features that distinguish arguments from texts designed to narrate events or experiences, to inform, or to explain.

Chapter 7 Recap

In contrast to Information and Ideas questions, Rhetoric questions on the SAT Reading Test focus on the author's craft rather than on the informational content of passages. When answering Rhetoric questions, you'll think less about the message the author is trying to convey and more about how that message is conveyed and what the author hopes to accomplish. Questions of this sort will ask you to analyze word choice, text structure, point of view, purpose, and arguments. Whatever their specific type, Rhetoric questions will generally be abstract in nature and ask you to step back from the information and ideas in a passage. You'll have a chance to show that you can think as an author would as you trace how particular words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs interact with an overarching purpose and structure to shape and express the message that the author is trying to share with the audience.

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