

“Language Devices” “Rhetorical Strategies” “Elements of Argument”: Say What?

What students need to know and be able to do when faced with broad, general wording in prompts that call for close reading and analysis.

The trend in the wording of the AP English Language exam passage analysis prompts is clear: the language is general and much less specific than it has historically been.

Compare these prompts from the last five years...

2012 Question 2

“...analyze the rhetorical strategies President Kennedy uses to achieve his purpose.”

2011 Question 2

“...analyze the rhetorical strategies Kelley uses to convey her message about child labor to her audience.”

2010 Question 2

“...analyze how Banneker uses rhetorical strategies to argue against slavery.”

2009 Question 2

“...analyze how Wilson’s satire illustrates the unproductive nature of such discussions.”

2008 Question 2

“...analyze how Barry uses rhetorical strategies to characterize scientific research.”

With these prompts from the 1990s

1990 Question 1

“...analyze how the author uses juxtaposition of ideas, choice of details, and other aspects of style to reveal the kind of person she is.”

1992 Question 3

“...analyze how Mairs presents herself...In addition to discussing the significance of Mairs choice of the word ‘cripple’ to name herself...consider such rhetorical features as tone, word choice, and rhetorical structure.”

1996 Question 2

“...analyze some of the ways...Soto recreates the experience of his guilty six-year-old self. You might consider such devices as contrast, repetition, pacing, diction, and imagery.”

1997 Question 2

“...noting such elements as syntax, figurative language, and selection of detail...identify the stylistic elements in the third paragraph that distinguish it from the rest of the passage and show how the difference reinforces Douglass’ rhetorical purpose in the passage as a whole.”

AP readers have consistently noted that students who go “device hunting” often produce lower-half papers. The Arch Method can go a long way toward helping students frame their essays in ways that lead to upper-half scores by replacing the immature device hunting with focusing on the over-*arching* idea or issue they are being asked to address in the prompt. What is the writer’s purpose, how is she characterizing something, what is her attitude or tone, what message does she want to convey?

Another characteristic AP readers have seen in more effective student essays is an ability to write about a passage at the level of structure as well as at the level of language. While both levels are “rhetorical strategies,” for my purposes here, I am referring to the two levels as “strategies” and “devices” respectively. The bigger umbrella (at the level of structure) might be thought of as the plan or method (the strategy!) a writer chooses to achieve his purpose. The smaller umbrella, the “devices” more closely refers to the specific techniques or tools a writer chooses to use at the level of language—words, phrases, and sentences. For example, a writer might organize his argument as a compare and contrast essay (his basic strategy) and make liberal use of antithesis (a device) syntax.

There are certainly no absolutes regarding which element of language goes into which category, but for the purpose of illustration, please consider the following chart:

STRATEGIES – LEVEL OF STRUCTURE	DEVICES – LEVEL OF LANGUAGE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three appeals—logos, pathos, ethos • Tone • Arrangement—inductive, deductive, etc. • Mode of development—narrative, division/classification, satire, etc. • Repetition • Patterns created from devices—imagery, diction, syntax, etc. • Language registers • Listing of reasons • Opening with counter argument or making a concession • Anticipating objections 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imagery or selection of detail • Diction • Syntax • Rhetorical questions • Irony • Figurative Language—metaphor, hyperbole, understatement, etc. • Schemes • Tropes

Generalizations about what students should do on the AP exam can be dangerous because teachers—and then their students—can clutch them too tightly as “truth.” What is intended as a helpful description becomes instead a prescription. So, with that as a disclaimer and caution, I’ll say student essay responses are generally more effective when they analyze an author’s “strategies” rather than when they zero in on “devices.”

I would encourage teachers and their students to amend this chart in ways that make sense to them. What is important is that becoming aware of the distinctions between what we are calling “strategies” and “devices” can add depth and nuance to students’ thinking and writing and thereby improve their essays on the AP Language exam.