

Scoring Report

Essay	Thesis	Evidence & Commentary	Sophistication	Total Score <i>Six points possible.</i>
1	1	1	0	2
2C				
2	1	3	1	5
2A				
3	1	2	0	3
2B				
Your Essay				





Examples of Thesis Statements that Earned a Point

- *“Michelle Obama uses a friendly tone, inspirational diction, and examples from her own family to convey her message about her expectations and hope for young people in America.”*
- *“In her last speech as First Lady, Michelle Obama adopts the persona of a mentor or parental figure, using second person pronouns and giving direct advice, to inspire her audience of young people to ‘rise to their best possible selves.’”*
- *“In her inspirational 2017 speech, First Lady Michelle Obama provides multiple examples of her own family to exhort the young people in her audience with a call to action to take their place as positive and productive members of American society.”*



Question 2

Note: Student samples are quoted verbatim and may contain grammatical errors.

Overview

Students responding to this question were expected to read an excerpt from a 2017 speech delivered by Michelle Obama at an event honoring outstanding school counselors and then write an essay that analyzes the rhetorical choices Obama made to convey her message about her expectations and hope for young people in the United States. Students were expected to respond to the prompt with a thesis that analyzes the speaker's rhetorical choices; select and use evidence to support their line of reasoning; explain how the evidence supports their line of reasoning; demonstrate an understanding of the rhetorical situation; and use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating their argument.

As per the Course and Exam Description, students were expected to be able to read and understand the speech and identify the strategic choices Obama made related to the rhetorical situation, explain how those rhetorical choices contributed to the purpose of the address, identify and describe their claims, and analyze and select the appropriate evidence to support their claims.

Sample: 2A

Score: 1-3-1

Thesis (0–1) points: 1

The defensible thesis is the last sentence of paragraph 1: “In her final speech as first lady Obama uses repetition, emotional appeals and allusions to convey her message about her expectations and hope for young people in the US.”

Evidence and Commentary (0–4 points): 3

The response provides specific evidence to support all claims in a line of reasoning. For instance, paragraph 2 includes several examples of how Obama acknowledges and appeals to the diversity of her audience (diversity of religion and economic background), and paragraph 3 explains several examples of ways in which Obama's use of repetition “emphasizes all the different potential characteristics or circumstances people could be going through” and “illustrates to her audience of young people the hope she has for them.”

The response is organized in a line of reasoning that focuses on Obama's awareness of and appeals to the audience through various rhetorical choices, building upon claims made in paragraph 2 to explain claims in paragraph 3. For example, the claim that Obama's emotional appeal in paragraph 2 “shows the audience that they are not alone when it comes to things that there are many other people who go through the same things” is built upon in paragraph 3 with the explanation that Obama's message “is important to her audience of young people because young people often have thoughts and questions on whether or not something applies to them or if they are included or a part of something.” While the discussion of the pilgrims and religious diversity in paragraph 2 demonstrates an understanding of the historical context from which the value of religious diversity in America comes, the commentary that follows—“it explains to her audience of young people that they do not have to be afraid of what they believe in because those differing religions contribute to the makeup of the nation”—does not clearly explain how Obama's rhetorical choice to include the allusion effectively conveys her expectations and hope for young people in the United States.



Question 2 (continued)

Sophistication (0–1 points): 1

The response demonstrates a complex understanding of Obama’s rhetorical situation and goes beyond repeating information included in the prompt, consistently connecting Obama’s speech to the past as well as the understanding that today’s words are meant to impact the future. The response offers a sophisticated understanding of why Obama includes specific references: “She alludes to the pilgrims reason for coming to the new world in paragraph three when she discusses the tradition of American religious diversity.” The response’s style is not particularly vivid or persuasive, but it does not suffer weaknesses in language control (despite consistent misspellings) that would interfere with the sophistication of the argument.

Sample: 2B

Score: 1-2-0

Thesis (0–1) points: 1

The defensible thesis appears in the last two sentences of paragraph 1: “First lady Michelle Obama gave a speech in her final days in administration to encourage students to continue their education after high school. While speaking to the students at their high school Michelle uses a call to action, and broad speaking to relate and push these students.”

Evidence and Commentary (0–4 points): 2

While the response identifies two rhetorical choices—“call to action” and “broad speaking”—it relies more on restating Obama’s message than on offering commentary that explains how these two rhetorical choices help to convey that message, e.g., “She reminds them that you will fail and you cannot take freedoms for granted” (paragraph 2). The claim about inclusion in paragraph 3 is simplistic and repetitive: “She never pinpoints one social group or is directly talking to them ... She is friendly and keeps everyone in mind, Michelle relates to everyone, even people of many religions ... No one should miss out on education in Michelle Obama’s eyes.” Because the response does not explain any connections between the claims or connect them back to the stated rhetorical choices, no line of reasoning is clearly established.

Sophistication (0–1 points): 0

The response does not explore complexities or tensions within Obama’s argument, nor does it explain the significance of Obama’s rhetorical choices. Instead, the response borders on summary and oversimplification, e.g., “Michelle Obama wants you to know that nothing is impossible” and “This first lady wants all students to feel as though they can have a higher education after high school.” The style is not particularly vivid or persuasive.

Sample: 2C

Score: 1-1-0

Thesis (0–1) points: 1

The defensible thesis is found in the first sentence of the response: “In her last speech, Michelle Obama uses comparing and contrasting to convey her message about her expectations and hope for young people in the United States.”



Question 2 (continued)

Evidence and Commentary (0–4 points): 1

While the response identifies “comparing and contrasting” in paragraph 2 as a rhetorical choice, (e.g., comparing “her and her husband’s life leading up to their spot in the White House to an ordinary citizen”), it does not explain how the comparisons support Obama’s desire to improve educational opportunities. The response consists of mostly summary and description in paragraph 2 (e.g., “She expresses how they started with very little” and “She states, ‘If your family doesn’t have much money, I want you to remember that in this country, plenty of folks ... started out with very little’”) offering little or no explanation of the rhetorical choices Obama makes and how they convey her message.

Sophistication (0–1 points): 0

Because the response is largely descriptive, it does not explore complexities and tensions. The argument relies on one underdeveloped claim about comparison, so it does not display sophistication of thought or a complex understanding of the rhetorical situation. The style is neither vivid nor persuasive.



Question 2

Task: Rhetorical Analysis

Topic: Michelle Obama speech to school counselors

Max Score: 6

Mean Score: 3.58

What were the responses to this question expected to demonstrate?

Students responding to this question were expected to read an excerpt from a 2017 speech delivered by Michelle Obama at an event honoring outstanding school counselors and then write an essay that analyzes the rhetorical choices Obama made to convey her message about her expectations and hope for young people in the United States. Students were expected to respond to the prompt with a thesis that analyzes the speaker's rhetorical choices; select and use evidence to support their line of reasoning; explain how the evidence supports their line of reasoning; demonstrate an understanding of the rhetorical situation; and use appropriate grammar and punctuation in communicating their argument.

As per the Course and Exam Description, students were expected to be able to read and understand the speech and identify the strategic choices Obama made related to the rhetorical situation, explain how those rhetorical choices contributed to the purpose of the address, identify and describe their claims, and analyze and select the appropriate evidence to support their claims.

How well did the responses address the course content related to this question? How well did the responses integrate the skills required on this question?

Students found the speech to be an accessible one, and most recognized themselves in the targeted audience of this excerpt. The more insightful students recognized that this excerpt served almost as an aside, with remarks directed at students during a speech that was honoring outstanding school counselors, but a failure to recognize this broader rhetorical context did not negatively affect students' ability to respond to the prompt with apt analysis. Stronger responses also understood the significance of this being Obama's final speech as First Lady, which is information found both in the provided introduction as well as stated by the First Lady in the text of the speech itself. Additionally, many students demonstrated an awareness of the transition of power from the 8-year Obama administration to the incoming Trump administration.

Many students seemed to have a familiarity with Obama. Students were aware of her focus on youths during her time in the White House and mentioned some of her other initiatives, such as getting kids to exercise and eat healthier school lunches. The stronger responses noted the significance of ending her time there by addressing the youth in her last formal remarks as First Lady, which Obama points out at the beginning of the excerpt.

Obama's speech is not reliant upon a use of rhetorical devices, but many students still anchored their responses in naming particular devices; the most commonly identified ones were repetition, parallelism, anaphora, appeals to ethos and pathos, personal anecdotes, tonal shifts, and varying types of diction (inspiring diction, patriotic diction, common diction, hopeful diction, etc.). Responses that were anchored in traditional rhetorical devices performed neither better nor worse than essays that took a broader approach to the types of choices a speaker makes. Some essays were also a hybrid of traditional devices and broader choices (e.g., "establishing her credibility, employing parallelism, and appealing to their sensibilities to evoke desire and patriotism"). By and large, students were also able to identify choices Obama made by describing the text. An example of such nondevice-driven choices is illustrated in this thesis statement:



“Through her attention on specific groups of people and her connection of her own story to the power of hope, Obama effectively delivers her message to young people that as someone who has a place in America, they have a duty to better themselves in order to strive for progress.”

Obama’s speech has a strong and clear line of reasoning, which many students noted by discussing her change in purpose and tone at several points: beginning with her inclusive call to young people from all walks of life to work hard and get a good education; followed by the recognition of the responsibility that accompanies that right to contribute to their communities; shifting to a message of hope; and finally acknowledging students who have already been working for their dreams and highlighting the responsibility of adults, like the counselor honoree of the event, to provide the support and hope to the young people she has addressed in the speech. Many successful students developed their responses by working chronologically through the speech, narrating Obama’s choices with evidence and commentary to build their own line of reasoning mirroring the framework of Obama’s speech.

To earn the point in Row A of the scoring guidelines, responses needed to “respond to the prompt with a defensible thesis that analyzes the writer’s rhetorical choices.” Because the prompt specifically tasks students with analyzing the rhetorical choices Obama makes to convey her message about her expectations and hope for young people in the United States, an acceptable thesis needed to include reference to choices as well as a specific purpose or message. Students were able to earn the point by minimally identifying particular choices and naming the message as stated in the prompt without elaboration. The point was not awarded if the statement listed choices with no mention of purpose at all or with only the generic “to get her point across” or “to convey her message.” Many theses were found among two sentences in close proximity to each other (generally, two consecutive sentences, always within the same paragraph). Most often, theses were found in the first paragraph, but many were also found in the conclusion.

Although Row C of the scoring guidelines offers several ways for a response to earn the point, most did not earn the point only for employing a style that is consistently vivid and persuasive. The responses that were vivid and persuasive also tended to demonstrate sophistication of thought and/or understanding of Obama’s rhetorical situation. The responses that earned the sophistication point suggested a student who is insightful and critical as a reader and skillful and deliberate as a writer. In fact, one made this same observation about the effectiveness of Obama’s choices: “Regardless of how beautiful your prose is or how forceful your delivery is, one will never be inspired to do something impossible. The First Lady realizes this and so she ends her speech by showing the audience tangible examples of her hope come true. ... It would be cruel to ask so much from an audience—to put the burdens of their freedom and future so solidly upon their shoulders—without giving them their due recognition.”

Many responses clearly demonstrated Obama’s purpose and offered ample evidence of the rhetorical moves she makes but did not earn the sophistication point because they did not address the speech’s complexities or tensions throughout. Although many responses demonstrated an understanding of Obama’s rhetorical situation, they did not explicitly address the significance or relevance of the identified rhetorical choices except where Obama had already noted that rhetorical context with her own words (e.g., discussion of anecdotes). Although many responses seamlessly integrated quotes within the analysis or offered a vivid phrase or choice word or two, the overall style was not particularly vivid or persuasive enough to rise to the level of sophistication.



What common student misconceptions or gaps in knowledge were seen in the responses to this question?

<i>Common Misconceptions/Knowledge Gaps</i>	<i>Responses that Demonstrate Understanding</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Many weaker responses did not demonstrate an adequate ability to discuss the role of syntax and grammar. Frequent claims were made about the use of polysyndeton, asyndeton, dashes, and different forms of parallelism. When provided, the examples were not always representative of the named choice, and students were ill-prepared to discuss why they mattered to Obama's message. For example, after making the claim that "Michelle used parallelism to help highlight key components of her speech," one response then provided evidence from the speech that failed to demonstrate parallelism and commentary that did not adequately support that claim about the role of parallelism in Obama's discussion of President Obama and her humble roots: "Obama used parallelism to really drive home her point and make each point the same importance. She said 'Something that my husband ... something that has carried us ... something better is always possible' (Obama lines 55–61)."	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Stronger essays consistently and clearly explained why Obama repeated particular words or phrases in their commentary, connecting the effect of that choice on what the response identified as Obama's purpose or message: "Parallelism is a rhetorical choice seen to be used by Obama to enforce her strong belief in education. Obama repeats the phrase 'so you' as a form of anaphora when she explains that getting an education opens doors 'so you can ...' (lines 48–51). The repetition of everything a good education unlocks reinforces Obama's desire to educate American students."Though it was not typically done well, some students were able to analyze the rhetorical effect of the dashes on Obama's overall purpose in what they seemed to recognize as a transcript of Obama's spoken words when she delivered the speech: "The consistent hopeful tone helps push the authors purpose, but also riddled throughout the speech are many dashes which further elaborate on the speaker's thoughts and introduce asides. These asides help break the wall between the speech and the listener and truly connect Obama to her audience. For example, the early parts of the speech Obama talks about 'our glorious diversity.' After this there is a strategically placed set of dashes which contain an explanation for this diversity: 'our diversities of faiths and colors and creeds.' This explanation is consistently seen in many places in the text and is also used as an introduction to an aside. The asides allow the First Lady to directly talk to her audience, interjecting personal anecdotes and other expanding thoughts she might have. Connecting with the school counselors is a major point of emphasis in this speech since Obama truly wants to thank them for their work."



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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Weaker responses claimed that Obama <i>used</i> ethos, pathos, or a call to action as rhetorical choices rather than discussing these as <i>effects</i> of the choices she made: “Michelle used ethos to connect with her audience. ‘I want you to remember that in this country, plenty of folks, including me and my husband—we started out with very little.’ This shows that Obama wants her audience to know she is just like them so they will trust her.” Educators should encourage students to see many of the choices they identify as ways to demonstrate pathos, logos, and ethos rather than as separate choices. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Stronger essays provide more than one direct reference to the speech, both quotes and paraphrased references, as evidence to demonstrate the effect of a particular choice Obama makes to elicit a particular impact on her audience, such as to inspire them to answer a call to action or build her own credibility: “She makes specific analogies to her own poverty—‘me and my husband, we started out with very little’—and her own journey along the path to the American success story. In these analogies, she identifies the theme of hope in the face of adversity that she aims to instill in her audience. She finds hope in she and her husband’s choice to run for office, in her own father’s dedication to his blue collar job, and she tells her audience that this hope is an inherent part of American character, that they too possess it. If she could do it, so can they.” |
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