AP* English Language and Composition

Rhetorical Analysis
William F. Buckley Jr.’s “Why Don’t We Complain?”

Teacher Overview
Rhetorical Analysis
Buckley’s “Why Don’t We Complain?”
Student Activity

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Materials and Resources: Copies of the Student Activity, pens, highlighters.
Instructions for the teacher appear in blue italics.

Past free response questions can be downloaded from College Board’s AP* Central website at http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/Controller.jsp. Below is a table that references some recent rhetorical analysis prompts. Pre-twentieth century texts are noted.

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Introduction

*Have the students take turns reading the paragraphs aloud.*

The AP® English Language and Composition exam includes one free-response question that requires students to analyze how an author constructs a text. To succeed in your analysis, you will be required to demonstrate how technique reveals meaning.

Rhetorical strategies are the tools by which the author creates meaning. You must be able to identify such strategies as well as explain their significance. As you analyze rhetorical strategies, remember what you are looking for: structure, appeals, and devices. To succeed, you must relate the devices used by the author to the meaning and/or purpose of the work.

Exam Structure and Pacing

As you know, two-thirds of your Advanced Placement® examination time are dedicated to essay writing. You have two hours of response time which further break down into 40 minutes per essay to address the prompts. You should apportion each of your 40 minute essay-writing periods like this:

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While you have two hours to write three essays, do not forget that you will also have 15 minutes of reading time before you can write when you can look over all three of the free-response prompts. On average, students have uses 6-8 minutes of that 15 to review the synthesis material. If you find yourself ready to write the synthesis before you can begin, it is a good idea to go ahead and look at the other prompts.

Assuming that you had to use all of your time to prepare for the synthesis (again, according to the law of averages, this will not happen to you), you will have enough time to respond to the prompt. Twenty minutes does not seem like a lot of time to write an essay and to be honest it is not unless you have spent your first fifteen minutes reading the prompt and planning.

In the following activities, you will answer questions designed to help “unlock the passage” in such a way that you can explain how William F. Buckley’s use of rhetorical devices develops his argument and reveals his take on the issue at hand.

Activity 1: Addressing the Prompt

Read the following prompt and answer the questions that follow.

In the following excerpt from “Why Don’t We Complain?” by William F. Buckley, Jr., originally published in Esquire in 1960, Buckley illuminates a notably increasing pattern of failure to speak out in everyday life. Read the passage carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze how Buckley crafts the text to reveal his perceived decline in American character.

1. Read the last sentence again. Write the two tasks it mentions (other than “write an essay”):
   - The first task is to **Analyze how Buckley crafts the text to reveal his point of view.** (concrete task)
   - The second task is to **Identify Buckley’s perceived decline in American character.** (abstract task)
2. Which of these two tasks is more abstract and therefore more intellectually difficult? **The second task**
3. What does it mean to “craft” a text? **Using various rhetorical devices to persuade an audience that a given course of action is correct or advantageous.**
4. Rewrite the prompt as an interrogative sentence. Answers will vary. How does Buckley use rhetorical devices to illustrate what he believes is a decline in American character?

5. Answer your question from #4 in one sentence. Answers will vary.

Your one line answer to the prompt’s implied question is the thesis of your essay.

Activity 2: Reading the Passage Closely

As you read this passage, one question should be uppermost in your mind:

What is Buckley’s view of American character?

The following are NOT your main goals:

- Discuss Buckley’s diction
- Discuss Buckley’s syntax
- Discuss Buckley’s use of sound devices
- Discuss the organization of this piece
- Etc.

Many a paper earning a “4” on the 9 point scale has done any and all of the above and even been written fairly well. These are all things that you could very easily find and discuss in an essay; however, to earn an upper level score, even a “5,” you will have to see the big picture, and the big picture is Buckley’s view of American character. Rhetorical devices, those things Buckley uses to “craft” his text, communicate his view—you will need to discuss how Buckley uses them to answer the question. So as you read the passage, be thinking about that big picture question.

Have the students take turns reading the passage aloud. Encourage them to annotate as they go. Depending upon the average skill level of the class, help them as necessary. Note, however, that the exercises that follow are designed to guide the students through the process of annotation.

1 Every New Year’s Eve I resolve to do something about the Milquetoast* in me and vow to speak up, calmly, for my rights, and for the betterment of our society, on every appropriate occasion. Entering last New Year’s Eve I was fortified in my resolve because that morning at breakfast I had had to ask the waitress three times for a glass of milk. She finally brought it—after I had finished my eggs, which is when I don’t want it any more. I did not have the manliness to order her to take the milk back, but settled instead for a cowardly sulk, and ostentatiously refused to drink the milk—though later I...
paid for it—rather than state plainly to the hostess, as I should have, why I had not drunk it, and would not pay for it.

2 So by the time the New Year ushered out the Old, riding in on my morning’s indignation and stimulated by the gastric juices of resolution that flow so faithfully on New Year’s Eve, I rendered my vow. Henceforward I would conquer my shyness, my despicable disposition to supineness. I would speak out like a man against the unnecessary annoyances of our time.

3 Forty-eight hours later, I was standing in line at the ski-repair store in Pico Peak, Vermont. All I needed, to get on with my skiing, was the loan, for one minute, of a small screwdriver, to tighten a loose binding. Behind the counter in the workshop were two men. One was industriously engaged in servicing the complicated requirements of a young lady at the head of the line, and obviously he would be tied up for quite a while. The other—“Jiggs,” his workmate called him—was a middle-aged man, who sat in a chair puffing a pipe, exchanging small talk with his working partner. My pulse began its telltale acceleration. The minutes ticked on. I stared at the idle shopkeeper, hoping to shame him into action, but he was impervious to my telepathic reproof and continued his small talk with his friend, brazenly insensitive to the nervous demands of six good men who were raring to ski.

4 Suddenly my New Year’s Eve resolution struck me. It was now or never. I broke from my place in line and marched to the counter. I was going to control myself. I dug my nails into my palms. My effort was only partially successful:

5 “If you are not too busy,” I said icily, “would you mind handing me a screwdriver?”

6 Work stopped and everyone turned his eyes on me, and I experienced that mortification I always feel when I am the center of centripetal shafts of curiosity, resentment, perplexity.

7 But the worst was yet to come. “I am very sorry, sir,” said Jiggs deferentially, moving the pipe from his mouth. “I am not supposed to move. I have just had a heart attack.” That was the signal for a great whirring noise that descended from heaven. We looked, stricken, out the window, and it appeared as though a cyclone had suddenly focused on the snowy courtyard between the shop and the ski lift. Suddenly a gigantic Army helicopter materialized, and hovered down to a landing. Two men jumped out of the plane carrying a stretcher, tore into the ski shop, and lifted the shopkeeper onto the stretcher. Jiggs bade his companion good-by, was whisked out the door, into the plane, up to the heavens, down—we learned—to a nearby Army hospital. I looked up manfully—into a score of man-eating eyes. I put the experience down as a reversal.

8 As I write this, on an airplane, I have run out of paper and need to reach into my briefcase under my legs for more. I cannot do this until my empty lunch tray is removed
from my lap. I arrested the stewardess as she passed empty-handed down the aisle on the
to the kitchen to fetch lunch trays for the passengers up forward who haven’t been
serviced yet. “Would you please take up my tray?”

9 “Just a moment, sir,” she said, and marched on sternly.

10 Shall I tell her that since she is headed for the kitchen anyway, it cannot delay the
feeding of the other passengers by the two seconds necessary to stash away my empty
tray? Or remind her that not fifteen minutes ago she spoke unctuously into the
loudspeaker to words undoubtedly devised by the airline’s highly paid public relations
counselor: “If there is anything I or Miss French can do for you to make your trip more
enjoyable, please let us—” I have run out of paper.

*Milquetoast: Caspar Milquetoast was a comic strip character created by Harold Webster in 1924 for his comic strip
The Timid Soul, published in the New York World. From this character the term “milquetoast” has come to mean
“weak and ineffectual.”

Use the text to answer the following questions:

1. Which of the following definitions of character does the essay prompt intend you
to use?
   a. A graphic representation used in writing or printing
   b. The complex of mental and ethical traits marking and often
      individualizing a person, group, or nation (Correct Answer)
   c. A person marked by notable or conspicuous traits
   d. One of the persons of a drama or novel; the personality or part which an
      actor recreates

2. Write what you perceive to be Buckley’s view of American character. Answers
   will vary.

Activity 3: Analyzing How Buckley Crafts the Text

Organization of the Passage

Buckley offers three anecdotes (short, personal narrative examples) to illustrate his claim
about American character. Summarize each of the anecdotes:

Anecdote 1: _The waitress doesn’t bring his milk until after Buckley is finished
eating, but he says nothing about it and pays for it just the same._
Anecdote 2: **Buckley tries to assert himself at the ski lodge, but his timing is bad. The person he seeks to chastise has suffered a heart attack and is air lifted to a hospital. He ends up looking like a jerk even though there is no way he could have known about Jiggs’ condition.**

Anecdote 3: **The stewardess/airline attendant will not take his tray when it is convenient for him, and he runs out of paper because he can neither control a woman nor reach under his seat.**

- Is there a discernable pattern to the order of the anecdotes?
- Is Buckley in the right (i.e. is he justified) in each example?
- Does Buckley succeed in following through with his resolution?

**Patterns in Diction**

1. Annotate the first paragraph of the passage, paying particular attention to the verbs. Look at what you marked. What image do verbs such as “resolve,” “vow,” and “was fortified” bring to mind? *Answers will vary.* Force, power, willpower, manliness, virility, etc.

**Connotation** is the associative meaning of a word, or, more simply, the ideas that a word brings to mind that may or may not have anything at all to do with the actual meaning. For example, a stuffed chair may have connotations of comfort to some people.

2. Are there any other words in the first paragraph that have the same connotation as these verbs? “…speak up, calmly, for my rights, and for the betterment of society…” “…manliness to order her…” “…cowardly sulk…” (antithesis) The verbs connote the will to act, which is what Buckley finds lacking in contemporary American society.

Buckley compares an aspect of his personality to someone called “Milquetoast,” and the passage offers you a footnote:

Caspar Milquetoast was a comic strip character created by Harold Webster in 1924 for his comic strip *The Timid Soul*, published in the *New York World*. From this character the term “milquetoast” has come to mean “weak and ineffectual.”
3. Buckley is resolved “to do something about the Milquetoast in [him] and vow to speak up, calmly, for [his] rights…” What does this suggest about how Buckley feels Americans should act? **Answers will vary. Buckley thinks that American should be rational men of action, defenders of what is right. However, he says he resolves to do this “Every New Year’s Eve,” suggesting that he cannot keep his own advice.**

Look again at the passage. Annotate the rest of the passage paying special attention to words or phrases with similar connotations to the verbs in the first paragraph.

4. In the second paragraph, what does Buckley again resolve to do? How is this different this time? **He resolves “to speak out like a man” for good this time because he was cowed at breakfast that morning.**

5. What is the difference between the two ski shopkeepers? What words lead you to that conclusion? **Youth and industry. One shopkeeper is “servicing the complicated requests of a young lady,” the other is sitting back puffing a pipe, and engaging in small talk. The young shopkeeper appears to be more manly than Jiggs, the older shopkeeper, because Jiggs is “idle.”**

6. How does the second anecdote end for Buckley? (Note: a “reversal” is a change of fortune, a run of bad luck.) **From all appearances, Buckley is in the right to be incensed, but he doesn’t know the entire situation. He puts this down as simply bad luck, not that speaking up for one’s rights is a bad thing.**

7. Does this outcome validate or invalidate his claim and why or why not? **Answers will vary. It invalidates his claim because while he looks up “manfully,” he does so “into a score of man-eating eyes.” The assertion of his manhood is ill-timed, even suggesting that it is perhaps pointless. On the other hand, there is no way he could have known that Jiggs had had a heart attack; had Jiggs been healthy, his behavior as a service employee would have been inappropriate.**
Putting it Together

The humor in The Timid Soul is situational; the character Caspar Milquetoast finds himself in situations where he is too “wimpy” to act like an ordinary person. For example, in one strip, Milquetoast heavily tips a rugged, hyper-masculine waiter in spite of a sign that says no tipping. He quickens his step in front of a no loitering sign, buys a new hat when his blows into a yard with a keep-off-grass sign, and averts his eyes at a museum when the guidebook describes an abstract statue as depicting a nude.

1. How is Buckley as he is depicted in his essay like Caspar Milquetoast? Answers will vary. Buckley is so caught up in following some ideal code of manliness that he has trouble finding the appropriate way to function in public. Milquetoast is similarly unable to function appropriately, deferring always to propriety and the “alpha male” in the room.

2. Look back at the three anecdotes. Choose at least one detail from each of the three anecdotes, and comment on how Buckley uses each to reveal his view of the decline of the American character (the first has been done for you):

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<tr>
<th>Detail from Anecdote</th>
<th>Commentary</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anecdote 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The waitress does not bring his milk until he no longer wants it.</td>
<td>A waitress is supposed to serve your food in a timely manner. Her income is based on your level of satisfaction. Buckley recognizes that he should have stood up for himself—a real American would have.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anecdote 2</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Answers will vary.</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Anecdote 3</td>
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3. Revise your general thesis statement from Activity 1 to address more specifically the prompt: Answers will vary.
Activity 4: Writing the Essay

In the following excerpt from “Why Don’t We Complain?” by William F. Buckley, Jr., originally published in *Esquire* in 1960, Buckley illuminates a notably increasing pattern of failure to speak out in everyday life. Read the passage carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze how Buckley crafts the text to reveal his perceived decline in American character.

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