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## Duration

One class session of approximately 40 minutes in length

## Resources

1. Handout: “The Ballot or the Bullet” Abridged
2. Study Guide: Developing Commentary
3. Handout: Analyzing Commentary



## Objectives of the Lesson

- To identify elements of effective commentary
- To evaluate student commentary

## Activities

- Annotating “The Ballot or the Bullet”
- Evaluating and revising commentary

## How to Use This Lesson

This lesson is designed to help students develop commentary after analyzing a passage. It provides students with an opportunity to analyze rhetoric and then evaluate commentary using the checklist detailed in the “Developing Commentary” study guide. The Practicing Commentary handout can be used in class or sent home for homework.

The best way to use this lesson to give students time to work through the speech itself. Students should read through the passage to identify effective rhetorical choices that help Malcolm X achieve his purpose. In the margins, students should note how the choices will impact the audience, making them more susceptible to his persuasion.

Next, walk students through the commentary study guide. Explain that the three essential components of effective commentary are NOT necessarily three separate sentences of an analysis. In fact, a sophisticated writer will be able to weave them into complex sentences. Additionally, the guide provides questions for students to consider when evaluating the commentary; however, a student’s analysis does not have to answer every single question on the table.

Finally, students will complete the handout: Evaluating Commentary. This activity provides students with an opportunity to evaluate written commentary as effective or ineffective. It also requires them to rewrite the ineffective commentary, allowing them to practice the skill.

## Context of “The Bullet or the Ballot”

“The Ballot or the Bullet” is the title of a public speech by human rights activist Malcolm X. First delivered in Ohio, Malcolm X recited the speech days later in Detroit. He advised African Americans to judiciously exercise their right to vote, but he cautioned that if the government continued to prevent African Americans from attaining full equality, it might be necessary for them to take up arms.

One month prior to giving the speech, Malcolm X, a Muslim minister, had to officially leave the Nation of Islam, which prohibited its members from working alongside civil rights’ activists.

### College Board Objectives from the 2019–2020 CED

**RHS 2:** Make strategic choices in a text to address a rhetorical situation.

**CLE 4:** Analyze and select evidence to develop and refine a claim.

In order to help students evaluate commentary, we have created a checklist that pertains primarily to commentary, not evidence. This separation allows students to recognize how they can embed small snippets of evidence as part of the analysis. This practice should also help them recognize the difference between summarizing and analyzing a text.

To align with Row B of the Rhetorical Analysis rubric, we have listed the total points for effective commentary as 4, working under the assumption that good commentary first relies on proper evidence.

### CRITERIA

- Explains the meaning of the evidence
  - Examines the impact on the audience
  - Analyzes how the choice supports the author’s purpose
- 
- / [4] Commentary

Malcom X, a civil rights activist, delivered this speech in April of 1964, an election year. Two thousand people—including some of his opponents who believed his separatist ideas would make the civil rights' movement more difficult—turned out to hear him speak. Read the passage carefully. Write an essay that analyzes the rhetorical choices Malcolm X makes to convey his message that the fight for racial justice must continue.

...I'm not here to argue or discuss anything that we differ about, because it's time for us to submerge our differences and realize that it is best for us to first see  
*Line* that we have the same problem, a common problem. . .  
5 We're all in the same boat and we all are going to catch the same [trouble] from the same man. He just happens to be a white man. All of us have suffered here, in this country, political oppression at the hands of the white man, economic exploitation at the hands of the white  
10 man, and social degradation at the hands of the white man. Now in speaking like this, it doesn't mean that we're anti-white, but it does mean we're anti-exploitation, we're anti-degradation, we're anti-oppression. And if the white man doesn't want us to be anti-him, let him stop  
15 oppressing and exploiting and degrading us. . . . If we don't do something real soon, I think you'll have to agree that we're going to be forced either to use the ballot or the bullet. It's one or the other in 1964. It isn't that time is running out—time has run out!  
20 1964 threatens to be the most explosive year America has ever witnessed. The most explosive year. Why? It's also a political year. It's the year when all of the white politicians will be back in the so-called Negro community jiving you and me for some votes.  
25 The year when all of the white political crooks will be right back in your and my community with their false promises, building up our hopes for a letdown, with their trickery and their treachery, with their false promises which they don't intend to keep. As they nourish  
30 these dissatisfactions, it can only lead to one thing, an explosion; and now we have the type of black man on the scene in America today. . . who just doesn't intend to turn the other cheek any longer.  
I'm not a politician, not even a student of politics;  
35 in fact, I'm not a student of much of anything. I'm not a Democrat. I'm not a Republican, and I don't even consider myself an American. If you and I were Americans, there'd be no problem. . . . Everything that came out of Europe, every blue-eyed thing, is already an  
40 American. And as long as you and I have been over here, we aren't Americans yet.  
Well, I am one who doesn't believe in deluding myself. I'm not going to sit at your table and watch you eat, with nothing on my plate, and call myself a diner. Sitting at the  
45 table doesn't make you a diner, unless you eat some of

what's on that plate. Being here in America doesn't make you an American. Being born here in America doesn't make you an American. Why, if birth made you American, you wouldn't need any legislation; you wouldn't need any  
50 amendments to the Constitution. . . .  
No, I'm not an American. I'm one of the twenty-two million black people who are the victims of Americanism. One of the twenty-two million black people who are the victims of democracy; nothing but disguised  
55 hypocrisy. So, I'm not standing here speaking to you as an American. . . no, not I. I'm speaking as a victim of this American system. And I see America through the eyes of the victim. I don't see any American dream; I see an American nightmare.  
60 These twenty-two million victims are waking up. Their eyes are coming open. They're beginning to see what they used to only look at. They're becoming politically mature. . . . It's possible for them to see that every time there's an election, the races are so close  
65 that they have to have a recount. . . . Well, what does this mean? It means that when white people are evenly divided, and black people have a bloc of votes of their own, it is left up to them to determine who's going to sit in the White House and who's going to be in the dog-  
70 house. . . .  
So it's time in 1964 to wake up. . . let them know your eyes are open. And let them know you—something else that's wide open too. It's got to be the ballot or the bullet. The ballot or the bullet. If you're  
75 afraid to use an expression like that, you should get on out of the country; you should get back in the cotton patch; you should get back in the alley. They get all the Negro vote, and after they get it, the Negro gets nothing in return. . . . That's camouflage, that's trickery, that's  
80 treachery, window-dressing. . . . Half of the people in the South can't even vote. . . .  
That's why, in 1964, it's time now for you and me to become more politically mature and realize what the ballot is for; what we're supposed to get when we cast  
85 a ballot; and that if we don't cast a ballot, it's going to end up in a situation where we're going to have to cast a bullet. It's either a ballot or a bullet. . . .

## Developing Commentary

One of the most difficult processes in the Rhetorical Analysis Essay is developing commentary, which is the articulation of HOW the author writes, rather than WHAT she actually wrote. To do this, you will need to identify the relationship between the rhetorical situation and the strategies the author uses to achieve her goal or purpose of writing the piece.

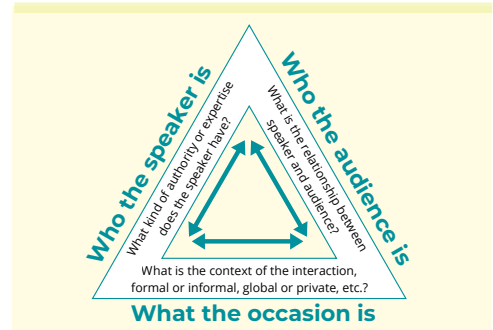
### The “Commentary Checklist”

After you have identified the author’s purpose and primary points, your next step is to identify what rhetorical choices the speaker makes to develop the claims. When choosing the evidence to illustrate the choice, read closely to ensure that what you’ve chosen supports one of the primary points.

Next, you will need to create your commentary that includes small snippets of evidence and an analysis of how the evidence supports the primary point, ultimately helping the writer achieve her purpose.

Use the following questions to help you evaluate your commentary:

<p><b>Meaning</b></p>	<p><b>-Have you explained the actual meaning of the evidence?</b></p> <p><b>-Why did the author choose this specific evidence for her purpose, for the intended audience?</b></p> <p><b>-How does the evidence connect to what the author is actually saying in the strategy?</b></p> <p>For example, a metaphor should be explained. Parallelism is often used to emphasize that two or more ideas have the same level of importance or to highlight the similarities and differences between two or more things.</p>
<p><b>Impact</b></p>	<p><b>-How does the evidence impact the audience?</b></p> <p><b>-How does the choice make the audience more amenable to the speaker’s persuasion?</b></p> <p>When discussing impact, you will likely refer to a logical, emotional, or credible appeal. However, avoid the terms ethos, logos, pathos. Instead, when discussing an appeal to credibility, you can explain how “the author endears herself to the audience by . . .” or explaining how a choice “elicits a sense of shame within the audience” instead of simply calling the evidence “pathos.” Psychologically, repetition can have a positive effect on an audience’s reception of and agreement with an argument, and create a greater familiarity with the message and often leads to gradual agreement.</p>
<p><b>Purpose</b></p>	<p><b>-How does the rhetorical choice help the speaker achieve her purpose?</b></p> <p><b>-What does it reveal about human nature or a universal idea in order to help the speaker achieve her purpose?</b></p> <p>Be sure to proofread your commentary. You may have embedded this within the discussion of the meaning or impact of the choice/evidence. If not, you may need to discuss how “a sense of fear often spurs humans into action, thus convincing his audience to join the war.”</p>



### Universal Ideas:

Often, a speaker will make assumptions about the audience’s beliefs, values, or needs. These assumptions could be based on the exigence, subject, setting, purpose, or additional information provided in the actual prompt. As an analyst, it is your job to identify and examine those assumptions and explain the significance behind them in connection to the impact of the rhetorical choices.

When writing a rhetorical analysis, it is important to address how a writer’s rhetorical choices affect the audience by appealing to one of these six universal topics:

- Moral
- Spiritual
- Political
- Social
- Psychological
- Historical

When discussing the universalities, it is not necessary to specifically state that “the author addresses a moral universality.” Instead, you can discuss how the speaker’s use of rhetorical questions serves “to prompt the audience to question their own moral behavior.”

**Instructions:** Using the checklist on the right-hand side, identify whether the following commentary satisfies the three essential criteria for commentary. If you determine that the sample would not earn full points, then rewrite the commentary in the lined space so that it would earn full points.

All of the responses are based on the following prompt:

Malcom X, a civil rights activist, delivered this speech in April of 1964, an election year. Two thousand people—including some of his opponents who believed his separatist ideas would make the civil rights’ movement more difficult—turned out to hear him speak. Read the passage carefully. Write an essay that analyzes the rhetorical choices Malcolm X makes to convey his message that the fight for racial justice must continue.

**Sample 1:**

*To begin, Malcolm X creates a bond with his audience, acknowledging that, although they may have differences, they are all united by their “common problem” referring to the oppression and exploitation that African-Americans have endured at the hands of the “white man.”*

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**Sample 2:**

*By repeatedly mentioning that “1964” is the year of political change for African Americans, Malcolm X establishes a sense of urgency among his audience.*

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**CRITERIA**

- Explains the meaning of evidence
- Examines the impact on the audience
- Analyzes how the choice supports the author’s purpose

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/ [4] Commentary

**CRITERIA**

- Explains the meaning of evidence
- Examines the impact on the audience
- Analyzes how the choice supports the author’s purpose

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/ [4] Commentary

**Sample 3:**

*Malcolm X establishes an either-or argument and works diligently through his speech to support how the “time has run out” for African-Americans to sit idly by. Instead, he calls for his audience to live by his motto, “the ballot or the bullet,” arguing that if they do not use their right to vote, they will be forced to use violence, “the bullet,” to gain freedom.*

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**Sample 4:**

*To further illustrate his argument, Malcolm X ridicules those in his audience that continue to delude themselves. Painting a picture of a man sitting at a table with no food yet watching another eat, Malcolm X ascertains that the man with no food cannot call himself a diner much like his audience cannot call themselves “Americans.” Through this metaphor, the audience is forced to examine their own allegiance to the country.*

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**CRITERIA**

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/ [4] Commentary

**CRITERIA**

- Explains the meaning of evidence
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/ [4] Commentary

**Sample 5:**

*Malcolm X alludes to Martin Luther King, stating that he doesn't see a "dream" but a "nightmare" instead.*

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**Homework**

Review the passage and identify two rhetorical choices Malcolm X employs to support his purpose. Be sure to include the three elements of effective commentary in each response.

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2. \_\_\_\_\_

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**CRITERIA**

- Explains the meaning of evidence
  - Examines the impact on the audience
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- 
- / [4] Commentary