

The SAT Essay: An Argument-Centered Strategy Demonstration from SAT Practice Exam #6

We'll look at and closely explicate a demonstration of the first three steps being conducted on an SAT Essay sample from practice exam #6, released by the College Board. The passage is written by Christopher Hitchens; he argues (as the prompt tells us) that the original Parthenon sculptures should be returned to Greece.

The first short paragraph is a good example of a professional writer creating their own rules. Hitchens is an especially well-regarded stylist. He opens this passage with piece of evidence – a quote from an authority on ancient Greece – before he has even stated his position or made his first argumentative claim.

The second paragraph lists historical crimes against Greece that included abuse of the Parthenon, associating these national crimes with Britain's appropriation of the Parthenon sculptures. The paragraph also includes the "horrible" imagery of a Nazi flag flying on top of the Parthenon, asserting Nazi ownership over this cultural property of the Greeks. This is a stylistic heightening of the historical evidence in the paragraph because it creates the most vivid, and the most extreme, visual image in the readers imagination.

Most of the third paragraph is devoted to the details of the way that the sculptures in the Parthenon have been split up and separated; there is too much detail here to be usable in a very short, quickly written essay. The paragraph does end with some numbers: the amount of money that Lord Elgin received for the Grecian stones he sold to the British government "to pay his debts." This is evidence of a kind of theft, perpetrated from personal greed. Early in the paragraph, Hitchens reasons that even though most of the prior crimes against the Parthenon cannot be undone, returning the sculptures to the Parthenon is one "desecration" that can be rectified. He appeals here to the audience's moral sense, their innate desire to do what can be done even if the world cannot be made perfect. And late in the same paragraph Hitchens reasons that though historians have not deciphered the entire symbolic meaning of the sculptures and the intricacies of their carvings, they do know that they make up "a continuous narrative." We pulled this section out to mark as reasoning in part because of the contrasting clauses: "Experts differ . . . but quite clearly . . ." This language of disagreement, of distinction-drawing, is one of the markers of argumentative reasoning.

Another such marker appears near the middle of the next paragraph. Hitchens offers a hypothetical example to try to make the evidence he has laid out about the separation of the sculptures that much more convincing. He suggests that if the *Mona Lisa* had been similarly cut up and taken by different nations to different museums there would be a strong desire to see the pieces reunited and the painting restored. We didn't index it, but this passage also includes use of understatement as a rhetorical device (the technical term for understatement is *litotes*). "A general wish" is much less than would be the public will to see this most famous of Da Vinci paintings made whole if it were torn apart, as Hitchens well knows. The fourth paragraph ends with a particularly "grotesque" example of a statue from the Parthenon that has been broken apart and whose pieces exist in different world capitols.



The fifth paragraph includes what is readily defined as a counter-argument, along with a response to it. Hitchens concedes that Athens is a heavily polluted city, tainted by acid rain. His concession here enhances his ethos as a credible, reasonable voice, acknowledging a legitimate concern that some might have about returning all of the Parthenon sculptures. But, he answers, Greece has since 1992 been assiduous about properly cleaning, storing, and protecting its valuable ancient marbles. There isn't really any hard evidence in this paragraph, though, to support its rebuttal to the counter-argument, which is basically why we've labelled it reasoning: Hitchens posits Greece's new concern for these objects and reasons from there to an answer to the counter-argument.

The penultimate paragraph includes a factual detail about the new Acropolis Museum: it is ten times as large as the previous museum for these relics in Athens. This counts as evidence, even if we don't know yet what the argumentative claim it is that the evidence supports. The short paragraph then closes with another use of imagery, a stylistic device, as it asks the reader to imagine that in the new museum the sculptures will look exactly as they did to citizens of Athens nearly 3000 years ago.

The final paragraph incorporates a new example of reasoning. It provides the significance for the reader of Athens' work with the impressive new Acropolis Museum. The fact that the Acropolis is putting up plaster casts of the missing sculpture pieces, to help fill its vast space, only further whets the public's appetite to see these wondrous pieces of historical art fully and authentically brought back together. Be reminded that reasoning in an argument often has the function of instilling the evidence and the argument with significance, addressing the So what? question (the Greeks have built a new museum and new plaster casts, so what? so why does that mean we should return the Parthenon sculptures?) Then the whole passage ends, as the SAT Essay passages often will, with a play on a double meaning of the word "right" – right as in morally correct, right as in harmoniously designed – a play that links back to the very beginning of the passage to bring the piece to closure.

Step Two is a little bit more succinct, since we have done so much of the thinking and significance-interpreting in Step One. We need to generate two to four argumentative claims from the rhetorical elements we have identified and named.

Looking at the first piece of evidence in the first paragraph, we have this concept of "rightness." A. W. Lawrence is of course referring to aesthetic rightness. And that meaning echoes with the stylistic element used at the end of the passage, which we analyzed two paragraphs above. With two elements present both supporting the same reason for the overall position we can go ahead and formulate a claim. So one argumentative claim – our first – is the following: "Returning Greek sculptures would restore their aesthetic wholeness."

The evidence in the second paragraph pertains to a reason that is distinguishable from the first reason for the overall position. Hitchens emphasizes the historical crimes that have been perpetrated against Greece and their cultural and artistic treasures in his supply of historical examples as evidence in paragraph two. There is even a strong use of imagery as a stylistic element in this paragraph, as we discussed above. Even though we have two elements in place for a second argumentative claim, in reading on just a bit in the passage we find an example of reasoning that is also well aligned with this claim. Hitchens moves from the evidence in the above paragraph to reasoning that appeals to his audience's moral sense – to their innate view that the world should do what can be done to right a past wrong. The second argumentative claim is ready to formulate: "Giving Greece back its rightful sculptures would rectify historical crimes against the country."



The next piece of evidence we couldn't quickly identify a use for: it is the long passage about the detailed ways in which particular sculptures that have been broken up had original symbolic coherence, had an original meaning. Our indexed reasoning in the third paragraph gives us a clue: Hitchens is reasoning that when the sculptures are placed together, rightfully, they told a continuous narrative. It isn't fully clear yet what argument this evidence and reasoning will support, but it does not seem to be either the claim that restoring the marbles will rectify past crimes or complete an aesthetic whole (assuming we distinguish between aesthetic and historical significance, as the passage seems to do).

The final piece of evidence in paragraph three clearly relates back to the second claim: Lord Elgin took the Greek marbles for mercenary reasons, apparently. And the fourth paragraph has evidence and reasoning that both point to the value and logical justification in piecing back these sculptures to recreate the aesthetic wholeness and beauty that they once contained. So, they both support the first argumentative claim.

The fifth paragraph contains a counter-argument and a rebuttal, both of which we have discussed above. So we added the counter-argument to the list of two to four arguments at the bottom of the second page of the prompt. It is quite possible to identify the (relatively) new Athenian program of protecting their ancient art work as evidence if we credit the specificity and exactness of their "careful cleaning with ultraviolet and infra-red lasers" as objective information. That would give the rebuttal in this paragraph two rhetorical elements, reasoning and evidence, allowing your writing of it to parallel the other paragraphs.

The sixth and seventh paragraphs triggered for us the third argumentative claim, and the use of the evidence and reasoning in paragraph three. The sixth paragraph discusses the new Acropolis Museum and its considerably expanded size. The seventh and final paragraph reasons through the public's hunger and implied right to see the original pieces in a great historical and cultural institution. Part of what they would do in front of these restored sculptures would be to read, interpret, and learn from them. When we looked quickly back to the evidence and reasoning in paragraph three, particularly the idea that the "frieze" tells a continuous historical narrative, we had our third argumentative claim: "Locating all of the original Greek sculptures together would support historically accurate and cultural institutions." The use of imagery at the end of the sixth paragraph is usable as part of the development of this third argument.

Note that with four arguments we wouldn't need to include all of them in the actual essay. And formulating the third claim was less a matter of reaching a number and more an instance of confronting evidence and reasoning in the Hitchens passage that didn't fit well with the claims we already had. Different passages are going to make a different number of arguments, differently configured.

With all of the important evidence, reasoning, and style elements identified and named, and the arguments formulated, it is a quick, backward-designed task to match the elements with its proper argument. We've already thought this through, and in fact when in the above quick internal deliberations we became clear that we were adding an argument it would have been fine to put the number of the argument next to the element during Step Two.

In writing the actual essay, we would write a three sentence introduction: (1) introduce the controversy over Grecian sculptures taken by other nations, including Britain's taking the "Elgin marbles;" (2) state that Christopher Hitchens' "The Lovely Stones" takes the position that the marbles should be returned to Greece, since they are an



aesthetic whole, Greece was victimized historically, and full sculptures would establish important cultural and historical institutions; and (3) to convince his audience, Hitchens uses varied forms of evidence, reasons by making moral and logical appeals based on hypotheticals, and stylistic elements, especially vivid imagery. Then the body paragraphs start with the argumentative claim that Hitchens advances, followed by the evidence, reasoning, and style element that he uses to support the claim. We can get to two or all three of the argumentative claims, and the counter-argument and rebuttal are optional. A conclusion will restate the position that Hitchens takes and give a final takeaway emphasis on the most important rhetorical techniques he uses across the arguments.

This argument-centered strategy produces a thorough handling of the SAT Essay. It isn't necessary to cover in the actual essay writing all of the options that the conceptual moves that it makes uncover for us. And a key to making it work for you is to practice the first three steps on numerous practice exam essay prompts, to ensure that you can squeeze them into 25 minutes. You should practice your actual essay writing, too, beginning perhaps by writing an essay in 25 minutes based on the preparation that this demonstration has taken you through.