

# AP<sup>®</sup> Language and Composition

## Analyzing Rhetorical Context Through Internet Trends

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**Lesson Overview:** In this lesson, students analyze the rhetorical situation surrounding viral social media challenges. Students will explore how these digital trends serve as cultural texts that communicate collective values, beliefs, and identities. By investigating speaker, audience, context, and purpose, students practice essential rhetorical analysis skills required for AP Language & Composition. This lesson bridges modern social media discourse with formal academic skills like crafting engaging introductions and conclusions.

### Before the Lesson

- **Optional Prep:** Instruct students to find one example of a meme or internet challenge they feel connected to before class (or allow them to explore during class.) Some ideas of viral trends in the last five years are below. Review each challenge and make sure it is appropriate for you and your students. You can also facilitate a group brainstorming session with certain categories.

Viral Challenges and Formats	Hashtag Movements and Commentary	Meme Trends and Pop Culture Moments
<p><b>How It Started / How It's Going</b> (2020): A meme format showing personal or collective growth over time, used for humor, nostalgia, and storytelling.</p> <p><b>Don't Rush Challenge</b> (2020): Originating on TikTok, this challenge involved people transitioning from casual to glam looks, highlighting transformation and community, especially during COVID lockdowns.</p> <p><b>TikTok Dance Trends:</b> E.g., <i>Renegade</i>, <i>Savage Love</i>, <i>Say So</i>, <i>Cuff it</i>—These dances often went viral alongside popular songs, shaping music charts and culture.</p>	<p><b>#BlackoutTuesday</b> (2020): Part of the Black Lives Matter protests, users posted black squares on Instagram to show solidarity, sparking debates about performative activism.</p> <p><b>#GirlDinner</b> (2023): A TikTok trend showing minimalist or mismatched meals, often poking fun at feminine habits or romanticizing everyday life.</p> <p><b>#BookTok</b> (Ongoing): A powerful TikTok subculture influencing book sales. Viral books like <i>It Ends With Us</i> or <i>Fourth Wing</i> exploded in popularity through this trend.</p>	<p><b>"This You?" Callout Tweets:</b> Users use a past post to highlight hypocrisy or irony in a person's current statements.</p> <p><b>Barbenheimer</b> (2023): A dual-release meme phenomenon combining Barbie and Oppenheimer, creating fan art, memes, and ironic mashups of two vastly different films.</p> <p><b>"No One:" / Absolute Silence Format:</b> A meme where a person or character does or says something unprompted, highlighting absurdity or awkwardness.</p>

<p><b>“Little Miss” Memes (2022):</b> Users captioned “Little Miss” characters with personal quirks, making humorous and self-deprecating identity statements.</p> <p><b>NPC Livestreams (2023–2024):</b> TikTok users acted like non-playable video game characters while receiving virtual gifts—commentary on internet performance, capitalism, and absurdity.</p>	<p><b>#NoMakeupSelfie &amp; #MakeupTransition Trends:</b> Before/after or glow-up challenges focusing on beauty standards, personal care, and vulnerability.</p> <p><b>#Deinfluencing (2023):</b> A backlash against consumerism and over-hyped products, where creators warned followers about what not to buy.</p>	<p><b>“Corecore” Aesthetic Videos:</b> TikTok trend using emotional audio and clips from media to critique or reflect modern emotional detachment, capitalism, or youth disillusionment.</p> <p><b>Roman Empire Meme (2023):</b> Women asking men how often they think about the Roman Empire, revealing unexpected gender/cultural gaps and inspiring funny, responses.</p>
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- **Review Rhetorical Situation Vocabulary:** Ensure students are familiar with key rhetorical terms: speaker, audience, purpose, medium, exigence.
- **Prepare or Distribute** reflection handouts or digital docs with the guiding questions

**Materials Needed**

- [Slideshow with links to meme examples](#)
- [Student worksheet with guiding questions](#)
- Devices for student internet access

**What to Do**

**1. Anticipatory Set / Warm-Up (5-7 minutes)**

- Brief discussion to activate prior knowledge about memes and cultural trends.
- Ask students to share their current knowledge about Internet memes and viral challenges. Reference the chart above to help guide students’ ideas.

**2. Guided Rhetorical Analysis: General Trends (15–20 minutes)**

- Complete **Part 1** of the module using the slides and/or their own research. This part of the assignment asks students to situate Internet memes and viral challenges in a broader context. Encourage them to explore multiple versions of the meme across different platforms (Twitter, Reddit, TikTok).
- Students analyze general **rhetorical components**:
  - **Speaker:** Is it an individual? A collective? What persona is being created?
  - **Medium:** How does platform shape meaning?
  - **Audience:** Who is the intended audience? Who engages with it?
  - **Context/Exigence:** What events shape its appeal? What social commentary is it making?

**3. Focused Analysis of a Single Example (20 minutes)**

- Complete **Part 2** of the module. In this part, students will select a specific meme or Internet challenge. This specific example should be ‘situated within the context’ they analyzed in Part 1.
- They then analyze its **rhetorical situation** more deeply using the structured questions:
  - What rhetorical choices affect tone, credibility, or message?
  - What is the context behind this meme?
  - What values, beliefs, or truths does it reflect?



**Tip:** Encourage students to make connections to their own experiences and contemporary cultural values.

**4. Class Discussion or Gallery Walk (10 minutes)**

- Ask for a few volunteers to share their selected memes and explain why they connected with them.
- Facilitate a group discussion:
  - What do these examples say about society today?
  - What makes some memes more impactful or memorable than others?
  - How can understanding memes help us write stronger intros/conclusions?

**5. Entering the Conversation: Evidence Practice (10 minutes)**

- Discuss: “What kind of evidence would strengthen a commentary or argument about viral trends or memes?”
- Students brainstorm relevant types: personal anecdote, cultural reference, statistics (e.g., meme virality), expert opinions, etc.
- They write 2-3 sentences explaining how a type of evidence could support an analysis of this meme trend.

**6. Wrap-Up and Exit Ticket**

Students respond to one or more of the following prompts:

- What’s one takeaway you have about how memes function rhetorically?
- How can analyzing memes help us write better introductions or conclusions?
- What values or cultural truths do you think today’s memes are reflecting?

**Optional Extension Activities**

- **Use the meme format** as a **hook for a future argument or narrative essay**.
- **Compare different meme formats** (e.g., “NPC memes,” “This you?,” “Barbenheimer”) to explore evolving rhetorical conventions in internet culture.

**PART 1: Anticipatory Set (Review), Contextualizing Viral Challenge**

Using the links at the slideshow [HERE](#) (or those you find on your own), answer the following questions, complete the following tasks, make the following notes. This part of the module asks that you examine and analyze the rhetorical situation (and choices) regarding viral challenges

**Speaker**

1. Who “speaks” through a viral meme or Internet challenge? Is there a clear individual speaker or a collective voice? Does this change?

2. What kind of persona (character-values, beliefs, background, credibility, etc.) is being created or projected through this meme format?

3. How does the speaker shape how we interpret the meme (think identity, credibility, background, tone, etc.)?

**Medium**

4. What is the medium of a meme and how does that shape how the message is received (Instagram? X? TikTok? Reddit?)

5. How does the format of different memes or Internet challenges function as a genre? What are its expectations or conventions?

**Audience (Intended/Unintended)**

6. Who is the intended audience for different kinds of memes/Internet challenges? Who actually ends up engaging with it?

7. Give an example: How does the audience’s background, values, cultural knowledge, beliefs, or needs affect how they interpret or respond to the meme?

**Context/Exigence**

8. What social, political, or cultural events were happening at the time of different meme challenges? How might it shape the appeal or purpose?

9. How does the meme challenge, or any viral challenge, reflect the cultural context OR the values, beliefs, needs, or backgrounds of a given community?

10. Think of trends that have hit different social media platforms. To what extent have these trends reflected collective and/or personal values? How do they reflect the “pulse of society?” What other trends reflect contemporary issues, values, or needs of American pop culture? How has this changed/evolved/shifted over time? Be specific; include a clear claim and evidence from your own reading, observations, and experiences.

11. What cultural or social context does the author highlight as influencing the popularity of this trend?

**PART 2: Analyzing Evidence of a Specific Viral Trend or Meme**

1. Select one specific meme or Internet challenge. Find some examples of this from the last few years, preferably on different social media or web platforms. Describe the overarching observations and trends that you notice (this would be your observations of the concrete, literal topics, subjects, images, words, references, etc.)

2. Why did you choose this particular meme or Internet challenge? How or why does it resonate with you, personally? Do you think that it would connect with others for similar or different reasons? Explain.

3. To what extent do these observations reflect the “pulse of society” and/or show our collective values, beliefs, needs, backgrounds?

**Analyzing ONE Example**

4. Find one example of the meme or challenge that especially “connects” with you in some capacity. In the space below, insert a screenshot of this as well as any supplementary information that might be included (such as a caption). If there is no additional information, leave it blank.

*Provided supplemental information:*

5. Of all the memes/examples to choose from, why were you attracted to this particular example? How does it resonate with your own values, beliefs, needs, backgrounds, interests, etc.?

**Analyzing the Rhetorical Situation for Image, Meme, or Challenge Example**

**Speaker**

6. Who is “speaking” through this example? What can you infer about their credibility, values, beliefs, backgrounds, needs, etc.? What kind of persona (character-values, beliefs, background, credibility, etc.) is being created or projected through this post?

7. How does the speaker shape how we interpret the meme (think identity, credibility, background, tone, etc.)? What rhetorical choices do they make in these images that you feel are significant to the message, purpose, or the way that they convey their persona?

**Audience (Intended/Unintended)**

8. Who is the intended audience for this post? Who is the ultimate audience for this post?

9. How does the audience’s background, values, cultural knowledge, beliefs, or needs affect how they interpret or respond to this post?

**Context/Exigence**

10. What social, political, or cultural events were happening at the time of this post (if you know it)? How might it shape the appeal or purpose?

**Message/Purpose**

11. What purpose might the rhetor have for posting this set of images?

12. What universal ideas are present in this post? What message (think universal truth) is conveyed through this post?

**Entering the Conversation**

What “types of evidence” or additional, supplemental sources would be relevant in this conversation? What source might we find this evidence in? Explain the “pro” or purpose of this choice in the context of this conversation.