

Lord chesterfield's letter to his son essay sample



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The passage below is an excerpt from a letter written by the eighteenth-century author Lord Chesterfield to his young son, who was traveling far from home. Read the passage carefully. Then, in a well-written essay, analyze how the rhetorical strategies that Chesterfield uses reveal his own values.

Though I employ so much of my time in writing to you, I confess I have often my doubts whether it is to any purpose. I know how unwelcome advice generally is; I know that those who want it most, like it and follow it least; and I know, too, that the advice of parents, more particularly, is ascribed to the moroseness, the imperiousness, or the garrulity of old age. But then, on the other hand, I flatter myself, that as your own reason, though too young as yet to suggest much to you of itself, is however, strong enough to enable you, both to judge of, and receive plain truths: I flatter myself (I say) that your own reason, young as it is, must tell you, that I can have no interest but yours in the advice I give you; and that consequently, you will at least weigh and consider it well: in which case, some of it will, I hope, have its effect. Do not think that I mean to dictate as a apparent;

I only mean to advise as a friend, and an indulgent one too: and do not apprehend that I mean to check your pleasures; of which, on the contrary, I only desire to be the guide, not the censor. Let my experience supply your want of it, and clear your way, in the progress of your youth, of those thorns and briars which scratched and disfigured me in the course of mine. I do not, therefore, so much as hint to you, how absolutely dependent you are upon me; that you neither have, nor can have a shilling in the world but from me; and that, as I have no womanish weakness for your person, your merit must,

and will, be the only measure of my kindness. I say, I do not hint these things to you, because I am convinced that you will act right, upon more noble and generous principles: I mean, for the sake of doing right, and out of affection and gratitude to me.

I have so often recommended to you attention and application to whatever you learn, that I do not mention them now as duties; but I point them out to you as conducive, nay, absolutely necessary to your pleasures; for can there be a greater pleasure than to be universally allowed to excel those of one's own age and manner of life? And, consequently, can there be anything more mortifying than to be excelled by them? In this latter case, your shame and regret must be greater than anybody's because everybody knows the uncommon care which has been taken of your education, and the opportunities you have had of knowing more than others of your age. I do not confine the application which I recommend, singly to the view and emulation of excelling others (though that is a very sensible pleasure and a very warrantable pride); but I mean likewise to excel in the thing itself; for, in my mind, one may as well not know a thing at all, as know it but imperfectly. To know a little of anything, gives neither satisfaction nor credit; but often brings disgrace or ridicule.

The directions for this prompt bear careful scrutiny. The student is presented with two tasks:

- 1) Determine Chesterfield's values.
- 2) Explain how he uses rhetorical strategies to reveal those values.

On the AP Language exam, when you see the term “ rhetorical strategies,” know that you are going to be analyzing an argument. So you should consider the appeals Chesterfield uses— logical, emotional, ethical—and consider what those appeals reveal about his values. Then, too, you should look at devices of language—figurative language, diction, imagery, syntax, etc.—and explain how those devices reveal Chesterfield’s values.

Chesterfield pairs concessions with his own assertions:

Using anaphora (“ I know”), Chesterfield concedes that his advice will be “ unwelcome,” that parental advice is ascribed to the “ moroseness, the imperiousness, or the garrulity of old age.” By listing these three parallel traits of the old, Chesterfield deftly deflects any objections his son may have to receiving his father’s advice.

This concession is followed by Chesterfield’s assertion (prefaced by “ But then, on the other hand”) that his son is too young to know what’s best for him and that the father has the son’s best interests at heart. His assertion is stated in a long sentence syntactically structured like this:

As part of his logical appeal, Chesterfield also uses the device of antithesis.

In his first paragraph, he uses two pairs of opposing ideas in the concession/assertion format to thoroughly trounce any possible objections his son may have to his advice:

“ Do not think that I mean to dictate as a parent VS I only mean to advise as a friend, as an indulgent one, too: do not apprehend that I mean to check your pleasures VS...I only desire to be the guide, not the censor.”

Chesterfield uses this same rhetorical structure—of using antithesis to develop a concession and an assertion—in the rest of the letter. Find and write the other examples:

ANTITHETICAL IDEAS CONCESSION

ASSERTION

What tone does Chesterfield create in the very first sentence of his letter? Do you notice how this sentence fits into this antithetical pattern?

Ethical Appeal

Chesterfield develops this appeal most strongly beginning at the end of the first paragraph. His complete lack and even repudiation of an emotional appeal is most telling: he is guided not by “womanish weakness,” or unconditional love—the “boy” will be treated according to his “merit,” or according to whether he acts the way his father requires him to. He repeats “act right” and “do[ing] right,” because of “affection and gratitude,” using parallel form. In Chesterfield’s ethics, a child has to earn parental love.

Look at the last paragraph and find other examples of an ethical appeal to his unnamed son. The first example is done for you.

ETHICS (CHESTERFIELD’S VALUES)

COMMENTARY

Son treated not according to “womanish weakness” but receives love due to his “merit”—“act[ing] right upon more noble and generous principles” [than fatherly love]

Your examples:

To Chesterfield, love is earned by works, not by virtue of the father-son relationship. He is emotionally detached, demanding, even dictatorial.

Chesterfield manages to make the natural, unconditional love of parents for their son seem weak and unmanly.

In the second paragraph of the letter, Chesterfield turns from reminding the "boy" of his dependence on his father to his advice for succeeding in the world. He contrasts a "greater pleasure" with something that would be "mortifying," again using antithetical ideas.

What would bring his son "greater pleasure" in life?

On the other hand, what would be "mortifying"?

What syntax technique does Chesterfield use to advance these ideas to his son?

2004 AP Language Exam

Question 1: Lord Chesterfield's letter to his son

Lord Chesterfield reveals, through his extensive use of litotes (understatement), anaphora (repetition), and various other rhetorical modes, his ill-conceived values of competition for its own sake as well as a haughty superiority complex.

One of the first things that comes to mind upon reading this essay is the discounting of a statement followed by a subsequent qualification of that statement, referred to as litotes (understatement). Lord Chesterfield employs

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understatement skillfully, in a way such that he in essence molds his son's thinking by telling him exactly what and what not to believe. From the onset, it is clear that Lord Chesterfield is in control. As a parental figure, the Lord knows "how unwelcome advice generally is," but reassuringly consoles his son "that I can have no interest but yours." This qualification is subtle but important, establishing Lord Chesterfield as a beneficent presence, not as an intrusive force. The clearest examples of Lord Chesterfield's use of understatement lie in the imperatives handed down to the son, as if to say "do not think...do not apprehend..." Lord Chesterfield wishes to expunge all possible misconceptions held by his son about his parental philosophy.

The Lord is "not the censor" & does not "hint" how absolutely dependent you are upon me." What he does instead is "point them out to you as conducive..." The Lord reveals his dubious morality to his son in his appeals to the son's education as grounds for a competitive spirit and an overall complex that would have made Feud shrink. All of the education conferred upon the son, we are told, was done so upon the expressed assumption that "I do not confine the application which I recommend, singly to the view and emulation of excelling others..." In essence, the Lord conveys to his son a sense of an inherited privilege meant to elevate him above all in every possible domain.

The striking use of anaphora (repetition) comes in as a close second in its importance to the passage as a whole in that it serves to emphasize the placement of the Lord as an authority figure in his son's life, not to be questioned. From the onset, we as readers are told of how much "I know..." by the august Lord as well as the extent to which "I only..." Such remarks

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could ordinarily be innocent enough in most scenarios, but not in this instance due to the conclusions drawn from the introductory premises. Indeed, the Lord does “flatter myself,” twice in fact. His tone comes off as condescending and haughty, as befits his later subsequent remarks. Some other interesting rhetorical strategies include alliteration in “attention and application to whatever you learn.” The alliterative quality of this series drives home the nature of the father’s expectations towards his son. A distinctive use of tricolon in “the moroseness, the imperiousness, and the garrulity of old age,” qualities which the Lord no doubt distances himself from, further cementing his arrogance.

In summation, Lord Chesterfield employs classic strategies of rhetoric drawn from the ancient Greeks and Romans to deliver a letter that is unmistakably clear. The Lord is passing the torch to his son in a manner that he sees as best suiting his purpose. The values instilled, however, leave something to be desired.

Lord Chesterfield begins his letter by being frank with his son: “I know how unwelcome advice generally is,” he admits. He sets up a tone of honesty and candor that one should see in a father-son letter. Chesterfield also understands the detachment from youth that comes with age, yet pleads, “I can have no interest but yours in the advice I give you.” By immediately establishing his purpose and being open to a hesitant reaction from his son, Chesterfield is wisely anticipating the said reaction, and by doing so, hoping to enrapture his son in the letter.

The author continually tries to emphasize his care without coming across as a doting and bothersome parent. He characterizes himself instead as a “guide,” and a “friend.” As a guide, Chesterfield draws from his own past mistakes to steer his son away from them. To express this sentiment, the author uses a metaphor of “thorns and briars which scratched and disfigured me...” By using a metaphor that provokes images of disfigured bodies and scars, permanent symbols of folly, the author is emphasizing the danger and lasting effects of adolescent mistakes.

Chesterfield's second maneuver involves emotional appeal; more specifically: guilt. The author pushes “noble and generous principles” on his son by prematurely asserting that he will do the right thing, “out of affection and gratitude to me.” Presenting this image of the morally ideal son puts pressure on his young son to uphold the image and not disappoint his expectant father.

In the closing paragraph, Chesterfield addresses the knowledge his son must strive to gain. Implying a richly educational upbringing, the author states that “attention and application” is no longer a duty but necessary to life. This reveals knowledge to be a highly-esteemed value in Chesterfield's eyes. The author goes on to use rhetorical questions to emphasize the significance of learning: “Can there be a greater pleasure than to be universally allowed to excel?” Continuing, Chesterfield warns that “To know a little of anything gives neither satisfaction nor credit.” His tone here is stern and dignified, showing this is a matter he takes seriously.

Through the letter, Chesterfield eased his way from an understanding friend to a preaching parent and everything in between. "I have often my doubts whether it is to any purpose," he confesses, yet with this expertly written letter, he should sleep soundly.

In his letter to his traveling son, the Lord Chesterfield gives his son some guidance which clearly reflects his own opinions about value. Chesterfield is both suggestive and condescending, but his views are clearly expressed.

Lord Chesterfield, trying to seem as a friend more than a father, suggests that his son should apply himself to what he does. "I have so often recommended to you attention and application to whatever you learn." He then goes on to describe this trait as "necessary to his son's pleasures." Clearly, Chesterfield admires complete attention and application, as he suggests that it is important for enjoyment of life! This rather forceful suggestion does not agree with his aforementioned point of view, "as a friend." The Lord also expresses what values he expects from his son through his condescension.

Chesterfield suggests that "(his son's) shame and regret must be greater than anybody's, because...of your education...and opportunities." The implication here is that as his son was so fortunate in his upbringing and preparation for life, he should excel in every aspect of it. Since he as yet has not exceeded expectation, his life has thus far been shameful in his father's eyes. Lord Chesterfield feels his son should not "know a little of anything," because this "often brings disgrace or ridicule." Here, the Lord suggests his son is a disgrace because he has not applied himself in a manner befitting

his excellent opportunities and upbringing. After all, this is obviously a trait held in high esteem in the Lord Chesterfield.