Examples of Rhetorical Devices in
Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s
“I Have a Dream Speech”

*You need to know these for your test –Honors: all of them

**Alliteration**
The repetition of sounds (usually initial consonant sounds)
In a sense we have come to our nation’s capital to cash a check.

* **Allusion**
An implied or indirect reference
The speech begins with “Five score years ago…”, a reference to Lincoln’s Gettysburg address

**Anaphora**
A rhetorical term for the repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses.

This term describes the most famous part of the speech: King’s repetition of “I have a dream.”

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.”

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

**Assonance**
relatively close juxtaposition of similar sounds especially of vowels

We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline.

* **Metaphor & Extended Metaphor**
A figure of speech in which a term or phrase is applied to something to which it is not literally applicable in order to suggest a resemblance

King equates light with freedom through the speech. Here are two examples:

This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity. (by itself this is a metaphor)

Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. (coupled with this other example it becomes an extended metaphor)

In the 3rd and 4th paragraph, King plays with the extended metaphor of extending a check.
**Metonymy**
When the name of one object (usually a simplified one) replaces another object that is closely associated with it

“It’s all about the Benjamins baby”

Houston, we have a problem.

**Hyperbole**
Obvious and intentional exaggeration

And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing.

*We could call this example hyperbole, because King is using lots of “alls” and “every”s. He believes that true justice will only come when every person believes in freedom for all.*

**Parallelism**
Similarity of structure in a pair or series of related words, phrases, or clauses

With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

*If you ever want to jazz up a crowd, use some parallelism in your sentences. It will make people ready to fight…peacefully, of course. It also makes the lines memorable, and perhaps represents the equality of the people fighting together.*

**Personification**
The representation of a thing or abstraction in the form of a person

*King is casting American society as a person who has done African-Americans wrong. He believes that people who are fighting for civil rights aren’t fighting a person, but rather a system.*

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro ...

**Simile**
No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

**Synecdoche**
*Synecdoche* is a figure of speech in which a term for a part of something is used to refer to the whole

We can never be satisfied, as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.