STRATEGIES FOR PASSING THE COMPASS READING TEST

Passing the COMPASS reading test will require you to carefully read passages and answer questions based on those passages. While standard test-taking strategies will help, it is also important that you understand the specific reading skills that are required. *Main Idea, Critical Understanding, Details, Inferences and Relationships* are specific reading skills covered on the COMPASS test. Each has unique features and requires unique strategies. Each skill area is described below and includes an example of a typical question stem.



THE MAIN IDEA of a passage reveals the central or overall meaning a passage has been written to convey. The main idea is often a general statement, not just a single specific aspect of the passage. It is often (but not always) found in the first or last sentence of the passage, but it may also be in the middle. To successfully find the main idea, look for the sentence that reveals the overall meaning of the passage. **Think of the main idea as the topic "umbrella." Every other sentence or idea in the passage logically fits under and supports the main idea.** On occasion, the main idea may be implied; in those cases, you will need to figure out the main idea.

EX: Which of the following most correctly summarizes the main idea of the passage?

CRITICAL UNDERSTANDING, like the main idea, involves understanding the overall meaning of the passage; however, it focuses more specifically on the **author's intent or purpose**. Considering the choice of language, order of information, and relationships between ideas can help readers determine if the author's objective is to persuade, describe, tell a story, compare or contrast, define, or make an emotional appeal. Critical understanding questions often ask for the best title for the passage, how information relates to the overall meaning of the passage, and the author's purpose, intent or feelings.

EX: The title best expressing the theme of the passage is...

DETAILS are used to support, explain, or emphasize the main idea. Details can be at the beginning, middle or end of the passage. Details include information, facts, figures, specific items, or arguments which support or reinforce the main idea or topic. **Details, which are also called literal facts, supply answers to the types of questions a reporter might ask:** *Who? What? When? Where? How Many?* The answers to these "reporter questions" are usually directly stated in the passage. Detail questions will often begin with the words "who," "what," "when," etc., or the question can often be re-phrased using these kinds of question words.

EX: The chief obstacle to the freedom of slaves is...

is the same as

What is the chief obstacle to the freedom of slaves?

INFERENCES involve understanding something about a topic beyond simply what is written. An inference is a guess at meaning based on what is written and how it is written. In other words, you must learn to "read between the lines." Making inferences begins with understanding the details that are directly stated; with these details and general knowledge you bring to the passage, you can draw a conclusion about what the author has only suggested. Look for questions involving ideas or meanings that are not directly stated in the passage. Inference questions often include terms and phrases such as *intent*, *meaning*, *purpose*, *because*, *shows*, *the author suggests*, *the thought*, etc.

EX: We can conclude that a student's attitude towards studying is a result of...

RELATIONSHIPS are connections or associations. In reading, we often see connections or associations between ideas or items related to the main idea or topic. The use of transitional words or phrases in a passage is a common clue to relationships, such as cause and effect, comparison and contrast, and the ordering of sets of ideas, numbers, facts and figures. Relationship questions may ask for the function of a sentence or phrase in relation to the main idea or topic, the most appropriate title for the passage, or the author's attitude in relation to the information.

EX: The distinction between Shakespeare and other writers is ...

VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT involves determining the meaning of a word by the way it is used in a sentence or paragraph. By using clues in surrounding words, sentences or paragraphs, it is possible to make an *educated guess* about the definition of an unfamiliar word. Some typical context clues to watch for are included in the list below.

- Contrast an unfamiliar word is contrasted with a more familiar word or words
- **Definition/synonym** a brief definition or a word(s) with similar meaning is used as a clue to meaning
- Example an example or examples provide a clue to the meaning of the unfamiliar word
- Explanation a short explanation, following the unfamiliar word, provides a clue to meaning

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Compass Strategies and Test Review http://www.testpreview.com/modules/reading1.htm
- Online Practice for Reading http://literacynet.org/cnnsf/archives.html
- Reading Comprehension Connection http://www.readingcomprehensionconnection.com
- Main Idea Recognition http://www.testprepreview.com/modules/readingmainidea.htm
- Reading Comprehension 1 http://www.testprepreview.com/modules/reading1.htm
- Reading Comprehension 2 http://www.testprepreview.com/modules/readingtest2.htm
- Jamestown Comprehension Skills Series (Advanced) Ten-workbook series; topics include main idea, inference, vocabulary, etc. Available for use in the LTC (ask at front desk)
- COMPASS Practice Software and workbooks (available in the LTC) Since the COMPASS is a computer-based test, plan to spend some time working on the practice software so you can gain confidence in using the computer for test-taking.