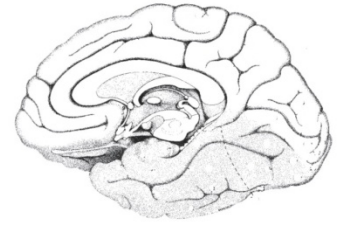


PREPARING FOR A READING TEST

College level reading classes are, in many ways, critical thinking classes. To decode the many strands of meaning that are woven into texts it is necessary to focus on the four key skills described below. These skills are crucial for understanding and evaluating material intended for a scholarly audience as well as succeeding on any test related to academic reading skills.



1. LITERAL COMPREHENSION

A. Retrieving facts

Questions which focus on information that is **clearly stated in the text** are called “literal” or “detail” questions. Because writers intentionally include details which supply the answers to the types of questions reporters might ask (*Who? What? When? Where? How many?*), literal comprehension questions are easily handled by **searching to retrieve the required answer**. The only mistake you can make with these questions is to glance too quickly at the text and retrieve the wrong piece of information. Remember, the answer may not be stated word-for-word.

Always read the passage through thoroughly one time. Re-reading should not be necessary for literal comprehension questions; it is a *search-and-retrieve* operation. You will want to scan the passage quickly to find a key word or idea from the question stem. Once you have found the appropriate section of the passage, read the complete sentence. The key word or idea may appear in several places, be sure you have identified the correct answer. Do not carelessly identify answers.

Identifying Literal Comprehension Questions: Literal questions often begin with question words such as who, what, when, etc., or the questions can often be re-phrased by using question words.

TIP: *Underline words that recur (including synonyms), numbers, and dates; these will help you as you “search and retrieve.”*

B. The Main Idea (stated)

For many of the passages you read on the test, you will be asked to identify the main idea. The main idea reveals the central or overall meaning a passage has been written to convey. The wrong answers for main idea questions are usually *too general* or *too specific*. So, when answering main idea questions, you will want to ask yourself: “What is *most* of the passage about?” For instance, if I read a passage in which one paragraph talks about the earthquake in Haiti and the following three paragraphs discuss earthquakes in the U.S., chances are that the main idea is related to earthquakes in the United States. I would not answer “Haitian earthquakes” (too specific) or “Earthquakes around the world” (too general).

When identifying the main idea of a particular paragraph, keep in mind that the main idea is **often expressed in the first or last sentence** of the paragraph. However, this is not always the case. Sometimes the main idea is in the middle of the paragraph. Again, you will want to ask yourself, **“What is the paragraph mostly about?”**

Identifying Main Idea Questions: Main idea questions often begin with the following types of phrases:

- “This passage primarily deals with ...,”
- “What is the main idea of the passage?”
- “What is the central theme of this passage?”
- “The best title for this selection is...”

C. Pronoun Referents

Some questions will ask you to understand what a pronoun (he, she, it, they, etc.) refers to. These questions begin with phrases like “*In the last paragraph ‘they’ refers to _____*” or “*The ‘I’ in the phrase ‘I won’t wait’ refers to _____.*” Remember that a pronoun is a **substitute** for a noun which has previously been identified. You will have to **read backwards in the passage** to understand the noun that the pronoun is replacing. Sometimes, you will be asked to identify what a general term refers to. For example, *In the passage, “this condition” refers to _____.*”

These questions are fairly straightforward. You will just want to take the time to reexamine the passage to make sure you have retrieved the correct answer.

2. VOCABULARY IN CONTEXT

Vocabulary questions involve determining the meaning of a word by looking at the words around it (**context**). By using clues in surrounding words, sentences or paragraphs, it is possible to make an educated guess about the meaning of an unfamiliar word. Some typical context clues include:

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

Identifying Vocabulary in Context Questions: Context clue questions are often structured like this: “As used in the passage, _____ means _____.” A key phrase here is “as used in the passage.” Since words may have more than one meaning, you will want to look back at the passage to see how the word is being used in this particular case.

TIP: Once you have selected the answer which best describes the meaning of the unfamiliar word, re-read the sentence substituting your answer choice for the unfamiliar word.

BONUS TIP: Build your vocabulary. Study common prefixes, suffixes and roots; these word parts will help you identify the meaning of whole clusters of words with which you may be unfamiliar. For help with vocabulary in context and building your vocabulary through familiarity with prefixes, suffixes and roots, try the following websites:

Vocabulary in context: <http://academic.cuesta.edu>

Prefixes, Suffixes, Roots: <http://academic.cuesta.edu/acasupp/AS/505.HTM>

BBC Skillswise, Spelling (Roots, Prefixes...): <http://www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise/words/spelling/>

3. INFERENCEAL COMPREHENSION

A. Knowing what information is implied

An inference is a guess based on what is written and how it is written. Inference questions involve understanding something about a topic beyond what is directly stated. For example, if an author tells us that a character walks slowly and had a wrinkled face, we could *infer* that the character is elderly. Making inferences begins with understanding the main idea and the directly stated details in the passage; with these details and general knowledge you bring to the passage, you can draw a conclusion about what the author has only suggested.

Identifying Inference Questions: These questions often begin with phrases like “It can be inferred that” or “It is implied in the passage that,” or they include words like “suggest” or “conclude.”

B. Knowing the author’s intention

Sometimes you may also be asked to figure out the *author’s attitude, intent or main idea*. You may get a question like “*The author is primarily concerned with...*” or “*Which answer best describes the author’s attitude toward _____?*” For example, if an author makes the statement, “Our children just sit in front of the TV all day instead of playing outside,” we could *infer* that the author has a low opinion of TV, even though he or she has not explicitly said so.

TIP: *Be careful not to make unfounded inferences; the clues in the passage must support the inference that you make.*

4. CONTENT ANALYSIS

A. Author’s Tone

Tone questions focus on how and why a passage was written. Tone is revealed through word choice and word arrangement, and the goal is to create an effect or feeling. Consider the following when identifying how and why a passage has been written.

Language: Does the author use academic words that might be found in a textbook? Chances are the tone is formal, factual, or neutral. Does the author use personal pronouns such as “I,” “you,” and “we”? Chances are the tone is informal or conversational. Does the author use a number of describing words like “faint,” “sunny,” antique,” to paint a picture? The presence of many adjectives means the tone is probably descriptive.

Expression: Tone also comes from the way an author expresses his or her ideas. Does the author use jokes? If so, the tone may be humorous. Does the author use exclamation points? If this is true, the tone may be excited, angry, or opinionated. Does the author make fun of others? The tone may be sarcastic. Does the author, in a good-natured way, say something different than what he or she literally means? The tone may be ironic. Does the author express his or her point of view forcefully, using phrases like “we must do this” or “we cannot do that”? The tone may be argumentative.

TIP: *Remember purpose influences how a passage is written. Try to determine if the passage is primarily expository (facts/informative), persuasive (opinion/argumentative), or literary (fiction/entertaining). Determine the author’s perspective: negative, positive or neutral?*

B. Author's Strategies/Techniques

Rhetorical Strategies: In some questions you will be asked to identify what methods the author has used to present his or her main idea. These main methods include:

- Analogy – a comparison between two things that are somewhat similar, usually to prove a point. For example, *War is like cooking. You have to break a few eggs to make an omelet.*
- Comparison/Contrast
- Examples
- Personal experience
- Propaganda – information meant to help or hurt a cause, individual, or institution; usually misleading because it only shows one side of an issue

TIP: *Be very familiar with transitional phrases. Transitional phrases in a passage provide clues to relationships such as cause and effect, comparison and contrast, and the ordering of sets of ideas, numbers, and facts and figures.*

Literary Devices: You may also be asked what literary devices the author has used. Some of these literary devices include:

- Irony – a difference between what is literally said and what is actually meant or a difference between what is expected to occur and what actually happens
- Overstatement – exaggeration
- Simile/Metaphor – saying that something is or is *like* something else

Identifying Analysis Questions: Common question stems for analysis questions include:

- The author develops the thesis by ...
- The author mentions _____ in order to ...
- The author's tone is ...
- The final sentence is an example of the following literary style ...

GENERAL TIPS

READ as much as you can between now and test time. Look up words you do not recognize, and apply the strategies listed above as you read. This will help tremendously in building your vocabulary.

UNDERLINE key words and transitional phrases when you take practice tests, and (if allowed) **DO** mark up the test booklet when you sit for the real test.