

STRATEGIES FOR ANSWERING READING QUESTIONS

The Reading Assessment Test challenges you to read short passages and answer questions that require you to:

- 1) Identify the *main idea* of a passage
- 2) Read a passage for *specific details*
- 3) Identify the *author's purpose* for writing a passage or the author's *tone*
- 4) Make *inferences* based on the facts presented in a passage.

In addition to general strategies for taking standardized reading tests (see separate handout), the following strategies are useful for tackling each of the above question types:

1. Identifying the Main Idea of a Passage

The main idea of a passage is its point – the central idea or primary focus of the writing. The correct answer in a main-idea question must be entirely true and complete.

Main idea questions will usually include one of the following key words: *main idea, emphasizes, focuses on, is primarily or chiefly concerned with, author's point of view, essence, will go on to discuss.*

In reading test passages, sometimes the main idea is stated in the opening sentence and developed with examples and evidence in the sentences that follow. Or a passage may *conclude* with the main idea – a point that the author has been building toward throughout the passage with supporting evidence. *But don't be fooled into thinking you only need to read the first and last sentences of the passage.* The main ideas of complex passages are not so easy to identify.

Strategies for Answering Main Idea Questions:

- *Look for key words that identify the question as a main idea question.* If the question includes any of the main idea key words listed above, this will help you focus on identifying the author's point as you read.
- *Read the passage and make notes.* Once you've identified the question as a main idea question, read the passage, making mental notes on your scrap paper as you read.
 - * *Remember to pay special attention to words such as but, yet, although, since, except, moreover, unless, nonetheless, however.* These words signal a shift, a qualification, something you should note. The ideas that follow these words are usually important to the overall meaning of the passage.
- *Learn to spot wrong answers.* Use the process of elimination to rule out wrong answers. Wrong answers for main idea questions are often:
 - a) too broad – the answer covers too much, is too “big” in some way
 - b) too narrow – the answer is too restricted in outlook, too “small
 - c) irrelevant – the answer is not directly related to the question
 - d) incorrect – the answer distorts or contradicts facts in the passage
 - e) illogical – the answer is not supported by facts in the passage.

2. Reading a Passage for Specific Details

An author often supports his or her main idea with key facts and examples that help make the overall meaning of the text clear. You may be asked a question based on one of these facts or examples. Your job is to make sense of the fact or example in the context of the overall main idea that is being conveyed. Questions about specific details are a matter of reading carefully for meaning.

Strategies for Answering Specific Detail Questions:

- *Identify the most important word(s) in the question.* This general strategy is critical for specific detail questions. Identify the word or phrase that will guide you toward the answer as you read the passage.
- *Make mental notes related to the word or phrase as you read.* If the question is a straightforward question about a fact or example from the text, your answer will likely appear in the same sentence in which the word or phrase appears -- or in the sentence before or after that sentence. *However, be sure to read the entire passage.* Understanding the main idea of the passage is often critical to choosing the correct answer for specific detail questions.

*Some questions will contain a key word or phrase that is a synonym for another word or phrase in the passage. In this case, look for the word or phrase in the passage that means nearly the same as the word or phrase in the stem.

*Some questions will simply ask you to identify the statement that is true or accurate among the answer options. In this case, take brief notes on the main idea as you read and test each answer choice against the facts presented in the passage.

3. Identifying the Author's Purpose

Questions about the author's purpose ask you to determine why an author wrote a particular passage. For example, an author might write a passage in order to persuade an audience, describe something, explain a process, define a term, refute a claim, analyze a text, or convey personal feelings. *Understanding the author's tone* – his or her attitude toward the subject and audience -- will help you understand the purpose. Authors convey purpose and tone through their choice of words and the impression those words create.

Author's purpose questions will usually include one of the following key words: *author's purpose, reason, why, the passage can best be described as*. You may also be asked to identify the *tone* of the passage or the *profession* of the author based on his or her words.

Author's purpose answer options often incorporate the following vocabulary words: *Analyze, compare, contrast, critique, evaluate, examine, investigate, characterize, define, depict, describe, explain, identify, introduce, narrate, recount, summarize, acknowledge, advocate, assert, promote, propose, support, condemn, criticize, oppose*. Familiarize yourself with the subtle distinctions in meaning among these various words. For instance, to describe is to trace out or give a pictorial account of, to explain is to make clear or to give a reason for, and to analyze is to examine in detail.

Strategies for Answering Author's Purpose Questions:

- *Look for key words that identify the question as an author's purpose question.* If the question includes any of the author's purpose key words listed above, make a note that you are looking for the author's purpose – the reason the author wrote the passage. This will help you focus on the author's tone as you read, which in turn will help you identify his or her purpose.
- *Read the passage and make notes.* Once you've identified the question as an author's purpose question, read the passage, making note as you read.
- *Consider the vocabulary of your answer options.* Is the author really *analyzing* something, or is she *describing* it? Use your knowledge of key vocabulary words to eliminate wrong answers and identify the better answer.

4. Making Inferences from a Passage

To “infer” is to draw a logical conclusion from what is known or assumed to be true, in this case from what is written in the passage. Inferences are not stated explicitly in the passage. *Rather, inference questions require you to draw conclusions from the factual knowledge or evidence presented.* In order to answer an inference question, you must understand the logic of the author’s statements and decide what is or is not reasonable. Inference questions are as much about critical thinking as they are about critical reading.

Most inference questions will include one of the following key words: *imply, suggest, infer, assume, most likely, probably, seem, predict, indicate, conclude.*

One type of inference question will ask you to draw a conclusion that is supported by facts presented in the passage. Another type of inference question may ask you the meaning of a word or phrase that is included in the passage. Such questions are not meant to test your vocabulary. Rather, they are designed to test your ability to understand a word or phrase *by the context in which it appears.*

Strategies for Answering Inference Questions:

- *Look for key words that identify the question as an inference question.* When you come upon a question that contains one of the words listed above, make a note that you are looking for an inference. This will help you later on as you consider the answer choices by reminding you that you must draw a logical conclusion based on the facts presented in the passage.
- *Identify the most important substantive word(s) in the question.* In addition to the key word(s), you will want to identify the word or phrase that will guide you toward the answer as you read the passage.
- *Read the passage and make notes.* Read the passage, making a note related to the substantive word or phrase you’ve identified in the question.

** Remember to pay special attention to words such as but, yet, although, since, except moreover, unless, nonetheless, however in the passage.* These words signal a shift, a qualification, something you should note. The ideas that follow these words are often the subject of inference questions.
- *Learn to spot wrong answers.* Wrong answers for inference questions often make a *wild leap* not supported by the details of the passage or contain a *factual error*, a conclusion that runs counter to the details of the passage.