

# Introduction to the Reading Test

The Reading Test consists of passages of approximately 200 words, shorter passages of approximately 100 words, and short statements of one or more sentences. Each passage or statement is followed by questions based on its content.

## Reading Test Format

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**Paper-based:** 60 minutes and 40 multiple-choice questions

**Computer-based:** 75 minutes and 46 multiple-choice questions

The test is composed of the following content areas and approximate number of questions.

### *Literal Comprehension (directly stated content)*

Paper-based: 18 questions

Computer-based: 21 questions

These are straightforward questions used to determine if you comprehend the passage and its direct meaning. The four types of literal comprehension questions will assess your ability to identify:

- the main idea or primary purpose of the passage
- the supporting ideas or specific details of the passage
- the organization of the passage
- the meaning of words or phrases used in the passage

### *Critical and Inferential Comprehension (non-directly stated content)*

Paper-based: 22 questions

Computer-based: 25 questions

These are questions requiring you to read “beneath the surface” and understand deeper meanings that are directly implied by the passage. The three types of critical and inferential comprehension questions will assess your ability to evaluate:

- the argument’s strengths or weaknesses, the relevance of its evidence, or whether the ideas presented are fact or opinion
- implications, inferences, or assumptions of the passage, or the author’s underlying attitude
- generalizations or conclusions that can be drawn to apply to or predict new situations

## Ability Tested

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This section tests your ability to understand the content of the passage and any of the following: its main idea, supporting ideas, or specific details; the author's purpose, assumptions, or tone; the strengths and weaknesses of the author's argument; inferences drawn from the passage; the relationship of the passage to its intended audience; supporting evidence in the passage; and so forth.

Although the reading passages are from a broad spectrum of general-interest topics (i.e., journals and magazines), no outside knowledge of the topic is necessary to answer the questions. All questions can be answered on the basis of what is *stated* or *implied* in the passage.

## Basic Skills Necessary

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Understanding, interpreting, and analyzing passages are the important skills for this section. The technique of *actively* reading and marking a passage is also helpful.

## Directions

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A question or number of questions follow each of the statements or passages in this section. Using only the *stated* or *implied* information given in the statement or passage, answer the question or questions by choosing the *best* answer from among the five choices given.

## Analysis of Directions

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1. Answer all the questions for one passage before moving on to the next one. If you don't know the answer, take an educated guess or skip it.
2. Use only the information given or implied in a passage. Do not consider outside information, even if it seems more accurate than the given information.
3. Use your time wisely! You have about 1.5 minutes to answer each question (the allotment is slightly longer for the computer-based test). This includes the time required to mark and read the passages. If you're stuck on a question, mark it and move on. There is no penalty for guessing because your score is based upon the number of correct responses and does not count the number of incorrect responses. Therefore, if you're uncertain about your answer choice, mark the question and come back later to make an educated guess.

# Suggested Strategies with Sample Passages

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Two strategies that will improve your reading comprehension are *prereading the questions* and *marking the passage*. Computer-based examinees can write down key words or phrases on scratch paper. Readers who become comfortable using these strategies tend to score higher on reading tests than readers who do not use these strategies.

## Active Prereading

The technique of *active reading* is an important skill in understanding the text of a passage. As you become actively engaged and purposeful in your reading, you are in control of the test reading experience. This can be accomplished by marking, highlighting, underlining, and circling important words and phrases in the passage (computer-based test-takers can use scratch paper). The skill of gathering information by using active reading will help you to quickly identify and visually focus on the main ideas of the passage and the questions, but it should be concise so that it will not interfere with your valuable allotted testing time.

## Paper-based

Readers who become comfortable using prereading strategies tend to score higher on reading tests than readers who do not use this strategy. Before reading the passage, read the question or questions that follow it. Do not read the multiple-choice answer choices at this time. Underline or circle the operative phrase in each question—that is, what you are being asked to answer.

## Computer-based

When taking the test by computer, you can preread questions by using the **NEXT** and **PREV** buttons while taking notes. You will see a passage on the screen, and a question with five answer choices will appear. For the first question only, do not read the passage first; *read the question on the right side of the screen first*, and write down one or two key words. Writing down one or two words helps you immediately remember the operative phrase for the question.

Don't try to memorize everything from the passage. Read the passage while focusing on the author's main point, primary purpose, or common themes. Briefly write down key words or phrases, along with the line number, on scratch paper to help trigger your memory for upcoming questions. Each passage contains numbered lines for reference to help you easily refer back to details of the passage. The entire passage may not fit on the screen, so make sure that you're comfortable with scrolling down and up the screen. Remember that you can move forward to the next question and back to a previous question by clicking the buttons marked **NEXT** and **PREV**.

In the example below, circle or underline the key words or phrases.

The author's argument in favor of freedom of speech may be summarized in which of the following ways?

- A. If every speaker is not free, no speaker is.
- B. Speech makes us different from animals.
- C. As we think, so we speak.
- D. The Bill of Rights ensures free speech.
- E. Lunatic speeches are not free speeches.

In this example, the operative phrase is “author’s argument . . . may be summarized (how?).” So you might underline or write down the words “author’s argument” and “may be summarized.” Thus, prereading allows you to focus on and clarify exactly what you’re being asked to answer.

## Marking the passage

For paper-based examinees, after prereading the questions, read and mark the passage. Computer-based examinees can write down key words or phrases on scratch paper. Underline or circle those spots that contain information relevant to the questions you’ve read as well as other important ideas and details. However, don’t overmark. A few marked phrases per paragraph help those ideas stand out.

## A short sample passage

\*By the time a child starts school, he has mastered the major task of understanding the basic rules of grammar. He has managed to accomplish this remarkable feat in such a short time by experimenting with and generalizing the rules all by himself. Each child, in effect, rediscovers language in the first few years of his life.

- (5) \*When it comes to vocabulary growth, it is a different story. Unlike grammar, the chief means through which vocabulary is learned is memorization. \*Some people have a hard time learning and remembering new words.

*\*Indicates portions of the passage that refer directly to a question you’ve skimmed. Also marked are main points and key terms.*

## Understand what is given

1. A child has mastered many rules of grammar by about the age of
- A. 3
  - B. 5
  - C. 8
  - D. 10
  - E. 18

The first sentence of the passage contains several words from this question, so it is likely to contain the correct answer. “By the time a child starts school” (line 1) tells us that the answer is age 5. The correct answer is **B**.

## Eliminate and mark out choices that are incorrect

2. Although vocabulary growth involves memorization and grammar learning doesn't, we may conclude that both vocabulary and grammar make use of
- A. memorization
  - B. study skills
  - C. words
  - D. children
  - E. teachers

You should mark out or write down choices **A**, **D**, and **E**. (Computer test-takers should have scratch paper that looks like this: 2-~~A~~, ~~D~~, ~~E~~.) The question asks you to simply use your common sense. **A** is incorrect; it contradicts both the passage and the question itself. **D** and **E** make no sense. **B** is a possibility, but **C** is better because grammar learning in young children does not necessarily involve study skills but does necessarily involve words. The correct answer is **C**.

## Understand what is implied in the passage

3. The last sentence in the passage implies that
- A. some people have no trouble learning and remembering new words
  - B. some people have a hard time remembering new words
  - C. grammar does not involve remembering words
  - D. old words are not often remembered
  - E. learning and remembering are kinds of growth

*Implies* tells us that the answer is something suggested but not explicitly stated in the passage. **B** is explicitly stated in the passage, so it may be eliminated. But it implies its opposite: If *some* people have a hard time, then it must be true that *some* people don't. **C**, **D**, and **E** are altogether apart from the meaning of the last sentence. The correct answer is **A**.

## Another short sample passage

St. Augustine was a contemporary of Jerome. After an early life of pleasure, he became interested in a philosophical religion called Manichaeism, a derivative of a Persian religion, in which the forces of good constantly struggle with those of evil. Augustine was eventually converted to Christianity by St. Ambrose of Milan. Augustine's *Confessions* was

(5) an autobiography that served as an inspiration to countless thousands who believed that virtue would ultimately win.

## Make sure that your answer is well-supported by the information in the passage

4. St. Augustine's conversion to Christianity was probably influenced by
- A. his confessional leanings
  - B. his contemporaries
  - C. the inadequacy of a Persian religion to address Western moral problems
  - D. his earlier interest in the dilemma of retaining virtue
  - E. the ravages of a life of pleasure

Having skimmed this question, you may have marked the portion of the passage that mentions Augustine's conversion and paid attention to the events (influences) leading to it. **A** requires speculating beyond the facts in the paragraph; there is also no evidence in the passage to support **C** or **E**. **B** is too vague and general to be the best answer. **D** points toward Augustine's earlier interest in Manichaeism, and the last sentence suggests that Augustine's interest in retaining virtue continued through his Christian doctrine. The correct answer is **D**.

## Understand meaning, style, tone, and point of view of the passage

5. From the information in the passage, we must conclude that Augustine was a
- A. fair-weather optimist
  - B. cockeyed optimist
  - C. hardworking optimist
  - D. failed optimist
  - E. glib optimist

Skimming *this* question is not very helpful; it does not point specifically to any information in the passage. Questions of this sort usually assess your overall understanding of the meaning, style, tone, or point of view of the passage. In this case, you should recognize that Augustine is a serious person; therefore, more lighthearted terms like *fair-weather* (A), *cockeyed* (B), and *glib* (E) are probably inappropriate. D contradicts Augustine’s success as an “inspiration to countless thousands.” C corresponds with his ongoing, hopeful struggle to retain virtue in the world. The correct answer is C.

## Know where to look for information

6. Judging from the reaction of thousands to Augustine’s *Confessions*, we may conclude that much of his world at that time was in a state of
- A. opulence
  - B. misery
  - C. equanimity
  - D. reformation
  - E. sanctification

Having skimmed this question, you may have marked the last sentence of the passage as the place to look for the answer. That Augustine’s readers were inspired may imply that they *required inspiration*. A, C, and E must therefore be eliminated because they are positive terms. D is not necessarily a negative term and so is probably not the best answer. The correct answer is B.

## A longer passage

Woodrow Wilson won his first office in 1910 when he was elected governor of New Jersey. Two years later, he was elected president in one of the most rapid political rises in our history. For a while, Wilson had practiced law but found it both boring and unprofitable; then he became a political scientist and finally president of Princeton University. He (5) did an outstanding job at Princeton, but when he was asked by the Democratic boss of New Jersey, Jim Smith, to run for governor, Wilson readily accepted because his position at Princeton was becoming untenable.

Until 1910, Wilson seemed to be a conservative Democrat in the Grover Cleveland tradition. He had denounced Bryan in 1896 and had voted for the National Democratic candidate who supported gold. In fact, when the Democratic machine first pushed Wilson's (10) nomination in 1912, the young New Jersey progressives wanted no part of him. Wilson later assured them that he would champion the progressive cause, and so they decided to work for his election. It is easy to accuse Wilson of political expediency, but it is entirely possible that by 1912 he had changed his views as had countless other Americans. While governor (15) of New Jersey, he carried out his election pledges by enacting an impressive list of reforms.

Wilson secured the Democratic nomination on the 46th ballot. In the campaign, Wilson emerged as the middle-of-the-road candidate—between the conservative William H. Taft and the more radical Theodore Roosevelt. Wilson called his program “the New Freedom,” which he said was the restoration of free competition as it had existed before the growth of the trusts. (20) In contrast, Theodore Roosevelt was advocating a “New Nationalism,” which seemed to call for massive federal intervention in the economic life of the nation. Wilson felt that the trusts should be destroyed, but he made a distinction between a trust and legitimately successful big business. Theodore Roosevelt, on the other hand, accepted the trusts as inevitable but said that government should regulate them by establishing a new regulatory agency.

## Always look for the main point of the passage

7. The author's main purpose in writing this passage is to

- A. argue that Wilson is one of the great U.S. presidents
- B. survey the difference between Wilson, Taft, and Roosevelt
- C. explain Wilson's concept of the New Freedom
- D. discuss some major events of Wilson's career
- E. suggest reasons that Wilson's presidency may have started World War I

There are many ways to ask about the main point of a passage. What is the main idea? What is the best title? What is the author's purpose? Choices **A** and **E** are irrelevant to the information in the passage, and choices **B** and **C** mention secondary purposes rather than the primary one. The correct answer is **D**.

## Be aware of information not directly stated in the passage

8. The author implies which of the following about New Jersey progressives?
- A. They did not support Wilson after he was governor.
  - B. They were not conservative Democrats.
  - C. They were more interested in political expediency than in political causes or reforms.
  - D. Along with Wilson, they were supporters of Bryan in 1896.
  - E. They particularly admired Wilson's experience as president of Princeton University.

Some information is not directly stated in the passage but can be gleaned by reading between the lines. Implied information can be valuable in answering some questions. In the second paragraph, Wilson's decision to champion the progressive cause after 1912 is contrasted with his earlier career, when he seemed to be a conservative Democrat. Thus, one may conclude that the progressives, whom Wilson finally joined, were not conservative Democrats as was Wilson earlier in his career. Choices **A** and **D** contradict information in the paragraph, while choices **C** and **E** are not suggested by any information given in the passage. The correct answer is **B**.

## Watch for important conclusions or information that supports a conclusion

9. The passage supports which of the following conclusions about the progress of Wilson's political career?
- A. Few politicians have progressed so rapidly toward the attainment of higher office.
  - B. Failures late in his career caused him to be regarded as a president who regressed instead of progressed.
  - C. Wilson encountered little opposition after he determined to seek the presidency.
  - D. The League of Nations marked the end of Wilson's reputation as a strong leader.
  - E. Wilson's political allies were Bryan and Taft.

Choice **A** is explicitly supported by the second sentence in the first paragraph, which states that Wilson was "elected president in one of the most rapid political rises in our history." The correct answer is **A**.

## Understand the meaning and possible reason for using certain words or phrases

- 10.** In the statement “Wilson readily accepted because his position at Princeton was becoming untenable” (lines 6–7), the meaning of “untenable” is probably which of the following?
- A.** Unlikely to last for years
  - B.** Filled with considerably less tension
  - C.** Difficult to maintain or continue
  - D.** Filled with achievements that would appeal to voters
  - E.** Something he did not have a tenacious desire to continue

On any reading comprehension test, be alert to the positive and negative connotations of words and phrases in each passage as well as in the questions themselves. In the case of *untenable*, the prefix *un-* suggests that the word has a negative connotation. The context in which the word occurs does as well. Wilson *left* his position at Princeton; therefore, we may conclude that the position was somehow unappealing. Only two of the answer choices, **C** and **E**, provide a negative definition. Although choice **E** may attract your attention because *tenacious* looks similar to *tenable*, choice **C** is the conventional definition of *untenable*. The correct answer is **C**.

## Eliminate those choices that are not supported by the passage

- 11.** According to the passage, which of the following was probably true about the presidential campaign of 1912?
- A.** Woodrow Wilson won the election by an overwhelming majority.
  - B.** The inexperience of Theodore Roosevelt accounted for his radical position.
  - C.** Wilson was unable to attract two-thirds of the votes but won anyway.
  - D.** There were three nominated candidates for the presidency.
  - E.** Wilson’s New Freedom did not represent Democratic interests.

Your answer choice must be supported by information either stated or implied in the passage. Choices **A**, **B**, and **C** contain information that is not addressed in the passage. We may eliminate them as irrelevant. Choice **E** contradicts the fact that Wilson was a Democratic candidate. The discussion of Taft and Roosevelt as the candidates who finally ran against Wilson for the presidency supports choice **D**. The correct answer is **D**.

# General Procedure for Answering Reading Comprehension Questions

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1. **Skim the questions.** Underline, write down, or circle the word or phrase that stands out in each question. *Don't* read the answer choices.
2. **Read and mark the passage.** Pay special attention to information relevant to the questions you've skimmed. Computer-based examinees, write down key words or phrases on scratch paper.
3. **Answer the questions.** Base your answers on *only the material given in the passage*. Assume that the information in each passage is accurate. The questions test your understanding of the passage alone; they do *not* test the historical background of the passage, the biography of the author, or previous familiarity with the work from which the passage is taken.

## Five Key Questions for Understanding and Interpreting What You Read

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### Main idea

**What is the main idea of the passage?** After reading any passage, try summarizing it in a brief sentence. To practice this very important skill, read the editorials in your local paper each day and *write* a brief sentence summarizing each one.

### Details

**What details support the main idea?** Usually such details are facts, statistics, experiences, and so on, that strengthen your understanding of and agreement with the main idea.

### Purpose

**What is the purpose of the passage?** Ask yourself what the author is trying to accomplish. The four general purposes are (1) to narrate (tell a story), (2) to describe, (3) to inform, and (4) to persuade.

## Style and tone

**Are the style and tone of the passage objective or subjective?** In other words, is the author presenting things *factually* or from a *personal point of view*? If an author is subjective, you might want to pin down the nature of the subjectivity. Ask yourself, is the author optimistic? pessimistic? angry? humorous? serious?

## Difficult or unusual vocabulary

**What are the difficult or unusual words in the passage?** Readers who do not mark or write down words that are difficult or used in an unusual way in a passage often forget that the words occurred at all and have difficulty locating them if this becomes necessary. By calling your attention to difficult or unusual words, you increase your chances of defining them by understanding their meaning in context.

### A PATTERNED PLAN OF ATTACK *Reading Comprehension*

