

The Complete Guide to ACT[®] Reading

2nd Edition

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The Complete Guide to ACT® English

The Ultimate Guide to SAT® Grammar & Workbook

The Critical Reader: The Complete Guide to SAT® Reading

The Complete GMAT® Sentence Correction Guide

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Introduction

This book is designed to overturn some of the common wisdom surrounding the ACT. It's become a test-prep truism that the SAT is a "reasoning test" whereas the ACT is a "curriculum based" test, but dig a little deeper, and those distinctions start to break down somewhat. Although it is true that ACT Reading Comprehension questions and answers are typically phrased in a more direct, less abstract manner, the reality is that the ACT is a test of reasoning skills as well – it simply tests those skills in a much less obvious way. Because the test seems so straightforward on the surface, though, a common misconception is that the ACT cannot be approached strategically. That is not only false but the exact opposite of the truth. In reality, many of the same shortcuts that can be applied to SAT reading – understanding the test's biases, playing positive and negative with purpose and tone questions, avoiding "extreme" answers – can be applied just as effectively to the ACT. To be clear, many of those "shortcuts" require you to think and work very logically and deliberately. They also require a great deal of self-management. But they are there, and if you use them properly, they can be exploited to great effect.

Moreover, what appear to be timing problems are, more frequently, reasoning and comprehension problems in disguise. The severity of the time constraint effectively demands shortcuts – unless you are an almost superhumanly fast reader, there is simply no time to hunt through the various passages for the answers to all 40 Reading Comprehension questions and still finish within the allotted 35 minutes. For example, many of the most straightforward, fact-based questions only require that you locate information stated word-for-word, or nearly word-for-word in the passage – usually not an excessively challenging task. Since these types of questions do not contain line numbers, however, you can potentially waste considerable amounts of time hunting through the passage, reading and re-reading, becoming more and more panicked, and thinking less and less clearly. A vicious circle inevitably ensues. If, on the other hand, you stop and consider how the passage is organized and can thus make logical assumptions about where information is located, you are much more likely to find the information both rapidly and calmly. Likewise, if you are able to stop and consider the "big picture" of a passage before plunging into the questions, you may find that you can answer a number of them correctly and confidently without even needing to look back at the text.

Viewing ACT Reading as a task that can be approached strategically, however, often entails something of a paradigm shift. It's easy to get stuck on the idea that you should be able to just read the passages and answer the questions, in order, every time. If you're accustomed to crashing through passage after passage, straining to just read a little faster and hoping that the stars will somehow align, stopping and *thinking* can seem like an unacceptable burden – not to mention an unacceptable waste of precious seconds. The problem, though, is that practice only makes perfect (or at least progress) if it's the right kind of practice. Doing the same thing over and over again while expecting a radically different result... well, that tends not to be very productive. This book is thus designed to push you out of your comfort zone and think about ACT Reading in new ways – ways that at first may seem very unfamiliar and perhaps even a little outrageous. While some of those ways may initially feel uncomfortable or counterintuitive, it is sometimes necessary for things to become harder in the short term in order for you to make progress in the long term. To be sure, though, it's a delicate balance between trying out new ways of thinking and holding on to what already works. There is no objectively "right" approach; your goal must be to find the method, or combination of methods, that is most helpful for you. Consider, then, this book as a toolbox of sorts, one that will help you to leverage your skills and apply them in the most effective way possible. Test out the various strategies presented, hold onto what works, and forget what doesn't. You are, after all, the one taking the test.

Erica Meltzer

1. Overview of Reading Comprehension

The ACT Reading Comprehension test comprises five passages: three single long passages (approx. 750 words), and one set of paired shorter passages (approx. 350-375 words apiece). Each passage/passage set is accompanied by 10 questions testing content, purpose, tone, point of view, and organization, as well the ability to make logical inferences based on information not explicitly stated in the text. Passages are drawn from contemporary fiction and non-fiction writings, primarily from serious books and periodicals (e.g. *Smithsonian*, *Scientific American*, *The Atlantic Monthly*) written for a general adult audience. The four passages are always presented in the same order:

1. Prose Fiction
2. Social Science
3. Humanities
4. Natural Science

Although there is an enormous amount of variation within these four categories, the passages within each one share some general characteristics and contain some recurring themes. The four categories listed above can also further be divided into two groups: Prose Fiction/Humanities and Social Science/Natural Science. There is often significant overlap between the passages in each group, in terms of content, style, and themes. Having a knowledge of this framework can help you to “read the test” more effectively and recognize answers likely to be correct/incorrect more quickly and easily.

Prose Fiction/Humanities

Prose Fiction (also called **Literary Narrative**) passages are excerpted primarily from novels and short stories written within the last few decades, although excerpts from slightly older works (early 20th century) or from works translated into English may occasionally appear as well. Passages excerpted from pre-20th century works do not normally appear, and you should not be concerned about having to decipher complex, Shakespearean-style writing. Prose Fiction passages are frequently written from a first person perspective, although some are written from a third person perspective as well. (For more information about different types of narrations, see Chapter 10.)

In addition, Prose Fiction passages frequently contain multicultural characters/themes (African American, Native American, Hispanic, Asian American), sometimes subtly and sometimes very clearly. In the case of the latter, passages frequently focus on characters’ attempts to assimilate into American society while retaining their cultural heritage. Regardless of whether the multicultural content is overt, **any passage written by a minority author or featuring members of a minority group will present the protagonist in a positive light**. Although some passages may describe familial conflict, or the challenges of living in two cultures/languages simultaneously, the majority will focus on the preservation of the characters’ cultural heritage and be relatively upbeat in tone. Usually the relationship between the protagonist and members of older generations (e.g. parents and grandparents) will be warm and loving, and the passage will involve the transmission of values from older to younger generations.

Humanities passages differ most significantly from Prose Fiction passages in that they are always taken from non-fiction works and describe actual events. When Humanities passages are written by first-person narrators and describe important or memorable personal experiences, however, they may be virtually indistinguishable from Prose Fiction passages. The fact that they are excerpted from memoirs rather than works of fiction is essentially irrelevant. In such cases, the author's point of view is typically the same as it is in Prose Fiction passages: an adult looking back on events that occurred in their youth, or earlier in their lives, and reflecting on their meaning. At times, the language in this type of passage can be quite literary and abstract – when, for example, a writer muses on the writing process or the relationship between real life and fiction – and thus challenging to comprehend.

Humanities passages are by no means restricted to personal narratives, however. Many are written in a third person, objective stance and describe events entirely unrelated to the author. Common topics include language and literature (especially the relationship between technology and the humanities, which will virtually always be presented in a positive way); visual arts and architecture; and music. Again, some of these more objective types of passages are minority-themed, focusing on African American, Native American, Hispanic, and Asian American authors, artists, and musicians, or forms of art historically associated with particular groups (e.g. jazz). Others, however, will discuss classic, well-known Western authors such as Shakespeare.

Social Science/Natural Science

Social Science (also called **Social Studies**) passages span an extremely broad range of topics, from history to linguistics to urban planning to the role of genes in determining lifespan. At one extreme, Social Science passages may seem very similar to Humanities passages; at the other extreme, they may seem nearly interchangeable with Natural Science passages, although they will rarely contain the same level of scientific terminology. As a result, they often seem less daunting, and many students find Social Science passages the most consistently straightforward and easiest to comprehend. As is true for the ACT in general, there is a strong eco-friendly bent: recycling, bicycle shares, and solar technology = good; cars, traffic, and urban sprawl = bad.

Unlike Prose Fiction and Humanities passages, **Social Science passages are almost always written from a third person, objective perspective.** Although the author's attitude is generally somewhat positive (why write about a subject unless you're interested in it?), the actual presentation of the information tends to be fairly neutral and factual. While some passages may be centered around an argument or claim, Social Science passages as a whole tend to be more fact- and detail-based; as a result, you should be prepared to spend a fair amount of time going back to the passage and hunting for specific pieces of information.

Natural Science passages are primarily focused on the “hard” sciences, some familiar to most high school students (e.g. biology and chemistry), some not (e.g. astrophysics, botany, neuroscience). Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of Natural Science passages are written from a third person, objective point of view; however, first person narrations are not unheard of. Although these passages are often filled with technical language, some of which is likely to be very unfamiliar, it is important to understand that these passages **do not require any specialized scientific background.** Any term unlikely to be familiar to the general public will be defined; you are simply responsible for keeping track of definitions. Indeed, some questions will directly test your understanding of technical terms as they are presented in the passage. One fairly common theme is that of **“old idea vs. new idea.”** In this model, passages will describe research that was initially controversial or viewed skeptically but that, as a result of new evidence, is now becoming more widely accepted. You can assume that questions asking about the research's original reception will have negative answers, whereas questions asking about how the work is viewed today will have positive ones.

Studying for Reading Comprehension

Aside from using *The Real ACT Prep Guide* to familiarize yourself with the test (and, of course, this book!), the most effective way to prepare for the Reading Comprehension portion of the ACT is to regularly read the type of material that you are likely to encounter on the exam. Although this guide presents a wide variety of strategies for you to pick and choose from, the reality is that those strategies can at best allow you to make maximum use of your existing skills; they cannot substitute for a lack of comprehension or systematically expose you to a wide range of topics.

One important thing to keep in mind as you prepare is that your ability to accurately understand any given text is much more closely related to your knowledge of the subject matter than to your knowledge of specific reading comprehension strategies. As a matter of fact, research has shown that when otherwise weak readers encounter a passage about a topic they are highly familiar with, their comprehension is actually *better* than that of strong readers with little previous knowledge of the topic. In addition, the more familiar you are with a subject, the less time and energy you will have to spend trying to understand a passage about it, and the faster you'll be able to work. You'll also be familiar with specific vocabulary associated with the topic, which means you won't have to worry about keeping track of new terminology. Moreover, you will probably find it much easier to identify correct answer choices. While you should never choose an answer simply because you know that it is factually correct, you should also keep in mind that **correct answers will always be true in the real world**. If you see an answer choice that you know is true based on your pre-existing knowledge of a topic, you can potentially save yourself a lot of time by checking that answer out first. And if you know that an answer is factually untrue, you can work from the assumption that it is wrong.

Finally, encountering a passage on a subject you already know something about can be very calming on a high-pressure test like the ACT because you will no longer be dealing with a frightening unknown. Instead of trying to assimilate a mass of completely new information in the space of a few minutes, you can instead absorb new information with relative ease, placing it in the context of your existing knowledge.

So does this mean that you need to spend hours daily poring over newspaper and magazine articles, trying to anticipate every possible topic that could appear on the ACT? Of course not (although spending hours reading certainly won't hurt). It does, however, mean that you should make a consistent effort to expose yourself to the type of reading you'll encounter on the exam. While the ACT is nominally a "curriculum-based" exam (a label that stuck from the early days of the exam, when factual knowledge *was* directly tested), the reality is that many ACT passages will in fact cover topics you have never encountered in school, e.g. paleontology, string theory, and linguistics. The wider the range of information that you have been exposed to prior to the exam, the more likely you are to encounter familiar topics when you take the test for real. (The next page lists a number of publications that feature ACT-style articles, and from which ACT passages are sometimes drawn.) Setting aside even 10 or 15 minutes daily to read a couple of articles can go a long way toward improving both your comprehension and your pacing. And while the ACT does not test high-level vocabulary directly, some passages will include both challenging words and sentence structures. You should therefore make an effort to look up any unfamiliar vocabulary and to practice restating complex – and potentially confusing – constructions in your own words. You can also practice the skimming techniques outlined in the book in order to develop a good sense of how to move quickly through an unfamiliar text while still retaining the key ideas. Reading is like anything: the more you practice, the better you get.

Suggested Reading

Periodicals:

The New York Times (www.nytimes.com)
The Wall Street Journal (www.wsj.com)
Humanities Magazine (www.neh.gov/humanities)
Smithsonian Magazine (www.smithsonianmag.com)
Scientific American (www.scientificamerican.com)
Science Magazine (www.sciencemag.org)
Popular Science (www.popsoci.com)
National Geographic (www.nationalgeographic.com)
The Atlantic Monthly (www.theatlantic.com)
Wilson Quarterly (www.wilsonquarterly.com)
Boston Review (www.bostonreview.net)

Books and Articles:

Temple Grandin	<i>Thinking in Pictures</i> <i>Animals in Translation</i> (with Catherine Johnson)
Ann Fadiman	<i>The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down</i>
Brian Greene	<i>The Elegant Universe</i> <i>The Hidden Reality</i> <i>The Fabric of the Cosmos</i>
Stephen Hawking	<i>The Elusive Theory of Everything</i> (with Leonard Mlodinow) <i>The Grand Design</i> (with Leonard Mlodinow) <i>A Brief History of Time</i>
Jhumpa Lahiri	<i>Interpreter of Maladies</i> <i>The Namesake</i> <i>Unaccustomed Earth</i> <i>The Lowland</i>
National Endowment for the Arts	<i>Reading at Risk</i> (http://arts.gov/sites/default/files/ReadingAtRisk.pdf)
Steven Pinker	<i>The Stuff of Thought</i> <i>How the Mind Works</i> <i>The Blank Slate</i>
Michael Pollan	<i>The Botany of Desire</i> <i>The Omnivore's Dilemma</i> <i>In Defense of Food</i>

Oliver Sacks

Awakenings
The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat
Musicophilia
Uncle Tungsten
Hallucinations

Amy Tan

The Joy Luck Club
The Kitchen God's Wife
The Bonesetter's Daughter

Tom Vanderbilt

"The Traffic Guru," *Wilson Quarterly*, Summer 2008.
<http://www.wilsonquarterly.com/article.cfm?AID=1234>

2. Managing Time: Minimize Your Stress, Maximize Your Score

Talk to almost anyone studying for the ACT, and you'll hear the following refrain: "I know I could answer every Reading question correctly, but I always run out of time." Indeed, a significant portion of ACT Reading prep is often devoted to finding strategies for making the 35-minute time constraint more manageable. But that said, timing does not need to pose an insurmountable obstacle. Aside from the obvious fact that you must move through the Reading Comprehension section at a relatively brisk pace no matter your strategy, there are a couple of common misconceptions that add to the stress involved in working under such tight conditions: first, that it is necessary to read each passage and answer every single question, in order; and second, that time should be divided evenly among the passages, allowing you precisely 8:45 for each one. Both of these beliefs are not only false but also have the tendency to overshadow more helpful possibilities.

The most important thing to remember is that you can divvy up those 35 minutes and four passages any way you want. Your only goal should be to answer as many questions correctly as you possibly can within that timeframe. Beyond that, it's up to you – you are free to pick and choose what to read and when to read it, as well as what to answer and when to answer it. Unless you are aiming for a 36, you do not have to spend time trying to answer every single question. Very often, it is not even a good idea to attempt to do so. In fact, trying to answer everything can sometimes hurt much more than it can help. Deliberately focusing the bulk of your time on the passages you understand best and the questions you are most likely to answer correctly is often a far more effective approach.

Moreover, the Reading Comprehension curve is very large. Consider this: missing 8 out of a whopping 75 questions on the English Test gets you around a 29. In Reading Comprehension, missing 8 questions out of only 40 still gets you a 28. On some tests, you can even answer 9 or 10 questions out of 40 incorrectly and still score as high as a 28. That means you can get almost a quarter of the questions wrong and still obtain a very respectable score. Even if you're aiming for a 30+, you still have more room for error than might be expected.

Regardless of whether you can just make it through all four passages or find yourself only at the end of the third passage when time runs out, you should plan to **do the passages in order of most to least interesting**.

Working this way ensures that you'll pick up easy points – points that you might not get as easily if you saw those questions after struggling through a passage you hated. You won't get tired or frustrated early on, then spend the rest of the section trying to make up for the time you lost struggling through a difficult passage at the start. You might even finish the first couple of passages in less than the allotted time, meaning that you won't have to rush through the more difficult material. As a result, you'll stay calmer throughout the entire section, allowing you to actually focus on answering the questions instead of panicking about running out of time.

It is true that this strategy requires you to spend about 10-15 seconds upfront skimming the beginning of each passage and seeing which one(s) seem least painful, but it's a worthwhile tradeoff. One way to avoid having to think about which passages to start and end with, however, is to know your strengths and weaknesses. **If there's a particular type of passage that you consistently nail, do it first.** That way, you automatically start with your strongest passage without having to waste time figuring out which one that is. Likewise, **if there's a type of passage you consistently stumble on, leave it for last.** When you're struggling through those last few questions, you can at least console yourself with the knowledge that the section is almost over.

If you are seriously struggling with time, there are a number of possible strategies.

1) Focus on three passages and forget the fourth

Choose your favorite three passages and focus all your time and energy on them. Instead of 8:45, you now have around 11:30 – and you can do a lot in that extra time. For the fourth passage, pick your favorite letter pair (A/F, B/G, etc.) and fill it in for every question; statistically, you're almost always guaranteed at least two, often three, and occasionally four additional points. If you answer 10/10 correctly on the other three passages, you can still score as high as a 31; if you answer 9/10, you can score a 28-29; if you score 8/10, a 24, etc. That last one might not sound so great, but if you tried to answer every question and got 24 right, you would only end up with around a 21.

This is often the most effective strategy for **very slow readers with solid comprehension skills**. If you frequently struggle with comprehension as well as timing, however, this strategy is probably too much of a risk. Otherwise, the danger of this method is that it can backfire if you get an unusually difficult passage. If you answer four or five questions incorrectly on one passage and don't get everything right on the others, you can easily end up with a score in the low 20s or even the teens. And from a psychological perspective, it can be awfully nerve racking to know that you're ignoring a full quarter of the test. Admittedly, that's a risk that many people are uncomfortable with. Still, in my experience, this is **by far the best method if you cannot even come close to finishing in time**. If you stick with it long enough, eventually you'll get a score you can handle. It might not be the score you originally wanted, but it also might be one that's just high enough to make you a competitive candidate at your top-choice college. I've had more than one student use this technique to maneuver their way into a score just high enough to get their application serious consideration, then ultimately be accepted on the strength of the rest of their accomplishments at a "reach" school.

2) Do all four passages, but "skip" some questions

This strategy tends to work best for faster readers who can *almost* finish all four passages in time. Instead of trying to answer every question, plan to fill in your favorite letter pair for one or two of the most difficult/time-consuming questions in each passage. If you forget about one question in each passage and answer everything else correctly, you can still score a 32-33; two, you can still score a 28-30; three, a 25-26, etc.

In order for this strategy to work, however, you must be truly committed to it. The primary danger is that you'll decide during the test that you really want to answer every question after all, and run out of time or answer more questions incorrectly than you should have because you were racing to finish.

This strategy also requires that you be able to quickly identify the questions that are most likely to give you trouble so that you don't waste time on them. You don't want to spend a full minute working on a single question before realizing that you would have been better off skipping it. Again, it all comes down to knowing what sorts of questions are easy for you, and what sorts of questions are likely to result in wasted time and energy.

3) Do all four passages but spend more time on some, less on others

This is another strategy that works well for strong readers who just feel a little pressed for time. If you know, for example, that Natural Science and Social Science tend to be easier for you, aim to do them in about 8:00, leaving 9:30 for Prose Fiction and Humanities. Or if you can blast through them in 7:30, you'll have 10:00 each for the remaining two. You have to play around with the proportions until you figure out what you're most comfortable with. If you get it right, the payoff can be enormous: one of my students raised his Reading Comprehension score from a 25 to a 33 this way.

4) Answer the questions with line references as you read the passage

If you consistently spend too much time trying to absorb the details of the passage and find yourself already running behind when you start to answer the questions, this strategy offers you a way to accomplish two things at once.

Before you begin reading the passage, glance through the questions and mark the ones that include line references.

Go to the passage, and *quickly* bracket off those lines. As long as you can tell which lines you need to focus on, this is not the time to worry about being meticulous.

Then, as you read, answer the questions whose responses are found in the lines you've bracketed. Note that sometimes you will need to read a bit above and below the line reference, but in general, answers to "detail" questions tend to be located in the lines provided.

Working this way will generally allow you answer at least three or four questions as you read the passage, allowing you to focus on only six or seven questions – rather than 10 – when you finish reading.

Important: Do not spend time bracketing the lines and then forget to answer the questions as you read! I have encountered multiple students who looked through the questions and marked line references, but then waited to answer all of the questions until they had finished reading the passage. If you do not actually answer the questions as you read, the time you spent looking over the questions and bracketing off lines will be wasted.

The Importance of Staying Flexible

As mentioned earlier, the ACT's straightforward *style* is hardly proof that it can only be approached in the most straightforward way. The degree of strategy you want to apply, however, is up to you. **If you are uncomfortable taking risks and making quick decisions, you should make a plan and stick to it strictly.** But if you are a solid reader and enjoy thinking on your feet, you can further boost your score by adapting your strategy to the particular set of passages in front of you.

There is no single order or approach that works for everyone; it all depends on your particular strengths and weaknesses. Most people need to spend some time experimenting, and you will most likely have to try a variety of different strategies until you determine which ones are most comfortable and effective for you.

For example, though, let's say that you usually get everything right on Natural Science and sometimes on Social Science, but Humanities is all over the place, and you frequently crash and burn on Prose Fiction. Your strategy might look something like this:

1. Natural Science
2. Social Science
3. Humanities
4. Prose Fiction (SKIP if you're focusing on three passages)

On some tests, that plan might work out very well. The problem, however, is that the content and difficulty of each passage type can vary considerably from test to test. Humanities passages can sometimes be very straightforward, and Social Science passages can be very challenging. Or Humanities can be very challenging, whereas Prose Fiction can be very straightforward.

So if you're a bit more willing to think on your feet, you could also choose Option #2:

1. Natural Science
2. Social Science
3. Choose between Humanities and Prose Fiction
4. Remaining passage (or SKIP)

This way, you don't spend time on a more difficult passage and cheat yourself out of easy points.

And if you make snap decisions very effectively, you could even choose Option #3:

1. Natural Science
2. Choose between Social Science and Humanities
3. Chose between the remaining passage and Prose Fiction
4. Remaining passage (or SKIP)

This strategy further reduces the possibility that you'll end up choosing a harder passage over an easier one.

Managing Paired Passages

One thing to be aware of is that in June 2014, the ACT added paired SAT-style paired passages to the Reading Comprehension Test. While three of the four passage categories will still contain the conventional long single passage of about 750 words accompanied by 10 questions, the remaining category will contain two shorter passages of about 350-375 words. Both passages will always discuss the same basic topic and be related to each other in some way, e.g. they may present different perspectives on the same topic, or the second passage may illustrate an idea discussed in the first.

Paired passages can appear in any of the four categories, and there is no way to predict which category the paired passages will fall into on a given test. Although these passages can create a bit of a twist in terms of strategy, they need not be a significant source of concern. In general, **the “paired” format tends to be less important than the actual content of the passages.** If you understand a topic well when there is only one passage, you’ll probably understand it well when there are two.

Keep in mind as well that only seven of the 10 questions will normally ask about the passages *separately* – only three questions will ask about the relationship between them. And questions that do ask about both passages are typically quite straightforward. Provided that you grasp the basic relationship between the passages, such questions tend to be very manageable.

If you are a strong reader across the board, you are thus likely to find that paired passages have little effect on your approach to the test (although you may want to save them for last in order to avoid a time crunch if you find that they are more time-consuming than single passages).

Even if you only do consistently well on certain passage types (e.g. Social Science and Natural Science) but are shaky on the others, you should probably stick with doing your strongest categories first – regardless of whether they are single or paired. Particularly if you are scoring in the mid-20s or higher and single passages aren’t normally a problem, double passages will most likely be fine as well.

If your comprehension is more uneven and/or you find paired passages particularly challenging, however, you may need to take those passages into account somewhat when deciding what order to tackle the passages in. In some cases, the “paired” factor can actually make the decision easier for you because it gives you an instant way of determining which passage to postpone or skip.

At the extreme, if you find paired passages so challenging that you want to avoid them regardless of what category they fall into, then you should automatically plan to leave them for last or even guess on them, and do the remaining three passages in order of ease/interest.

Likewise, if you are generally weakest in Social Science and Natural Science, and you encounter paired passages in one of those categories, you should automatically plan to leave that passage type for last or guess on it.

To reiterate: deciding on the spot which passages to focus on and what order to do them in won’t work unless you’re willing to sacrifice a few seconds choosing between passages, and can accurately gauge difficulty levels from the first couple of sentences. **If you get too nervous about losing time or have trouble quickly determining how difficult passages are likely to be, you’re better off coming up with a clear plan well in advance and sticking to it when you take the test.** You might not reach your target score on the first try, but if you play to your strengths long enough, you stand a good chance of getting there eventually.

Using Time Effectively on Each Passage/Question Set

In addition to having a plan for managing your time on the entire section, you should also have a general plan for managing your time on each individual passage/question set.

It is extremely common for students to run out of time on the Reading Test not because they spend a little too much time doing everything, but rather because they do almost everything at a reasonable clip and then get bogged down doing a few exceptionally time-consuming tasks – most often, either reading the same confusing section of a passage over and over again, or hunting through the passage for a detail that just doesn't want to be found. One of your primary challenges, then, is to resist the temptation to “fight” with these sections/questions. Refusing to give up on a question may be rewarding psychologically, but when it comes to finishing the questions in the allotted time, it's just about the worst thing you could do.

I do not, however, generally advocate skipping the passage and jumping directly to the questions. While this approach does save time in the short term, it can actually be more time-consuming in the long run. Because you will lack any sense of context when you look at the questions, you will often spend *more* time hunting for answers that you could otherwise determine in a couple of seconds, given a general understanding of the passage.

The only **exception** is as follows: if you choose to focus your attention primarily on three passages and happen to have three or four minutes left over after working through everything else carefully, you can try to grab a few easy-looking questions from the remaining passage. Since you are usually statistically guaranteed at least two questions just from random guessing, however, you are probably better off spending that time working on questions that accompany passages you've actually read.

The fact that you should not skip passages entirely does not, however, mean that you need to pore over every word. **In fact, you should read each passage as quickly as possible without sacrificing comprehension.** There's no point in speeding through if you're going to look up at the end and wonder what you just read.

Your goal during the initial read-through is to obtain a general idea of what the passage is about, how it's organized, and where the important information is located. You should never try to absorb every last detail. If you find part of the passage confusing, skip it and focus on what you do understand. The last thing you want to do is waste a minute reading and rereading a sentence that might at most be relevant to a single question.

You should also make sure that you finish each passage with enough time left over to answer all of the questions you intend to answer. If you're planning to do all four passages, spend no more than about 2-2:30 reading. If you're doing three passages, aim to finish in about 3-3:30. **Remember: you can and should go back to the passage in order to search for the details as you work through the questions.** Even if you read the passage slowly, your mind simply cannot store its contents fully after one read-through, especially when you're under pressure. You'll almost certainly have to go back to the passage, no matter how slowly you read the first time around.

Working through the questions is a little trickier, and the amount of skipping around you are willing to do will of course depend on your ability to judge what questions/question types are most likely to give you trouble, as well as your level of comfort with working out of order. **Your goal is to avoid sacrificing questions that you could answer both quickly and easily for the sake of spending time on ones that you may or may not get right.** Basically, if it's hard and complicated, save it for later. There are times when procrastination can be a good thing, and this is one of them.

Regardless of how comfortable you are with skipping around, a good rule of thumb is that if you look at a question and your immediate reaction is *Hub???*, you're probably better off skipping it for the time being. In addition, **certain types of questions – particularly inference; all of the following EXCEPT; I, II, and III; and “detail” questions without line references – are often impossible to do quickly, no matter how strong a reader you are.** If you encounter one of these questions early on in a section and either aren't sure of the answer or have no clear idea of how to start working toward the answer within the first 10 seconds or so, you're probably better off leaving it and coming back to it once you've answered everything you can answer quickly. If you're worried you won't remember to come back to the questions you've skipped, mark them with a huge star or circle. Just don't cheat yourself out of potentially easy points.

You also have to know when it's worth it to let things go. If you've worked through nine questions in a set and are still struggling through #10 when your time runs out for that passage, either leave the question to come back to after you're done with the rest of the Reading Test, or bubble in your most reasonable guess. You cannot afford to get behind on the other passages for the sake of a single question.