

***The Critical  
Reader***

***The Complete Guide to  
SAT Reading***

***2<sup>nd</sup> Edition***

***by***

***Erica L. Meltzer***

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## **Dedication**

*To Ricky, who pestered me to write this book until I finally acquiesced*



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## Introduction

Eight years elapsed between my last SAT, which I took as a senior in high school, and the first time I was asked to tutor reading for the SAT. I distinctly remember sitting in Barnes and Noble, hunched over the Official Guide, staring at the questions in horror and wondering how on earth I had ever gotten an 800 at the age of 17. Mind you, I felt completely flummoxed by the SAT after I had spent four years studying literature in *college*.

Somehow or other, I managed to muddle through my first reading tutoring sessions. I tried to pretend that I knew what I was doing, but to be perfectly honest, I was pretty lost. I had to look up answers in the back of the book. A lot. I lost count of the number of times I had to utter the words, “I think you’re right, but give me one second and let me just double-check that answer...” It was mortifying. No tutor wants to come off as clueless in front of a sixteen-year old, but I was looking like I had no idea what I was doing. Grammar I could handle, but when it came to teaching reading, I was in way over my head. I simply had no idea how to put into words what had always come naturally to me. Besides, half the time I wasn’t sure of the right answer myself.

Luckily for me, fate intervened in the form of Laura Wilson, the founder of WilsonPrep in Chappaqua, New York, whose company I spent several years writing tests for. Laura taught me about the major passage themes, answer choices patterns, and structures. I learned the importance of identifying the main point, tone and major transitions, as well as the ways in which that information can allow a test-taker to spot correct answers quickly, efficiently, and without second-guessing. I discovered that the skills that the SAT tested were in fact the exact same skills that I had spent four years honing.

As a matter of fact, I came to realize that, paradoxically, my degree in French was probably more of an aid in teaching reading than a degree in English would have been. The basic French literary analysis exercise, known as the *explication de texte linéaire*, consists of close reading of a short excerpt of text, during which the reader explains how the text functions rhetorically from beginning to end – that is, just how structure, diction, and syntax work together to produce meaning and convey a particular idea or point of view. In other words, the same skills as those tested on the SAT – the old test as well as the new version. I had considered *explications de texte* a pointless exercise (Rhetoric? Who studies *rhetoric* anymore? That’s so nineteenth century!) and resented being forced to write them in college – especially during the year I spent at the Sorbonne, where I and my (French) classmates did little else – but suddenly I appreciated the skills they had taught me. Once I made the connection between what I had been studying all that time and the skills tested on the SAT, the test suddenly made sense. I suddenly had something to fall back on when I was teaching, and for the first time, I found that I no longer had to constantly look up answers.

I still had a long way to go as a tutor, though: at first I clung a bit too rigidly to some methods (e.g. insisting that students circle all the transitions) and often did not leave my students enough room to find their own strategies. As I worked with more students, however, I began to realize just how little I could take for granted in terms of pre-existing skills: most of them, it turned out, had significant difficulty even identifying the point of an argument, never mind summing it up in five or so words. A lot of them didn’t even realize that passages contained

arguments at all; they thought that the authors were simply “talking about stuff.” As a result, it never even occurred to them to identify which ideas a given author did and did not agree with. When I instructed them to circle transitions like *however* and *therefore* as a way of identifying the key places in an argument, many of them found it overwhelming to do so at the same time they were trying to absorb the literal content of a passage – more than one student told me they could do one or the other, but not both at the same time. In one memorable gaffe, I told a student that while he often did not have to read every word of the more analytical passages, he did need to read all of the literary passages, only to have him respond that he couldn’t tell the difference. He thought of all the passages as literary because the blurbs above them all said they came from books, and weren’t all books “literary?” It never occurred to me to tell him that he needed to look for the word “novel” in the blurb above the passage in order to identify works of *fiction*. When I pointed out to another student that he had answered a question incorrectly because he hadn’t realized that the author of the passage disagreed with a particular idea, he responded without a trace of irony that the author had spent a lot of time talking about that idea – no one had ever introduced him to the idea that writers often spend a good deal of time fleshing out ideas that they *don’t* agree with. And this was a student scoring in the mid-600s!

Eventually, I got it: I realized that I would have to spend more time – sometimes a lot more time – explaining basic contextual pieces of information that most adult readers took for granted and, moreover, I would have to do so at the same time I covered actual test-taking strategies. Without the fundamentals, all the strategy in the world might not even raise a score by 10 points. My goal in this book is to supply some of those fundamentals while also covering some of the more advanced skills the exam requires.

I would, however, like to emphasize that this book is intended to help you work through and “decode” College Board material. It is not – and should not be used as – a replacement for the Official Guide. To that end, I have provided a list of the Reading questions from the tests in the College Board Official Guide, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (also available through Khan Academy), corresponding to the relevant question type at the end of each chapter.

The tests can be downloaded from the Khan Academy website as follows:

- Test 1: <https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/pdf/sat-practice-test-1.pdf>  
Answers: <https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/pdf/sat-practice-test-1-answers.pdf>
- Test 2: <https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/pdf/sat-practice-test-2.pdf>  
Answers: <https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/pdf/sat-practice-test-2-answers.pdf>
- Test 3: <https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/pdf/sat-practice-test-3.pdf>  
Answers: <https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/pdf/sat-practice-test-3-answers.pdf>
- Test 4: <https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/pdf/sat-practice-test-4.pdf>  
Answers: <https://collegereadiness.collegeboard.org/pdf/sat-practice-test-4-answers.pdf>

As you work through this book, you will undoubtedly notice that some of the passages are reused in multiple exercises. Although you may find it somewhat tedious to work through the same passages multiple times, that repetition was a deliberate choice on my part. This book is not designed to have you whiz through passage after passage, but rather to have you study the workings of a limited number of passages in depth. As you work through the exercises, you may also notice that different questions accompanying the same passage are targeting the same concepts, merely from different angles. Again, that is a deliberate choice. The goal is to allow you to solidify your understanding of these concepts and the various ways in which they can be tested so that they will leap out at you when you are taking the test for real.

In addition, I have done my best to select passages that reflect the content and themes of the redesigned SAT (based on the Official Guide, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition). The new exam focuses much more heavily than the old on science and social science topics, with a notable focus on the recent onslaught of new technologies (the Internet, the rise of social media, “green” energy) and new business models (flexible and individual vs. company-based and traditional) as well as the consequences of those developments. While some passages will address their downsides, you can assume that the overwhelming emphasis will be on their positive – and transformative – aspects.

That said, this book can of course provide no more than an introduction to the sorts of topics you are likely to encounter on the SAT. While the College Board has been very vociferous (to invoke an “irrelevant” term) about proclaiming that the redesigned test will reflect exactly what students are studying in school, the reality is of course a bit more complex. Common Core or no Common Core, American high schools have nothing even remotely resembling a core curriculum, with the result that a student high school A might emerge from AP US History with a solid understanding of how Locke and Rousseau influenced the American revolutionaries, while a student at high school B the next town over might emerge from AP US History not even knowing their names. No short-term SAT prep program, “disruptive” and Internet-based or otherwise can easily compensate for knowledge gaps built up over a dozen years or more. So while some of the passages you encounter on the SAT may indeed seem familiar and accessible, others may seem very foreign. On p. 13, I have provided a list of suggested reading resources, and I strongly encourage you to devote some time to exploring them.

Unfortunately, there is no such thing as a “pure” reading test the way there is such thing as a pure math test. To some extent, your ability to understand what you read is always bound up with your existing knowledge. Research shows that when students whose overall reading skills are weak are asked to read about subjects they are highly familiar with, their comprehension is *better* than that of students whose reading skills are stronger across the board. The more familiar you are with a subject, the less time and energy you will have to spend trying to understand a text about it, and the faster you’ll move through the passage as a whole. You’ll also be familiar with any vocabulary associated with the topic, which means you won’t have to worry as hard about keeping track of unfamiliar terminology.

Moreover, you will probably find it much easier to identify correct and incorrect answer choices. While it is true that answers that are true in the real world will not necessarily be right, it is also true that correct answers will not be false in the real world. If you see an

answer that you know is factually true based on your pre-existing knowledge of a topic, you can potentially save yourself a lot of time by checking that answer first.

Finally, encountering a passage about a subject you already know something about can be very calming on a high-pressure test like the SAT 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 “place” what you are reading in the context of your existing knowledge. No matter how strongly the College Board might insist that the SAT is simply testing skills, and that all of the Reading questions can be answered on the basis of the information in the passages alone, the SAT is also testing your knowledge of the subjects those passages discuss for the simple reason that it would be impossible to design a reading test that did not!

Provided that you have solid comprehension skills and contextual knowledge, success in Reading is also largely a question of approach, or method. Because the test demands a certain degree of flexibility – no single strategy can be guaranteed to work 100% of the time – I have also tried to make this book a toolbox of sorts. My goal is to provide you with a variety of approaches and strategies that you can choose from and apply as necessary, depending on the question at hand. Whenever possible, I have provided multiple explanations for questions, showing how you might arrive at the answer by working in different ways and from different sets of starting assumptions. The ability to adapt is what will ultimately make you unshakeable – even at eight o’clock on a Saturday morning.

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New York City  
July 2015

## Suggested Reading

Gerald Graff, Cathy Birkenstein, and Russell Durst: *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*, 2nd Edition. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2009.

### Periodicals:

*The New York Times*

(particularly the op-ed section, <http://www.nytimes.com/pages/opinion/index.html>, and the “Room for Debate” feature)

*The Wall Street Journal*, [www.wsj.com](http://www.wsj.com)

*The Economist*, [www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)

*Harvard Business Review*, [www.hbr.com](http://www.hbr.com)

*The Boston Globe “Ideas” Section*, [www.bostonglobe.com/ideas](http://www.bostonglobe.com/ideas) (5 free articles/month)

*Scientific American*, [www.scientificamerican.com](http://www.scientificamerican.com)

*National Geographic*, [www.nationalgeographic.com](http://www.nationalgeographic.com)

*Newsweek*, [www.newsweek.com](http://www.newsweek.com)

*Time Magazine*, [www.time.com](http://www.time.com)

*Smithsonian Magazine*, [www.smithsonianmag.com](http://www.smithsonianmag.com)

*The Atlantic Monthly*, [www.theatlantic.com/magazine](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine)

*Reason Magazine*, [www.reason.com](http://www.reason.com)

*Wired*, [www.wired.com](http://www.wired.com)

*The New Atlantis: A Journal of Technology and Society*, [www.thenewatlantis.com](http://www.thenewatlantis.com)

For links to many additional resources containing SAT-level material and above, please visit Arts & Letters Daily at [www.aldaily.com](http://www.aldaily.com).

**Fiction, suggested authors:** by Jane Austen, Charlotte/Anne Brontë, Charles Dickens, George Orwell, Toni Morrison, Edith Wharton, Virginia Woolfe

### Historical Documents, Sources:

<http://www.ushistory.org/documents/>

<http://www.ourdocuments.gov/content.php?page=milestone>

<https://thesocialstudiesteacher.wordpress.com/important-historical-documents/>



# 1. Overview of SAT Reading

The redesigned SAT contains one 65-minute reading section that will always be the first section of the exam. The section consists of four long single passages and one set of shorter paired passages, accompanied by a total of 52 questions (9-11 questions per passage or paired passage set).

The breakdown of passage topics is as follows:

- Fiction (1 passage)
- Social science (1-2 passages)
- Natural science (1-2 passages)
- Historical Documents, aka the “Great Global Conversation” (1 passage or 1 set of paired passages)
- Paired passages (1 set, science or social science)

Each passage or set of paired passages will range in length from 500-750 words; science and social science passages will also include 1-2 graphs or charts related in some way to the topics of those passages. In some instances, the graphic (or graphics) will clearly support an idea or phenomenon discussed in the passage; in other cases, the relationship between the graphic and the passage will be less clear-cut.

The majority of the Reading questions will be text-based; however, science and social science passages accompanied by graphs or charts will also contain several questions pertaining to those graphics. Some of these questions will ask you consider information from the graphic alone, while other questions will require you to integrate information from both the passage and the graphic.

## What Does SAT Reading Test?

To some extent, the SAT reading test is a reading comprehension test, but it would perhaps be more accurate to call it an *argument* comprehension test. **It does not simply test the ability to find bits of factual information in a passage, but rather the capacity to understand how arguments are constructed and the ways in which specific textual elements (e.g. words, phrases, punctuation marks) work together to convey ideas.** The focus is on moving beyond what a text says to understanding how the text says it. Comprehension, in other words, is necessary but not sufficient.

The skill that the SAT requires is therefore something I like to call **“rhetorical reading.”** Rhetoric is the art of persuasion, and reading rhetorically simply means reading to understand an author’s argument as well as the rhetorical role or *function* that various pieces of information play in creating that argument.

**Reading this way is an acquirable skill, not an innate aptitude. It just takes practice.**

While the primary focus of the redesigned SAT is on having students use evidence to justify their responses – that is, requiring them to identify which section of a passage most directly supports their answers – the exam does still test a number of other skills. The most important of these skills include drawing relationships between specific wordings and general/abstract ideas; distinguishing between main ideas and supporting evidence; understanding how specific textual elements such as diction (word choice), syntax, and style convey meaning and tone; keeping track of multiple viewpoints and understanding/infering relationships between arguments and perspectives; and recognizing that it is possible for an author to agree with some aspects of an idea while rejecting others.

That might sound like an awful lot to manage, but don’t worry; we’re going to break it down.

These skills are tested in various ways across a variety of different question types.

- **Big picture** questions test your understanding of the passage as a whole. They may ask you summarize, identify main points, or determine the overall purpose of a passage.
- **Literal comprehension** questions test your understanding of what is indicated or stated directly in the passage.
- **Inference** questions test your understanding of what is suggested or stated indirectly in the passage.
- Both literal comprehension and inference questions will frequently be followed by **supporting evidence** questions, which test your ability to identify the specific information in the passage that supports the answer to the previous question.
- **Function or purpose** questions test your understanding of the **rhetorical role** (e.g. support, refute, criticize) that various pieces of information play within a passage.



- **Vocabulary in context** questions test your ability to use context clues to identify alternate meanings of common words.
- **Rhetorical strategy** and **passage organization** questions test your understanding of passage structure as well as the effects of particular rhetorical figures.
- **Tone** and **attitude** questions test your understanding of how specific words or phrases contribute to an author's tone.
- **Supporting and undermining claims** questions ask you to identify information, in either a passage or an answer choice, that would either support or contradict an idea presented within the passage.
- **Analogy** questions test your ability to identify parallels between situations.
- **Paired passage** questions test your ability to compare texts with different, often conflicting, points of view, and to infer how each author would likely react to the other's point of view.
- **Information graphic (infographic)** questions test your ability to interpret information presented in graph or table form, and to determine whether and how it supports various pieces of information in a passage.

Each chapter in this book is devoted to a specific type of question and is followed by exercises that allow you to practice that particular skill.

## Managing the Reading Section as Whole

The 65 minutes you have to complete the 52 questions in the reading section are both a blessing and a curse. On one hand, you have over an hour to read and answer questions for just five passages; on the other hand, reading passage after passage for a straight hour without interruption can start to feel like a slog. Even though you have a good amount of time, you still want to use it as efficiently and effectively as possible. Regardless of whether you're aiming for a 600 or an 800, your goal is simple: to correctly answer as many questions as possible within the allotted time. You are under no obligation to read the passages and/or answer the questions in the order in which they appear. In fact, you can divvy up those 65 minutes and 52 questions in any way you wish.

If you're a strong reader across the board, or you simply have a very strong aversion to skipping around, you may find it easiest to read the passages and answer the questions in the order they're presented (skipping and possibly coming back to anything that seems excessively confusing). If you have very pronounced strengths and weaknesses or consistently have difficulty managing time on standardized tests, however, keep reading.

One way to ensure that you use your time most effectively is to **do the passages in order of most to least interesting** or **easiest to hardest**. 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.

It's 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 can often be a worthwhile tradeoff.

If you don't want to spend time trying to figure out which passages to start and end with, however, you can come in with a plan of attack based on your strengths and weaknesses. **If there's a particular type of passage that you consistently find easy, do it first.** That way, you automatically start with your strongest passage without having to waste time. Likewise, **if there's a type of passage you consistently have trouble with, 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.

For example, a student who excels in science and graph reading but who dislikes more humanities-based passages might prefer the following order. (Note that this strategy will also necessitate some looking around since passages will not always appear in the same order).

1. Science
2. Social Science
3. Paired Passages
4. Historical Documents
5. Fiction

On the flip side, a student who is strong in the humanities but who finds science passages and graphs challenging might do the passages in this order:

1. Fiction
2. Historical Documents
3. Social Science
4. Paired Passages
5. Science

There are, of course, many possible combinations. In order to figure out which one works most effectively for you, you will most likely have to spend some time experimenting to see what order is most comfortable.

Just as you can read the passages in an order that works to your advantage, you can also answer questions in an order that helps you leverage your skills to maximum effect.

**To reiterate:** while you should always fill in an answer for every question, you do not need to devote serious time to answering every question. In fact, you may be better off planning from the start to guess on a certain number of questions. If you are not aiming for a perfect score, answering all of the questions may actually make it *more* difficult for you to achieve your goal.

Think of it this way: most time problems come about not because people spend too much time answering every question but rather because they spend an excessive amount of time answering a small number of questions, leaving them too little time to think through other, easier questions carefully. As a result, they feel pressured and rush, incorrectly answering questions they otherwise could have gotten right. If they were to eliminate those three or four time-consuming questions completely, they would have far more time to answer the remaining questions and thus be considerably more likely to get them right. The goal then becomes to ensure that all of the easier questions are answered before any of the more challenging questions are even considered.

One factor that can make implementing this strategy challenging, however, is that there is no way to predict where in the section easy vs. hard questions will fall. A very difficult question might be placed next to one that is very straightforward. You must therefore spend some time learning to recognize which questions you are normally able to answer easily and which ones you frequently struggle with so that you already have a clear sense of where to focus the majority of your attention when you walk into the test.

Although “easy” and “hard” are to some extent subjective, **there are some types of questions – most notably combined passage/graphic, Passage 1/Passage 2 relationship, and support/undermine – that tend to be both challenging and time consuming.** If you are not aiming for a top score, you may want to skip them entirely and spend your time focusing on more straightforward questions instead.

### **The Answer Isn’t Always \*In\* the Passage**

One of the great truisms of SAT prep is that “the answer is always in the passage,” but in reality this statement is only half true: **the information necessary to answer the questions is always provided in the passage, but not necessarily the answer itself.** The SAT tests the ability to draw relationships between specific wordings and general ideas – so while the correct answer will always be *supported by* specific wording in the passage (which you will sometimes be explicitly asked to identify), the whole point is that you are responsible for making the connection. That, in essence, is the test.

As a rule, therefore, the correct answers to most questions will not usually be stated word-for-word in the text. In fact, **if the phrasing of an answer choice mimics the phrasing of the passage too closely, you should approach it with a healthy dose of suspicion.** The correct answer will usually refer to an **idea** that has been discussed in the passage and that has simply been **rephrased**. Your job is therefore to identify that idea and look for an answer choice that rewords it using **synonyms**. Same idea, different words.

## Understanding Answer Choices

Each SAT Reading question is accompanied by four answer choices, labeled A) through D). Despite the multiple-choice format, the presence of multiple answers does not somehow make incorrect answers any more valid or make correct answers any less so.

Although one or more incorrect answers may sound convincing, there is always a specific reason – supported by the passage – that wrong answers are wrong. Often, they describe a situation that *could* be true but that the passage does not explicitly indicate *is* true. They may also employ relatively abstract language that many test-takers find confusing or difficult to comprehend. That said, incorrect answers typically fall into the following categories:

- Off-topic
- Too broad (e.g. the passage discusses *one* scientist while the answer refers to *scientists*)
- Too extreme (e.g. the passage is neutral or slightly negative/positive but the answer is extremely negative/positive)
- Half-right, half-wrong (e.g. right information, wrong point of view)
- Could be true but not enough information
- True for the passage as a whole, but not for the specific lines in question
- Factually true but not stated in the passage

On most questions, many test-takers find it relatively easy to eliminate a couple of answers but routinely remain stuck between two plausible-sounding options. Typically, the incorrect answer will fall into either the “could be true but not enough information” or the “half-right, half-wrong” category. In such cases, you must be willing to read very carefully in order to determine which answer the passage truly supports.

## Understanding Line References

A line reference simply tells you where a particular word or phrase is located – it does **not** tell you that the answer will be in that line or set of lines. A question that reads, “The author uses digital and video offerings (line 35) as examples of...” is telling you the phrase *digital and video offerings* is in line 35. The answer could be in line 25, but it could also be in line 23 or 27 or even 35.

In addition, **the most important places in the passage, the ones that you need to pay the most attention to, are not necessarily the ones indicated by the questions.** Focusing excessively on a particular set of lines can make you lose sight of the bigger picture.

At the other extreme, only a small part of the line reference may sometimes be important. In fact, **the longer a line reference, the lower the chance that all of it will be important.** There’s no sense spending time puzzling over eight or ten lines that you’ve spent time carefully marking off if all you need to focus on is the first sentence or a set of dashes.

## Strategies for Reading Passages

One of the major challenges of SAT reading is that questions are arranged in two ways: first, in rough chronological order of the passage (although answers to “supporting evidence” questions may be found *after* the line reference in the following question), and afterward, in non-chronological order for infographic questions. In addition, some “big picture” questions that appear either at the beginning or in the middle of a question set may not provide line references. As a result, some jumping around is unavoidable. If you can understand the gist of the author’s argument, though, you will likely be able to identify some correct answers – even those to “detail” questions – without having to hunt through the passage. You will also find it easier to answer “supporting evidence” questions because in many cases, you will already have a good idea of the information the correct lines must include.

There are essentially two major ways to read passages. Regardless of which strategy you choose, you should read the passage as quickly as you can while still absorbing the content. Do your best to focus on the parts you understand and try to avoid spending time puzzling over confusing details or turns of phrase (which may or may not ultimately be relevant), and repeatedly re-reading sections you do not grasp immediately.

The **first option** is to read the entire passage with the goal of understanding the big picture, then answering the questions in one block after you are done reading. This strategy tends to work best for people who have excellent focus and comprehension, and who are strong at identifying and summarizing arguments.

Read the passage slowly until you figure out the **point – usually at the end of the introduction** – and underline it. Then, focus on the first (topic) and last sentence of each paragraph carefully, skimming through the body of each paragraph and circling major transitions/strong language. Finally, read the conclusion carefully, paying particular attention to and **underlining the last sentence or two because the main point will often be restated at the end of the conclusion.**

Working this way will allow you to create a mental “map” of the passage: the introduction and conclusion will most likely give you the main point, and each topic sentence will generally provide you with the point of the paragraph, allowing you to understand how it fits into the argument as a whole. Then when you’re asked to think about the details, you’ll already understand the ideas that they support and have a sense of their purpose within the passage.

**If you consistently spend too much time reading passages,** you can try another version of this approach, reading the introduction slowly until you figure out the point, then reading the first and last sentence of each body paragraph carefully and skipping the information in between. Then, read the conclusion slowly and underline the end. That way, you’ll get the major points without losing time.

**If your comprehension is outstanding,** you can simply move on to the next section of the passage (the place where the idea clearly changes) once you’ve grasped the point of any particular section of the passage you happen to be reading – regardless of how long that section may be. You can worry about the details when you go back.

The **second option** is to read the passage in sections, say a paragraph or two at a time, answering the more straightforward line-reference questions as you read. When you turn to a new passage, start by skimming through the questions. Notice which ones have specific lines references, then go to the passage and mark off those lines in the passage. (Note: bracketing lines is generally faster and more efficient than underlining.) Then, as you read the passage, you can answer those questions as you come to them, **keeping in mind that the answers to some questions will not be located directly in the lines referenced, and that you may need to read before/after in order to locate the necessary information.**

This is often a good approach for people who difficulty recognizing main ideas, or who have difficulty maintaining focus when they are confronted with too much information. Breaking passages down into smaller “chunks” can make them seem more manageable.

This can also be a helpful strategy for people who are concerned about spending too much time reading the passages and not having enough left over to comfortably answer all the questions. Knowing that you’ve answered even three or four of the questions by the time you get done with the passage can allow you to work more calmly through the remaining questions.

**An important note about “supporting evidence” questions:** If you choose to answer some of the questions as you work through the passage, you need to be careful with “supporting evidence” questions. They come in two types: ones in which the first question of the pair contains a line reference, and ones in which the first question of the pair does not contain a line reference.

**When the first question of the pair does contain a line reference, you can probably answer both questions as you read the passage.** Pay close attention to the lines you use to determine your answer to the first question; assuming you understand the passage, those lines will likely be cited in the correct answer to the second question, allowing you to answer both questions simultaneously. (Don’t worry, we’re going to look at some examples of how to do this a little later on.) For this reason, **you should make sure to mark both questions in this type of pair as you look through the questions.** If you overlook the “supporting evidence” question initially, you’ll end up having to backtrack after you’re done with the passage and re-locate information you’ve already found.

On the other hand: **when the first question of a “supporting evidence” pair does not contain a line reference, you should not normally try to answer both questions as you read, and you should not mark the line references in the second question.** If you attempt to pay attention to all those various places and connect them to the first question as you read, you will almost certainly become confused.

Answering the questions as you read the passage can work well if you are a strong reader, but it does have some potential drawbacks. Reading passages in bits can cause you to get lost in the details and lose sight of the argument. So while this method can be effective if you tend to have trouble understanding the big picture, it cannot fully compensate for that weakness. Strategies allow you to leverage the skills you do have, but they cannot substitute for the ones you don’t. To be sure, it is possible to get many – or even all – of the questions right working this way. It’s just that the process will be much more tedious and open to error.

You might be wondering why we're not going to seriously address the possibility of skipping the passage entirely and just jumping to the questions. If time is a serious problem for you, you might think that this option represents your best shot at finishing on time. After all, those passages are long! While I don't dispute that this strategy can be effective for the right person, I do not normally recommend it.

The main problem is that it does not take into account what the SAT is actually testing, namely relationships between ideas – particularly between main ideas and supporting details. In order to determine relationships between ideas, you need context for them, which is very difficult to determine if you're reading bits and pieces of a passage in isolation. You therefore run the serious risk of misunderstanding certain sections – or even the entire passage.

Moreover, unless you are able to split your attention and glean main ideas at the same time you are hunting for answers to detail-based questions (an extremely sophisticated skill), you will have no way of using the big picture to “shortcut” detail-based questions. You are likely to spend considerable time hunting through the passage, re-reading aimlessly as you try to figure out where to look. What is intended to be a time-saving strategy thus ends up requiring more time than would have been involved in simply reading the passage.

If you have a serious time problem, you are much better off simply reading a few key places – introduction, topic sentences, conclusion – so that you at least have a gist of what the passage is talking about when you look at the questions.

### **Skimming Effectively Means Knowing What to Focus On**

If you ask those rare lucky people who can easily complete a test with half an hour left over how they finish so quickly, they'll probably just shrug and tell you that there's no magic trick involved; they're just reading the passages and answering the questions. What most highly skilled readers often do not recognize, though, is that their “naturally” fast reading is actually the result of a combination of specific skills. But because expert readers generally perform those skills subconsciously, they can't explain how they do what they do or teach someone else to do it. The good news is that those skills can be learned. You probably won't become a champion speed-reader overnight, but you can learn to read more quickly and effectively.

Brute speed, no doubt, is a useful thing to have, but it is not the whole story. In reality, **the key is to read efficiently**. If you understand main ideas, you can often use a general, “bird's eye” view to answer some questions without even looking back, leaving you plenty of time to worry about questions that require more time.

One of the most common mistakes people make is to read as if every sentence were equally important. As a result, when they encounter something they don't understand, they assume it must be crucial and read it again. And if they still don't understand it, they read again. And maybe even a third and fourth time. Before they know it, they've spent almost a minute reading and rereading a single sentence. When they finally move on, they're not only confused and frustrated (which makes it harder to concentrate on the rest of the passage) but they've also lost sight of what the passage is actually about.

What's more, when most people skim through a passage, they simply try to read *everything* faster, with the result that they don't understand the passage as more than a string of vaguely related sentences. When they look at the question, they have only a fuzzy idea of what they just read. Because they haven't focused on the key places indicating main ideas and concepts, they're often perplexed when they encounter "big picture" questions that ask about the passage as a whole. And because they've just been worrying about each individual piece of information, they have difficulty thinking about where information would logically be located when confronted with questions without line references.

**Effective skimming, on the other hand, involves reading selectively. Some sections are read very slowly, while others are glanced through or even skipped over entirely.** Reading this way requires much more thought and focus, but it is also much faster and, when done properly, actually improves comprehension. In order to know what to read slowly and what to skip, however, you must be able to recognize what information is important.

As a general rule, authors tend to be pretty clear about the parts of their writing that they want you to pay attention to: if they're really generous, they'll even come right out and tell you what the point is. Even if they're not quite that blatant, however, they usually make a decent effort to tell you what's important – if not through words, then through punctuation.

So first, **you should circle any words or phrases that indicate the author is making a point**, e.g. *the point is, goal, or intention*, along with the word *important* and any of its synonyms (*significant, central, essential, key*) and any italicized words. If you see one of these terms in the middle of a paragraph as you're racing through, you need to slow down, circle it, and read that part carefully. **If the author says it's important, it's important.** There's no trick.

Second, you need to learn to recognize when an argument changes or when new and important information is being introduced: transitions such as *however, therefore, in fact*; "unusual" punctuation such as dashes, italics, and colons; strong language such as *only, never, and most*; and "explanation" words such as *answer, explain, and reason* are all "clues" that tell you to pay attention. If one of these elements appears either **in or around** the lines you're given to read, **the answer will typically be located right around that spot.** If you are able to do so while still absorbing the meaning of the passage, you should mark these key elements as you read so you'll know what to pay attention to when you go back to answer the questions. To be clear the goal is not to look for transitions just for the sake of doing so. You don't need to circle every last *and* or *but* that appears. In fact, you probably shouldn't. Rather, the goal is to use the "clues" that the passage provides as a means of identifying the *major* points of the argument – the places where you most need to pay close attention.

If, on the other hand, you feel that looking for transitions will interfere with your comprehension, then you should not worry about them when you read through the passage initially. It is far more important that you gain a clear understanding of the passage. When you go back to answer the questions, however, you do need to take them into account because they will typically indicate where the answers are located.

In the passage on the following page, key elements are in bold. **The chart on p. 203 provides a full list of key words, phrases, and punctuation, as well as their functions.**



The following passage is adapted from “Makerspaces, Hackerspaces, and Community Scale Production in Detroit and Beyond,” © 2013 by Sean Ansanelli.

During the mid-1980s, spaces began to emerge across Europe where computer hackers could convene for mutual support and camaraderie. In the past few years, the idea of fostering such shared, physical spaces has been rapidly adapted by the diverse and growing community of “makers”, who seek to apply the idea of “hacking” to physical objects, processes, or anything else that can be deciphered and improved upon.

A hackerspace is described by hackerspaces.org as a “community-operated physical space where people with common interests, often in computers, technology, science, digital art or electronic art, can meet, socialize, and/or collaborate.” Such spaces can vary in size, available technology, and membership structure (some being completely open), but generally share community-oriented characteristics. **Indeed, while** the term “hacker” can sometimes have negative connotations, modern hackerspaces thrive off of community, openness, and assimilating diverse **viewpoints – these** often being the only guiding principles in otherwise informal organizational structures.

In recent years, the city of Detroit has emerged as a hotbed for hackerspaces and other DIY (“Do-It-Yourself”) experiments. Several hackerspaces can already be found throughout the city and several more are currently in formation. **Of course,** Detroit’s attractiveness for such projects can be partially attributed to cheap real estate, which allows aspiring hackers to acquire ample space for experimentation. Some observers have **also** described this kind of making and tinkering as embedded in the DNA of Detroit’s residents, who are able to harness substantial intergenerational knowledge and attract like-minded individuals.

Hackerspaces (or “makerspaces”) can be found in more commercial forms, **but** the vast majority of spaces are self-organized and not-for-profit. **For example,** the OmniCorp hackerspace operates off member fees to cover rent and new equipment, from laser cutters to welding tools. OmniCorp also hosts an “open hack night” every Thursday in which the space is open to the general public. Potential members are required to attend at least one open hack night prior to a consensus vote by the existing members for **admittance; no** prospective members have yet been denied.

A visit to one of OmniCorp’s open hack nights reveals the **vast variety** of activity and energy existing in the space. In the main common room alone, activities range from experimenting with sound installations and learning to program Arduino boards to building speculative “oloid”

shapes - all just for the sake of it. With a general atmosphere of mutual support, participants in the space are continually encouraged to help others.

One of the **most active** community-focused initiatives in the city is the Mt. Elliot Makerspace. Jeff Sturges, former MIT Media Lab Fellow and Co-Founder of OmniCorp, started the Mt. Elliot project with the aim of replicating MIT’s Fab Lab model on a smaller, cheaper scale in Detroit. “Fab Labs” are production facilities that consist of a small collection of flexible computer controlled tools that cover several different scales and various materials, with the **aim to make “almost anything”** (including other machines). The Mt. Elliot Makerspace now offers youth-based skill development programs in **eight areas: Transportation,** Electronics, Digital Tools, Wearables, Design and Fabrication, Food and Music, and Arts. The range of activities is meant to provide not only something for everyone, **but** a well-rounded base knowledge of making to **all** participants.

**While** the center receives some foundational support, the space also derives **significant support** from the local community. Makerspaces throughout the city connect the space’s youth-based programming directly to school curriculums.

The growing interest in and development of hacker/makerspaces has been **explained,** in part, as a result of the growing maker movement. Through the combination of cultural norms and communication channels from open source production as well as increasingly available technologies for physical production, amateur maker communities have developed in virtual and physical spaces.

Publications such as *Wired* are noticing the **transformative potential** of this emerging movement and have sought to devote significant attention to its development. Chief editor Chris Anderson recently published a book entitled *Makers*, in which he proclaims that the movement will become the next Industrial Revolution. Anderson argues such developments will allow for a new wave of business opportunities by providing mass-customization rather than mass-production.

The **transformative potential** of these trends goes beyond new business opportunities or competitive advantages for economic growth. **Rather, these trends demonstrate the potential to actually transform economic development models entirely.**

## Using Key Words: Managing Questions Without Line References

Just as you must be able to recognize key words and phrases within passages, so must you be able to recognize key words and phrases within *questions*. This is a crucial skill for questions that are not accompanied by line references – while many of these questions will be accompanied by supporting evidence questions that direct you to look at specific places in the passage, you will also encounter detail-based questions in which line references are **not** provided in either the question or the answer choices. In such cases, you must be able to locate the necessary information efficiently by using the wording of the question for guidance.

For example, consider this from a hypothetical passage about sustainable energy:

1

The author suggests that a reduction in fossil fuel subsidies could lead to

- A) greater cooperation among nations.
- B) decreased economic stability.
- C) higher transportation costs.
- D) more sustainable infrastructure.

This question is relatively straightforward, but it gives no indication of where in the passage the answer might be located. If you happen to remember the answer from the passage, you're in luck. If you don't remember, however, you have to know how to find the information in a way that will not involve staring at the passage and aimlessly (and increasingly nervously) skimming random parts of it.

The first step is to identify and **underline** the key word(s) or phrase in the question. That word or phrase is the specific focus of the question, i.e. the topic, and will virtually always follow the word *indicates/conveys* or *suggests/implies*. In this case, the key phrase is *fossil fuel subsidies*.

Then, you should go back to the passage to skim for that word or phrase, **dragging your index finger down the page as you scan**. This may seem like a minor detail, but in fact it is extremely important: it establishes a physical connection between your eye and the page, focusing you and reducing the chance that you will overlook the necessary information.

As you skim, you should **pay particular attention to the first (topic) and last sentence** of each paragraph because they are most likely to include important points. Even if they don't provide the information necessary to answer the question, they will often provide important clues about where the information *is* located.

Each time the key word or phrase appears, stop and read a sentence or two above and below for context. If that section of the passage does not answer the question, move on and check the next place the key word/phrase shows up. **Your goal is to avoid falling into a loop of reading and re-reading a section, searching for information that isn't there.**

## How to Work Through Questions with Line References

While your approach will vary depending on the specific question, in general I recommend the following strategy:

### 1) Read the question slowly.

Put your finger on each word of the question as you read it; otherwise you may miss key information, and every letter of every word counts.

When you're done, take a second or two to make sure you know exactly what it's asking. If the question is phrased in an even slightly convoluted manner, rephrase it in your own words in a more straightforward way until you're clear on what you're looking for. If necessary, scribble the rephrased version down.

This is not a minor step. If, for example, a question asks you the purpose of a sentence, you must re-read it with the goal of understanding what role the sentence plays within the argument. If you re-read it with a different goal, e.g. understanding what the sentence is literally saying, you can't work toward answering the question that's actually being asked.

### 2) Go back to the passage and re-read the lines given in the question. If the question seems to call for it, read from a sentence or two above to a sentence or two below.

Purpose/function questions often require more context and, as a result, you should be prepared to read both before and after the line reference. The answers to most other question types are usually found within the lines referenced, but there are exceptions. If the line reference begins or ends halfway through a sentence, however, make sure you back up or keep reading so that you cover the entire sentence in which it appears. If a line reference begins close to the beginning of a paragraph, you should automatically read from the first sentence of the paragraph because it will usually give you the point of the paragraph.

There is unfortunately no surefire way to tell from the wording of a question whether the information necessary to answer that question is included in the line reference. If you read the lines referenced and have an inordinate amount of difficulty identifying the correct answer, or get down to two answers and are unable to identify which is correct, that's often a sign that the answer is actually located somewhere else. Go back to the passage, and read the surrounding sentences.

**For long line references: a long line reference is, paradoxically, a signal that you don't need to read all of the lines.** Usually the information you need to answer the question will be in either the first sentence or two, the last sentence or two, or in a section with key punctuation (dashes, italics, colon). Start by focusing on those places and forgetting the rest; they'll almost certainly give you enough to go on.

### 3) Answer the question in your own words, and write that answer down.

This step is not necessary on very straightforward questions, but it can be a big help on questions that require multiple steps of logic, particularly Passage 1/Passage 2 relationship questions. Writing things down keeps you focused, reminds you what you're looking for, and prevents you from getting distracted by plausible-sounding or confusing answer choices.

The goal is not to write a dissertation or come up with the exact answer in the test. You can be very general and should spend no more than a few seconds on this step; a couple of words scribbled down in semi-legible handwriting will suffice. The goal is to identify the general information or idea that the correct answer must include. Again, make sure you're answering the question that's actually being asked, not just summarizing the passage.

If you do this step, you should spend **no more than a few seconds** on it. If you can't come up with anything, skip to step #4.

### 4) Read the answers carefully, A) through D), in order.

If there's an option that contains the same essential idea you put down, choose it because it's almost certainly right. If it makes you feel better, though, you can read through the rest of the answers just to be sure, but make sure you don't get distracted by things that sound vaguely plausible and start second-guessing yourself.

If you can't identify the correct answer...

### 5) Cross out the answers that are absolutely wrong.

Try not to spend more than a couple of seconds on each answer choice. If an option clearly makes no sense in context of the question or passage, get rid of it.

When you cross out an answer, put a line through the entire thing; do not just cross out the letter. As far as you're concerned, it no longer exists.

Leave any answer that's even a remote possibility, even if you're not quite sure how it relates to the passage or question. **Remember: your understanding of an answer has no effect on whether that answer is right or wrong. You should never cross out an answer because you're confused or haven't really considered what it's saying.**

If you get down to two answers, go back to the passage again and start checking them out. Whatever you do, do not just sit and stare at them. The information you need to answer the question is in the passage, not in your head.

When you're stuck between two answers, there are several ways to decide between them.

First, go back to the passage and see if there are any major transitions or strong language you missed the first time around; you may have been focusing on the wrong part of the line reference, or you may not have read far enough before/after the line reference. If that is the case, the correct answer may become clear once you focus on the necessary information.

The correct answer will usually contain a synonym for a key word in the passage, so if a remaining choice includes this feature, you should pay very close attention to it.

You can also pick one specific word or phrase in an answer to check out when you go back to the passage. For example, if the lines in question focus on a single scientist and the answer choice mentions *scientists*, then the answer is probably beyond the scope of what can be inferred from the passage. Likewise, if an answer focuses on a specific person, thing, or idea not mentioned in the lines referenced, there's also a reasonable chance that it's off topic.

**Remember: that the more information an answer choice contains, the greater the chance that some of that information will be wrong.**

Finally, you can reiterate the main point of the passage or paragraph, and think about which answer is most consistent with it. That answer will most likely be correct.

**6) If you're still stuck, see whether there's a choice that looks like a right answer.**

If you still can't figure out the answer, you need to switch from reading the passage to "reading" the test. Working this way will allow you to make an educated guess, even if you're not totally sure what's going on. Does one of the answers you're left with use extremely strong or limiting language (*no one, always, ever*)? There's a pretty good chance it's wrong. Does one of them use a common word (e.g. *compromised, conviction*) in its second meaning? There's a pretty good chance it's right. You might want to pay particularly close attention to the latter.

In addition, ask yourself whether all of the answers you're left with actually make sense in context of both the test and the real world. For example, an answer stating that no scientific progress has been made in recent years is almost certain to be wrong. Yes, you should be very careful about relying on your outside knowledge of a subject, but it's okay to use common sense too!

**7) If you're still stuck, skip it or guess.**

You can always come back to it later if you have time. And if you're still stuck later on, you need to pick your favorite letter and fill it in. You should never leave anything blank.

Starting on the next page, we're going to look at some examples.

The sharing economy is a little like online shopping, which started in America 15 years ago. At first, people were worried about security. But having made a successful purchase from, say, Amazon, they  
5 felt safe buying elsewhere. Similarly, using Airbnb or a car-hire service for the first time encourages people to try other offerings. Next, consider eBay. Having started out as a peer-to-peer marketplace, it is now dominated by professional “power sellers” (many of whom started  
10 out as ordinary eBay users). The same may happen with the sharing economy, which also provides new opportunities for enterprise. Some people have bought cars solely to rent them out, for example. Incumbents are getting involved too. Avis, a car-hire firm, has a share  
15 in a sharing rival. So do GM and Daimler, two carmakers. In the future, companies may develop hybrid models, listing excess capacity (whether vehicles, equipment or office space) on peer-to-peer rental sites. In the past, new ways of doing things online have not displaced the  
20 old ways entirely. But they have often changed them. Just as internet shopping forced Walmart and Tesco to adapt, so online sharing will shake up transport, tourism, equipment-hire and more.

The main worry is regulatory uncertainty. Will  
25 room-4-renters be subject to hotel taxes, for example? In Amsterdam officials are using Airbnb listings to track down unlicensed hotels. In some American cities, peer-to-peer taxi services have been banned after lobbying by traditional taxi firms. The danger is that  
30 although some rules need to be updated to protect consumers from harm, incumbents will try to destroy competition. People who rent out rooms should pay tax, of course, but they should not be regulated like a Ritz-Carlton hotel. The lighter rules that typically govern  
35 bed-and-breakfasts are more than adequate. The sharing economy is the latest example of the internet’s value to consumers. This emerging model is now big and disruptive enough for regulators and companies to have woken up to it. That is a sign of its immense potential.  
40 It is time to start caring about sharing.

1

The author suggests that the sharing economy (line 11) could eventually

- A) grow larger than the traditional economy.
- B) be controlled by a particular group of sellers.
- C) rely mostly on hybrid models.
- D) depend exclusively on former eBay users.

The first thing to remember about a question like this is that the line reference is telling us only that the phrase *sharing economy* – the key phrase – appears in line 11. The information we need to answer the question is not necessarily in line 11. Let’s start by reading the entire sentence in which the phrase appears:

**The same may happen with the sharing economy, which also provides new opportunities for enterprise.**

Unfortunately, we don’t really get much information from this sentence. It tells us that *the same may happen*, but we don’t actually know what that thing is.

In order to figure out what *the same* refers to, we need to back up some more and read the previous couple of sentences as well:

**Next, consider eBay. Having started out as a peer-to-peer marketplace, it is now dominated by professional “power sellers” (many of whom started out as ordinary eBay users).**

Now we’re getting someplace. The passage is telling us that the sharing economy as a whole, like eBay, could eventually become dominated (=controlled) by professional “power sellers” (=a particular group of sellers). So the answer is B).

Notice that the correct answer takes the wording of the passage and **rephrases it in more general terms**. The specific people mentioned in the passage (“power sellers”) become the much more general “a particular group of sellers.”

Notice also that if we had started reading at line 10 or 11 and kept going from there, we would never have found the answer in the passage. We might have eventually stumbled across it by process of elimination, but the process would have been much less straightforward. There would be considerable room for all sorts of confusion.

If the method described above seems like a reasonable – not to mention simpler – way to work, great. This book will provide you with numerous ways to help you figure things out on your own and reduce your reliance on the answer choices.

You might, however, be thinking something like, “Well *you* make it seem easy enough, but *I* would probably get confused if I tried to figure that out on my own.” Or perhaps you’re thinking something more along the lines of, “Ew... that seems like way too much *work*. Can’t I just look at the answer choices?” So for you, here goes. One by one, we’re going to consider the answer choices – very, very carefully.

### **A) grow larger than the traditional economy**

No, this answer is completely off topic. It might sound like a reasonable possibility, but there is no information about how the sharing economy compares to the traditional economy, either now or in the future. In fact, the phrase *traditional economy* never even appears. So A) is out.

### **B) be controlled by a particular group of sellers**

The “vague” answer. As a matter of fact, the **“vague” wording suggests that the answer is correct** – even in the absence of any other information. But again, if you started reading in line 10 or 11 and never backed up, it’s likely you would never find the information indicating that it was right. As discussed above, this answer rephrases the idea that a professional group of sellers could eventually come to dominate the entire sharing economy, just as they came to dominate eBay.

### **C) rely mostly on hybrid models**

Half-right, half wrong. This answer takes a random word from the passage and uses it to create an answer that could sound either vaguely plausible or confusing (especially if you don't know what a hybrid is), but it does nothing to answer the question. The passage does indicate that some companies may develop hybrid models to list their inventory; it does not, however, suggest in any way that the sharing economy will come to rely *mostly* on hybrid models.

A hybrid, by the way, is something that is created by combining parts from two sources. For example, a hybrid car is a car that contains both a gasoline engine and an electric engine, either of which can be used to power it.

### **D) depend exclusively on former eBay users**

First off, the extreme word *exclusively* is a big warning sign that this answer is probably wrong, so you should be suspicious of it from the start. It's true that the author does *mention* eBay users right before the key phrase, but there's no direct relationship between the two things – the author is simply pointing out that many of the “power sellers” who eventually came to dominate eBay started out as regular users. We cannot in any way infer that the sharing economy as a whole will depend *only* on former eBay users (“power sellers” or otherwise). That is an interpretation that goes far beyond what the passage supports.

Besides, if you think about it logically, this answer doesn't really make sense. Even if you don't know anything about the sharing economy, the passage indicates that it involves a variety of companies in different fields (Amazon, Airbnb, GM). The idea that the sharing economy could depend only on former eBay users is completely at odds with that fact.

If you do know some basic things about the sharing economy, you can think of it this way: correct answers must always be supported by the passage, but they must also correspond to reality – many of the passages on the SAT are connected to current trends, debates, and controversies, and as a result, correct answers must reflect real-world facts.

**To be clear: Factually correct answers are not necessarily right, but factually incorrect answers are virtually guaranteed to be wrong.**