

The Critical Reader

AP[®] English Language and Composition

Erica L. Meltzer

 THE CRITICAL READER

New York

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Part I: Reading

Chapter One

Introduction to the Reading

The reading portion of the Advanced Placement® English Language and Composition Exam is 60 minutes long and counts for approximately 25% of the total score. It consists of two passages and 23-25 questions, with 11-15 questions accompanying each passage. Passages are generally around 75 lines long, or 600-800 words. One point is awarded for each correct answer, and no points for questions that are either skipped or answered incorrectly. **Because there is no additional penalty for wrong answers, you should not leave any questions blank.**

Passages are drawn from non-fiction works in a range of genres; the exam may even include a math- or science-related passage, albeit from a social or philosophical standpoint. Passages are written for a general audience—you do not need to know any specialized terminology.

Although you may encounter at least one passage from the eighteenth, nineteenth or early twentieth century, most of the passages are excerpted from works published in the last several decades. While often very challenging, their language is rarely archaic. Throughout this book, I have done my best to select passages that reflect the current exam.

What Does Multiple-Choice Reading Test?

The reading section asks you to go beyond *what* the text says to *how* the text says it (e.g., using vocabulary, syntax, punctuation). To that end, the exam tests your ability to do the following:

- Distinguish between main ideas and supporting details.
- Draw relationships between specific wordings and general/abstract ideas.
- Understand how diction (word choice), syntax, structure, and rhetorical devices convey meaning and tone/attitude.
- Understand the rhetorical role (e.g., supporting, emphasizing, criticizing) that various pieces of information play within an argument.
- “Track” viewpoints and relationships between arguments, ideas, and attitudes.
- Make logical inferences and generalizations from information not explicitly stated.
- Understand nuances and recognize that authors can agree with some aspects of an idea while disagreeing with others.

The essential skill that the exam requires is something called “**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.**

You should, however, be aware that while the exam has traditionally tested the identification of advanced rhetorical figures (e.g., synecdoche, onomatopoeia, apostrophe), that is no longer the case. Rather, the focus is on identifying more common terms (e.g., abstract language) and general purposes (e.g., explaining, criticizing, implying).

The Answer Isn’t Always *In* the Passage

One of the great truisms of test prep for reading comprehension 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 answers themselves.** The AP® English Language and Composition Exam 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, 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 almost never be stated word for word in the text. **In fact, the more directly an answer choice mimics the wording of the passage, the more likely it is to be wrong!** The correct answer, on the other hand, will refer to an **idea** that has been discussed in the passage and that has simply been **rephrased**. Your job is to identify that idea and to look for the option that restates it with **synonyms**. Same idea, different words.

Understanding Incorrect Answer Choices

Remember that although incorrect answers are deliberately written to sound plausible, there are always specific textual elements that prevent them from being right. Sometimes, these options describe a situation that *could* be true, but that is *not necessarily true* according to the information explicitly stated in the passage. They also tend to employ relatively sophisticated vocabulary and highly abstract language that many test-takers find confusing or difficult to comprehend.

Incorrect answers typically fall into the following categories:

- Off-topic.
- Too broad, e.g., the passage is about one author while the answer refers to “authors.”
- Too extreme, e.g., the passage is slightly negative but the answer is highly negative.
- 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.

Also: you should approach any answer containing the word *obscure* (e.g., “define an obscure term,” “obscure references”) with a healthy dose of suspicion. Some passages may be quite sophisticated, but truly obscure content would likely fall outside the framework of the test. Moreover, any reference unlikely to be familiar to high school students will be footnoted.

Often, test-takers find it relatively easy to eliminate a few answers but then get stuck between two plausible-sounding choices. Typically, the incorrect answer will fall into either the “could be true but not enough information” category, 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.

How to Work Through Multiple-Choice Reading Questions

While your approach may change depending on the question, I generally recommend the following strategy:

1) Read the question slowly.

Put your finger or your pencil on each word of the question as you read it. Otherwise, you may overlook key information.

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 complicated manner, rephrase it in a more straightforward way until you’re clear on what you’re looking for. If necessary, scribble down the rephrased version.

This is not a minor step. If, for example, the question asks you the purpose of a particular sentence, you must be prepared to reread that sentence with the goal of understanding what role it plays within the argument, or what impression the author is trying to convey. If you reread it with a different goal, e.g., understanding what the sentence is literally saying, you can’t do any meaningful work toward answering the question that’s actually there.

2) Go back to the passage and reread the lines given in the question. If necessary, read from a sentence or two above to a sentence or two below.

There is unfortunately no surefire way to tell from the wording of a question whether the necessary information is included in the line reference. Most of the time it will be there, but sometimes it will appear either before or after. Very occasionally, it will be located in another paragraph entirely.

Purpose (or “function”) questions often require additional context and, as a result, you should be prepared to read both before and after the line reference. In contrast, other question types generally involve only the information in the line reference itself.

If a line reference begins or ends halfway through a sentence, make sure you back up or keep reading so that you cover the entire sentence in which it appears. Otherwise, you may miss key information. And if a line reference begins close to the beginning of a paragraph, you should automatically back up and read from the first (topic) sentence of the paragraph because it will almost always give you the point.

If you read the lines referenced and have an inordinate amount of difficulty identifying the answer, or you get stuck between two options and cannot decide between them, that's often a sign that the answer is actually located somewhere other than in the line reference. Go back to the passage and read from a sentence or two above to a sentence or two below.

Note that a long line reference is, paradoxically, often a signal that you don't need to read the entire section. The information necessary to answer the question will usually be located in the first couple of sentences, the last couple of sentences, or in a section with key punctuation (e.g., dashes, italics, colon). Start by focusing on those places; they'll almost always give you enough to go on.

3) Come up with your own answer, and write it down.

The goal is not to write a dissertation or come up with the exact answer. You can be very general and should spend no more than a few seconds on this step. A couple of words scribbled in semi-legible handwriting will suffice. The goal is to identify the essential information or idea that the answer must include, keeping in mind that the correct choice may reword that idea in an unexpected way.

It is, however, important that you write something in your own words because doing so serves to focus you. It reminds you what you're looking for and prevents you from getting distracted by plausible-sounding or confusing answer choices.

Again, make sure you're answering the question that's actually being asked, not just summarizing the passage.

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

4) Read the answers carefully, (A)-(E), 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, you can read through the rest of the answers just to be sure, but make sure you don't get distracted by options that sound vaguely possible and start second-guessing yourself.

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.

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

5) Cross out the answers that clearly don't work; leave everything else.

Try not to spend more than a couple of seconds on each answer choice. If an option clearly does not make sense in context of the question or passage, eliminate it.

Leave any answer that could even slightly work, even if you're not quite sure how it relates to the passage or question. **Remember: your understanding of an answer choice has no bearing whatsoever on whether it's right or wrong, so you should never cross out anything simply because you find it confusing.**

When you get down to two or three 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.

There are several ways to approach the remaining answers:

First, when you go back to the passage, see whether 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. If that is the case, the correct answer may become clear once you identify the appropriate section.

Very often, the correct answer will also 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 in each answer to check out when you go back to the passage. For example, if the lines in question focus on a specific group of writers and the answer choice mentions “writers” as a whole, 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 discussed in the relevant section of the passage, there’s also a reasonable chance that it’s off-topic.

Remember: the more information an answer contains, the greater the chance that some of that information will be wrong. Function questions often have correct answers that are short and vague, and you should give them careful consideration.

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, totally incompatible*)? There’s a pretty good chance it’s wrong. Does one of them use a common word (e.g., *qualify, conviction*) in its second meaning? There’s a pretty good chance it’s right. Is one answer very long and detailed and the other very short and abstract? You might want to pay particularly close attention to the latter.

In addition, ask yourself whether all the answers you’re left with actually make sense in context of both the test and the real world. For example, an answer choice that states an author is “criticizing the prominent role of the arts in society” is simply out of keeping with the exam’s humanistic bent. No author who seriously believed that the arts should not play an important role in society would ever have his or her work appear on the test. Likewise, an answer containing information that is historically false (e.g., it suggests that a man who lived during the eighteenth century held radically feminist views) is equally unlikely to be right. Yes, you should be careful about relying on outside knowledge, but you can use common sense too!

7) If you’re still stuck, skip it.

You can always come back to it later if you have time. Better to focus on questions you can answer easily first.

Understanding and Marking Line References

The writers of the AP English Language and Composition Exam are not known for being particularly generous. That said, they do give you two “gifts.” First, they often provide line references telling you which section of the passage to focus on for a given question; and second, they present questions in more or less chronological order of the passage.

Be careful, though: line references are often not nearly as much help as many people think. The most important thing to understand is that a line reference simply tells you where in the passage a particular word, phrase, or set of lines is located. Consider a question that reads, “The author’s attitude toward ‘that alternative’ (line 35) can be best be described as...” This question is telling you that the words *that alternative* appear in line 35. That’s it. The answer is not necessarily in line 35. It could be in line 33 or line 37 or line 40. If the author is playing “they say/I say,” it could even be suggested in line 5. Yes, the information you need to answer a question will frequently appear in the lines provided, but sometimes it will also appear in a neighboring line, either before or after. Occasionally, it may appear in a different paragraph entirely.

In one popular strategy, the test-taker goes through the questions and marks all the line references in the passage before reading it so that she or he will “know where to focus.” While this can be a very successful strategy for helping people whose minds would otherwise wander—and I would not discourage anyone from using it if they find it helpful—it does have some pitfalls. First, as discussed above, the answer may not actually be located in the lines cited in the question. If it doesn’t occur to you to read elsewhere when you can’t figure out the answer, you’ll often get stuck between two options and have no clear-cut way of figuring out which one is correct. And that’s a shame since often the answer will be fairly straightforward; it will simply be somewhere else.

Second, this strategy can drain significant amounts of time that could be better spent answering questions. If you have difficulty finishing sections on time, you probably shouldn’t be using it. There’s no reason you can’t go back to the passage and bracket off the lines as you come to them.

Third, this strategy is to some extent based on a misunderstanding of how the reading section works: **the most important places in the passage, the ones you need to pay the most attention to, are not necessarily the ones indicated by the questions.** Remember: the details are only important in context of the point. Focusing excessively on a particular set of lines can therefore cause you to lose sight of the big picture—and often it’s the big picture you actually need to answer the questions. At the other extreme, only a small part of the line reference may sometimes be important. There’s no point in meticulously blocking off eight lines if all you need to focus on is the first sentence or a set of dashes.

Now, let's look at an actual example:

- There's a certain way jazz musicians from the 1930s pose for photographs, half-turned to face the camera, symmetrically arrayed around the bandleader, who can be identified by his regal smile and proximity to the microphone.
- 5 Publicity stills of the period were the equivalent of English court paintings, hackwork intended to exalt their subjects and attract admiration to their finery. Band-leaders often took titles borrowed from the aristocracy: Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Earl Hines . . . well, Earl was actually the man's given
- 10 name, but he lived up to it in a way no modern celebrity could approach.

- There's a picture of Hines with his band on the stage at the Pearl Theater in Philadelphia, exuding swank. Their suit pants, which bear stripes of black satin down the seams, break
- 15 perfectly over their gleaming shoes; their jacket lapels have the span of a Madagascar fruit bat; their hair is slicked. They were on top of their world. The year was 1932, and about one in four Americans was out of work.

1. The author mentions the "given name" (lines 9-10) in order to
- (A) characterize the appearance of English court paintings
 - (B) praise Earl Hines for his elegance and style
 - (C) promote a particular type of music
 - (D) criticize the practice of borrowing titles from the aristocracy
 - (E) indicate an exception to a common occurrence

If we're going to answer the question on our own, the first thing we need to do is make sure we understand what it's actually asking. The phrase "in order to" indicates that it's a "purpose" or "function" question. We could therefore rephrase it as, "Why does the author use the phrase *given name* right there?" or "What's the point of using the phrase *given name* right there?" Although you might be rolling your eyes and saying, "Duh, yeah, that's obviously what it's asking," taking a moment to rephrase the question is crucial because it forces you to clarify your thoughts and allows you to approach the passage with a precise idea of what you're looking for.

The fact that it's a function question tells us that we need to establish **context**, so we're going to start where the sentence begins, all the way back in line 7. (The colon in line 8 tells us that there's important information there.) What do we learn? *Band-leaders often took titles borrowed from the aristocracy.* In other words, they took names that weren't their own (i.e., their "given names"). So the fact that Earl Hines used his own name meant that he was different from other musicians. The correct answer must be related to that idea. When we scan through the choices, we see that (E) is the sole option that fits — "exception" is the only word in any answer that captures the idea of being different. And (E) is in fact correct.

If that seems like a reasonable—not to mention simpler—way to work, great. You might, however, also be thinking something like, “Well *you* make it seem easy enough, but *I’d* never actually be able 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*. I just want to 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) characterize the appearance of English court paintings

This is pretty obviously not the answer. The author does draw a comparison between the pictures of jazz musicians and English court paintings, but the mention of Hines’s given name clearly has nothing to do with that. Besides, it’s just not the focus of the passage. So it’s wrong because it’s **off-topic**.

(B) praise Earl Hines for his elegance and style

It would be pretty easy to assume that this was the answer. After all, the author talks about Earl Hines, and he clearly likes him and his style a whole lot. There’s only one little problem, though: the question isn’t asking what the author is doing throughout the passage as a whole—it’s asking **why** the author uses the particular phrase *given name* in that particular spot. And unfortunately, that little detail isn’t included to support the overall point of the passage. Rather, it’s used to support a different point: that Earl Hines, unlike Duke Ellington and Count Basie, truly did have a name (*Earl*) that was also an aristocratic English title.

So it’s *a* right answer. It just isn’t *the* right answer to this particular question.

(C) promote a particular type of music

Yes, the author does talk about *a particular type of music* (jazz), but he isn’t really promoting anything in the sense that “promote” = try to get people to listen to jazz. Now, it might seem reasonable to infer that since the author thinks these musicians were so amazing, he must be promoting their music, but there’s nothing in the passage that explicitly supports that idea. He’s just talking about how sleekly jazz musicians presented themselves during the 1930s. Even though he’s clearly impressed with them, being impressed with something is not by definition the same thing as trying to get other people to do it. It’s too much of a leap.

This type of answer plays on **associative thinking**, which involves making connections between ideas even when no direct relationship between them is indicated by the passage. You might be able to use it in your English papers, but on the AP exam, it can get you in a lot of trouble.

(D) criticize the practice of borrowing titles from the aristocracy

Like (A), this answer is relatively easy to eliminate because it’s so far from the focus of the passage. Notice that although this option includes a phrase taken directly from the passage (*borrowed from the aristocracy*), it’s the first part of the answer, the word “criticize,” that makes the whole thing incorrect. If you didn’t really understand—or think about—either 1) what the passage was saying, or 2) what the question was asking, you could get fooled by the similarity between the passage and the answer choice.

You could also fall prey to associative thinking again: you might assume that since this is an American test, and America is a democracy, the author would probably be against a form of social organization that gave people status based purely on family background, and so it would make sense for him to be criticizing it. Unfortunately, there is absolutely nothing whatsoever in the passage to support that interpretation. It's also completely unrelated to the question. Being aware of the test's biases *can* be useful in some instances, but that goes way, way too far. **Right words, wrong idea.** It's also **too broad**. The passage only talks about jazz musicians who named themselves after aristocratic titles; it says nothing about the practice in general.

Remember: when an answer contains the exact same wording as the passage, that answer is most likely wrong.

(E) indicate an exception to a common occurrence

If you're like many test-takers, you probably eliminated that answer almost immediately. After all, it doesn't really seem to have anything to do with the passage—but in fact, that's precisely why you should pay extra-close attention to it.

Don't forget that the question asked us to consider *why* the author used the particular phrase *given name*. In other words, how does the use of that phrase support the idea that the author is trying to convey? As we saw in (B), the point is that Earl Hines was *different* (i.e., an "exception") from other jazz musicians because his real name was an aristocratic title. (*Band-leaders often took titles borrowed from the aristocracy: Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Earl Hines . . . well, Earl was actually the man's given name, but he lived up to it in a way no modern celebrity could approach.*) The word *often* tells us that it was "common" for jazz musicians to take such names (taking such names = an occurrence).

So (E) is right because it simply restates what's going on in the passage, albeit in very, very different language—language that you probably weren't expecting and might not have been sure how to connect to the question or the passage. We'll look at that issue later on, in Chapter Two, but for now, just one more thing to point out: although the question tells you to look at line 9, the information you need to answer the question actually comes earlier. If you start at the line you're given, you have no way of figuring out the answer, whereas if you back up and start in line 7 at the beginning of the sentence, you at least have a chance.

Chapter Two

The Big Picture

I've spent a lot of time teaching people to stop looking so hard at the details. It's not that there's anything wrong with details — it's just that they're not always terribly relevant, or even relevant at all. A former edition of the SAT® *Official Guide* included a passage about the qualities that make for a good physicist, and since most high school students don't have particularly positive associations with that subject, most of them tended to dislike the passage. The remarkable thing is, though, is that the passage was strikingly applicable to *reading*: the mark of a good physicist is the ability to “abstract out” all irrelevant information. Likewise, the mark of a good test-taker is the ability to abstract out all irrelevant information and focus on what's actually being asked.

One of the things that is easy to overlook is that the AP English Language and Composition Exam is in many ways an exam about the big picture, and for the most part, the details only count insofar as they fit into that picture. Very often, smart, detail-oriented students feel that they need to worry about every single thing that sounds remotely odd or confusing, all the while missing something major staring them in the face. Frequently, they blame this on the fact that they've been taught in English class to read closely and pay attention to all the details.

Well, I have some news: when you're in college with a 500-page reading assignment that you have two days to get through, you won't have time to annotate every last detail — nor will your professors expect you to do so. Whether or not you're truly interested in what you're reading, your job will be to get the gist of the author's argument and then focus on a few key areas. And if you can't recognize those key areas, college reading will be, shall we say, a struggle; unlike the books you read in English class, most of what you read in college will not have easily digestible summaries available courtesy of sparknotes.com.

The problem is that the exam will always include passages containing bits whose meaning isn't completely clear — that's part of the test. The goal is to see whether you can figure out their meaning from the general context. You're not expected to get every word, especially not the first time around. Your job is to ignore things that are initially confusing and move on to parts that you do understand. If you get a question about something you're not sure of, you can always skip it, but you should never get hung up on something you don't understand at the expense of something you do. If you get the gist, you can figure a lot of other things out, whereas if you focus on one little detail, you'll get . . . one little detail.

What's the Topic?

Given that the AP English Language and Composition Exam is intended to test college-level reading, a discussion of topics might seem like an exceedingly basic place to start; however, passages can be quite dense and confusing, making it a genuine challenge to figure out just what they're actually talking about.

Let's start with a very simple definition: **the topic of a passage is simply the person/people, thing, or idea that appears most frequently** in the text. Sometimes the author will refer to the topic by name (e.g., *Almanacks*, in the passage below); sometimes with another noun (*these writings, manuscript leaves*); and sometimes with pronouns such as *she, it, or they*.

It is very important that you be able to recognize the topics of passages precisely – as opposed to just approximately – because **correct answers to big-picture questions will often mention the topic of the passage or paragraph, albeit rephrased in a more general manner**. These questions essentially ask you to distinguish “talks about” from “is about.”

To illustrate, let's start with something short. Consider the following passage:

For more than half a century—1804 through 1858—
Mary Moody Emerson authored an immense series of
journals she called her “**Almanacks**.” Numbering more
than one thousand manuscript pages, **these writings** offer
5 a rare and prolific example of early American women’s
scholarly production. Unlike the standard almanac genre,
which typically relates matter-of-fact jots about daily life
and the weather, Emerson conceived of her **Almanacks** as
an expansive record of the mind, a place to work out her
10 thoughts and, more important, to engage directly with
others, including the authors of her vast reading. Written
on loose sheets of letter paper that were then bound with
thread to create booklets, **they** became compact parcels
designed for sharing. For every ten **manuscript leaves**
15 sewn together, she enclosed another leaf (or more) with
one of her many letters. As Emerson confided to her dear
friend Elizabeth Hoar, “My **Almanack** scraps . . . love to
wander.”

The topic of the passage on the previous page is Emerson’s “Almanacks.” We know this because *Almanacks* is the noun that appears repeatedly, both by name and in rephrased form.

Next, let's consider the **scope** of the passage—that is, whether it is **general** or **specific**. The focus here is on one single aspect of Emerson’s literary output, so the scope is quite **specific**.

Why do we care about the scope? Because incorrect answers often play on the confusion between general and specific. For example, if a passage focuses on a specific group rather than an entire category of people, you probably cannot make broad generalizations or assumptions about the category as a whole. As a result, answers containing sweeping generalizations are unlikely to be correct. But if you don't notice that the scope of the passage is narrower, you might get fooled.

In this case, some incorrect descriptions of the topic could be as follows:

- Mary Moody Emerson’s life
- Daily life in the nineteenth century
- Almanacs
- Women’s lives in early America
- Letter-writing in nineteenth century America

In addition to not being the main focus of the passage, what do all these things have in common? They’re **too broad**.

That would become very important if you were to encounter a question like this:

Which of the following best describes the passage as a whole?

- (A) An exploration of women’s daily lives during the nineteenth century
- (B) A treatise on the significance of the almanac genre in American culture
- (C) A description of a literary project undertaken by an individual
- (D) A discussion of scholarly production in the nineteenth century
- (E) An analysis of women’s letter-writing practices in early America

The incorrect options all play on the theme of “general vs. specific.” They’re written with the assumption that test-takers will be sidetracked by the appearance of potentially confusing words and phrases from the passage (*scholarly production, almanac genre*) and overlook the fact that they are beyond the scope of what the passage covers. Only (C) is sufficiently narrow, referring to *an individual* – that is, Mary Moody Emerson.

Keep that in mind when you look at the passage on the following page. It’s longer and more complex, but the principle is the same.

The passage below is adapted from a book published in 1987.

One of the first and most frequently repeated strategies used to cope with **Berthe Morisot's** position as a female member of a 'radical' art group participating in what is perceived as an exclusively man's world, has been to construct **her** as exceptional. Unlike other women artists, both before and during her time, she, it is claimed, does not fall into the inevitable traps which beset women artists. George Moore, writing in 1898, stated that **Morisot's** pictures 'are the only pictures painted by a woman that could not be destroyed without creating a blank, a hiatus in the history of art.' In turn, her painting 'style,' Impressionism, is produced as a method which is suited to and the natural expression of an appropriately feminine temperament. 'Impressionism' is offered as the answer to the problem of **Morisot's** 'femininity,' the problem posed by a skilled and prolific professional woman painter in a world which deemed such activities to be 'unfeminine.' From as early as the 1870s **Morisot's** manner of working was seen to reflect a naturally feminine sensibility; it was repeatedly called 'charming,' 'feminine,' 'delicate' in a way which transposed onto the painting those characteristics most favored in the middle-class women of the time.

What representations of **Morisot** as the intuitive feminine painter do not take into account, however, is the fact that she was one of many women working as professional artists at the period and that these women represented in working methods the full range of artistic practices. Few used the painterly brushmarks and sketchy surfaces that are characteristic of much of Impressionist painting and most were unaware of **Morisot's** existence, preferring to define their context as that of the Paris Salons or alternately the women's Salon which emerged in the early 1880s as a significant forum for the display of women's work. If **Morisot** shared any technical qualities with her contemporaries, it was with male artists like Renoir and Monet. They, like **her**, were committed to an aesthetic of apparent spontaneity, using separated brushmarks, revealing the light ground of the canvas, eliminating the use of the art-based pigment bitumen, and striving for the approximate effect of natural light. The resulting 'delicacy of touch' was part of a conscious strategy to free academic painting from the emphasis on finish, the highly polished surface with no traces of individual brushmarks, and can in no way be attributed to the outpouring of an essential femininity.

Accompanying the idea that Impressionism was a naturally feminine style of painting was the notion that **Morisot's** working methods flowed intuitively from **her** inner self without conscious intervention or mediation. As Paul Valéry* was to put it: 'the peculiarity of **Berthe Morisot**...was to live her painting and to paint her life, as if the interchange between seeing and rendering, between the light and **her** creative will, were to her a natural function, a necessary part of her daily life.' But **her** letters themselves do not allow this view to be sustained. If anything, they represent **her** often painful and intense involvement with painting, described once as a 'pitched battle with her canvases.' Equally, they represent **a woman** who is absolutely aware of the ways in which **she** and **her** colleagues are received in the press, and is mindful of the reception of her own work and that of her associates.

But if the image of **Morisot** as an intuitive, unreflective artist living out her natural femininity through her painting cannot be sustained, neither can she be accommodated by today's feminist art historians in the role of the lofty female ancestor, politicized about her gender and the institutionalized sexism of her time. This does not mean that **she** was unaware of the debates around women's positions, or the restrictions, social and psychic, which were placed on women's lives, but that **her** responses are not unified and worked out. They are often confused, ambiguous, and tellingly self-denigrating.

The 'evidence' provided in **her** letters is fragmentary and suggestive. It presents **a woman** often confused, filled with self-doubt, frequently discontent, berated for **her** stubbornness and selfishness, envied and admired, a devoted friend, and above all, a committed artist. The texts of **her** letters themselves, many of them by **Morisot's** family and friends, provide a telling contrast to the idealized mythic representation of the enigmatic, even muse-like figure, which so many accounts of **Morisot** construct.

*Paul Valéry was a nineteenth-century French poet.

Often, when students try to state the topic of a passage like this, they'll say something along the lines of, "Umm... I *think* it's like talking about women artists, but honestly, I'm not sure."

As a matter of fact, the topic is not "women artists." It is actually one particular woman artist, namely Berthe Morisot. The scope is specific, not general.

At that point, you might be thinking, "Ok, but the passage talks about a bunch of other stuff too. And some of it was really confusing. It, like, didn't make sense at all! OMG HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO KNOW IT'S REALLY ABOUT HER?!!!"

While it's true that the authors (there are two of them) do mention other people such as Renoir and Paul Valéry, Berthe Morisot's name, as well as the pronouns *she* and *her*, which refer to Morisot, appear **repeatedly** throughout the passage. Those words appear more often than any other noun or pronoun. In addition, the authors introduce Morisot in the first sentence of the entire passage, suggesting that she will be its focus.

Again, let's look at how a big-picture question about this passage might work:

The passage as a whole is best described as

- (A) A treatise on the influence of a formerly overlooked artist
- (B) An exploration of the characteristics of Impressionist painting
- (C) A diatribe against the injustices suffered by women painters
- (D) A refutation of a conventional interpretation of a particular artist's work
- (E) A comparison between the works of Berthe Morisot and those of other French Impressionists

Remember that the correct answer must be consistent with the passage's narrow focus on Berthe Morisot. (B) and (C) are both too broad: the passage is not primarily about women painters as a whole, nor is it about Impressionist painters/painting.

(E) is very tricky because it mentions Morisot by name, and the passage does in fact compare Morisot's work to that of other Impressionist painters; however, that comparison is only part of the passage ("talks about") – it is not the point of the passage ("is about").

(A) and (D) refer to "an artist," singular, correctly indicating the passage's focus on one individual. There is no information in the passage to suggest that Morisot's work was "overlooked" – quite the opposite, in fact – so (A) can be eliminated.

That leaves (D), which is consistent with the authors' refutation of the idea that Morisot's female status made her "exceptional" as a painter.

Important: when defining a topic, try to limit yourself to no more than a few words (e.g., Berthe Morisot, city ecosystems) and avoid saying things like, "Well, so I think that basically the passage is like talking about xyz..." The former takes almost no time and gives you exactly the information you need. The latter is time-consuming, vague, and encourages you to view the topic as much more subjective than it actually is.

What's the Point?

The point of a passage is the **primary idea** that the author wants to convey, and along with the topic and the tone (more about that later), it is the most important thing to look for when you begin to read a passage.

To be clear, if you have consistent and significant difficulty making the jump from the specific wording of the passage to the overall idea the author is attempting to convey, then you are probably best served by answering the questions as you read the passage, working from detail to detail. You can still do extremely well using this strategy, and it almost certainly represents your best chance to obtain a high score on the multiple-choice section.

However, if you are a strong reader who is generally able to grasp the big picture with ease, you should attempt to identify the main point upfront because many of the questions will relate to it either directly or indirectly. If you keep the point in mind, you can often eliminate several answers immediately because they are inconsistent with it. Better yet, you will sometimes be able to identify the correct answer right away because it is the only option that corresponds directly to the point.

Focusing on finding the point means you don't have a chance to get bored. It reduces the chance that you'll spend five minutes trying to absorb three lines while losing sight of the big idea that really counts. And it stops you from wasting time and energy trying to convince yourself that a passage is interesting when you're actually bored out of your mind.

For the sake of thoroughness, let's start by looking at what a main point is **not**:

- It is not a **topic** such as "mathematics" or "changes in language" or "class structure."
- It is not a **theme** such as "people vs. nature" or "overcoming oppression."

Topics and themes will get you virtually nowhere; instead, you need to know what the author *thinks*.

A main point is an **argument** that answers the question "so what"? It tells us *why* the author thinks the topic is important, or what essential information he or she wants to convey.

The main point can be thought of in terms of the following formula:

Topic + So What (why does the author care?) = Main Point

Sometimes the author will directly state the main point in the passage itself. If this is the case, you should **underline it immediately**. If not, you need to **write it yourself**.

How to Write an Effective Main Point

It isn't terribly effective to discuss writing a main point in the abstract, so let's start by taking another look at this passage:

For more than half a century—1804 through 1858—
Mary Moody Emerson authored an immense series of
journals she called her “**Almanacks.**” Numbering more
than one thousand manuscript pages, **these writings** offer
5 a rare and prolific example of early American women’s
scholarly production. Unlike the standard almanac genre,
which typically relates matter-of-fact jots about daily life
and the weather, Emerson conceived of her **Almanacks** as
an expansive record of the mind, a place to work out her
10 thoughts and, more important, to engage directly with
others, including the authors of her vast reading. Written
on loose sheets of letter paper that were then bound with
thread to create booklets, **they** became compact parcels
designed for sharing. For every ten **manuscript leaves**
15 sewn together, she enclosed another leaf (or more) with
one of her many letters. As Emerson confided to her dear
friend Elizabeth Hoar, “My **Almanack** scraps . . . love to
wander.”

In my experience, a lot of students aren't quite clear on the difference between describing the content of a passage and summarizing its argument. But since the ability to summarize arguments quickly and accurately is perhaps the single most helpful skill for doing well on the reading section, this confusion is a major stumbling block. In fact, understanding the distinction between describing and summarizing can be the difference between answering main point questions with relative ease and finding them an insurmountable challenge.

Describing content = recounting the information presented in the text without necessarily distinguishing between main points and supporting evidence and/or counter-arguments. The goal is simply to relate what is being said, often in sequential *first x, then y, and finally z* form.

Summarizing an argument = identifying the essential point that the author wants to convey and eliminating any unnecessary detail. The goal is not to cover all the information in the sequence in which it appears, but rather to pinpoint the overarching idea contained in the passage.

Summarizing an argument requires you to make a leap from concrete to abstract because you must move beyond simply recounting the information presented to recognizing which parts of it are most important and relating them to other, more general ideas.

While some questions directly ask you to identify the point of a passage or paragraph, others will do so more subtly, asking which idea a particular example illustrates. Either way, you must be able to separate the details from the more general point.

When students are asked to summarize the main point of a passage, however, they typically respond in one of two ways:

1) They state the topic

Emerson's "Almanacks"

2) They summarize the content

Uh... so the guy basically talks about how this person, I think her name was Mary, right? She was like really into these Almanack things... Umm...so she lived in the nineteenth century sometime, and she liked to write about the weather and stuff. Oh, and um, I think it said she was really into reading too. Yeah, and it also talks about like how she put the Almanacks together, and how she wrote letters to her friend about it. And, uh, I think it said something about wandering?

Notice how long, not to mention how vague, this version is. It doesn't really distinguish between primary and secondary information; everything gets mushed in together, and frankly, it doesn't make a lot of sense. That summary gives us exactly zero help in terms of figuring out the main point. It also wastes *colossal* amounts of time.

At the risk of stating the obvious, this is not what you want to do.

Argument Summary:

Mary Emerson's "Almanacks" were important because they were a rare example of nineteenth-century women's scholarship.

Notice how this version just hits the big idea and omits the details. All the details.

Argument Summary Super-Condensed:

Almncks = 19c rare wmnns schlrship

Now notice how this version cuts out absolutely everything in order to focus on the absolute total utter bare essentials. It doesn't even attempt to incorporate any sort of detail beyond the subject of the passage (Emerson's "Almanacks") and its result, the "so what?" – the part that tells us **why** the topic of the passage is important (they were rare examples of nineteenth-century women's scholarly writing).

So in five condensed words and a symbol, we've managed to capture the essential information *without wasting any time*. It doesn't matter if anyone else would understand it as long as we know what it's saying.