

Strategies for the Reading Test

OF THE FOUR SUBJECT TESTS, IT CAN BE the most difficult to prepare for the Reading Test. Doing well on the Reading Test is not a matter of having tricks up your sleeve. When you come to a question that asks about a passage's main point, you can't rely on some handy main-point trick to figure out the answer—either you know it or you don't.

That said, you can use a general strategy to improve your performance on the test. We like to think of this general strategy as a macro approach to the entire Subject Test, rather than micro tips to get you from question to question. The crux of the strategy is your ability to read well—that is, with speed and without sacrificing comprehension.

Read!

Before we go on to discuss specific strategies for the Reading Test, we want to give you this piece of advice: reading during the months and weeks before the ACT is the best preparation for the Reading Test. The Reading Test assesses one main thing: your reading comprehension skills. Every time you read, regardless of *what* you read, you exercise your reading comprehension skills. And the more you read, the better you'll become at quickly and thoroughly comprehending what's written. So it makes sense that the best practice for the Reading Test is reading.

While reading this SparkNotes book will have you well on your way toward ACT success, we encourage you to improve your score and your mind by reading other things in your spare time. Newspapers, novels, and homework assignments provide good reading material. You may particularly want to focus on reading science articles in a newspaper or scientific magazine, as many students have less familiarity with this type of material. The more challenging the material, the more exercise your brain will get, so don't just read comic books and cereal boxes.

Order of Difficulty, the Reading Test, and You

Neither the passages nor the questions on the Reading Test are ordered by difficulty. Different students find different passages of the Reading Test difficult. Some people can't make heads or tails of Prose Fiction, while others get bogged down by the slew of facts in the Natural Science passage. Similarly, different students have difficulty with different types of questions on the Reading Test. Some students may find it difficult to remember facts, while others may become confused drawing inferences.

Beating yourself silly trying to master all the Reading Test passages and questions is not necessarily the best method of preparation. In an ideal world, you'd know how to answer all the questions correctly. But in ACT world, being aware of your abilities and using that awareness strategically will get you as far as you need to go.

Using Practice Tests

Practice tests are your most useful tool for spotting your weaknesses. Take a practice Reading Test before you begin studying and then another after you've done some preparation. On the answer sheets accompanying each test in the back of this book, we've provided the question type for each question. When you score your practice tests, you'll be able to see how you did on each type of question, so you can pinpoint your weak and strong areas for focused study.

Using Your Abilities to Develop a Test-Taking Strategy

Knowing your strong and weak points is essential for developing a simple but effective Reading Test strategy. On the actual test, play to your strong points and play down your weak ones. For example, after all your studying, if you're still incapable of correctly answering cause-effect questions, don't waste valuable time struggling with them on the actual test. Instead, guess on those questions or save them for a second pass through the test. Play the percentages: concentrate on questions you're more likely to get right to achieve your optimum score.

The Perfect Balance: Optimizing Your Time

As is probably abundantly clear to you by now, the Reading Test demands a little extra something from you: in addition to answering its questions, you must digest approximately 3,000 words worth of information. In order to be effective on this test, you must achieve an optimum balance between the time you spend reading the passages and the time you spend answering the questions. For instance, if you sweat over the first passage, painstakingly making sure you know its every little detail, you'll probably run out of time before you get to the last passage. On the flip side, if you breeze through the passages, registering a word here and there, you'll probably have a hard time answering the questions. The lesson here is that you need to find the perfect balance.

There's no formula for this perfect balance; in fact, what's "perfect" varies from person to person. Below, we'll give you some general strategies for rationing your time on the Reading Test. We think these strategies work well for most people, but ultimately it's up to you to decide what works best. Our strategies can help you, but you should complement them by taking timed practice Reading Tests. By practicing frequently, you can determine your ideal reading speed—the speed that allows you to get through the passages quickly while understanding what's being said.

Reading the Reading Test

Because the Reading Test quizzes you on your understanding of general themes and specific information in each passage, your instinct is probably to read the entire passage carefully, making sure you don't miss anything that can be covered in the questions. If you had unlimited time, this method of reading would probably make sense, but you don't have unlimited time; in fact, you have extremely limited time.

There are only ten questions accompanying each passage. These ten questions cannot cover the entire content of a passage, so reading for every detail is a waste of time. When reading an ACT passage, read carefully to understand general elements: the topic, theme, argument, etc. When you see details that seem important, don't fuss painstakingly over those details. Instead, lightly note them in your mind and perhaps make a quick mark in the margin. This way, you'll reduce wasted time and gain a good enough comprehension of the passage to answer questions that cover general aspects of the passage correctly. You'll also have a good enough sense of the passage's layout, so that when the passage asks about specific information, you'll be able to go back quickly to the passage, check the information, and choose the correct answer.

Achieving the Perfect Balance

You may be thinking that finding the perfect balance is easier said than done. Well, yes, that's probably true. But there are methods you can use to find this balance.

Read the Passage First, Then Answer the Questions

We suggest that you read the passage first and save the questions until you're done reading. Read the passage quickly and lightly for a general understanding. Pay active attention to what's going on, but don't get bogged down trying to assimilate every detail. By the end of your first reading, you should understand the themes of the passage and the argument, if there is one. We definitely don't mean that you should ignore the meat of paragraphs and focus only on their first sentences; if you do that, you won't understand the passage.

Reading for a general understanding means you don't have to memorize all the specific facts of the passage. The author uses specific facts to support an argument, but as you read, you should be more concerned with their cumulative effect (i.e., the larger argument) than with the specific facts themselves. If you get to a point in a passage where the author lists a bunch of facts to support an idea, you can make a quick note of the list in the margin for future reference (for more on this, see "Scribble, Doodle, Underline").

The only time you should slow down and go back is if you lose the flow of the passage—if you realize you don't know what's happening, what's being argued, or what in the world that entire last paragraph was about.

Read the passage with an awareness of the general questions you might be asked. What is the author's goal in writing the passage? What are the tone, themes, major points, and so on of the passage? When you finish a passage, you should be able to answer these questions and also have a sense of the passage's layout. Reading on the ACT is like taking a tour of a room—you have to know the layout of the room, but you don't have to know the location of every knickknack.

After you finish the passage, go to the questions. Since you read the passage with the big picture in mind, you should be able to answer the general questions dealing with main points, point of view, tone, etc. When you get to a question on a specific detail, don't immediately look at the answer choices to avoid being influenced by "trick" answers. Instead, articulate to yourself exactly what the question is asking. Then quickly go back to the passage and come up with your own answer to the question. Finally, choose the answer that best matches yours.

If you get to a question that is very hard and threatens to take a lot of time, place a mark next to it, skip it, move on to the next question, and come back if you have time. You should *not*, however, move on to the next passage while leaving a blank question behind you. Answer all questions dealing with a passage while the passage is still fresh in your mind.

Why "Passage First, Questions After" Is a Good Strategy

Some test prep books advise you to look at the questions first to find key words, and then to read the passage with an eye to answering the questions. While this strategy seems good on paper, it's really quite difficult in practice, especially in high-pressure situations like taking the ACT. Imagine trying to remember what 10 questions ask while reading an unfamiliar passage, simultaneously trying to get the gist of it and looking for possible answers to the questions. That's like trying to chew gum while patting your head, rubbing your stomach, and singing "The Star Spangled Banner." In addition, because some of the questions ask for specific details, you'll feel pressured to pay close attention to the passage line by line, which takes too much time. Ultimately, the "questions first, passage after" strategy can be extremely confusing as well as extremely difficult to execute.

"Passage first, questions after" is really just common sense. Using this method, you can avoid the confusion caused by other strategies. Again, think about the passage as a room and the answers to the questions as objects within the room. If you follow the other test books' strategy of "questions first," you'll be left groping helplessly for the objects in a completely dark room. If you follow our

strategy (in other words, if you use common sense), you'll have turned on the lights first, making the objects much easier to find.

Scribble, Doodle, Underline

Once upon a time, you learned that a pristine ACT test booklet is a sad ACT test booklet. Here, on the Reading Test, you have an opportunity to give your friendly test book a happy buzz by scribbling and underlining away in it. You won't be doing all this scrawling simply for the benefit of the ACT booklet, though; any marking you do will help you when it's time to answer the questions.

You're probably wondering how you'll know what to underline without having read the questions. Indeed, that does seem like the tricky part. But the point of underlining is not to pinpoint specific answers to questions; in fact, if you could underline answers, you'd be wasting time underlining them when you could be filling in a bubble on the answer sheet.

The point of underlining, then, is not to highlight correct answers, but to assist you when you refer back to the passage for those answers. You can use your underlines and notes as a map through the passage, so you don't waste time covering passage territory for a second time. As long as scribbling and underlining don't take up a significant amount of time (you should not be drawing straight lines or printing neatly), any marginal notes and underlines will help and guide you when you answer the questions.

Underlining the topic sentence of each paragraph (it's not always the first sentence) will help you keep on top of the argument's direction. These underlines will serve as handy reference tools when you need to refer back to the passage. Because you're reading for the general point of a passage and its component paragraphs, you do not need to know every single illustrative example. When you encounter a sentence or a section that looks like it will enumerate examples to support a point, you can quickly glance at the section, then scribble "eg" or "ex" or some other mark in the margin to let you know that this is an example. If a question asks you for specific evidence that demonstrates a certain point, you can refer back to the relevant passage by glancing at your notes and then moving down to the section marked "eg" or "ex." You can also use numbers to mark items in an extended list. Underlining key phrases that help relate parts of the passage, such as "subsequently," "on the other hand," and "in contrast" will also help you map your way through the passage.

Take a practice Reading Test and exercise your wrists making marginal notes and underlines. Soon you should be able to develop a scribbling system that works for you.

Passages and Questions on the Reading Test

IN THE FOLLOWING SECTION, YOU'LL GET AN in-depth look at the passages on the Reading Test through four sample passages covering each topic area. You should read these sample passages to gain familiarity with the types of passages on the test.

Our four sample passages are accompanied by descriptions of the question types you're likely to encounter, along with examples of these questions and methods for answering the sample questions. Our goal in offering you these descriptions and examples is to increase your familiarity with the types of questions on the test. These descriptions are usually not heavy on suggested strategy. As we've said before, there aren't many strategies you can use to answer individual questions on the Reading Test. The best thing you can do to prepare is to know what the test will ask you.

We've divided this section into two parts: Prose Fiction first, and the other three tests second. We've made this division because the Prose Fiction passage differs the most from the others in terms of how you read it and what you're reading it for.

The Prose Fiction Passage

As we've stated before, you should not read the ACT Prose Fiction passage as you would a novel that you casually pick up on a Saturday afternoon. Treat the Prose Fiction passage as you would an English homework assignment. In addition to understanding the story behind the passage, you should also strive to understand the passage's use of style and tone.

The Sample Passage

The following sample is adapted from James Joyce's short story "Grace" in Dubliners.

She was an active, practical woman of middle age. Not long before she had celebrated her silver wedding and renewed her intimacy with her husband by waltzing with him to Mr. Power's *Line* accompaniment. In her days of courtship, Mr. Kernan had seemed to (5) her a not ungallant figure: and she still hurried to the chapel door whenever a wedding was reported and, seeing the bridal pair, recalled with vivid pleasure how she had passed out of the Star of the Sea Church in Sandymount, leaning on the arm of a jovial well-fed man, who was dressed smartly in a frock-coat and (10) lavender trousers and carried a silk hat gracefully balanced upon his other arm. After three weeks she had found a wife's life irksome and, later on, when she was beginning to find it unbearable, she had become a mother. The part of mother presented to her no insuperable difficulties and for twenty-five years she (15) had kept house shrewdly for her husband. Her two eldest sons were launched. One was in a draper's shop in Glasgow and the other was clerk to a tea-merchant in Belfast. They were good sons, wrote regularly and sometimes sent home money. The other children were still at school.

(20) Mr. Kernan sent a letter to his office next day and remained in bed. She made beef-tea for him and scolded him roundly. She accepted his frequent intemperance as part of the climate, healed him dutifully whenever he was sick and always tried to make him eat a breakfast. There were worse husbands. He had never been (25) violent since the boys had grown up, and she knew that he would walk to the end of Thomas Street and back again to book even a small order.

Two nights after, his friends came to see him. She brought them up to his bedroom, the air of which was impregnated with a (30) personal odor, and gave them chairs at the fire. Mr. Kernan's

tongue, the occasional stinging $\frac{1}{2}$ pain of which had made him somewhat irritable during the day, became more polite. He sat propped up in the bed by pillows and the little color in his puffy cheeks made them resemble warm cinders. He apologized to (35) his guests for the disorder of the room, but at the same time looked at them a little proudly, with a veteran's pride.

He was quite unconscious that he was the victim of a plot which his friends, Mr. Cunningham, Mr. M'Coy and Mr. Power had disclosed to Mrs. Kernan in the parlor. The idea had been Mr. (40) Power's, but its development was entrusted to Mr. Cunningham. Mr. Kernan came of Protestant stock and, though he had been converted to the Catholic faith at the time of his marriage, he had not been in the pale of the Church for twenty years. He was fond, moreover, of giving side-thrusts at Catholicism.

(45) Mr. Cunningham was the very man for such a case. He was an elder colleague of Mr. Power. His own domestic life was not very happy. People had great sympathy with him, for it was known that he had married an unpresentable woman who was an incurable drunkard. He had set up house for her six times; and each time (50) she had pawned the furniture on him.

Everyone had respect for poor Martin Cunningham. He was a thoroughly sensible man, influential and intelligent. His blade of human knowledge, natural astuteness particularized by long association with cases in the police courts, had been tempered by (55) brief immersions in the waters of general philosophy. He was well informed. His friends bowed to his opinions and considered that his face was like Shakespeare's.

When the plot had been disclosed to her, Mrs. Kernan had said:

(60) "I leave it all in your hands, Mr. Cunningham."

After a quarter of a century of married life, she had very few illusions left. Religion for her was a habit, and she suspected that a man of her husband's age would not change greatly before death. She was tempted to see a curious (65) appropriateness in his accident and, but that she did not wish to seem bloody-minded, would have told the gentlemen that Mr. Kernan's tongue would not suffer by being shortened. However, Mr. Cunningham was a capable man; and religion was religion. The scheme might do good and, at least, it could do no harm. Her

(70) beliefs were not extravagant. She believed steadily in the Sacred Heart as the most generally useful of all Catholic devotions and approved of the sacraments. Her faith was bounded by her kitchen, but, if she was put to it, she could believe also in the banshee and in the Holy Ghost.

The Questions

Below, we'll give you a rundown of the questions you're most likely to find on the Prose Fiction passage and how to answer them. All of the examples below pertain to the above passage.

Identify Specific Details and Facts

Specific detail questions are perhaps the most straightforward questions you'll encounter anywhere on the test. As the name suggests, these questions ask you to find specific details within the passage. They are very common on the Prose Fiction passage and throughout the rest of the test. You'll probably see three or four specific detail questions accompanying the Prose Fiction passage.

Here's an example of a relatively easy specific detail question:

According to his friends, Mr. Cunningham resembles:

- A. Mr. Kernan.
- B. a policeman.
- C. Shakespeare.
- D. Mr. Power.

If you know the answer to this question, you're all set. If you don't, you probably remember there was a section near the end of the passage that discussed Mr. Cunningham and his background. To answer this question, you should first look in that section because the answer is probably there. Have you looked yet? Well, the answer is there, on line 49 ("his face was like Shakespeare's"). The correct answer is C.

That question was fairly simple, partly because it had a one-word answer, but specific detail questions can be more confusing when the answers are longer. Try another question about Mr. Cunningham:

According to the passage, people feel sorry for Mr. Cunningham because:

- A. he is sensible, influential, and intelligent.
- B. he was the victim of a plot by his friends.
- C. he has a long association with police courts.
- D. he is married to a drunkard.

While this question is not too difficult, it is slightly more confusing than the previous one simply because the answers are longer. If you've read the passage reasonably carefully and you've quickly double-checked the answer in the passage, you can correctly identify D as the answer. Choices A and C are actually given as reasons why Mr. Cunningham is *respected* by his acquaintances, and choice B applies not to Mr. Cunningham but to Mr. Kernan.

While specific-detail questions are generally straightforward, they can try to trick you by leading you to give an answer that seems correct if you read one sentence, but is revealed as incorrect by another. For example,

How many children do the Kernans have?

- A. None
- B. One
- C. Two
- D. More than two

If you remembered that the Kernans' children were mentioned in the first paragraph, you'd look there, and perhaps your eye would fall on the sentence, "Her two eldest sons were launched." A quick glance at this sentence may miss the word "eldest," which indicates that there are younger children, so you may decide that there are only two children in the Kernan family and the answer is C. But the word "eldest" and the last sentence of the paragraph, "The other children were still at school," indicate that there are other children in the family and that the correct answer is **D**.

Draw Inferences

Inference questions ask for implied information. They want you to take a piece of information given in the passage and use it to figure out something else. Because the answers are not given explicitly within the passage, these questions are often significantly more difficult than specific detail questions. But they are just as common, so you need to get a handle on them.

You can usually spot an inference question from a mile away. Inference questions frequently use verbs such as "suggest," "infer," "imply," and "indicate."

As with specific detail questions, some inference questions are easier than others. Sometimes, the ACT writers will feel extra nice and refer you to a specific portion of the passage. For example,

The second paragraph (lines 20-27) suggests that the Kernans' marriage is characterized primarily by:

- A. Mr. Kernan's violent behavior toward his wife.
- B. Mrs. Kernan's patience with her husband.
- C. Mr. Kernan's fondness for his wife's beef-tea.
- D. Mr. Kernan's willingness to go to the store for his wife.

In some ways, this inference question resembles a specific detail question. Elements of all the answer choices are mentioned in the paragraph. Your job is to figure out which answer choice *best* answers the question. Perhaps choice A characterized the marriage at one point in time, but the narrator notes that Mr. Kernan "had never been violent since the boys had grown up," so A is wrong. Nowhere in the paragraph does it mention that Mr. Kernan likes the beef-tea his wife makes for him, so you can rule out C. Choice D seems to be a true statement, since the last sentence of the paragraph states, "she knew that he would walk to the end of Thomas Street and back again to book even a small order." But does this willingness adequately *characterize* their marriage? Not really. The specificity of the act makes it an unlikely candidate to be a characteristic. If choice D had said, "Mr. Kernan's courtesy to his wife" or "Mr. Kernan's consideration for his wife," the choice would have a little more promise as a characteristic (but then its validity would come into question). That leaves us with Choice B. Although we eliminated the other answer choices, it doesn't hurt to make sure that B fits the bill. The key sentence in the paragraph that suggests B is the correct answer is the third one (lines 18-20): "She accepted his frequent intemperance as part of the climate, healed him dutifully whenever he was sick and always tried to make him eat a breakfast." Words such as "accepted" and "dutifully" don't suggest that Mrs. Kernan takes care of her husband because she thinks it's fun; rather, these words suggest a patient resignation to her life and duties. So you can safely choose **B** as the correct answer.

Less direct inference questions will ask you to draw out character or plot details from the information given in the passage. These inference questions can be more difficult to answer than the one given above. Here's an example of a character inference question:

It can be reasonably inferred from this passage that Mrs. Kernan's attitude toward religion is:

- A. fervently pious.
- B. practical but faithful.
- C. skeptical.
- D. nonexistent.

If you read effectively, you'll remember that the last paragraph contains a description of Mrs. Kernan's brand of religious faith. There are several key phrases in this passage that should help you choose the correct answer: "Religion for her was a habit"; "Her beliefs were not extravagant"; "She believed steadily in the Sacred Heart as the most generally useful of all Catholic devotions"; "Her faith was bounded by her kitchen, but, if she was put to it, she could believe also in the banshee and in the Holy Ghost." We can't provide you with a strategy for interpreting this information. You must be able to comprehend the writing in order to get this question right. No matter what your understanding is, you'll probably realize that D is wrong because the existence of the phrases indicates that Mrs. Kernan has some kind of attitude toward religion. If you understand what's being said in the phrases above, you can eliminate choice A (because "Her beliefs were not extravagant") and choice C (because "she could also believe in the banshee and in the Holy Ghost"). So the correct answer is **B**, "practical but faithful," which is exactly what those phrases imply.

Now try this plot inference question:

One can reasonably infer from this passage that the goal of the friends' plan, mentioned in line 37, is to:

- A. make Mr. Kernan a good, practicing Catholic.
- B. cure Mr. Kernan of his alcohol abuse.
- C. turn Mr. Kernan into a better husband.
- D. go to Thomas Street for Mrs. Kernan while her husband recovers.

The nice thing about inference questions is that they do the inferring for you. If you have no idea what the friends are plotting for Mr. Kernan, don't worry: the ACT writers have given you the right answer already—along with three wrong answers. The best way to approach this question, and any like it, is to read the sentences around the provided section (line 37, in this case). For this question, the information following line 37 will help you decide on the correct answer. The rest of the paragraph is devoted primarily to Mr. Kernan's religious background and his attitude toward Catholicism, and it should give you a good clue that the answer is probably A. If you've gotten to this point but feel uncomfortable committing yourself to the answer, consider the other answer choices and how well they work. Choice B suggests that the friends want Mr. Kernan to stop drinking; however, there is no mention of his drinking habit after line 19 (in fact, there is only one reference to it in this passage), so it is most likely not the answer. Choice C suggests the vague goal of turning Mr. Kernan into a better husband. While this may be a consequence of the desired change in his behavior, it doesn't seem to be the right answer because there is no mention of it in the passage; in fact, Mrs. Kernan seems reasonably content with their relationship. Choice D, which offers Thomas Street as an answer, tries to lure you off track by mentioning an unrelated but specific piece of information from the passage. So choice **A** is the best answer to this question. Remember that, although choices B and C may be true desires of Mr. Kernan's friends, they are not the *best* answer to

the question. Choice A is the best answer because religion is specifically discussed in relation to the plot.

Understanding Character

Character generalization questions appear only with the Prose Fiction passage. They ask you to reduce a lot of information about a character into a simple, digestible statement. For instance, if you have a character who hates children, kicks dogs, takes candy from babies, and steals his neighbors' mail, you could make the generalization that he is mean-spirited and cruel. Let's take a look at a character generalization problem dealing with the sample passage:

Mrs. Kernan would most likely agree with which of the following characterizations of her husband:

- A. He is foolish and excessive.
- B. He is sensible and intelligent.
- C. He is irreverent but generally considerate.
- D. He is proud of his accomplishments.

As you can see, this question is similar to the inference questions discussed above, in that it asks you to draw a conclusion from the information provided by the passage. You should note that the question doesn't ask you how *you* would characterize Mr. Kernan or how the narrator or any other character would, but how *Mrs. Kernan* would characterize him. Because this question is specific in its point of view, it helps you pinpoint the sections you must examine—the ones that give Mrs. Kernan's opinion of her husband. If you do that, you can figure out that nothing suggests choice A is true. Choice B is also incorrect according to the passage; the words "sensible" and "intelligent" are actually used to describe Mr. Cunningham. Choice D is not correct, although Mr. Kernan appears proud of his injury (line 36). Choice C is the correct answer. You can arrive at this answer through process of elimination, but you can also get to it through understanding the passage. The last paragraph reveals that Mrs. Kernan apparently thinks her husband's "tongue would not suffer by being shortened." Earlier in the passage, the narrator also describes Mr. Kernan's verbal lack of respect for Catholicism, so "irreverence" seems to describe him accurately in Mrs. Kernan's eyes. The second part of the answer, his consideration, is implied in the second paragraph, which describes Mr. Kernan's willingness to run errands for his wife.

When answering inference and character generalization questions, you should remember that right answers are not necessarily perfect answers; they must simply be the best answer out of the four provided. For that reason, when answering these questions, you should read through all the answer choices and ask yourself which one best answers the question.

Point of View

Point of view questions accompanying the Prose Fiction passage will generally ask you to describe the narrator's point of view. Questions that deal with other characters' points of view usually fall under the heading of inference or character generalization. Point of view questions are fairly rare on the Prose Fiction passage, but you may encounter one of them on the test.

These questions tend to be pretty obvious when they're asked because they usually look like this:

The narrator's point of view is that of:

- A. a detached observer.
- B. Mr. Kernan.
- C. a biased observer.

D. the Kernans' child.

Again, answering this question is a matter of understanding the material, not of tricks and strategies. You can eliminate choices B and D immediately if you recognize that the passage is not written in the first person. Then ask yourself whether the narrator expresses any biases (does he obviously prefer one character to another, for instance?). In this passage, the narrator is fairly bias-free, so the best answer to this question is **A**, a detached observer.

Cause-Effect

These questions ask you to identify either the cause or the effect of a situation. These questions are fairly rare on the Prose Fiction passage, but you should still be prepared to answer one. You will generally recognize these questions from cue words in the question, such as “resulted in” and “led to” for effect questions, and “caused by” and “because” for cause questions. On the Prose Fiction passage, cause-effect questions will generally ask you to identify how one character's actions affected another's. For example,

According to the passage, the visit paid by Mr. Kernan's friends resulted in:

- A.** his unpleasant behavior toward them.
- B.** a completely healed tongue.
- C.** his boasting of weathering two days of sickness.
- D.** his politeness.

As in the example above, cause-effect questions will not make you draw inferences (only inference questions will). Cause-effect questions are interested in the facts of the passage. Both the cause (the visit paid by Mr. Kernan's friends) and the effect (one of the answer choices) should be clearly stated in the passage. You should not choose an answer choice that requires you to make an inference. After you eliminate choices A and B, which are contrary to facts stated in the third paragraph of the passage, you must choose between choices C and D. You should eliminate choice C, though, because it is an inference and involves guessing on your part rather than referring specifically to the text. Although the last line of the third paragraph states that Mr. Kernan appears to feel “a veteran's pride,” it is never explicitly stated within the passage that this feeling arises from the visit by his friends. Because you are looking for the *best* answer choice—not the *perfect* answer choice—choice **D** is correct. The passage explicitly states that the visit causes Mr. Kernan to become “more polite” after having been cantankerous.

The Three Nonfiction Passages

The following section deals with the three nonfiction passages. First, we'll give you a sample Social Science passage (the one that directly follows Prose Fiction on the test), and then a rundown of the questions that may be asked on it. As these questions are similar to the questions asked on the other two sections, Humanities and Natural Science, we will use our sample Social Science passage as a template for the others, explaining to you exactly how to answer general question types found on all three passages. Following the Social Science section, we will discuss the specifics of the Humanities and Natural Science passages, using sample passages and questions.

The Social Science Passage

In many ways, you can think of the Social Science passage as the standard nonfiction passage on the Reading Test because it can cover all of the question types and because it represents a middle ground between the Humanities and Natural Science passages. In this section, you'll read a sample Social Science passage and learn about all the possible question types associated with Social Science:

1. Specific Detail
2. Inference
3. Main Idea and Argument
4. Cause-Effect
5. Point of View
6. Comparison
7. Vocabulary

These questions types are also found on the Humanities and Natural Science passages, so the descriptions we give of them here also apply to those passages.

The Sample Passage

The following passage is adapted from an essay on Malcolm X.

During 1963 the nation became aware of a civil rights leader making a dramatic impact on the black community. Malcolm X, the charismatic, ferociously eloquent preacher and organizer for the *Line* Nation of Islam, had been preaching his message to (usually poor) (5) black communities since the early 1950s. Malcolm X was a “black Muslim,” a member of a small but crucial religious organization that proved instrumental in giving birth to the modern Black Power Movement. The Nation of Islam, led by Elijah Muhammed, believed that whites had systematically and immorally denied (10) blacks their rights and that blacks therefore had no reason to act peacefully or lovingly towards whites. Instead of supporting the philosophy of non-violence embraced by Martin Luther King, Jr., the Nation of Islam believed that whites should repay blacks for slavery and allow them to set up their own nation within (15) America. Until that day arrived, the Nation encouraged blacks to defend themselves against white supremacy “by any means necessary.”

The membership and influence of the Nation of Islam grew tremendously during the late 1950s and early 1960s, in large part (20) due to the dedication and speaking skills of Malcolm X. Like King, Malcolm X mobilized the people, leading them in rallies, protest marches, and demonstrations. Though he was widely known among the black underclass and in civil rights circles, it was not until his famous “Chickens Coming Home to Roost” speech on (25) December 1, 1963, that he truly blasted his way into the consciousness of most Americans. X gave the speech in reference

to the November 22 assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and described the killing as “chickens coming home to roost.” The media, which had negatively portrayed the Nation of Islam in (30) general and Malcolm X in particular, jumped on the speech immediately, claiming it as an example of Malcolm X’s divisive hatred and blatant disrespect for the U.S. government. In the face of public reaction, officials within the Nation silenced X for 90 days . The speech not only brought Malcolm X to the (35) forefront of the civil rights struggle but also highlighted and helped solidify a strand of civil rights activism that found inadequate the non-violent policies the movement had so far used. Malcolm X is a highly controversial figure in black history. Many see him as a spouter of hatred and divisiveness. Certainly (40) it is true that a fair portion of X’s rhetoric—his references to “white devils” and “Uncle Tomming Negro leaders”—was angry and inflammatory, and did little to promote the cause of integration. However, X represented an element of black consciousness that white people refused to face: the incredible rage that most black (45) people felt after suffering so many years of oppression. For all of his fame, it is interesting to note that his mobilization and participation in the civil rights movement was actually fairly slim . He respected some civil rights leaders (King, for example), though for much of his life he believed that (50) the idea of integration was merely playing into the hands of the white man. For the most part, Malcolm X’s role in the civil rights movement was merely to preach, to pass on the crucial message of black rage to white America, and to become a role model for those who began the Black Power Movement a few years (55) later. He is vitally important not because of what he actually did, but because of what he said and how he said it. Malcolm X’s own biography reveals that he was more nuanced and interesting than the simple role of black rage that he was sometimes assigned by both whites who held him up as an example (60) of rage gone wild, and blacks who saw him as a warrior willing to express that which most blacks could not. After years of service, X eventually broke with the Nation of Islam. Then, after a life-changing visit to Mecca in 1964, he broke with his own previous thought and began preaching a message of cross-cultural (65) unity, and founded the Organization for Afro-American Unity. With

his fire-and-brimstone oratory, broad base of black community support, and knack for attracting media attention, X's new path might have forged major interracial inroads. But before he could follow this new path of more general inclusion, X was (70) assassinated on February 21, 1965, shot as he was giving a speech in New York. The perpetrators have never been found, though many presume the Nation of Islam to have been responsible. X's autobiography, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, is an abiding document of both his own personal journey and of his time.

The Questions

Below, we'll give you a rundown of the questions you'll likely encounter on the Social Science passage. All of the questions below pertain to the above passage on Malcolm X.

Specific Detail

Specific detail questions on the nonfiction passages are as straightforward as they are on the fiction passage. They ask you to identify a specific detail or piece of evidence from the passage. For example,

According to the passage, some critics of Malcolm X censured him for being:

- A. an "Uncle Tomming Negro leader."
- B. an example of rage gone wild.
- C. a warrior for African-Americans.
- D. a civil rights leader.

If you read the section dealing with specific detail for Prose Fiction, you probably have a pretty good idea of how to answer this question. Getting the right answer is really a matter of careful reading, but you can use the question to help you eliminate answers that are clearly wrong. For instance, because the question asks you for criticisms of Malcolm X, it is probably a safe bet to eliminate choices C and D, which give positive interpretations of his career. Choosing the right answer from choices A and B is really a matter of understanding the material. If you read the passage with some care, you probably remember that Malcolm X used choice A as a criticism for black leaders whom he considered panderers to white supremacists. In the last paragraph of the passage, the writer notes that some white people "held him up as an example of rage gone wild"—a pretty clear criticism of Malcolm X; thus **B** is the correct answer to the question.

Inference

You may remember that inference questions ask for implied information. The answers to inference questions won't be stated explicitly in the nonfiction passages; instead, you must ferret out the answer from the evidence provided by the passage. For example,

One can reasonably infer from the passage that the Nation of Islam is widely thought responsible for Malcolm X's assassination because:

- A. X broke with the group politically and philosophically.
- B. X gave a controversial speech after Kennedy's assassination.
- C. X visited Mecca in 1964.

D. X began to write an autobiography.

You should look to the last paragraph, where Malcolm X's assassination is described. Ask yourself what this paragraph focuses on. The paragraph mentions that Malcolm X broke with the Nation of Islam (choice A) and that he visited Mecca (choice C). You can safely eliminate choice B because his controversial "Chickens Coming Home to Roost" speech occurred well before his break with the Nation of Islam; moreover, the author explicitly states the Nation of Islam's response to the speech in line 33-34. Now you must choose between the remaining three answer choices: A, C, and D. If you can't figure out the correct answer, consider which answer choices make sense and which one best answers the question. Choice C, which points to Malcolm X's trip to Mecca, would probably not make sense as an answer choice, as this pilgrimage is a central element of the Islamic faith. Like choice C, choice D also does not seem to offer the proper detail. The passage offers no connection at all between Malcolm X's autobiography and his assassination. Choice A, meanwhile, fits the bill: Malcolm X not only split from the Nation of Islam, but also began to preach a message opposed to the group's—a message of unity and nonviolence rather than of separate nations and cultures. Choice **A** is the correct answer to the question because it best describes why the Nation of Islam would assassinate Malcolm X.

Main Idea and Argument

On the nonfiction passages, you'll encounter quite a few main idea questions. Some of the questions will deal with the passage as a whole, while others will deal with sections of the passage. In both cases, these questions will ask you to identify the main ideas or arguments presented within the passage.

Here's an example of a main idea question:

The main point made in the third paragraph (lines 38-45) is that:

- A.** the "Chickens Coming Home to Roost" speech propelled Malcolm X to the forefront of the civil rights debate.
- B.** Malcolm X's rhetoric promoted hatred and divisiveness.
- C.** Malcolm X was an important role model for the future leaders of the Black Power Movement.
- D.** although his message was controversial, Malcolm X successfully gave a voice to black people who had been oppressed for generations.

This question refers you to a specific paragraph and asks you for that paragraph's main point. For questions that direct you to a specific section, you should glance back at that section to ensure that you don't confuse it with another. If you don't glance back, you may mistake the paragraph for the one before or the one after and choose the wrong answer, such as A (which deals with the second paragraph) or C (which deals with the fourth). Also make sure that you understand the point of the whole paragraph. If you read just the first couple sentences, you may think the correct answer to this question is B. But the rest of the paragraph goes on to talk about Malcolm X's impact despite that controversial side of him, and ultimately the point of the paragraph is **D**. Choice D is the best answer because it incorporates both aspects of the paragraph: the first part of it, which discusses his controversial method; and the second part, which talks about why he was an important civil rights figure.

Many main point questions will cover the entire passage. These questions will generally be posed in one of the following three ways:

- The main idea of the passage is that:
- One of the main ideas of the passage is that:

- Which of the following best states the main point of the passage?

Here's where having read the passage carefully (but quickly) will work to your advantage. You should be able to answer general questions like these without referring back to the passage *if* you did a good job of reading the first time. Reading with an eye to answering specific questions may be an effective strategy for most questions, but you will inevitably encounter general questions like these on the Reading Test. If you choose the strategy of reading for answers, you will have to reread the passage in order to answer these questions. Ultimately, you'll waste more time than you'll save. Another kind of main idea question asks you to identify the main *purpose* of the passage—in other words, to determine why the author wrote it. For example:

The author's purpose in writing this passage seems to be:

- A. to portray Malcolm X as the man responsible for the civil rights movement.
- B. to reveal an overlooked event in Malcolm X's life.
- C. to give a relatively balanced account of the positive and negative sides of Malcolm X's career.
- D. to expose the Nation of Islam's role in the assassination of Malcolm X.

You should be able to answer this question without referring back to the passage because it deals with the general theme and argument. When you come to a question like this, ask yourself what the author has accomplished with the passage. If you form your answer before looking at the answer choices, you're less likely to be swayed by a wrong but convincing answer choice. The author of this passage describes both negative and positive aspects of Malcolm X's career. For example, the author mentions his early rage and unwillingness to integrate, but balances that with X's crucial representation of African-Americans. Choice C seems the best answer to the question, but you can always double-check by eliminating the other answer choices. Choice A is wrong because the author states in line 47-48 that X's "participation in the civil rights movement was actually fairly slim." Choice B is also wrong; the author never mentions an overlooked event in his life. Choice D is wrong even though the author suggests the Nation of Islam's culpability in X's death; this suggestion is not the focus of the entire passage, and it is only briefly mentioned in the last paragraph. So you can safely select choice C as the best answer.

Cause-Effect

As with their Prose Fiction counterparts, cause-effect questions on the nonfiction passages will ask you to identify either the cause or the effect of a particular situation. You are more likely to see these questions on Social Science and Natural Science passages than on Humanities passages because the "science" passages often describe sequences of events.

Cue words in the question will let you know whether you must identify the cause or the effect of the relationship. Words such as "because" warn you that the question seeks the cause of an event, while words such as "resulted in," "led to," and "caused" let you know you'll need to identify the effect of a situation.

Here's an example of a nonfiction cause-effect question:

According to the passage, Malcolm X came to the forefront of the American civil rights struggle because:

- A. of his "Chickens Coming Home to Roost" speech, which generated a media frenzy.
- B. he was silenced by the Nation of Islam for 90 days.
- C. he rejected King's nonviolent message.
- D. he founded the Organization for Afro-American Unity.

As with almost all questions on the ACT Reading Test, answering this question correctly requires a careful reading of the passage. From the cue word “because,” you know that the question asks you for the “cause” half of the relationship. If you’re unable to answer this question without referring back to the passage, you should at least have an idea of where to look. The second paragraph deals with Malcolm X’s increasing fame. There are a couple of sentences within this paragraph that clearly indicate **A** as the correct answer to this question: “it was not until his famous ‘Chickens Coming Home to Roost’ speech on December 1, 1963, that he truly blasted his way into the consciousness of most Americans” and “[t]he speech . . . brought Malcolm X to the forefront of the civil rights struggle.”

Point of View

Point-of-view questions on the nonfiction passages differ somewhat from those on the Prose Fiction passage. As opposed to the fiction point-of-view questions, which ask you to identify the point of view of the narrator (a fictional invention), the nonfiction point-of-view questions ask you to identify how the writer (a real person) views his or her subject. As you read a passage, consider whether the writer’s argument seems to support or attack the passage’s subject, and pay attention to the language the writer uses. The writer’s tone (is it angry? is it sympathetic?) will be a good indication of his or her feelings about the subject.

Here’s an example of a point-of-view question:

The attitude of the author of the passage toward Malcolm X is apparently one of:

- A. anger.
- B. ambivalence.
- C. disapproval.
- D. respect.

The relatively objective tone of this particular Social Science passage makes this point of view question difficult—more difficult, at least, than answering a point-of-view question for a passage written by an obviously biased author. Still, you should be able to pinpoint the author’s tone even here, especially with assistance from the answer choices. In this passage, the author pretty clearly does not feel negatively about Malcolm X, although she may disagree with some of his tactics, so you can eliminate choices A and C, which indicate negative sentiments. Now you are left with a positive feeling (choice D) and a mixed one (choice B). Which one more accurately describes the author’s feelings for Malcolm X? While the author is fairly objective in her writing, her attitude cannot be described as mixed or ambivalent. Although she does mix praise for Malcolm X with some condemnation, her overall tone is one of respect, so the best answer is **D**.

As you can see in the example above, the answer choices for a point of view question can seem similar to one another, but there are always crucial differences. For example, words like “anger” and “disapproval” both express negative sentiments. If “anger” and “disapproval” were the two most promising answer choices for a question, you would have to know more than whether the writer approves or disapproves of the subject. You would have to identify the degree of passion in the writer’s negativity. If the writer cares deeply about the subject, then “anger” may be the correct answer. If the writer is intellectually opposed to the subject, then “disapproval” may be correct.

Comparison

As the name implies, comparison questions ask you to make comparisons, usually between different viewpoints or data. Comparisons can be tricky questions to handle because you need to assimilate information on both sides of the comparison and then see how the sides compare. You'll see these types of questions more frequently on the Social Science and Natural Science passages than on the Humanities passage because the "Science" passages usually contain a lot of factual information. You probably won't encounter more than a couple of these questions on the entire test. The question will contain cue words or phrases that indicate it's a comparison question. "Compares" and "analogy" are two words that frequently appear in comparison questions. Here's an example of a comparison question:

The author's comparison of Malcolm X to Martin Luther King Jr. focuses primarily on:

- A. their stances on integration and violence against whites.
- B. their leadership of the civil rights movement.
- C. their roles in the Nation of Islam.
- D. their influences on future black leaders.

Two key points in the passage can help you answer this question: lines 11-15 and lines 20-22. If you refer to those sections, you'll be able to select choice **A** as the best answer to the question. You can also go through the list and eliminate incorrect answers. Choice B is incorrect because the author explicitly states that X's role in the civil rights movement was limited. Choice C is incorrect because the author never connects King to the Nation of Islam (to which King did not belong). Choice D doesn't work because the author never discusses King's influence on future leaders.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary questions ask you to decipher the meaning of a word given its context. Usually, these words will have multiple meanings, so you must decide the function of the word in the specific context.

You will immediately recognize these questions from their formulaic phrasing. They provide you with a line number along with an italicized word or short phrase in quotation marks, and then they ask you to provide the meaning of the word in context. For example,

As it is used in line 37, the word *inflammatory* most nearly means:

- A. revolutionary.
- B. flammable.
- C. violent.
- D. agitating.

To answer this particular vocabulary question (a rather difficult one), you must also know what the answer choices mean. This is where having a good vocabulary will help you on the ACT. In line 37, the author discusses how X's language was "angry and inflammatory." In the surrounding lines, you get a sense that X's speech was designed to provoke anger and disorder. Thus the correct answer to this question is **D** because "agitating" provides that sense of provocation. If you cannot figure out the answer directly, you should try to eliminate the other choices. Choice A, "revolutionary," is related to "inflammatory," but it is incorrect. You can think of it as a subset of inflammatory: revolutionary speech tends to be inflammatory, but inflammatory speech is not always revolutionary. "Revolutionary" contains a political connotation that "inflammatory" and "agitating" lack, so it is not as good an answer as D. Choice B, "flammable," applies to physical objects and means that something is capable of being lit on fire. While you may be tempted to choose

this answer because both the tested word and the answer choice contain the root “flam,” there is a crucial difference between their definitions. Choice C, “violent,” is incorrect because it lacks the element of provocation present in “inflammatory.”

The Humanities Passage

The Humanities passage will generally deal with a topic of cultural interest. You can think of it as a “softer” version of the Social Science passage, which tends to have more of an analytical and political angle. Still, the general approach to answering Social Science questions should apply to Humanities questions.

The Sample Passage

The following passage is adapted from the chapter “How I Came to Play Rip Van Winkle” in The Autobiography of Joseph Jefferson (© 1890, 1891 by the Century Company, New York).

The hope of entering the race for dramatic fame as an individual and single attraction never came into my head until, in 1858, I acted Asa Trenchard in *Our American Cousin*; but as
Line the curtain descended the first night on that remarkably
(5) successful play, visions of large type, foreign countries, and increased remuneration floated before me, and I resolved to be a star if I could. A resolution to this effect is easily made; its accomplishment is quite another matter.

Art has always been my sweetheart, and I have loved her for
(10) herself alone. I had fancied that our affection was mutual, so that when I failed as a star, which I certainly did, I thought she had jilted me. Not so. I wronged her. She only reminded me that I had taken too great a liberty, and that if I expected to win her I must press my suit with more patience. Checked, but
(15) undaunted in the resolve, my mind dwelt upon my vision, and I still indulged in day-dreams of the future.

During these delightful reveries it came up before me that in acting Asa Trenchard I had, for the first time in my life on the stage, spoken a pathetic speech; and though I did not look at
(20) the audience during the time I was acting—for that is dreadful—I felt that they both laughed and cried. I had before this often made my audience smile, but never until now had I moved them to tears. This to me novel accomplishment was delightful, and in casting about for a new character my mind was ever dwelling on
(25) reproducing an effect where humor would be so closely allied to pathos that smiles and tears should mingle with each other. Where

- could I get one? There had been many written, and as I looked back into the dramatic history of the past a long line of lovely ghosts loomed up before me, passing as in a procession: Job
- (30) Thornberry, Bob Tyke, Frank Ostland, Zekiel Homespun, and a host of departed heroes “with martial stalk went by my watch.” Charming fellows all, but not for me, I felt I could not do them justice. Besides, they were too human. I was looking for a myth—something intangible and impossible. But he would not come.
- (35) Time went on, and still with no result.
- During the summer of 1859 I arranged to board with my family at a queer old Dutch farmhouse in Paradise Valley, at the foot of Pocono Mountain, in Pennsylvania. A ridge of hills covered with tall hemlocks surrounds the vale, and numerous trout-streams wind
- (40) through the meadows and tumble over the rocks. Stray farms are scattered through the valley, and the few old Dutchmen and their families who till the soil were born upon it; there and only there they have ever lived. The valley harmonized with me and our resources. The scene was wild, the air was fresh, and the board
- (45) was cheap. What could the light heart and purse of a poor actor ask for more than this?
- On one of those long rainy days that always render the country so dull I had climbed to the loft of the barn, and lying upon the hay was reading that delightful book *The Life and*
- (50) *Letters of Washington Irving*. I had gotten well into the volume, and was much interested in it, when to my surprise I came upon a passage which said that he had seen me at Laura Keene’s theater as Goldfinch in Holcroft’s comedy of *The Road to Ruin*, and that I reminded him of my father “in look, gesture, size, and make.”
- (55) Till then I was not aware that he had ever seen me. I was comparatively obscure, and to find myself remembered and written of by such a man gave me a thrill of pleasure I can never forget. I put down the book, and lay there thinking how proud I was, and ought to be, at the revelation of this compliment. What an
- (60) incentive to a youngster like me to go on.
- And so I thought to myself, “Washington Irving, the author of *The Sketch-Book*, in which is the quaint story of Rip Van Winkle.” Rip Van Winkle! There was to me magic in the sound of the name as I repeated it. Why, was not this the very character I
- (65) wanted? An American story by an American author was surely just

the theme suited to an American actor.

The Questions

As we stated above, your approach to questions on the Humanities passage should be essentially the same as your approach to Social Science questions. For that reason, in this section we'll skip most of the commentary on the question types and go straight to the examples.

To start with, we'll give you a rundown of the types of questions that appear most frequently on the Humanities passage, in decreasing order:

1. Specific Detail
2. Inference
3. Vocabulary
4. Main Idea
5. Comparison

Specific Detail

Specific detail questions on the Humanities passage are exactly the same as on the rest of the test. Because you should already have a good grasp of how to answer these questions, we'll just give you some examples of questions that could accompany the passage above.

According to the passage, Washington Irving saw the author perform:

- A. Asa Trenchard in *Our American Cousin*.
- B. Goldfinch in *The Road to Ruin*.
- C. Rip Van Winkle in *The Sketch-Book*.
- D. Job Thornberry.

The author considers the following to be attractions of Paradise Valley EXCEPT:

- F. the fresh air.
- G. the untamed scenery.
- H. the long rainy days.
- J. the inexpensive board.

As you already know, the best way to answer these questions is to read the passage carefully enough the first time around that you either know the answer, or can quickly find the answer in the passage. If you made marginal notes and underlines during your preliminary reading, you will be able to refer easily to the relevant sections of the passage for these questions.

The correct answers to these questions are **B** and **H**, respectively.

Inference

By now, you should have a good idea of how to answer inference questions. An inference question on this sample Humanities passage could look like this:

It can be reasonably inferred from the passage that the character of Rip Van Winkle is:

- A. charming.
- B. very human.
- C. like Washington Irving's father.
- D. mythical.

This inference question is slightly complicated because Rip Van Winkle is mentioned in the last paragraph of the passage, but you need to refer to the third paragraph in order to answer the question. In the third paragraph, the author describes the types of characters he is unable to play and the type of character that he would like to play. The inference you must make to answer this question is that Rip Van Winkle represents an ideal character for the author and therefore must fit the description in Paragraph 3: “a myth.” The correct answer to this question is **D**.

Vocabulary

The Humanities passage often contains a number of vocabulary questions, so be on the lookout. Vocabulary questions on the passage above could look like this:

As it is used in line 19, the word *pathetic* most nearly means:

- A. moving.
- B. pitiful.
- C. contemptible.
- D. weak.

As it is used in line 44, the word *board* most nearly means:

- F. a rectangular piece of wood.
- G. a group of people with managerial powers.
- H. to walk onto a ship or aircraft.
- J. to lodge and eat at an inn or residence.

These vocabulary questions deal with words that have multiple meanings. They ask you to decide which meaning best suits the context. When you see vocabulary questions like these, go to the indicated line number without even looking at the answers. Read the relevant sentence, ignoring the tested word and coming up with a different word to fill its place. This new word will be a synonym for the tested word. If you can't come up with a word by looking at the individual sentence, read the sentences around it as well. Once you have your synonym, go back to the question and compare your synonym to the answers. When you've found a match, you have your answer. If you're at a loss for words when using this strategy, you can substitute the answer choices (as long as you know what they mean) into the sentence to see whether they make sense.

If you employ the strategy above, you should see that choices **A** and **J**, respectively, make the most sense in the sentences and thus are correct.

Main Idea

Main idea questions tend to accompany Humanities passages that are more analytical or journalistic in tone than the sample passage above. With anecdotal passages like this, it's unlikely that you'll be asked to identify the main point of the passage or of a paragraph—the anecdote itself is usually the point. If you do face a main idea question, use the same strategy that we covered under the “Social Science” passage.

Comparison

Though some Humanities passages may be accompanied by more than one comparison question, this particular passage is not very fact-heavy, so it likely would not have any comparison questions. If a comparison question did appear with this sample passage, it might look like this:

In the second paragraph of the passage, the author compares art to:

- A. a profession.

- B. a sweetheart.
- C. a star.
- D. a daydream.

The comparison in this paragraph is actually a metaphor, in which the author doesn't explicitly say that art is *like* something, but says that it *is* something that it clearly isn't. You don't need to know this literary term or any other to answer this question. The first sentence of the paragraph ("Art has always been my sweetheart") should make the answer to this comparison question pretty clear. The correct answer is **B**.

Natural Science

On the continuum of Reading Test passages, the Prose Fiction passage would be on one extreme, the Social Science and Humanities passages in the middle, and the Natural Science passage at the other extreme end. The Natural Science passage is heavy on scientific facts, argument, cause-effect logic, and details.

The Sample Passage

The following passage is adapted from an essay on Lamarckian evolutionary theory.

For many centuries, scientists and scholars did not question the origin of life on Earth. They accepted the authority of the Book of Genesis, which describes God as the creator of all life.

Line This belief, known as creationism, was supported by observations
(5) made by scientists about the everyday world. For instance, organisms seemed well adapted to their environments and ways of life, as if created specifically to fill their roles; moreover, most organisms did not seem to change in any observable manner over time. About two centuries ago, scientists began accumulating
(10) evidence that cast doubt on the theory of creationism. As scientists began to explore remote parts of the natural world, they discovered seemingly bizarre forms of life. They also discovered the fossils of animals that no longer existed. These discoveries led scientists to develop new theories about the
(15) creation of species.

Count George-Louis Leclerc de Buffon was an early pioneer of these new theories, proposing that the species he and his contemporaries saw had changed over time from their original forms. Jean Baptiste Lamarck was another early pioneer. Lamarck
(20) proposed ideas involving the mechanisms of use and disuse and inheritance of acquired traits to explain how species might change over time. These theories, though in many ways incorrect

and incomplete, paved the way for Charles Darwin, the father of the theory of evolution.

- (25) Although he built on the work of his mentor Leclerc, Lamarck often receives credit for taking the first step toward modern evolutionary theory because he proposed a mechanism explaining how the gradual change of species could occur. Lamarck elaborated on the concept of “change over time,” saying that life originated
- (30) in simple forms and became more complex. In his 1809 publication of *Philosophie Zoologique*, he describes the two part mechanism by which change was gradually introduced into species and passed down through generations. His theory is referred to as the theory of transformation or, simply, Lamarckism.
- (35) The classic example used to explain the concept of use and disuse is the elongated neck of the giraffe. According to Lamarck’s theory, a giraffe could, over a lifetime of straining to reach food on high branches, develop an elongated neck. Although he referred to “a natural tendency toward perfection,”
- (40) Lamarck could never offer an explanation of how this development could occur, thus injuring his theory. Lamarck also used the toes of water birds as an example in support of his theory. He hypothesized that water birds developed elongated, webbed toes after years of straining their toes to swim through water.
- (45) These two examples attempted to demonstrate how use could change an animal’s trait. Lamarck also believed that disuse could cause a trait to become reduced in an animal. The wings of penguins, he believed, are smaller than those of other birds because penguins do not fly.
- (50) The second part of Lamarck’s theory involved the inheritance of acquired traits. Lamarck believed that traits changed or acquired over an individual animal’s lifetime could be passed down to its offspring. Giraffes that had acquired long necks would have offspring with long necks rather than the short necks
- (55) their parents were born with. This type of inheritance, sometimes called Lamarckian inheritance, has since been disproved by the discovery of hereditary genetics.
- An extension of Lamarck’s ideas of inheritance that has stood the test of time, however, is the idea that evolutionary
- (60) change takes place gradually and constantly. Lamarck studied ancient seashells and noticed that the older they were, the

simpler they appeared. From this, he concluded that species started out simple and consistently moved toward complexity or, as he said, “closer to perfection.”

The Questions

Since Natural Science passages contain so many facts, many of the questions on this passage will test whether you know these facts. These questions will come in many guises besides the standard specific detail format. For example, some questions will ask you to build on information in the passage by making you identify cause-effect relationships or comparisons. Here’s a breakdown of the question types commonly asked on the Natural Science passage, in order of decreasing frequency:

1. Specific Detail
2. Inference
3. Cause-Effect
4. Comparison
5. Main Idea
6. Vocabulary
7. Point of View

Despite the scientific jargon that permeates this passage, in answering the questions you should treat the passage as you would the two other nonfiction passages. In this section, we’ll give you examples of questions that could be asked on the sample passage above, so you can start getting familiar with the Natural Science section.

Specific Detail

Specific Detail, the most common question type on the ACT Reading Test, is also a biggie on the Natural Science passage. For the passage above, you could see questions like these:

The theory that describes God as the creator of all life is called:

- A. creationism.
- B. Lamarckism.
- C. the theory of transformation.
- D. the Book of Genesis.

According to the passage, the giraffe is a classic example of Lamarck’s theory because of its:

- F. webbed toes.
- G. elongated neck.
- H. small wings.
- J. coloration.

According to the passage, Leclerc proposed the theory:

- A. of the mechanisms of use and disuse.
- B. of inherited traits.
- C. that giraffes developed elongated necks over time.
- D. that species changed over time from their original forms.

As we’ve said many times by now, the best method for answering these questions correctly is simply to refer back to the passage. If you’ve made marginal notes and underlines, you’ll have an easier time referring back to the passage and getting the right answer.

The correct answer (choice **A**) to the first question is conveniently located in the first three lines of the passage. For the second question, look to paragraph 5, where the author discusses the example of the giraffe. The first sentence of paragraph 5 reveals choice **G** to be correct. When answering the third question, you should refer to the discussion of Leclerc. In the first mention of him (in paragraph 3), you'll discover that choice **D** is the correct answer to the question.

Inference

Inference questions on the Natural Science passage are the same as they are elsewhere on the test. For example,

It is reasonable to infer from this passage that Lamarck's most lasting work on a theory of evolution is his hypothesis that:

- A.** species inherit traits acquired by their parents.
- B.** the forms of animals change over time.
- C.** giraffes develop long necks from straining to reach high tree branches.
- D.** species evolve gradually and constantly over time into more complex forms.

The answer to this question is in the first sentence of the last paragraph: "An extension of Lamarck's ideas of inheritance that has stood the test of time, however, is the idea that evolutionary change takes place gradually and constantly." The phrase "stood the test of time" indicates that this particular aspect of Lamarck's work is still relevant today. Thus the correct answer to this question is **D**.

Cause-Effect

Cause-effect questions appear pretty frequently on Natural Science passages because of the nature of their topics. Most Natural Science passages, including the sample one above, discuss cause-effect relationships that appear in nature. For example,

According to the passage, Lamarck proposed that the changing form of animals was a result of:

- A.** giraffes stretching their necks to reach high branches.
- B.** a natural tendency toward perfection and the inheritance of acquired traits.
- C.** organisms being created to fill specific roles.
- D.** hereditary genetics.

This particular cause-effect question also tests your understanding of one of the main points of the passage, as the main point happens to be a cause-effect relationship. If you understood the passage, you should be able to identify the correct answer as **B**. Choice A deals specifically with Lamarck's example of giraffes, while the question calls for a general explanation for all animals. Choice C is the belief of creationism, and Choice D would not be discovered until after Lamarck's time.

Comparison

You will probably see one comparison question with the Natural Science passage. As we stated before, comparison questions usually accompany passages that contain a lot of factual information, and the Natural Science passage fits the bill.

According to the passage, the elongated neck of the giraffe is analogous to:

- A.** the small wings of the penguin.
- B.** the large wings of most birds.

- C. the webbed toes of water birds.
- D. the inheritance of elongated necks.

To answer this question, ask yourself what the giraffe's elongated neck can be compared to. In paragraph 5, the author names both the giraffe's neck and the water bird's toes as examples of the concept of use, so the best answer is C. To make sure, you can eliminate the other answers. Choice A deals with the concept of disuse, so it is not analogous to the giraffe's neck. Choice B is never discussed in the passage. Choice D is not an analogous situation; it is a separate aspect of Lamarck's theory.

Main Idea

Main idea questions are always pretty straightforward. The tricky part is making sure that you read carefully enough to understand the main point of the passage or of a paragraph within it. Try this example:

The main point of the passage is to:

- A. describe Lamarck's ideas on evolution and their relevance to modern theories of evolution.
- B. explain how animals change through the mechanisms of use and disuse and through the inheritance of acquired traits.
- C. discuss alternative theories to creationism.
- D. show how Lamarck built upon the work of Leclerc.

If you read the passage carefully, you should be able to eliminate choices C and D, as they are clearly not the main focus of the passage. You may get stuck trying to decide between choices A and B, but you should remember that the question asks for *the passage's* main point, and not for *Lamarck's* main point. Remembering that, you should be able to identify the correct answer, A.

Vocabulary

You will not see many vocabulary questions accompanying the Natural Science passage. The vocabulary questions that do appear on this passage may ask you to identify an unfamiliar scientific word from its context. You can employ the strategies described for vocabulary questions on the Humanities and Social Science passages to answer vocabulary questions here.

Point of View

Point-of-view questions are extremely rare on the Natural Science passage. If you see one, it will most likely ask you to identify the point of view of the passage's author. For example,

With which of the following statements would the author most likely agree?

- A. Most scientists today believe in creationism.
- B. Leclerc, not Lamarck, should be credited with taking the first step toward modern evolutionary theory.
- C. Lamarck's theory that life evolves from simple to complex forms is still important today.
- D. Today, giraffes have long necks because early giraffes did a lot of stretching.

The author of this sample passage does not seem to hold strong views on -Lamarck, but it is still possible to eliminate wrong answers here and correctly answer the question. Choices A and B are incorrect because there is little focus on them in the passage: both creationism and Leclerc are mentioned, but only briefly. Choice C looks like the right choice because the author states in the last paragraph that this aspect of Lamarck's theory "has stood the test of time." You can make sure that Choice C is correct by eliminating D, which Lamarck, not the author, believes.