Chapter 14

Writing and Language: Expression of Ideas

As we mentioned in Chapter 13, questions on the SAT Writing and Language Test fall into two broad categories: (1) Expression of Ideas and (2) Standard English Conventions. Here in Chapter 14, we'll go into more detail about the first of these two categories, using some of the sample Writing and Language questions also found in Chapter 16. That chapter contains additional samples as well as explanations for the answer to each question. Chapter 15 covers Standard English Conventions.

Expression of Ideas: The Art of Writing

In Chapter 13, we noted that Expression of Ideas was the Writing and Language category focused on refining the substance and quality of the writer's message. Specifically, Expression of Ideas questions focus on development, organization, and language use in relation to the writer's purpose. Collectively, these questions address the rhetorical aspects of the passages on the test. You may recall that in Chapter 10, we defined "rhetoric" as, roughly, the study of the art of writing (and speaking) and the application of that art in practice. When you answer the rhetorically oriented Expression of Ideas questions, you're using your knowledge of and skill in writing to make each passage clearer, sharper, richer, and more engaging.

Expression of Ideas includes a wide range of rhetorical question types. Within Development, Organization, and Effective Language Use are a number of specific testing points that we'll explain in turn. Broken down, the Expression of Ideas category consists of these elements:

▶ **Development:** Refining the content of a passage to achieve the writer's purpose, including:

— *Proposition:* Adding, revising, or retaining (leaving unchanged) thesis statements, topic sentences, claims, and the like — the "main ideas" of a passage or paragraph

— *Support:* Adding, revising, or retaining material that supports a passage's points or claims

— *Focus:* Adding, revising, retaining, or deleting material on the basis of relevance to the purpose (e.g., deleting an irrelevant sentence)

— *Quantitative information:* Using data from informational graphics (tables, graphs, charts, and the like) to enhance the accuracy, precision, and overall effectiveness of a passage

▶ **Organization**: Improving the structure of a passage to enhance logic and cohesion, including:

— *Logical sequence:* Ensuring that material is presented in a passage in the most logical place and order

— *Introductions, conclusions, and transitions:* Improving the openings and closings of paragraphs and passages and the connections between and among information and ideas in a passage

▶ **Effective Language Use**: Revising text to improve written expression and to achieve the writer's purpose, including:

— *Precision:* Making word choice more exact or appropriate for the context

— *Concision:* Making word choice more economical and eliminating wordiness and redundancy

REMEMBER

As you can see from the descriptions of these three subcategories, Expression of Ideas questions require you to have a strong understanding of the passage as a whole.

— *Style and tone:* Making word choice consistent with the overall style and tone of a passage or accomplishing some particular rhetorical goal

— *Syntax:* Combining sentences to improve the flow of language or to accomplish some particular rhetorical goal

In the following sections, we'll examine the contents of each of these subcategories in turn.

DEVELOPMENT

Development questions on the Writing and Language Test get to the heart of the substance of the passage. They're the questions that focus most directly on the content of the writer's message. (Note, though, that you won't need background knowledge of the passage's topic to answer the questions; all the information you'll need will be in the passage itself.) When you answer a Development question, you'll be looking for ways to enhance the writer's message by clarifying the main points, working with supporting details, sharpening the focus, and — in some passages — using data from informational graphics such as tables, graphs, and charts to make the passage more accurate, more precise, and generally more effective. Let's go into a little more detail on each of these points.

Proposition

Proposition questions require you to think about the "big ideas" in the passage and how they can be refined to better clarify and structure the

writer's message. The forms these big ideas take vary from passage to passage, but there are several common types: *Thesis statements* express the main idea of the overall passage. *Topic sentences* are used to help structure and clarify the focus of paragraphs. These often (but not always) come at the beginning of a paragraph and serve to preview (and limit) what's to come. *Claims* and *counterclaims* are features specific to arguments. A claim is an assertion that the writer is trying to convey, such as the writer's position on a debate or issue, while a counterclaim is someone else's assertion that differs from, and sometimes opposes, the assertion the writer is making. (You might think of claims and counterclaims this way: In the formula "While many people believe *x*, *y* is actually the case," *y* is the writer's claim and *x* is the counterclaim the writer is arguing against.)

Writing and Language Test questions won't always use words and phrases such as "claim" or "topic sentence," but it's helpful to use them here to get a sense of the focus of the Proposition questions. Proposition questions will typically ask you to add or revise topic sentences, thesis statements, and so on in order to clarify and sharpen the writer's points or to leave them as is if the original version presented in the passage is better than any of the alternatives offered.

Support

Support questions are basically the flip side of Proposition questions. When you answer a Support question, you'll be thinking about how best to flesh out and make more effective or convincing the writer's big ideas. Support comes in many forms, but among the most common are descriptive details, facts, figures, and examples. The questions will typically use a word such as "support" and indicate what idea in the passage the writer wants to develop. You'll be asked to add or revise supporting material in order to strengthen a writer's points or to leave supporting material unchanged if the original version in the passage is the best way to accomplish the writer's goal.

Focus

Focus questions are mainly about relevance in relation to the writer's purpose. Purpose is a key consideration here because while some questions will ask you to remove information or an idea that's clearly irrelevant to the topic, the harder questions of this type will offer a detail that's loosely but not sufficiently tied to the point that the writer is making or that goes off on an interesting but ultimately unhelpful tangent. Focus questions are often about recognizing and deleting material that's irrelevant or only vaguely connected to the writer's aim, and these types of questions will often identify a sentence and ask you whether it should be kept or deleted. Focus questions, however, can also be about adding or retaining relevant information and ideas, so you shouldn't assume that every time you see a Focus question the answer will be to remove something. For these types of questions, it's especially important to consider the larger context of a particular paragraph or of the passage as a

REMEMBER

Proposition questions focus on the "big ideas" in the passage and ask you, for instance, to add or revise thesis statements or topic sentences in order to clarify the writer's points.

REMEMBER

Whereas Proposition questions focus on the big ideas, Support questions get into the details of how the writer backs up the big ideas with evidence, examples, and the like.

REMEMBER

Some Focus questions may ask you to determine what information is irrelevant or insufficiently connected to the writer's purpose. Other Focus questions may ask you to determine what information should be added or retained.

whole; without an understanding of the goal the writer is trying to achieve, it's very difficult to make informed decisions about relevance.

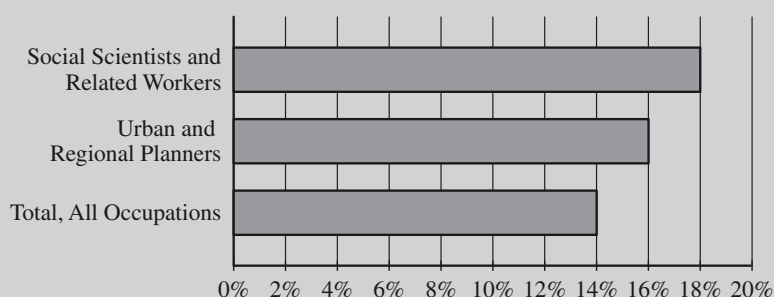**Quantitative Information**

We talked at length in the discussion of the Reading Test about comprehension questions related to informational graphics. Although the Writing and Language Test also includes a number of such graphics, the focus of questions about them is significantly different. On both tests, you'll have to read and interpret informational graphics, but on the Writing and Language Test you'll have to integrate text and graphics in a more direct way than on the Reading Test. Let's cruise through an example from a passage on traffic congestion. (As with the other samples in this chapter, the full passage text, question, and answer explanation can be found in Chapter 16.)

[. . .] Transportation planners perform critical work within the broader field of urban and regional planning. As of 2010, there were approximately 40,300 urban and regional planners employed in the United States. The United States Bureau of Labor Statistics forecasts steady job growth in this field, **11** projecting that 16 percent of new jobs in all occupations will be related to urban and regional planning. Population growth and concerns about environmental sustainability are expected to spur the need for transportation planning professionals.

Urban and Regional Planners
Percent Increase in Employment, Projected 2010–2020

11. Which choice completes the sentence with accurate data based on the graph?

A) NO CHANGE

B) warning, however, that job growth in urban and regional planning will slow to 14 percent by 2020.

C) predicting that employment of urban and regional planners will increase 16 percent between 2010 and 2020.

D) indicating that 14 to 18 percent of urban and regional planning positions will remain unfilled.

To answer this question, you need to understand both the passage and the accompanying graph. The question directs you to the underlined portion of the passage excerpt above and asks you to complete the sentence with accurate data from the graphic. (Unless told otherwise by a question, you should assume that the graphic itself is accurate, so you don't need to worry about whether you're working with "true" information.)

The basic logic of the question is similar to that of other questions on the test that include a "NO CHANGE" option: If you think the original version in the passage is the best, select choice A; if you think that one of the other choices better meets the goal set out in the question, pick that one instead.

In this case, the original version doesn't accurately capture what's in the graph. The graph's title lets us know that the bars represent projected increases in employment between 2010 and 2020. (These increases are "projected" because at the time the graph was put together, actual data on those years weren't available.) The original version (choice A) is inaccurate because the graph indicates that employment in "all occupations" is expected to increase 14 percent between 2010 and 2020, not that 16 percent of new jobs in all occupations during that period will be related to urban and regional planning. So we have to look at the other choices for a better option. Choice C proves to be the best answer because the middle bar in the graph indicates that the employment of urban and regional planners is expected to increase 16 percent over the indicated time period. As is true on the Reading Test, you won't have to use math skills to answer a question such as this; you'll just be "reading" the graphic and locating and interpreting the data.

While many Quantitative Information questions will be like this one, you may come across other styles. For instance, you may be asked to replace a general description with a more precise one based on numerical data. (To take a simple example, the preceding passage might simply have said that there's expected to be "a great deal of growth in the employment of urban and regional planners," and you would replace that vague assertion with the fact that growth is expected to be 16 percent.) You may also be told that the writer is considering adding a particular graphic to the passage and asked to decide whether doing so would help make a particular point. In any case, you'll need to have a good understanding of the graphic and be able to draw a meaningful connection between the graphic and the passage.

ORGANIZATION

Questions about organization ask you to consider whether the placement or sequence of material in a passage could be made more logical or whether the openings and closings of a passage and its paragraphs and the transitions tying information and ideas together could be improved. We'll now examine each of these types.

REMEMBER

Pick choice A, "NO CHANGE," if you think the original version presented in the passage provides the most accurate description of data from the graph.

REMEMBER

Quantitative Information questions may come in a few different forms, but all of them require you to establish a meaningful connection between graphic(s) and passage.

Logical Sequence

If you're recounting an event, you'll typically want to present things in the order in which they happened, and if you're presenting new information or ideas, you'll want to follow a sequence that makes things easy for the reader to understand. Logical Sequence questions address these sorts of issues. One common question of this type directs you to consider the numbered sentences in a paragraph and to decide whether one of those sentences is out of place. In this situation, you'll identify the best placement for the given sentence within the paragraph in terms of logic and cohesion. If you think the sentence is OK in its present location, you'll choose an option such as "where it is now" (similar to the "NO CHANGE" choice found in many other questions); otherwise, you'll pick one of the alternative placements, which are generally phrased in terms of "before" or "after" another numbered sentence (e.g., "before sentence 1," "after sentence 3"). Other questions may ask you to find the most logical place for a sentence within the passage as a whole or to add at a logical point a new sentence that's not already in the passage; other variations are possible as well. The basic approach is the same in every case: After reading and considering the passage, figure out which order or placement makes the passage the most logical and cohesive.

Introductions, Conclusions, and Transitions

Introductions, conclusions, and transitions are, in a sense, the connective tissue that holds a text together. They help orient the reader, generate interest, serve as reminders of the purpose and point of a text, and build conceptual bridges between information and ideas. Questions about introductions, conclusions, and transitions on the Writing and Language Test ask you to think about how to make the reader's movement through a passage smoother and more meaningful. You may, for instance, be asked to add or revise the opening or closing of a passage or paragraph or to incorporate or replace a word, phrase, or sentence in order to create or clarify the logical link within or between sentences and paragraphs. Again, you often have a "NO CHANGE" option, which you should select if you think the original version found in the passage is better than any of the offered alternatives. Once more, context is critical: You'll need to read more than just the tested sentence to know what relationship the writer is trying to establish between and among ideas.

A note on transitions: Many questions about transitions focus on those critical words and phrases that signal the logical relationship of information and ideas within and between sentences. If you see "for instance" in a text, you know that you're getting what the writer hopes is a clarifying example of a general point; if you see "however," you know that the writer is trying to tell you that something is actually the case despite what might seem to be the case. Becoming comfortable with the function of common transition words and phrases such as "by contrast," "additionally," "in spite of that," "thus," and the like will be of great value in answering questions about transitions. Still (there's another one of those words!), not all transitions can be reduced to a single word or phrase,

so some questions on the Writing and Language Test may ask you to add or revise (or retain) a full-sentence transition between sentences or paragraphs.

EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE USE

A whole category of questions, discussed in more detail in the next chapter, deals with applying the conventions of standard written English. Effective Language Use questions, by contrast, focus on using language to accomplish particular rhetorical goals. Questions in this subcategory deal with improving the precision and economy of expression, making sure that the style and tone of a passage are appropriate and consistent, putting sentences together to make ideas flow more smoothly, and other specified aims. In the following discussion, we'll examine the ways in which Effective Language Use is tested on the SAT.

Precision

Vague language is usually sorta bad. Put more, er, precisely, vague language is imprecise and often fails to make clear the point the writer is trying to convey or, worse, confuses the reader by using language that just isn't appropriate to a particular situation. Precision questions on the Writing and Language Test generally require you to replace vague language with something more specific or to recognize that a particular word or phrase doesn't make sense in a given context.

If you're familiar with the 1987 movie *The Princess Bride*, you probably remember the scene where Inigo Montoya tells Vizzini, who has a fondness for using the word "inconceivable" in inappropriate ways, that "I do not think it means what you think it means." Many Precision questions are much like this. When answering them, you'll have to consider whether a particular word or phrase in the passage means what is intended in the context in which it appears or whether another word or phrase should be used instead.

Here's an example, taken from a humanities passage about painter Dong Kingman (available in full in Chapter 16).

> [. . .] As Kingman developed as a painter, his works were often compared to paintings by Chinese landscape artists dating back to CE 960, a time when a strong tradition of landscape painting emerged in Chinese art. Kingman, however, **16** vacated from that tradition in a number of ways, most notably in that he chose to focus not on natural landscapes, such as mountains and rivers, but on cities. [. . .]

16. A) NO CHANGE
    B) evacuated
    C) departed
    D) retired

All four of the tested words have something to do with "leaving," but only one of them makes good contextual sense. It's not "vacated" — the version already in the passage — because while you might vacate, or leave, a place, you wouldn't "vacate" from a tradition. Similar problems occur if you try to use "evacuated" or "retired" in that context. Only "departed" (choice C) has both the correct general sense and says what it means to say. We're confident that Inigo would approve.

While many Precision questions take this approach, other forms are possible. For example, you may simply be presented with language that is vague or otherwise unclear and asked to sharpen it by using more specific, precise phrasing.

Concision

Sometimes language can be repetitive, duplicative, and say the same thing more than once. Concision questions will ask you to recognize such cases — like the one in the preceding sentence — and to eliminate wordy or redundant language. Sometimes this repetitiveness will be in the underlined portion of the passage itself, but other times you'll have to recognize that the writer made the same point elsewhere in a sentence or passage and that the underlined portion should be deleted for the sake of economy. You'll want to avoid automatically picking the shortest answer in every case, though, because there's such a thing as being too concise, and sometimes a particular phrasing is just too "telegraphic" to be clear or to include all the necessary information.

Style and Tone

Sometimes a writer will lose track of the "voice" he or she is trying to establish in a piece of writing and use language that's "super casual" or that "embodies a stultifying degree of ponderousness" that's not in keeping with the level of formality (or informality) established in the rest of the passage. One common type of Style and Tone question on the Writing and Language Test asks you to recognize such cases and to revise the passage as needed to better maintain a consistent tone. To answer such questions, you'll need to have a clear sense of the writer's voice and be able to identify language that fits in with that voice. Across the test, passages exhibit a range of tones, meaning that sometimes a very casual or a highly formal choice may, in fact, be the right one in context.

This question type addresses more than just tone, however. A question may specify a particular stylistic effect that the writer wants to create and ask you to determine which choice best achieves that goal. One such approach involves stylistic patterns. Maybe the writer has used a series of sentence fragments (incomplete sentences) for emphasis, and you'll be expected to recognize that only one of the four answer choices maintains that pattern. You might instinctively want a complete sentence since we're often told that fragments are "wrong," but in this case the goal specified in the question

REMEMBER

Concision — stating an idea briefly but also clearly and accurately — is a valued characteristic of writing in both college and the workforce.

PRACTICE AT

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The tone of the passages on the Writing and Language Test may range from very casual to very formal. You may be asked to identify instances in which a writer deviates from the established tone.

should override that instinct. Fragments aren't the only kind of pattern that a writer might establish to create a particular effect. Perhaps the writer wants to set up a series of short, descriptive sentences ("The wind blew. The trees waved. The leaves spun."), and only one of the four options ("The onlookers shivered.") extends that pattern. We've said it before, but it's true here again: The context provided by the passage (and often a goal named in the question itself) should guide you as you select your answer to such questions.

Syntax

"Syntax" is a fancy term for the arrangement of words into phrases, clauses, and sentences. While there are grammatical "rules" (really, standard practices or conventions, as we'll see in the next chapter) for syntax that most well-edited writing usually follows, what we're talking about here is the arrangement of words to achieve specific rhetorical purposes or effects. Syntax questions will ask you to consider how two (or sometimes more) sentences can be combined — blended together — to improve flow and cohesion or to achieve some other end, such as placing emphasis on a particular element. In some cases, you'll be combining two (or sometimes more) full sentences; in others, you'll identify the choice that creates the best link between sentences. You won't be changing the meaning of the original text, just connecting ideas to achieve a particular writerly goal.

The following example will give you a good sense of the format. (The full passage, along with this and other questions and their answer explanations, can, again, be found in Chapter 16.)

> [. . .] During his career, Kingman exhibited his work
>
> **21** internationally. He garnered much acclaim. [. . .]
>
> 21. Which choice most effectively combines the sentences at the underlined portion?
>   A) internationally, and Kingman also garnered
>   B) internationally; from exhibiting, he garnered
>   C) internationally but garnered
>   D) internationally, garnering

There's nothing grammatically wrong with having two separate sentences here, but the writing is rather choppy, and a good writer or editor might reasonably want to combine the two sentences to create a clearer, more fluid single thought. The best answer here is choice D, which — importantly, without changing the original meaning — creates a logical, smooth connection between the two ideas (Kingman exhibited his work and Kingman earned recognition). Note how choice C is also grammatical but creates an illogical proposition: Despite exhibiting his work internationally, Kingman garnered

acclaim. Note also how choices A and B really don't do anything to improve the sentence flow. Choice A creates two partially redundant independent clauses (". . . Kingman exhibited . . . and Kingman also garnered . . .") and doesn't make clear that the exhibitions were what won Kingman the acclaim. Choice B does draw that connection but, in a clunky way, repeats the idea of exhibiting (". . . Kingman exhibited . . .; from exhibiting . . ."). When you answer Syntax questions, you'll have to think less about what works from a technical, grammatical standpoint and more about what creates the most effective connections between and among phrases, clauses, and ideas.

CHAPTER 14 RECAP

The Expression of Ideas category of Writing and Language Test questions focuses on the rhetorical aspects of writing. In answering these questions, you'll have to revise passages as a writer or editor would, considering the issues of how best to develop the topic and the points the writer is attempting to convey; how to organize information and ideas to create a logical, smooth progression; and how to use language purposefully to achieve particular results. These questions will often specify a goal that the writer is seeking to achieve, and you should use this information, along with a full understanding of the passage and its intended purpose, to make the best choice in each case.