

Chapter 8

About the SAT Reading Test

Whatever your postsecondary plans, reading will be a central part of them. Even as other forms of media, such as audiovisual formats, have gained an important and valuable place in education, the written word remains a vital tool in conveying information and ideas. Whether you're taking a course in literature, history, physics, or accounting, your ability to read and understand text — often largely or wholly on your own — will be critical to doing well in the class. The SAT Reading Test is designed to assess how ready you are to read and interpret the very kinds of texts you're likely to encounter in college and career.

The passages (reading selections) on the Reading Test vary in genre, purpose, subject, and complexity in order to assess your skill in comprehending a diverse range of texts like those you'll come across in many different postsecondary courses. The Reading Test will also include a pair of related passages, with some questions asking you to draw connections between the two selections. Some passages will also include one or more informational graphics, such as tables, graphs, and charts, and you'll be expected both to understand those graphics and to link the information contained in them with information found in the passage.

You'll be answering questions that deal with both what's stated and what's implied in these texts — that is, what authors say directly and what they suggest but don't come right out and say explicitly. Some questions deal with the information and ideas in passages, while others focus on structure, purpose, and the craft of writing; still others ask you to draw connections between pairs of related passages or between a passage and an informational graphic or graphics. As a group, these questions require you to use the same sorts of close reading skills you're already using in your high school classes and that are important to have in order to be successful in college courses and workforce training programs.

The rest of this chapter is an overview of the Reading Test. Additional information about the question types can be found in the next three chapters.



REMEMBER

The basic aim of the SAT Reading Test is to determine whether you're able to comprehend the many types of challenging literary and informational texts you're likely to encounter in college and career.

Reading Test Passages

The passages on the Reading Test are as varied as those you're reading now for your high school classes. Some are literary in nature, while others are primarily informational. They differ in purpose as well: Some tell a story, while others share information, explain a process or concept, or try to convince you to accept or do something. They also cover a wide range of subjects. Some passages you may find particularly challenging, while others are more straightforward. In addition, some passages are paired, while others are accompanied by one or more informational graphics.

Here are some of the key features of Reading Test passages.

- ▶ **Genre:** The Reading Test includes both literary and informational passages. Literary passages are primarily concerned with telling a story, recounting an event or experience, or reflecting on an idea or concept. On the Reading Test, the main literary passage is a fiction selection, although other passages may also have literary elements, such as figurative language or imagery. Informational passages, as the name implies, are mostly concerned with conveying information and ideas.
- ▶ **Purpose:** As noted above, some Reading Test passages are mainly focused on telling a story, recounting an event or experience, or reflecting on an idea or concept. Other passages present new information and ideas or explain a process or concept. Still other passages are best described as arguments. Their goal is to convince readers to believe something or to take some sort of action through the use of evidence, reasoning, and/or stylistic and persuasive techniques.
- ▶ **Subject:** The Reading Test includes passages in three major subject areas: U.S. and world literature, history/social studies, and science. Literature passages are selections from classic and more recent works of fiction by authors from the United States and around the world. History/social studies passages include selections from fields such as economics, sociology, and political science. These passages also include selections from U.S. founding documents (e.g., the Declaration of Independence and the Gettysburg Address) and similar texts about civic and political life written by authors from the United States and across the globe. Science passages deal with information, concepts, and experiments in the fields of earth science, biology, chemistry, and physics.
- ▶ **Complexity:** The reading challenge posed by the passages on the test varies. Some passages are relatively straightforward. They may, for example, have a very clear purpose, present a fairly small amount of information, and use familiar language. Other passages, by contrast, are more complex. They may have multiple levels of meaning (such as a literal and a metaphorical level), require the reader to follow a complicated series of events, and make use of long and involved sentences. (It's important to note here that each administration of the Reading Test has a similar range of passage

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You may find that you're better at reading and interpreting passages from one subject area — history/social studies, for instance — than from others. It's important, therefore, to practice reading and answering questions about passages from all three subject areas on the SAT (U.S. and world literature, history/social studies, and science). In fact, consider devoting more practice time to the types of passages you're less comfortable reading.

complexity, so you shouldn't worry about getting a test that has nothing but highly complex passages.) Chapter 12 includes examples of low- and high-complexity passages to give you a sense of the spread of difficulty you'll see on the test.

Two other features of passages are important as well.

- ▶ **Paired passages:** Each version of the Reading Test includes a pair of related informational passages. These passages are on the same topic and interact with one another in some way. They may, for instance, present different perspectives or opinions on the topic, with the first passage taking one position on the subject and the second passage another. In other cases, the two passages may simply contain different information on the same topic. One may be a general overview, for example, while the other zeroes in on one particular element. The set of questions will ask about each passage separately as well as about both passages together. (More on this below.)
- ▶ **Informational graphics:** Some passages include one or more tables, graphs, charts, and the like that correspond to the topic of the passage. A graphic may, for instance, display the results of an experiment described in the passage. Questions may ask you to locate information in the graphic, draw reasonable conclusions about the data, or make connections between the graphic and the passage. Graphics appear along with one of the history/social studies and one of the science passages.



REMEMBER

Two passages on the SAT Reading Test will include one or two informational graphics — tables, charts, graphs, or the like. Related questions will assess your skill in locating and interpreting information and integrating that information with the text.

All of the passages on the Reading Test come from previously published, high-quality sources, so you're getting a chance to read some of the best writing and thinking out there. While you're not likely to forget that you're taking a test while reading the passages, it's our hope that you'll find them interesting and engaging and maybe learn a thing or two from them as well.

Reading Test Questions

Now let's shift to the kinds of questions you'll come across on the Reading Test. All of them will be multiple-choice, meaning that you'll be selecting the option that best answers the question. To do this, you'll want to consider what's stated and implied in the passage (or passage pair), along with any additional material (such as a table or graph), and decide which of the four choices makes the most sense. The questions follow something of a natural order. You'll find questions about the passage as a whole — questions about the main idea or point of view, for example — early on in each set, while questions about specific parts of the passage come later. Questions about graphics and questions linking paired passages typically come near the end of the sequence.

The questions are meant to be like those that you'd ask or answer in a lively, serious discussion about a text. Think of the kinds of questions you'd be

 **REMEMBER**

Wrong answer choices are often tempting. You must, therefore, base your answer on a close reading and interpretation of the text and any associated graphics.

 **REMEMBER**

All of the information you need to answer the questions can be found in the passages themselves or in supplementary material such as graphics or footnotes. You won't be tested on your background knowledge of the specific topics covered. In fact, be careful not to apply outside knowledge to the passage or questions, as this may skew your interpretation of the text.

asked to consider in your favorite, most engaging class, and you'll have the general idea of what's in store on the Reading Test. The questions aren't intended to be tricky or trivial, although some will be quite challenging and will require careful reading and thinking. You may find it useful to skim the questions before reading each passage (or passage pair), but this is no substitute for actually reading the passages and grappling with their content. As we said, the questions aren't meant to be tricky, but they *are* designed to determine whether you're reading closely and making reasonable interpretations, so expect to see some answer choices that may seem right or to fit your preconceptions but that don't match up with what an author is saying.

The questions also often reflect the specific sort of passage you're reading. A literature question may ask you to think about plot or character, but a science question won't; instead, it will ask about things such as hypotheses and experimental data. Although these passages are taken from texts on various subjects, the questions don't directly test your background knowledge of the specific topics covered. All of the information you'll need to answer the questions can be found in the passages themselves (or in any supplementary material, such as a graphic or footnotes).

Reading Test questions fall into three general categories: (1) Information and Ideas, (2) Rhetoric, and (3) Synthesis. The questions won't be labeled this way on the test, and it's not crucial that you understand all of the differences. A brief explanation of each category, though, should help you get a sense of what you'll encounter, what knowledge and skills are covered, and how better to prepare for the test.

- ▶ **Information and Ideas:** These questions focus on a close, careful reading of the passage and on what the author is saying. In these sorts of questions, you'll be asked to locate stated information, make reasonable inferences, and apply what you've read to another, similar situation. You'll also be asked to figure out the best evidence in the text for the answer to another question or the best support for a conclusion offered in the question itself. (This concept was introduced in Chapter 6.) You'll also have to determine the central ideas and themes of passages, summarize important information, and understand relationships (including cause-and-effect, comparison-contrast, and sequence). Other questions will ask you to interpret the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in particular passages. (This concept was introduced in Chapter 7.)
- ▶ **Rhetoric:** These questions take a different approach, focusing your attention on how an author puts together a text and how the various pieces contribute to the whole text. You'll be asked to think about how an author's word choice shapes meaning, tone, and style. You'll also be asked to consider how the text is structured and what purpose its various parts (such as a particular detail) play. Understanding the author's point of view and purpose is also part of this category, as are questions about the claims, reasons, evidence, and stylistic and persuasive devices

(such as appeals to fear or emotion) found in arguments. The common thread tying these questions together is their focus on the author’s craft. Instead of thinking about the author’s message per se, you’ll be asked to think about how the author constructs his or her text to make its message clear, informative, or convincing.

- ▶ **Synthesis:** Unlike questions in the other two categories, Synthesis questions only accompany certain passages. They come in two basic forms. Some Synthesis questions ask you to draw connections between a pair of passages. For example, a question may ask how the author of the first passage would most likely react to a claim made by the author of the second passage. It might also ask you something more general, such as how the two passages are similar or different in content, form, style, or perspective. Other Synthesis questions ask about an informational graphic. Here, for example, you’ll have to find a particular piece of data, figure out which conclusion is the most reasonable given a certain set of results from a study, or integrate information from a table with the information and ideas found in the passage itself.

These categories are discussed more fully in Chapters 9 to 11.

The Reading Test in Overview

Having a general sense of how the Reading Test is put together will help you to prepare for the test and pace yourself during the test itself.

- ▶ Total Questions: 52
- ▶ Total Time: 65 minutes (on average, a minute and 15 seconds per question, inclusive of passage reading time)
- ▶ Number of Passages: Four single passages plus one pair of passages
- ▶ Passage Length: 500 to 750 words; total of 3,250 words
- ▶ Passage Subjects: One U.S. and world literature passage, two history/social studies passages (one in social science and one from a U.S. founding document or text in the Great Global Conversation), and two science passages
- ▶ Passage Complexities: A defined range from grades 9–10 to early postsecondary
- ▶ Questions per Passage: 10 or 11
- ▶ Scores: In addition to an overall test score, the questions on the Reading Test contribute to various scores in the following ways:
 - Command of Evidence (Chapter 6): 10 questions, two per passage
 - Words in Context (Chapter 7): 10 questions, two per passage



REMEMBER

You’ll have 65 minutes to answer 52 questions on the Reading Test, or 1 minute and 15 seconds per question on average. However, it is important to keep in mind that you’ll spend time reading the four single passages along with one pair of passages.

- Analysis in History/Social Studies: 21 questions (all of the questions on the two history/social studies passages)
- Analysis in Science: 21 questions (all of the questions on the two science passages)

Note: Some Reading Test questions don't contribute to any of these scores (just to the overall test score), and some history/social studies and science questions (such as vocabulary questions) contribute to two of these scores.

Chapter 12 provides sample passages and questions to help you become more familiar with the Reading Test. Chapter 12 also contains explanations for the answers.

CHAPTER 8 RECAP

The SAT Reading Test measures your skill in reading and comprehending texts across a wide range of genres, purposes, subjects, and complexities. The questions on the test are all multiple-choice, mirror those that you'd encounter in a good class discussion, and cover three basic areas: Information and Ideas, Rhetoric, and Synthesis. All of the questions can be answered based on what's stated or implied in the passages (and in any supplementary material provided), and no question tests background knowledge of the topic. Each test includes one passage pair, and two passages (one in history/social studies, one in science) include an informational graphic or graphics.

There's quite a bit to read on the test and also a fair number of questions; the length of the test, however, is balanced by three factors. First, the passages, while often challenging, are like those that you're probably already reading for your high school classes, and they cover many of the same subjects as well. Second, the questions deal with important aspects of the passages rather than trivia, so if you grasp the central ideas and key details of each passage, you're more likely to do well. Finally, enough time is provided (65 minutes) so that you should be able to answer the questions without a lot of rushing as long as you maintain a good, consistent pace and keep track of the clock.

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Devote ample practice time to reading passages efficiently and strategically, considering the types of things you'll likely be asked in SAT questions. With practice, you'll find that you can read passages more quickly and gain a stronger grasp of the content, structure, and author's purpose.