



Test Prep

Reading Tips & Strategies



Introduction

At Gradeful, as we tried to find ways that students could speed up their reading, we made an accidental discovery.

Ironically, we found that students extracted main ideas far better when reading faster. The reason for this, in our opinion, is because, at any moment, readers can either extract the overall main idea or small, specific details, but not both at the same time.

This discovery, in addition to our other tried and true reading strategies, comprise what we believe to be the most effective approach to SAT & PSAT Reading on the planet.

P.S. Remember that the Reading section can be notoriously difficult for some students at first. For this reason, it is important that you do not get discouraged too easily. Through diligent practice and consistent application of the following strategies, your Reading skills (and score) will inevitably go up.

Good luck and make sure to check out these resources to help with your Reading practice:

[College Board SAT Practice Tests](#)

[College Board PSAT Practice Tests](#)

[Gradeful Test Prep SAT Answer Explanation Videos](#)



1. Reading Passages

Starting a Passage

At the moment when you begin an SAT Reading passage, the thing you need most is the overall main idea.

At that moment, specific details are not important, because a passage has hundreds of specific details, and we don't know which of them we'll be quizzed on.

To get that initial main idea, start by reading faster than your comfortable reading speed, getting through the passage, believe it or not, in around 60 seconds. You can only do this by cutting corners in order to read fast (i.e. skipping long names, dates, modifiers, and other details that you don't need at this exact moment).

The Way Your Brain Reads

As you read, there are two parts of your brain that are making sense of the passage: your auditory brain and your visual brain.

Your auditory brain hears the passage in your head, as if it's being read out loud. This takes long!

Your visual brain sees the words, like seeing trees in a forest. This happens quickly. In fact, if you really want to, you can see the entire forest at once.

To use this method, use your visual brain and auditory brains simultaneously.

- Glance (visually) through the sentence, judging which words are more important and which are less important.
- Pronounce, in your inner monologue (auditory), only the words that you've quickly judged to be the most important ones.



This method only works if you trust in your visual brain's amazing ability to quickly judge which words are more important.

How Does 'Skipping Words' Work?

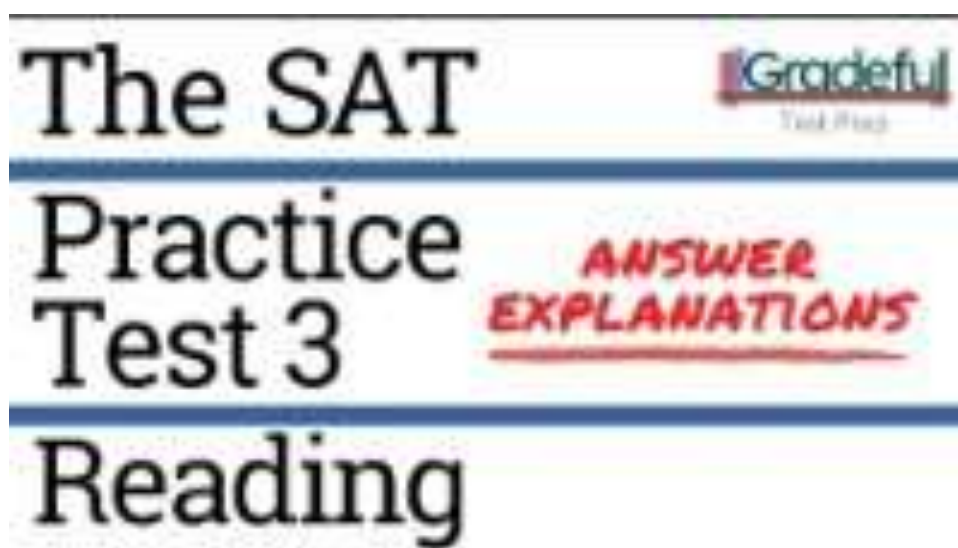
Let's say we're reading this sentence from an SAT Reading passage (Practice Test 2, Passage 1 "The Professor"):

"No man likes to acknowledge that he has made a mistake in the choice of profession, and every man, worthy of the name, will row long against wind and tide before he allows himself to cry out, "I am baffled!" and submits to be floated passively back to land."

Letting our mind pick the more important words, we might only pronounce these words in blue:

No man likes to acknowledge that he has made a mistake in the choice of profession, and every man, worthy of the name, will row long against wind and tide before he allows himself to cry out, "I am baffled!" and submits to be floated passively back to land.

Here's what the 'Skipping Words' Method looks like on a real SAT Reading passage:



Don't Doubt!

If you're hearing about this method and are doubtful that you will have the ability to quickly judge the more important words, fear not!

It's more of an art than a science. Practice this method and make it your own. There's at least a possibility that you'll be someone with an above average ability to use this method.

If not, we have a backup plan! For the toughest reading passages and the most difficult questions, we can try the 'Focusing on Verbs' method, which takes longer, and which we'll get into next.

The 'Focusing On Verbs' Method

Verbs are like the neon signs in a reading passage and focusing on them takes you to the most important things in a sentence. When using this method, we need to make sure that we are surgical with verbs.

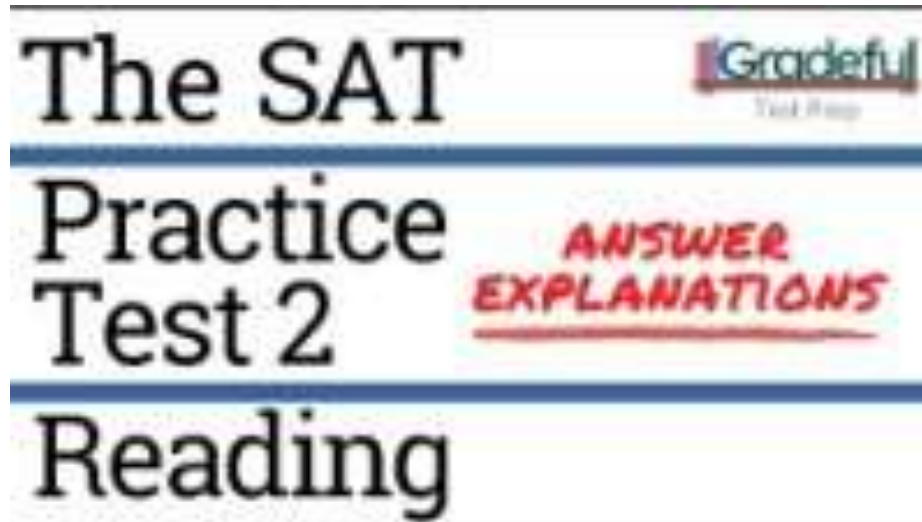
To review:

- Regular verbs are words like run, punch, and jump.
- Important verbs are is, was, are, am, were, be, have, has, had.
- The following are not verbs: '-ing' words like running, punching, jumping and 'to do' words like to run, to punch, to jump. They are not verbs because we can say, "I like muffins.", "I like running.", and "I like to run."

In order to use the 'Focusing on Verbs' method correctly, you must identify and read each and every verb in a given paragraph, as well as the surrounding words for context.



Here's what the 'Focusing on Verbs' method looks like on a real SAT Reading passage:



It's Not Black or White

It's important to note that we are not forcing students to use a specific reading method for every situation. The biggest ability that we seek to build in our students is judgment: knowing when to go fast or slow, when to use one method or another.

Rules are meant to be broken, but in general, we do recommend using the 'Skipping Words' Method to start most passages and the 'Focusing on Verbs' Method for more difficult passages or portions of passages that you have difficulty understanding.



2. Answering Questions

I've Sped Through the Passage...Now What?

Since you moved so quickly, you should have, at this moment, only a superficial knowledge of the passage. That's okay, because moving swiftly is more important than retaining information at this point.

All you need to be able to answer right now is:

This passage is arguing or saying _____.

Next, you want to tackle the questions in order of difficulty, using those questions as an opportunity to get to know the passage better. Avoid questions that require a deep understanding to start. You will use the 'easy' and 'medium' questions as an opportunity to become an expert on the passage and answer the 'hard' questions last.

What Do You Mean 'Easy'?

For the purposes of getting into reading passages, we'll define difficulty in an unusual way.

- **Easy Questions-** Tell you exactly where to look, for example:

What did the author mean on line 47?

What was the purpose of the discussion in the paragraph on lines 22-35?

We group Best-Evidence questions in this category as well because they tell you where to look.

Which choice provides the best evidence for the answer to the previous question?



- **Medium Questions-** Tell you what to look for. For example:

According to the passage, what role did the Constitution play in determining the structure of the various states in 1825?

What did the author think about cats?

In this question type, although you're not given line numbers, searching through for something specific is easy to do, and is the very muscle that makes you better in reading over time and with lots of practice.

- **Hard Questions-** Everything else, but more specifically, questions that you need a deep understanding for.

The main purpose of the passage is to...

One central idea of the passage is that...

The 1st Golden Rule of SAT Reading

While completing the SAT Reading section, it is imperative that you never pick an answer without specifically finding a line of evidence that supports that answer. Every question is evidence-based and the SAT is 'super literal,' meaning that you pretty much never have to read between the lines.

Here's an example:

Line 5 There they all stood, an uncertain circle, and then her grandfather came forward, greeted her mother, shook hands with her father. Although he seemed mellower and smaller than the picture that her mother had painted for her over the years, Jess had a sudden and irrational fear that he might start shouting at her.

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Based on the passage, which factor most decisively influences Jess's reaction to meeting her grandfather?

- A) His intimidating physical presence and mannerisms
- B) His indifference to other family members' attitudes toward him
- C) Her parents' concerns about being reunited with him
- D) Her mother's ominous descriptions of his temperament



Here, if you're looking at the answer choices first, choice A) might seem tempting.

Instead, the correct process is to look through the passage for signs of something that is influencing what would otherwise be Jess's natural reaction.

Jess's reaction is that 'he might start shouting at her,' and it results from 'the picture that her mother had painted for her over the years.'

The 2nd Golden Rule of SAT Reading

Another crucial technique that you must employ on SAT Reading is to answer each question in your own words first, as often as possible, based on specific lines of text.

Why do we want to answer questions in our own words first whenever possible?

Because the SAT writers are not our friends, they're our enemies!

With that being said, on some questions, it will be impossible to answer in your own words first. On those questions, you can cheat by glancing at the answer choices first. Try to do this in situations where the question is so vague, general, or just plain difficult, that there's no way to answer in your own words first.

Here's an example:

Which choice best represents the overall structure of the passage?

- A) A hypothesis is put forth, an experiment testing that hypothesis is outlined, and an explanation for the findings of that experiment is offered.
- B) A theory is described, studies exploring that theory are recounted, and the significance of the results of those studies is suggested.
- C) A generalization is presented, two examples of that generalization are contrasted, and a revision of that generalization is provided.
- D) A theory is introduced, potential criticism of that theory is considered, and a rebuttal of that criticism is presented.



In this question, which relates to a very difficult passage, it would take too much time and effort to be able to answer this question clearly in your own words first. Instead, we instruct students to glance at the answer choices first. In the answers, the theme of the passage is described as a theory, hypothesis, and generalization. The actual passage describes it as a theory, which gets rid of A) and C). Next, we can look through the passage to determine whether studies are recounted or examples are contrasted, which is easier to tell apart.

Passage-Based Vocabulary Questions

The SAT writers claim that the test doesn't quiz students on vocabulary, which is mostly true. When you reach a Passage-Based Vocabulary question, you're being quizzed not on the specific dictionary definition of a word, but on the way it's being used within the passage. The tip for these questions is:

Describe the Context & Invent your own word to replace the given word.

14

As used in line 20, "interest" most nearly means

- A) sympathy.
- B) importance.
- C) responsibility.
- D) attention.

Some of the evidence in favor of this view comes from behavioral experiments that show that how you respond to something depends on otherwise irrelevant features of the sensory stimulus. And of particular interest here, these seemingly irrelevant features often involve space. In one classic study, Mike Tucker and Rob Ellis at the University of Plymouth asked subjects to judge whether items were upside down or right side up. The stimuli consisted of photographs of common household objects like frying pans or spatulas. Subjects were to indicate their choice by pressing a designated button, one button for upright and the other for upside down. One button was placed near the subject's left hand and the other near the right hand—a detail we wouldn't normally consider to be important but that was essential for what Tucker and Ellis were really getting at.



The context:

Around line 19, the passage discusses ‘features’ that the mind takes in about sensory details. Around line 20, the passage emphasizes that those features tend to be about space.

Invent:

In our own words, we can say that ‘of particular value here’ is the idea that the features involve space.

The word ‘importance’ is similar to ‘value,’ which we invented, so the correct answer would be B).

Best-Evidence Questions

You must always be aware of questions that are followed by best-evidence questions. We strongly recommend NOT answering the second question before the first, because each quote mentioned in the evidence question has a context, and taking each one out of its context causes more harm than good in a variety of ways.

We do, however, want you to be aware of the range of lines being covered in the best-evidence question. This makes the question easier because now we only have a small area to analyze.

16

Based on the passage, which statement regarding the subjects in Tucker and Ellis’s experiment can most reasonably be inferred?

- A) They were unaware of the true focus of the study.
- B) They had been carefully selected based on their backgrounds.
- C) They frequently used the utensils seen in the photographs.
- D) They had unusually well-developed spatial skills.

17

Which choice provides the best evidence for the answer to the previous question?

- A) Lines 21-24 (“In one . . . side up”)
- B) Lines 24-26 (“The stimuli . . . spatulas”)
- C) Lines 26-28 (“Subjects . . . down”)
- D) Lines 34-38 (“Secretly . . . photograph”)



We know before beginning question 16 that it relates to the area from lines 21 to 38.

Next, we can read through lines 21-38 looking for anything special about the subject, which ends up being the idea, in lines 34-38, that the researchers were hiding the true intent of the experiment from the subjects themselves.

features often involve space. In one classic study, Mike Tucker and Rob Ellis at the University of Plymouth asked subjects to judge whether items were upside down or right side up. The stimuli consisted
25 of photographs of common household objects like frying pans or spatulas. Subjects were to indicate their choice by pressing a designated button, one button for upright and the other for upside down. One button was placed near the subject's left hand
30 and the other near the right hand—a detail we wouldn't normally consider to be important but that was essential for what Tucker and Ellis were really getting at.

Secretly, Tucker and Ellis were not particularly
35 interested in the upright/inverted choices, but whether the subjects would respond faster when they had to press the button with the hand on the *same side* as the *handle* of the object in the photograph. All

The Other 'Best-Evidence' Scenario

Like it or not, there will be a few instances where we're sure of the first question in an evidence sequence but not the evidence question itself. Here, you want to clearly restate what you chose in the first question, to make it easier to evaluate each evidence question.

24

Based on the passage, it can most reasonably be inferred from the research conducted in the French Alps that

- A) living at higher altitudes affects larval growth and development.
- B) high levels of UVB exposure cause lethal effects at all altitudes.
- C) DNA photolyase concentrations are naturally higher in the species of frog that were studied.
- D) tolerance to UVB exposure can vary within a species.



Which choice provides the best evidence for the answer to the previous question?

- A) Lines 47-49 (“The question . . . Alps”)
- B) Lines 49-54 (“Frog . . . altitude”)
- C) Lines 54-56 (“Identifying . . . study”)
- D) Lines 57-60 (“Although . . . tadpoles”)

The question was answered in part by researchers working with a single species of frogs inhabiting different altitudes of the French Alps. Frog
50 populations adapted to life at higher altitudes, and therefore naturally higher UVB exposures, showed less DNA damage than did their lower-altitude brethren when exposed to UVB intensities typical of high altitude. Identifying the genetic mechanism of
55 this adaption—rapid evolution, increased protein production, or both—will require further study. Although DNA photolyase concentrations were not measured, the authors report an interesting twist that suggests increased photolyase activity in high-
60 altitude tadpoles. Interested in other ways frogs

Here, we know the answer has to come from somewhere in lines 47-60.

What happens if we are having trouble with this set of questions? We know D) is the only answer that makes sense for question 24, and we’re trying to answer question 25.

In this situation, you want to clearly restate to yourself exactly what you answered for question 24, which is that, as a result of the work in the French Alps, we know that tolerance to UVB varies within a species.

Looking through the evidence candidates, we can see that answer choice B) for question 25 talks about that very issue. Choice D seems to do so as well, but addresses photolyase activity, not tolerance to UVB. Therefore the correct answer would be B) for question 25.



3. General Tips & Strategies

The Anatomy of a Wrong Answer Choice

In wrong answer choices, the majority of the sentence might match valid elements of the passage.; however, one single word or phrase will usually conflict with the question or the passage.

Passage Introduction

Always read the passage introduction. It doesn't always offer something you need, but when it does, it's often something of critical importance.

Common Paired Passage Relationship

Oftentimes, paired passages will have points of view in direct opposition to one another, but both will acknowledge the existence of a phenomenon or issue they disagree on.

Graphs/Tables/Charts

On questions dealing with graphs/tables/charts, you first want to determine the overall trend.

