



Test Prep

Reading 101



1. Reading Passages

Starting a Passage

At the moment when you begin an ACT 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 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?

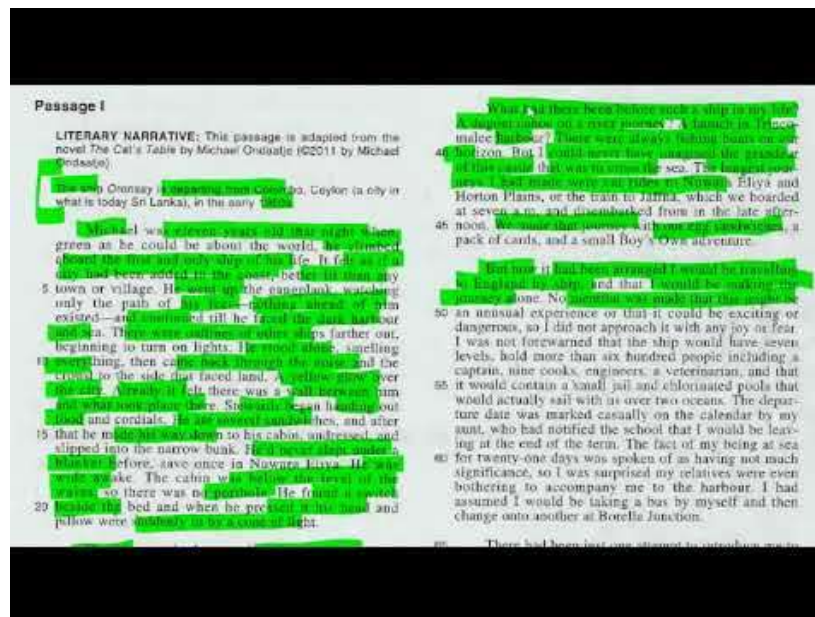
Let's say we're reading this sentence from an SAT Reading passage (Practice Test 2, Passage 1 "The Professor"):

"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 ACT 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*."

"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 ACT Reading passage:

10 beef brisket. Naturally, I viewed these developments with suspicion and my suspicion focused on the kitchen of Commander's Palace and its celebrated chef, Paul Prudhomme.

15 Prudhomme hails from Cajun Country, near Opelousas, Louisiana. He refers to his cooking not so much as Cajun, but as "Louisiana cooking," and thus reflective of influences beyond his home parish. For years I blamed him for the destruction of the gumbo universe. Many of the chefs and cooks in New Orleans restaurants learned under him or under his students.

20 Many of these cooks were not from Louisiana, and thus had no homemade guide as to what good gumbo was supposed to be. As I saw it then, these were young, impressionable cooks who lacked the loving guidance and discipline that only good home training can provide.

25 My reaction was admittedly nationalistic, since New Orleans is my nation. The Cajun incursion in and of itself didn't bother me. We are all enriched immeasurably when we encounter other people, other languages, other traditions, other tastes. What bothered me was the tyrannical influence of the tourist trade. Tourist trap restaurants, shops, cooking classes, and at times a

30 seemed the whole of the French Quarter, were given over to providing visitors with what they expected to find. There was no regard for whether the offerings were authentic New Orleans food or culture. Suddenly andouille sausage became the local standard even though most New Orleanians had never heard of it.

rooms and berries. Because of the climate, little of this was eaten fresh; it was salted, pickled, or dried for the long winter. Most of Russia ate this way until the twentieth century.

75 By exploring the Russian food that existed before potatoes, Syrnikov hopes to help Russians reacquaint themselves with the country's agrarian roots, and to convince them that their national cuisine can be just as flavorful as anything they might find in a sushi bar. He spends his time travelling through the countryside in search of old recipes, trying them himself, and blogging about his experiences. Often, he is brought in as a consultant on projects to make a restaurant authentically

80 Russia. Recently, he hatched a plan for a user-generated database of folk recipes. "My idea is to send out a call across all of Russia," he told me. "If you have a grandmother who makes *shushki*—disk-shaped pastries—take a picture of them, write down the

85 recipe. To me, it's absolutely obvious that, if we don't wake up and find out from these old women and set it down on paper, in twenty years we won't have anyone to ask. Russian culture will lose a very significant part of itself."

Questions 11–13 ask about Passage A.

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 and portions of text 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 understanding 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 _____.

Order of Answering Questions

You can answer the questions in the order that they are given to you on the test, except for the Main Idea or Broad questions. These questions should be answered last. The reason you want to answer these Main Idea or Broad questions last is because you will be much more of an expert on the passage by that time, therefore they will become much easier for you.

Every Answer is Quote-Based

Every answer on ACT Reading is quote-based, which means you need to be able to point out the specific line where the answer came from. Quite often, you'll notice that the correct answer is nearly a word for word quote of the actual text.

Because the answers are so quote-based, you must resist the temptation to ever answer a question based on 'what you think you read,' and always, no matter what, find actual textual support.



Answer in Your Own Words First

Once you have found the area in the passage that discussed the given information, answer the question in your own words first, and then (only then) look at the answer choices.

The reason you want to answer in your own words first is because the ACT is very good at giving you answer choices that seem correct but, in reality, are not.

Skip When You're Stuck

Be willing to skip any question that is taking too much time or seems overly involved and come back to it after answering the rest of the questions for that passage.

