

CHAPTER 5

About the SAT Reading Test

Whatever your postsecondary plans, reading will be important. Even as other forms of media, such as audiovisual formats, have gained a 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 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 similar to those you'll come across in many different postsecondary courses. The Reading Test will include a pair of related passages, with some questions asking you to draw connections between the two selections. Some passages will 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 other aspects of the craft of writing; still others ask you to draw connections between pairs of related passages or analyze informational graphics. As a group, these questions require you to use the same 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 are particularly challenging, while others are more straightforward. In addition, some passages are paired, and 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. The Reading Test includes both a fiction selection and a selection from a historically or culturally important document, such as a speech, essay, or letter. 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 information and ideas or explain a process or concept. Still other passages are best described as arguments. Their goal is to convince readers through the use of evidence, reasoning, and/or stylistic and persuasive techniques to believe something or to take some sort of action.
- **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. This category also includes selections from U.S. founding documents and similar texts in the Great Global Conversation about civic and political life written by authors from the United States and other nations. 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



PRACTICE AT

satpractice.org

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 Reading Test (U.S. and world literature, history/social studies, and science). In fact, consider devoting more practice time to the type(s) of passages you're less comfortable reading.

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 complexity, so you shouldn't worry about getting a test that has nothing but highly complex passages.) Chapter 9 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 administration of the Reading Test includes a pair of related 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 a topic, with the first passage taking one position 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 associated questions will ask about each passage separately as well as about both passages together. History/social studies and science passages may be paired.
- **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 graphic's data, or make connections between the graphic and the passage. Graphics appear with one of the history/social studies and one of the science passages.

All of the passages on the Reading Test come from previously published, high-quality sources. The Reading Test always includes:

- One passage from a classic or contemporary work of U.S. or world literature.
- One passage or a pair of passages from either a U.S. founding document (such as an essay by James Madison) or a text in the Great Global Conversation (such as a speech by Nelson Mandela).
- One passage on a social science topic from a field such as economics, psychology, or sociology.
- Two science passages (or one passage and one passage pair) that examine foundational concepts or recent developments in Earth science, biology, chemistry, or physics.



REMEMBER

Two passages on the SAT Reading Test will include one or more informational graphics—tables, graphs, charts, or the like. Related questions will assess your skill in locating and interpreting information in the graphic(s) and integrating that information with information and ideas in the passage.

Reading Test Questions

All Reading Test questions are multiple-choice and have four answer options. To decide which of the four answer choices makes the most sense, you'll want to consider what's stated and implied in the passage (or passage pair), along with any supplementary material (such as a table or graph). 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.



REMEMBER

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

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 asked to consider in your favorite, most engaging class, and you'll have the general idea of what's 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. They're designed to determine whether you're reading closely and making reasonable interpretations, so expect to see some answer choices that may seem right or fit your preconceptions but that don't match up with what an author is saying.



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. You won't be tested directly on your background knowledge of the specific topics covered. In fact, be careful if applying outside knowledge to a passage or its questions, as this may skew your interpretation.

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 may ask about things such as hypotheses and experimental data. Although 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).

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 the author's message. 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 passage for the answer to another question or the best support for a conclusion offered in the question itself. You'll also have to determine central ideas and themes, summarize important information, and understand

relationships (including cause-and-effect, comparison-contrast, and sequence). Other questions will ask you to determine the meaning of words and phrases as they're used in particular contexts.

- **Rhetoric:** These questions focus 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 a passage is structured and what roles its various parts (such as particular details) play. Questions about the author's point of view and purpose are also part of this category, as are questions about the claims, reasons, evidence, and stylistic and persuasive elements (such as appeals to fear or emotion) found in arguments. The common thread tying these questions together is their emphasis on the author's craft. Instead of thinking about the author's message *per se*, you'll be thinking about how the author constructs a text to make its message clear, engaging, 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 in a pair would most likely react to a claim made by the author of the second passage. A question may instead 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 informational graphics. In these, you may 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.

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; approximate 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



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's important to keep in mind that you'll spend a good portion of this time reading the four single passages along with one pair of 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:** 10 questions, generally two per passage
 - ◆ **Words in Context:** 10 questions, generally two per passage
 - ◆ **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) may contribute to two of these scores.

Chapter 5 Recap

The SAT Reading Test measures your skill in reading and comprehending texts of varied 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 administration of the 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 watch the clock.



PRACTICE AT **satpractice.org**

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.