Part 7: Reading Section Training and Walkthroughs

In this part, we'll finally start tackling a specific test on the SAT, applying all of the training concepts we've discussed so far. Remember that prepping for the SAT Reading test is the best way to lay the foundation for the rest of the SAT: reading carefully and paying attention to details that other people will overlook are key skills throughout the test.

In this part of the Black Book, you'll learn the following:

- the single most important secret of doing well on the SAT Reading section
- why the College Board had to design SAT Reading questions the way they're designed
- the key role that literal reading plays throughout the SAT
- the difference between restatement and demonstration, and why both are critical on test day
- the four reasons why most untrained test-takers never realize how SAT Reading actually works
- how the College Board tries to trick us into thinking subjectively instead of objectively
- why it's so important to consider the precise meaning of each word we encounter
- the key patterns that account for all wrong answers on the SAT Reading section
- the different approaches to reading the passages on test day, and how to find the one that suits you best
- why you shouldn't take notes when you read a passage on test day
- how to deal with passages, paragraphs, and sentences that are hard to follow
- how to recognize (and work around) slang, rhetorical questions, jargon, and other strange expressions
- how mentally removing "comma sandwiches" can help you understand a text better
- specific ideas to keep in mind for decoding the types of text you'll encounter on test day
- a list of terms you'll need to know in order to understand prompts and answer choices fully
- the recommended process for answering SAT Reading questions
- how to handle "best evidence" questions, and why they can often save you time
- how to answer "most nearly means" questions
- why questions about the author's "attitude" still require us to think objectively, and how to do that
- how to approach questions with figures and data
- what "yes-yes-no-no" questions are, and the SAT's unwritten rules for them
- how to remain objective when answering questions about the "central claim" of a passage
- what constitutes "humor" on the SAT
- how to attack questions about paired passages without guessing what an author might say
- how to apply all of these ideas to every Reading question in the first four official SAT Practice Tests
- and more . . .

SAT Reading Training

Education . . . has produced a vast population able to read but unable to distinguish what is worth reading.
G. M. Trevelyan

Overview and Important Reminders for SAT Reading

Students often tell me that Reading questions are their least favorite questions on the SAT. A lot of people think these questions are too subjective to be part of a standardized test—they think that questions about an author's intentions can be answered in more than one way, so it's unfair to use them in multiple-choice tests.

Fortunately, this isn't the case. The answer to an SAT Reading question is every bit as clear and definite as the answer to an SAT Math question. In this section, I'll show you how trained test-takers identify those answers.

But first, I want to say that again, because it's really important. I'll put it in caps, too. And center it, even:

THE ANSWER TO AN SAT READING QUESTION IS ALWAYS AS CLEAR AND DEFINITE AND OBJECTIVELY PREDICTABLE AS THE ANSWER TO AN SAT MATH QUESTION.

If the reading questions required arbitrary interpretation, then the SAT would produce meaningless results, because there would be no objective basis for rewarding one answer choice and punishing the others. And if the results from the SAT were meaningless, then colleges would stop using them. (For more on the role of standardized tests in the admissions process and the implications of that role for us test-takers, check out the article on the purpose of standardized testing at my blog, www.TestingIsEasy.com.)

You see, the main problem with SAT reading is that it requires you to look at a passage in a way that's totally different from the approach you would use in an English class. In the typical English class, you're often rewarded for coming up with any interpretation of a passage that you possibly can; every interpretation that doesn't directly contradict the reading is welcomed with open arms.

But that approach clearly won't work for a multiple-choice question with only one correct answer. So on the SAT, you have to read everything as literally as you possibly can, without adding any of your own interpretation at all. (We'll get into this in a lot more detail below.)

After working with me, most of my students who didn't like SAT Reading to begin with end up changing their minds about Reading questions. Actually, they often end up thinking that the Reading questions are among the easiest ones on the entire test, and I tend to agree with them.

The Big Secret of SAT Reading

In order for the College Board to develop Reading questions that would function properly on a multiple-choice test, it had to overcome a pretty big problem: it needed a way to ask questions about literature that weren't subjective, so that each question would only have one legitimate, objective answer. After all, the College Board has to use the multiple-choice format to make efficient grading of millions of tests possible, and you can't use that format effectively unless one choice for each question is clearly correct, and the other choices are clearly wrong—otherwise each question would be up for debate, and colleges wouldn't be able to rely on the data generated by the test.

So the College Board had to find a way to eliminate interpretation from the process of answering questions about a text. This would allow it to write questions that would ask students to talk about a text while still using the multiple choice format in a valid, meaningful way.

If you think about it, there are really only two ways you can possibly talk about a text without interpreting it—and these two ways of talking about a text are the big secret of the SAT Reading section. They apply to all questions on the Reading Test. I'll put them in italics, because they're really important:

- *restating the text without changing the meaning, and*
- *demonstrating an idea that appears on the page*

In other words, believe it or not, we'll find that the correct answer to every single question on the Reading section of the SAT is spelled out or demonstrated somewhere on the page.

Yes, really.

(At this point, if you've ever taken the SAT before, or ever had any kind of traditional SAT preparation, you're probably shaking your head angrily and cursing me for lying to you about the test. But trust me on this: the correct answers to SAT Reading questions are always restated or demonstrated by relevant ideas from the text, and the incorrect answers are always wrong because they fail to be restated or demonstrated by the text, and/or because they add in ideas that aren't in the text.)

Before we proceed, let me take a moment to give you concrete examples of how restatement and demonstration work on the SAT Reading section.

Restatement

Restatement refers to the idea that two separate pieces of text express the same idea using different words. For an example of this idea, let's start with the following phrase, which appears in the second passage of section 1 in SAT Practice Test #1:

> The notion of gift-givers and gift-recipients being unable to account for the other party's perspective seems puzzling . . . [66-68]

Question 21 from that section asks what "the authors would likely attribute" some data in the graph to. The correct answer is (A), the only one that directly restates an idea from the passage. That choice says "an inability to shift perspective," which directly restates "being unable to account for the other party's perspective" from the sentence above.

The other choices are loosely connected to the text, and test-takers who don't read carefully might even think some of the other choices restate the text. But when we read the other choices carefully, we can find concrete reasons why each one fails to restate the text. (For a complete discussion of this question and its wrong answer choices, see its walkthrough on page 88 in this Black Book.)

Demonstration

The idea of demonstration is a little different from the idea of restatement, but both ideas involve careful reading and a focus on evaluating the literal meaning of a text without interpretation. When a correct answer depends on demonstration, one of two things happens:

1. the correct answer provides an example or scenario that's exactly described in the text, or
2. the text provides an example or scenario that's exactly described in the correct answer

For an example from a real SAT Reading question, look at question 24 from section 1 of SAT Practice Test #4. That question asks what the word "expert" means in context. The word "expert" appears in line 20 of the passage, as part of this sentence:

> dairy animals, on the other hand, are expert protein producers, their udders swollen with milk.

The right answer is choice (C), "capable," even though nothing in the surrounding text specifically *restates* the idea that dairy animals are "capable protein producers." So how do we know that "capable" is the correct answer?

Well, the phrase "their udders swollen with milk" tells us clearly that the dairy animals produce milk. In other words, that phrase *demonstrates* that the animals are able to produce milk, which means they must be "capable protein producers," because "capable" basically means "able to do something." (For a complete discussion of this question, please see its walkthrough on page 153 in this Black Book.)

Again, a *restatement* of the phrase "capable protein producers" might be a phrase like "the dairy animals were able to make proteins in their milk" or "dairy animals could make milk with their udders." But in this case, instead of restating the correct answer, the passage *demonstrated* the correct answer: it just described the dairy animals producing milk. This might seem a like a nitpicky distinction to make, but on certain challenging questions, understanding the difference between restatement and demonstration will help you find the portion of the relevant text that directly supports the correct answer.

Is that Really All there Is?

It might sound a little ridiculous to say that the entire Reading section avoids literary interpretation and focuses on the literalist ideas of restatement and demonstration, but let's think about this from the College Board's standpoint:

1. The College Board needs the SAT to include multiple-choice questions about passages.
2. The College Board needs to avoid any ambiguity and interpretation in order for the SAT to fulfill its role as a legitimate, reliable standardized test. (For more on this, see my article on the purpose of standardized tests at www.TestingIsEasy.com)
3. The only way to discuss a text without interpreting it is to restate it or to demonstrate ideas from it.

All of this leads to one conclusion:

4. The College Board has designed the correct answers on the SAT Reading section so they restate elements of the text, or are demonstrated by elements of the text.

At this point, you might be wondering something very important: if SAT Reading questions really are as simple as I say, then how can so many intelligent people take the SAT every year without ever noticing that the correct answer to each question either says exactly the same thing as the text they're reading, or demonstrates an idea from the text in a literal way?

This is a very good question. There are four reasons why most test-takers never notice how Reading questions work, and you need to know them so you can prevent them from affecting you negatively:

1. Most Test-Takers aren't Even Looking for an Answer Choice to be Stated Directly in the Text.

Most SAT-takers are used to analyzing everything they read the way an English teacher would want, so when they read the passages on the SAT they try to analyze them automatically. In other words, most test-takers wouldn't even notice if an answer choice was restated or demonstrated by the text, because it never occurs to them to look for that. This is just one more way in which most untrained test-takers are their own worst enemies.

2. The College Board Deliberately Phrases Questions to Make you Think you Should Use Subjective Interpretation to Find the Answer.

If you've ever seen any real Reading questions from the College Board, you've definitely seen that they use words like "primarily," "probably," "suggests," "likely," and so on, like this:

> The author would likely use the example in line 5 to illustrate . . .

The College Board deliberately phrases questions in this way to mislead you and get you to interpret the text. It wants you to think that two or three answer choices might all be pretty reasonable. So we have to learn to ignore the subjectivity in words like "primarily" and "suggests." When I read a question like "The author uses the phrase 'turtle power' in line 10 primarily to suggest which of the following?" I treat that question as though it said, "Which of the following ideas appears directly in the text near the discussion of 'turtle power' in line 10?"

Here's a simple chart with some similar examples of how we should treat the prompt when it contains phrases that seem subjective to untrained test-takers:

When the prompt says . . .	. . . we should read it as . . .
"Which choice most nearly means . . ."	"Which is the only choice that means the same thing as . . ."
"The author of Passage 2 would most likely respond . . ."	"The author of Passage 2 directly states which opinion . . ."
"Which choice provides the best evidence for . . ."	"Which is the only choice that provides evidence for . . ."

3. We Sometimes Have to be Extremely Particular about the Exact Meanings and Relationships of Words in the Prompt, the Text, and in the Answer Choices.

The College Board is very picky about the specific meanings of phrases. As a result, test-takers often make the mistake of thinking that more than one answer choice can be restated or demonstrated by the passage. One clear example of this from a real SAT question can be found in question 7 on SAT Practice Test #4. The question asks us how the narrator would describe something, and one of the wrong answers includes the phrase "socially beneficial." The passage clearly mentions elements of society, and clearly mentions benefits, but it never actually says the benefits themselves would be social, which is enough to make the choice wrong.

So if you want to make a perfect score on the Reading section, you'll have to learn to *attack* every single phrase that you read, and you'll have to make sure you're only considering *exactly* what each word means, instead of working from your generalized assumptions about what it might mean, or what you think it implies, as you might do in a literature class. The College Board splits hairs when it comes to these things, and if you want to score high you'll have to learn to split them too.

4. Test-Takers are Sometimes Mistaken about What Words Mean.

No matter how strong your vocabulary is, I promise you that there are some words that you use incorrectly—it happens to all of us. Sometimes the differences are subtle. For example, I once had a student who mistakenly thought that "shrewd" had a strong negative connotation. He correctly understood that it involved being clever and intelligent, but incorrectly thought that it indicated a certain type of calculating evil. For this reason, he didn't pick an answer choice with the word "shrewd" since he didn't see anything in the text that indicated negativity, and he missed the question. On the other hand, sometimes the differences are huge, and a little embarrassing—I always thought the word "pied" meant something like "renowned" or "famous," because of the story of the Pied Piper. But it actually describes something with patches of different colors. Needless to say, I drew a complete blank when a test question mentioned the word "pied" and my understanding of that word didn't match with anything on the page. (Don't think that memorizing vocabulary words will help correct these mistakes—memorizing vocab might even contribute to making more of them, because test-takers' actual understanding of memorized vocabulary is often limited. Just know that you might be confronted with unknown vocabulary words at some point.) If you're looking at a question and none of the answer choices seems to be restated or demonstrated by the passage, then the bottom line is that you've made a mistake somewhere.

So those are the four major reasons that most test-takers never realize that the correct answers to Reading questions function by directly restating the relevant portion of the text. I'll list them again briefly, for review:

1. Test-takers aren't even looking for these kinds of ideas in the first place.
2. The College Board deliberately misleads you by using subjective phrasing.
3. You have to be extremely particular about what words actually mean.
4. Sometimes you might have a flawed understanding of a word you think you know.

Now that we've covered the Big Secret Of SAT Reading, which is that the correct answers to all SAT Reading questions must be spelled out on the page, you might be wondering what the wrong answers do.

Well, simply put, the wrong answers are the ones that *aren't* restated or demonstrated by the reading. And the ways that they fail to be restated or demonstrated by the passage are standardized, just like every other important detail of the test, so it can be very beneficial for us to know the various ways that wrong answers tend to relate back to the text on the SAT.

What do Wrong Answers Do?

We've already seen that the right answer to a Reading question on the SAT will restate or demonstrate the ideas from the relevant portion of the text. But what will wrong answers do?

Broadly speaking, wrong answers are wrong because they fail to restate the relevant portion of the text or demonstrate an idea from it. But there are a handful of ways that the College Board creates these wrong answers—that is, there are certain common ways in which wrong answers fail to restate the passage exactly, or to be demonstrated by the passage. And it can be very helpful for us to know what those ways are.

But Wait! Before We Discuss Types of Wrong Answers . . .

Remember as you learn about these answer types that you won't need to classify each wrong answer choice—or any wrong answer choice—on test day, or even when you train for the test. You'll only need to pick the correct answer choice out of the set of answer choices, of course. But we're going to discuss these different types of wrong answer choices because knowing the standardized ways that the College Board tries to trick us will allow us to be ready for them, and avoid falling for them.

In some instances, some of these wrong answer choice types might seem to overlap—there might be a specific answer choice that I see as one type of wrong answer choice, but you see as more of another type of answer choice, for example. That's fine! To some extent, the classifications will vary a little depending on the test-taker's perspective. We don't need to agree on the exact classification for each wrong answer on each test as long as we can reliably separate the right answers from the wrong answers.

A Hypothetical Example

For the purposes of illustration, we'll use a fake question and fake wrong answers. In other words, what you see below did NOT come from a real College Board source. It came from my head. But I constructed it in the same ways that the College Board constructs its wrong answers. And later, I'll demonstrate my methods in action against real questions from the College Board's SAT Practice Tests #1-4 (remember, you should only ever practice with real test questions from the College Board itself).

Okay, so let's pretend our fake sample question reads like this:

> According to the citation, research suggests that Benjamin Franklin invented bifocals because . . .

And let's pretend that the relevant citation is this part of a fake text:

> . . . Researchers have shown that Benjamin Franklin's sister was visually impaired, which might explain the amount of energy that Franklin invested in the invention of bifocals . . .

(By the way, as far as I know, Benjamin Franklin's sister had nothing to do with the invention of bifocals. In fact, I don't even know if he had a sister. It's an example—just go with it.)

Here are some of the various wrong answer types we might see for this kind of question.

Wrong answer type 1: Off by one or two words

This might be one of the most dangerous and sneaky types of wrong answer when it comes to trapping test-takers who know how the test works. For this type of wrong answer, the College Board provides a phrase that mirrors the text exactly—except for one or two words. Even when test-takers know they have to find answer choices that are restated or demonstrated by the passage, they can still fall for these kinds of wrong answers if they're not in the habit of constantly attacking every single word they read.

Example:

> His sister had a congenital vision problem.

In this wrong answer, the ideas of "sister" and "had a vision problem" directly restate the phrase "Franklin's sister was visually impaired" from the fake citation. But the word "congenital" isn't reflected at all in the citation, so this answer choice would be wrong if this were a real SAT question. Remember that you have to look for a textual justification for every concept in every answer choice.

Wrong answer type 2: Barely relevant

This type of wrong answer is a statement that has almost nothing to do with the cited text. These wrong answers can be very tempting to a lot of test-takers, because they don't actually contradict the text—they just say something that might seem to make sense to an untrained test-taker. This wrong answer type exploits your natural tendency to give the benefit of the doubt to anything that doesn't directly contradict the text.

Example:

> He wanted to revolutionize the way society viewed glasses.

This wrong answer has almost nothing to do with anything mentioned in the citation. Once we know that the correct answer must be spelled out directly in the passage, it's usually pretty easy to eliminate these barely relevant choices from consideration—but for untrained test-takers, these kinds of answer choices can often be quite tempting.

especially true if we think that two choices both seem to restate the passage accurately—it may well be that one of them is restating the wrong part of the text, which makes it a wrong answer.

Conclusion

These wrong-answer types, or combinations of them, will account for most of the wrong answers you'll encounter in SAT Reading questions. Basically, they all boil down to the idea that wrong answers provide information that differs from the information found in the relevant portion of the text, while the right answer for each question will restate concepts and relationships from the relevant part of the text, or be demonstrated by the relevant part of the text.

(Once again, bear in mind that you don't have to classify the wrong answer choices that you encounter on test day! You only need to pick the correct answer. But we're discussing the types of wrong answer choices here because it will be harder for the College Board to trick you if you already know what kinds of tricky wrong answer choices will appear on the test.)

Now that we've explored the types of wrong answers we're likely to encounter on Reading questions, you're probably eager to see how we actually go about answering questions. But before we get into that stuff, we need to talk about how to go through passages on the SAT Reading section.

How to Handle Passages on the SAT Reading Section

General Ideas for SAT Reading Passages

One of the most common issues people have with Reading questions on the SAT is the issue of actually reading the passages. Another is the question of how to take notes on the passages.

So let's talk about those things. My answers are pretty simple, really:

- You can read the passage in any way you want, as long as your approach leaves you enough time to finish the section. You can even skip reading the passage if you want, and just refer back to portions of the text on a question-by-question basis.
- You shouldn't take any kind of notes on the passage.

Like most good SAT advice, those two ideas probably contradict most of what you may have heard from teachers, tutors, and prep books. So let's explore them a little. (If you haven't already read my previous remarks on "The Big Secret of SAT Reading" on page 58," I'd recommend you go back and do that before proceeding.)

When we talked about correct answer choices for these questions, we indicated that they're restated or demonstrated by elements of the relevant portion of the original text. This is necessary because the College Board needs to have an objective, legitimate reason to say that one choice is correct and the others are incorrect, otherwise there would be tens or hundreds of thousands of test-takers each year trying to challenge questions without clear correct answers. The only real way to do that is to have the correct answer be the only choice that restates or demonstrates the passage.

This means there are always specific words and phrases in the passage that correspond to the correct answer. It also means that, technically, *the only portion of the text you need to read for any question is the specific portion that restates or demonstrates the ideas in the correct answer.*

So, in theory, if it were somehow possible to know in advance which portions of the text were going to restate or demonstrate the key phrases in the right answer, then we could completely avoid reading the rest of the passage and still answer every question correctly.

In other words, there is literally *no test-taking benefit whatsoever* in trying to get an overall impression of the passage, because there will never be a situation in which the only way to find the correct answer to a real SAT question is to make a general inference from the entire text. (To be sure, there are some students who try to draw inferences from the text and still successfully pick the correct answer to every question, but it's not the most efficient approach, and it's never *necessary.* We can always find the answer for every question spelled out somewhere on the page, even if an untrained test-taker would think the question was asking for a general impression of the whole text.)

For this reason, it doesn't really matter which method you use to read the text. All that matters is that you can locate the relevant portion of the text so that you can figure out which choice is being restated or demonstrated as quickly as possible without sacrificing accuracy.

In general, there are three ways to do this, and I recommend you play around with them to see what works best for you. Again, you can mix, match, or modify these approaches as you see fit, so long as you come up with a system that lets you find the relevant portion of the text quickly enough to allow you to complete the entire section within the time limit.

I want to add one very important piece of advice before we discuss these three approaches, though: make sure you read the introduction to each passage on the Reading Test! Before each passage, there will be a bolded statement that says something like this:

> **Questions 1-10 are based on the following passage.**

Immediately after that, and before the beginning of the passage itself, there will be a brief introduction to the passage that provides the author, title, and year of the work the passage is taken from. That introduction will often contain additional relevant information. It sometimes happens that a prompt or an answer choice will assume you know the material in the introduction; without that knowledge, it may be impossible to see how the right answer is restated or demonstrated by an idea from the passage. So, no matter which approach you take to reading the passage, you should definitely read the brief introduction in full.

With that in mind, let's take a look at the three main ways to approach an SAT Reading passage.

Reading the whole passage at once

The first approach is the old standard of simply reading the passage before attempting the questions. This is by far the most widely used approach. It can definitely work, as long as you don't read too slowly to finish the section before time is called. One note, though—if you read the passage first, don't worry about trying to understand it as an organic whole. *Definitely* don't take notes on it, for reasons we'll get into in a moment. Just give it a thorough once-over. You're going to have to come back to specific parts of it later to verify which answer choices are correct anyway, so just read it once and move on to the questions.

Answering citation questions first before trying to read the passage

The second-most popular approach is to skip reading the passage and just move straight to the questions. On your first pass, you start with two types of questions:

- the questions that have specific line citations, and
- "best evidence" questions.

For each citation question, you go back to the relevant portion of the text, read that portion, and then consider the answer choices. For each "best evidence" question, you either answer the previous question and then the "best evidence" question itself (if the "best evidence" question refers to the previous question), or you just answer the best evidence question (if the "best evidence" question is one of the few that doesn't refer to the previous question). In either case, you use the citations from the answer choices in the "best evidence" question to decide where to look for the answer in the passage. (See "Is there a "best evidence" shortcut?" on page 72 of this Black Book for more thoughts on answering questions in this way.)

When you've finished all the citation questions and "best evidence" questions, you'll generally have a good idea of how the passage is structured. Then you move on to the remaining questions in the section. Many of those questions will mention key concepts that you'll recall from the citation questions and "best evidence" questions, so you'll know where to go back in the passage and locate those portions of the text again. When one of the remaining questions has no citation and also doesn't refer to something that you've already read, you can simply skim the portions of the text that you haven't read yet to find the relevant key terms, and proceed accordingly.

And that brings us to the third type of approach:

Making a mental map

The third general approach to reading passages involves lightly skimming the passage before approaching the questions, in order to construct a rough mental map of where different terms and concepts appear in the passage. I want to stress that, so I'll say it again: in this type of skimming, you're just moving your eyes through the text quickly, NOT really trying to understand the text, but trying to get a rough idea of where various concepts appear in the text so you can use your "map" for later. This way, if a question lacks a citation, you can look at the concepts in the question and the answer choices and recall those concepts from your skimming. This allows you to zero in on the relevant text, read it closely, and find the answer. Of course, you can always re-skim if you need to.

Again, it's important to be aware of these different approaches, and to play around with them during your practice sessions so you can figure out what works best for you. Different students will prefer different approaches based on their personalities and skills.

Why not take notes?

You may be wondering why I'm opposed to the idea of taking notes on the text. The reason is simple, actually: taking notes involves interpreting the text so that you can decide which parts of the passage seem important to you, and then modifying those parts to make them your own. When we interact with a text by making assumptions about what the College Board will ask us, prioritizing words or phrases that seem important to us, or thinking about our reactions to an author's statements, we're straying from the literal meaning of the words on the page, which can hurt our score on the Reading section. As we keep discussing, the correct answer to every single question is spelled out somewhere on the page, so there's no need to interpret what you're reading in any way, including by taking notes.

That's really it for the general approaches to reading SAT passages.

I often hear from students who read this section and then contact me directly to ask what's *really* the one best way to read passages on the SAT. I'll tell you now what I tell those students: *there really, truly is no single best way to read passages on the SAT.* It's possible to use any of the approaches we just discussed and be successful—the key is just trying them all out in practice against real questions, and finding out which one works best for you. Remember that it's okay to tweak one of the approaches if you want, as long as your version of the approach works within the time limit against real SAT questions.

If you've tried all of these approaches and you're still running out of time, the issue probably has more to do with your understanding of how to answer questions in the first place, and less to do with the way you read the passage. In that situation, I'd recommend that you focus on the other aspects of training for the Reading section of the SAT, and that you carefully review your reading practice. It could also help to revisit "Time Management on Test Day" on page 36 of this Black Book.

More Specific Approaches for Different Types of Passages

The College Board likes to incorporate different types of writing in the passages that it uses for the SAT Reading section. When I say this, I'm not only talking about the general types of *texts* that appear on the section (such as the way the College Board categorizes its texts into Literary, Scientific, and Historical/Social types)—I'm referring to broader differences in the kinds of passages you'll see:

- The publication dates for the passages have ranged from as early as the 18th century to as late as the 21st century.
- Some passages are written in the third person, some are in the first person, and some even use the second person.
- Some passages use short sentences and a style that we might think of as more "modern," while other passages use much longer sentences, and sometimes don't even follow the rules of punctuation and grammar that you'll need to know for the Writing and Language section of the SAT.

The result of this wide array of different writing styles is that most test-takers will find some passages harder to read than others—in fact, they'll even find some parts of a given passage harder to understand than other parts of the same passage.

Most high school English classes don't ask their students to read such a wide variety of texts as carefully as the SAT requires, so I've found that it's helpful to give my students some specific tactics that will help them navigate any kind of text they'll see on test day.

We'll talk about the individual tactics first, and then we'll talk about how they tend to be useful in different ways on the three different kinds of passages we'll see from the College Board.

Key tactics:

1. Always focus on the easiest questions available, but don't stereotype any particular type of passage.

In "Approach Each Section in Multiple Passes—Probably More than Two." on page 37 of this Black Book, we discussed the importance of investing your time in questions that you find easier before you worry about questions that are harder for you.

On the SAT Reading section, this idea can lead you to save an entire passage's share of questions for later passes, or it can lead you to skip around within the set of questions for one passage before deciding to move on to questions for another passage.

But it's important not to develop the bad habit of assuming that you should always skip certain types of passages or certain types of questions and save them for later passes! As you'll see during your training, and during the walkthroughs of real SAT questions later in this Black Book, the College Board can write questions that are straightforward and relatively obvious about any kind of passage . . . and it can also ask questions that are relatively complex and confusing about any kind of passage. So if you get in the habit of avoiding all questions with figures for as long as possible, or automatically saving any questions about older texts for later, you'll probably miss out on the opportunity to invest your time in easier questions, which could cause you to rush through them later and hurt your score.

2. Use the "bad connection" approach when you encounter parts of a sentence or paragraph that make no sense to you.

A lot of people dislike reading certain kinds of passages because they get frustrated when they don't understand what an author is saying. But, as trained test-takers, we have to remember that our goal on the SAT Reading is NOT to understand entire passages, because no real SAT question will require us to do that. Instead, our goal is always—and only—to try to understand *as much of a text as we need to* in order to figure out which choice is the only one that restates or demonstrates the relevant part of the passage.

So instead of focusing on the parts of a text that you don't understand, which is only likely to cause frustration, you may find that it's surprisingly effective just to ignore the confusing parts of a sentence or a paragraph, and think about the meanings of the parts you do understand. Believe it or not, this can often give you enough information to arrive at a correct answer with certainty; alternatively, it can put you in a position to make a very well informed hunch guess, if you decide to use that kind of guessing. (See "Guessing on the SAT" on page 33 of this Black Book for more on the different approaches to SAT guessing.)

I often compare this approach to the experience of trying to have a phone conversation or a video chat with somebody when there's a bad connection between you—instead of clearly hearing everything the other person says, you can only hear bits and pieces, but those bits and pieces are often enough to allow you to understand most of what the other person is saying. Most high school students are pretty good at communicating in this way when they have to. I recommend you make a conscious attempt to view the challenging parts of a text in the same way: try to focus on the parts you understand better, and use them to figure out which part of the text is relevant to a question because it restates or demonstrates one of the answer choices.

3. Recognize unknown slang expressions or cultural references, and try to understand them from context—if you even need to understand them at all.

In older texts, and in texts that originate from non-American cultures, we may run into slang phrases that have no immediate meaning for us, even if we understand the individual words in the phrase. For example, line 15 on the first passage on the Reading section of SAT Practice Test #2 includes the phrase "has held high carnival," which is a phrase that was popular in the 1800's, but is pretty uncommon now. An untrained test-taker might see that phrase on test day and panic, because he's never heard it, even if he knows the individual words that make it up. But a trained test-taker would realize that the passage was relatively old, and would already be expecting to see some unfamiliar phrases—and she'd know that the meanings of phrases on SAT Reading passages only matter in the first place if we get asked a question about them. As it turns out, question 34 on that Reading test does ask about this phrase, and the correct answer restates the ideas of "overpowering" and "crushing" from the same sentence in the passage—which are words that most test-takers would have no problem with. So it's never actually necessary to understand the phrase "has held high carnival" in order to answer a question correctly in that section. (See the walkthrough for question 34 on page 93 in this Black Book for further explanation.)

On the other hand, consider the phrase "our First Parents" from line 41 of the first passage on the Reading section of SAT Practice Test #4. Some test-takers may get confused by the phrase, since the narrator never mentions his parents—or any other parents, or any other family relations at all—throughout the rest of the passage. But, again, a trained test-taker would know that he didn't need to worry about the phrase unless a prompt or an answer choice touched on it; as it turns out, no question asks about that phrase at all, so it doesn't matter if a test-taker recognizes the reference or not.

4. Recognize rhetorical questions, and realize the "answers" to these questions are almost always obvious, broad, and/or extreme.

You may have heard of rhetorical questions in school, but many teachers don't really address them specifically, so it's important for us to make sure you understand them for the SAT Reading section.

A rhetorical question is a sentence that has the same structure as any other kind of question in English—the subject and verb are usually inverted, and it ends with a question mark, as in the question "where are we?" But writers don't use rhetorical questions because they're trying to get information, which would be the normal reason someone would ask a question. Instead, a rhetorical question is designed to make the reader believe that the answer to the question is so obvious, and so widely agreed upon, that the writer doesn't even need to state the answer to the question.

In modern English, a common example of a rhetorical question in everyday speech might be something like, "Have you ever heard anything so ridiculous in your entire life?" A person who asks that question may not even wait for an answer—she might just say something

like, "So my boss asked me if I'm willing to work on Saturday for no pay—have you ever heard anything so ridiculous in your entire life? Of course I told him I'm not available." If a speaker does wait after a rhetorical question like this, it's only so that the listener can agree immediately, not so that the listener can provide new information in response to the question. Nobody who says, "Have you ever heard anything so ridiculous?" is open to a sincere answer like "Yes, actually—I once heard of a guy who used to dress his dogs in three-piece suits and have them walk on their hind legs so he could try to sneak them into movies. One time they made it in and cried all the way through *Muppets In Space*. That's way more ridiculous than your thing."

So a rhetorical question is a "question" that's really more like a statement—it's designed to make the reader feel like the point being raised in the question is obvious and can't be argued with. For this reason, the implied or expected answer to a rhetorical question is usually an extreme or broad statement. As an example, consider these lines from the first Reading passage on SAT Practice Test #4, in which the speaker is talking about whether the North Pole has any benefit:

> Can you eat it? Will it carry you from Gothenburg to Malmo like a railway?

Instead of sincerely asking us whether the North Pole can be eaten, or whether it can get you from place to place, the speaker is using rhetorical questions to show that the North Pole *can't* be eaten under any circumstances, and it can *never* carry you from place to place. Again, these implied responses are broad statements (things like "no," and "never"), and the context makes the author's point clear.

In SAT Reading questions, we'll typically find that rhetorical questions occur more often in older passages, but you can theoretically encounter them in any kind of passage. When you do encounter them, remember that they aren't intended to be sincere requests for information—they're intended to make the reader realize that a particular point is obvious.

5. Don't be afraid to ignore the meanings of academic or technical expressions, especially.

Some of the more technical passages on the SAT will include academic-sounding phrases you've never heard before, which will intimidate a lot of untrained test-takers. As trained test-takers, we need to realize that we can often completely ignore the meanings of these technical expressions, even if they seem like they're extremely important to the passage. For example, one of the Reading passages in SAT Practice Test #3 begins with a sentence that includes this phrase, which sounds pretty scientific:

> pathogenic large ectoparasitic mite *Varroa destructor* (Varroa mites)

. . . but the words "pathogenic" and "ectoparasitic" never appear again in the passage, and no question or answer choice refers to them. We could literally ignore those words and phrases without having any effect on our ability to answer any question on the test.

6. With longer sentences, consider mentally removing phrases in "comma sandwiches," and/or ignoring punctuation altogether.

As you'll see when we talk about the Writing and Language section, "comma sandwich" is my made-up term for a phrase surrounded by commas (or other identical pieces of punctuation, such as parentheses or dashes), which "sandwich" it. (See page 448 for more on comma sandwiches if you want.) For our purposes right now, on the Reading section, it's enough to realize that the phrase inside a "comma sandwich" can usually be removed from the sentence where it appears and considered separately, without altering the meaning of the rest of the sentence, or of the sandwiched phrase itself. We can also think of phrases that are sandwiched between dashes or parentheses in the same way—basically, any phrase surrounded by two matching punctuation marks can be thought of as a "punctuation sandwich," meaning it can be removed and considered separately. This can be useful on test day when you're trying to understand a sentence that spans multiple lines of text.

Let's use the sentence that starts on line 69 of the second Reading passage from SAT Practice Test #2 as an example:

> The model of man on which classical economics is based—an entirely rational and selfish being—is a parody, as John Stuart Mill, the philosopher who pioneered the model, accepted.

If a question required a test-taker to work through parts of that sentence, she might notice these two punctuation sandwiches:

1. —an entirely rational and selfish being—
2. , the philosopher who pioneered the model,

If we remove those two phrases from the original sentence, we get this, which is probably easier to understand:

> The model of man on which classical economics is based is a parody, as John Stuart Mill accepted.

If necessary to answer a question, we could also separately consider the ideas from the punctuation sandwiches that we removed: that the model is one of "an entirely rational and selfish being," and that John Stuart Mill is "the philosopher who pioneered the model."

We may also run into SAT Reading passages that are so old the author doesn't even use the same rules of punctuation that you'd have to follow on the SAT Writing and Language section. If a question requires us to consider a sentence like that, we can often just ignore the punctuation altogether, and still identify the key elements of the text that allow us to find the correct answer with total certainty.

Consider question 41 on the Reading section of SAT Practice Test #1, which refers to lines 72-76 of a passage. That citation includes a single sentence with five semi-colons used in a way that we wouldn't be allowed to use them on the Writing and Language section, and that most English teachers wouldn't reward in class. But if we just read the words in the citation and don't get too distracted by the weird

punctuation, we should have no trouble answering the question correctly. (For a more detailed discussion of that question, see the corresponding walkthrough later in this section, on page 96.)

Now that we've discussed some tactics for working through different types of texts, let's talk about some of the ways you may need to use those tactics on the particular "types" of passages that the College Board recognizes: literary, historical/social, and scientific.

Things to keep in mind when reading literary passages

The literary passages on the SAT can sometimes include relatively long, relatively complex sentences, especially if they come from older sources. They may also involve expressions and cultural references that don't make much sense to us, even if we think we understand the individual words that make up the expressions. For these reasons, we may need to be especially prepared to ignore or work around the parts of individual sentences that we don't understand, using the tactics described above.

But there's another difficult aspect of some literary passages: their narrative structures. Unlike the other types of passages on the SAT, the literary passages often depict a story or episode, and many untrained test-takers will feel a strong need to try to understand the structure and flow of the overall narrative. As trained test-takers, we need to remember that the College Board never asks us to understand every part of an entire passage all at once; instead, it can only ask us questions based on individual words and phrases throughout the passage. So if we can't understand the entire sequence of events in a literary passage, there's no need to panic—we may still be able to answer every single question with certainty if we just focus on the portions of sentences and paragraphs that we can understand, and remember our training.

Things to keep in mind when reading passages for history and social studies

Like the literary passages on the SAT, the historical and sociological passages can sometimes come from older sources, and can often describe social situations that don't exist today. This means, once again, that we'll often need to make a deliberate effort to ignore the parts of the passage that don't make sense at first, and focus on the parts we can understand, and the parts that are relevant to the prompts and answer choices that we encounter in the questions.

Some of these passages can include figures, especially when the passages are a bit more academic. As trained test-takers, we need to remember that figure-based questions on the SAT Reading section can sometimes require us to match phrases from answer choices with labels on a figure, and/or with phrases in the passage itself. (See "Reading Graphs, Charts, Tables, and Other Figures on page 44 of this Black Book for more on this.)

Things to keep in mind when reading science passages

Science passages on the SAT are generally modern in terms of style and grammar, which can make them feel more approachable in some ways than the other passages. On the other hand, many untrained test-takers might be intimidated by some of the phrases and concepts that appear in Science passages, because they might involve areas of science that test-takers have never encountered before in class. Of course, as trained test-takers, we know that the SAT Reading section always provides the information we need in order to answer questions with complete certainty, so there's no need to panic if a scientific passage is discussing something unfamiliar.

We also know that technical terms can often be overlooked for SAT purposes because they end up not being relevant to any of the questions in the section, as we discussed above, and as we'll see in the Reading walkthroughs later in this Black Book.

You might think that test-takers who aren't particularly strong in science would have a harder time with scientific passages than people who like science in school—but this isn't always the case! It sometimes happens that untrained test-takers who like science will look at a passage on the SAT and assume they already know what it's trying to say, because it might discuss an area of science that they've already read about. This can be a very dangerous situation, because it can lead some test-takers to rely on outside knowledge, which can cause them to pick answer choices that might seem like true statements in real life, even if they aren't restated or demonstrated directly in the passage.

For more on the ways that issues related to science can appear on the SAT, see "How Science Appears on the SAT" on page 43 of this Black Book.