

READING COMPREHENSION FOR GRADUATE ENTRANCE EXAMS

General Thoughts

What do reading comprehension tests look like?

Most of the tests are similar. The Graduate Record Exam, for example, usually has six passages ranging from 350 to 750 words each. These are taken from fields such as history, astronomy, sociology, psychology, biology, chemistry, physics, literature, art and music. You have 50 minutes to answer 40 questions; you are allowed to refer to the passages throughout the exam.

In a second type of reading comprehension test, you have 15 minutes to read three passages. Then, without referring to the passages again, you must answer the questions in 15 minutes. The LSAT Practice Test includes about 2,450 words to be read in 15 minutes and 30 questions you must complete in 15 minutes. With this type of memory test it helps to read the passages in chronological order (A-B-C) and review them in reverse order (C-B-A). This way, the first passage read is the last reviewed and may remain “fresher” for you.

Myths

Speed-reading is the answer

Probably not. Efficiency and accuracy are far more important than speed. (In the LSAT example above, the average reading speed necessarily to complete the reading within the allotted time is only 163 words per minute.) In most tests, students with average reading rates have ample time to finish. People fall behind when they have to reread excessively to answer the questions.

If the reading passage is taken from my field, I'm OK; if it's not, I'm dead

Not at all. Reading comprehension tests are not tests of your previous learning in a specific field. You should assume that in any passage, enough information is given about the subject for you to find or reason out the most appropriate answer. Students frequently report that some of the easiest passages for them were in subjects with which they had little previous experience.

Remember, you can do an easy-looking passage first to get your confidence up. In most tests, you aren't required to follow the order in which the passages and questions are presented. If you decide to skip around within a section, just be careful that the question you're answering corresponds to the correct number on the computer answer sheet.

Questions

It helps to know what type of reading comprehension skill is being tested. With a little practice, you can look at a reading comprehension question and quickly judge whether it's about a main point or an inference, etc. Let's examine several types of questions and the sample formats in which they might appear.

1. Some questions test your ability to make a judgment about the most appropriate central thesis for the passage. The central thesis of any passage is always a general statement of the author's topic. These questions usually begin this way:
 - The most appropriate theme for this selection is . . .
 - The best title for this selection is . . .
 - The author's purpose in writing this selection is . . .

Often you can find an introduction to the central thesis (general topic) at the beginning of the passage. Or it may be restated in a final summarizing paragraph. If not, you may have to summarize for yourself and conclude which alternative best expresses the central thesis.

2. A second type of question tests your ability to recognize main points. Roughly speaking, once an author has presented a general topic, he or she will present a series of main points to develop it. The topic sentence (that which explains most clearly what a paragraph is about) often expresses the main point an author is making. Look out for these. It is difficult to write sample formats, because the wording of main point questions is usually quite specific to the context, but two samples are:
 - “_____” served the dual purpose of . . .
 - The effectiveness of _____ was diminished by . . .
3. A third type of question tests your ability to find and understand *specific details*. The details of writing are those points made to illustrate, expand, compare or develop main points. The important thing about both main point and detail questions is that you can reread, if necessary, in order to find out or check your answer. Many detail questions are specifically constructed using the wording of the passage, but two more general formats are:
 - All of the following _____ are listed in the passage except . . .
 - Which of these statements are correct?
4. A high-level skill tested in reading comprehension passages is your ability to reason inferentially. This requires you to understand the logic of the paragraph and use it on your own to choose the most appropriate answer. For example, if you read a passage about the politics of Thomas Jefferson in the 18th century and then were presented with a question asking how Jefferson would have reacted to a 20th century political scandal, you would have to *infer* his reaction from your knowledge of what you had just read. The important thing to remember about inferential reasoning questions is that you can't reread to find the answer (although you may wish to reread to check the logical development of the passage). Here are some sample stem items from inferential reasoning questions:
 - We can conclude the country discussed in the passage is not the United States because . . .
 - The author's attitude towards is one of . . .
 - Of the following, the author would be least interested in basing his analysis on . . .
5. Still another type of question is one where you are asked to derive the meaning of a word or phrase from the context of the passage. Most adults learn the majority of their new vocabulary words this way anyway, so don't panic. You are not being asked to define a word, but to make a judgment about the most logical and appropriate meaning for it given the context in which it appears. Reread the alternative answers and look back to the text to choose the answer that best fits the context. You can infer that the purpose of this type of item is not to test your precise knowledge of a word or phrase, but rather your ability to understand the meaning of a whole sentence. A typical format is:
 - The word “_____” as used in this selection, means . . .

A Way to Approach Reading Comprehension Selections

Remember that reading speed is not as crucial as how accurately you comprehend and retrieve information. The model that follows has proven successful for many students. Study the principles presented and try these techniques on some of the exercises (see page 3 for references).

Preview

Begin with a quick overview (about 30 seconds) of what it is you are going to read. You have a definite advantage if you can anticipate even vaguely what the content of a selection is before you read it. These steps will help you make a good guess about the content of any passage.

1. For about 15 seconds, look over the article to pick up phrases from the introductory sentences of each paragraph and topic nouns from the body of the article. Here are the beginning sentences from three different paragraphs of a passage taken from *The GRE Aptitude Test* by Gruber and Gruber (NT, NY: 1971) pp. 15-16. It will take you longer than 15 seconds to read the entire sentences. Just try to pick out the important phrases and skip the rest. To help you, the important phrases in the first two sentences have been underlined. You may wish to underline those in the third sentence yourself.
 - a. “First of all, modern propaganda is based on scientific analysis of psychology and sociology.”
 - b. Second, propaganda is scientific in that it tends to establish a set of rules, rigorous, precise and tested, that are not merely recipes but impose themselves on every propagandist, who is less and less free to follow his own impulses.
 - c. Third, what is needed nowadays is an exact analysis of both the environment and the individual to be subjected to the propaganda.”

In the body of the article, the topic noun that appears in various forms again and again is “propaganda.” Fifteen seconds spent glancing over the article in the prescribed way should enable you to guess what the content will be. A quick look (another 15 seconds) at the questions will confirm and enlarge your rough preview-guess. This brings us to the second step of the process.

2. Now look at the important phrases from the stems of the questions. Don’t read the responses—that’s a waste of time at this point. Here are the stem items from the first three questions from the propaganda passage:
 - a. The usefulness of a propaganda technique is determined by ...
 - b. Propaganda has been brought from its primitive stages by . . .
 - c. All of the following reveal an increasing use of science and scientific method in the field of propaganda except ...

Don’t expect yourself to remember all the questions as you read the passage—you won’t, and that’s not the point, anyway. You will get a good general idea of what the passage is about before you have actually read it. Also, you will probably remember the emphasis of some of the questions. A specific word from a context analysis question is easy to relocate later as you’re answering the questions. Also, you can underline or circle the vocabulary word from the context question in the test booklet when you read and find it—it will be easier to find again that way.

Read and Mark the Passage

When you have finished your preview, begin to read. As you read through the selection, be sure to mark or underline any sentences that relate to questions you remember from your preview. It will probably help you to “editorialize” as you read (note where in the passage information is located and so forth). Typical editorializing comments might go something like this: “Hmm, let’s see ... first half is about how the propagandist makes use of science and scientific techniques. Then, in the last part, the author talks about how the effects of propaganda are evaluated.” It is helpful to editorialize about what you are reading for several reasons. First, it will help you to have a sense of where in the article to relocate information when you get to the questions. (Remember the bias of this paper: efficient information retrieval methods are much more useful than speed-reading.)

Next, it will help you to focus on the passage rather than on yourself. It is colossally unhelpful for your internal messages or “self-talk” to be negatively self-evaluative during a task. Poor self-talk might be “Oh Lord, that guy next to me is really zipping through—I’m so slow.” Or, “I’ll never make it! I’ve never been good at this stuff.” It would be more helpful to ignore the performance of others and focus on the test. For example, “I’ve never been good at this-no, don’t start that stuff now. Let’s see, the main point of this paragraph seems to be . . .”

Answer the Questions

As you read through the questions, do the ones you’re sure of first. Then take advantage of your editorializing to quickly relocate the needed information. Reread only until you find or check your answer. This way, efficient information retrieval may hold you in better stead than your memory. If you can eliminate one or two answer choices as definitely wrong, you will improve the chance of a correct guess.

Further Sources

1. Work in any of the practice manuals for graduate entrance examinations. There is a great deal of overlap in any of the manuals that contain reading comprehension exercises.
2. SRA Rate Builders have a series of cards with a three-minute time limit to read a small selection and answer questions. Make sure you stick to the time limit and answer at least 80 percent of the questions correctly. It’s good practice to work under timed conditions. (Easy)
3. Baldridges’ *Rate and Comprehension Check Tests* (Greenwich, Conn.) 1970, includes a good series of excerpts and multiple-choice questions. There is also a rate table if you wish to calculate your reading rate. Aim for about five minutes per article to read and answer questions, or read three selections in 15 minutes and then answer questions over all three without looking back. (Harder)
4. Perry and Whitlock, *Selection for Improving Speed of Comprehension* (Cambridge, Mass.) 1961, has 1,000 word selections and multiple-choice tests. These are quite sophisticated and will provide good practice. An approximate five-minute time limit is a good idea here, too. (Hardest)