

The passage below is followed by questions based on its content. After reading the passage, choose the best answer to each question. Answer the questions on the basis of what is stated or implied in the passage.

CRITICAL READING

Most students have an abiding anxiety at the thought of these sections. Not only do they require that students read – torturous activity for them in the best of circumstances – but that they do it under the pressure of time.

For most students, this means reading through the paragraphs and passages a number of times, each more anxious than the last, hunting down answers and re-reading for clarity in passages seemingly written to deliberately confuse – or bore. Often the answer-choices themselves are labyrinths of distraction, each one sounding more or less plausible than the next. After careful deliberation and much second-guessing, most students usually choose the answer most like a phrase or sentence from the passage, something recognizable and familiar. Some of the time, it's actually the *right* answer. Most of the time, however, the students are out of luck – and have wasted a lot of valuable time sprinting down blind alleys and getting more confused.

But one of the reasons why I like teaching this part of the test is that it gives the student opportunities to practice some of the fundamentals of reading – and practice with the difference between seeking understanding and acting like a rat in the multiple-choice maze of half-recognitions.

If the student seeks to *understand*, he or she must first focus attention on the structure of paragraphs and essays, on the form that supports and holds the content.

In this sense, I'm really advising that you do what you did with Sentence Completion problems, only on a different scale. If the Analogy and Antonym problems test your capacities to relate words, and the Sentence Completion problems test your skills with sentence and word construction, then we can say that the Critical Reading sections test your ability to understand and put together words and sentences into essays.

But make no mistake; these sections are not about *critical* reading. There's nothing critical about them – except in the sense that reading is critical to moving beyond ignorance. Rather, this section is about *reading comprehension*, plainly and simply. Like the Sentence Completion, if you look toward your answers for clues, you've already lost at least half the battle. The answers are there to *keep you from paying attention to what's important!*

Let me explain. What's important is NOT recognizing answer-choices that sound like phrases in the passage. Rather, what's important is UNDERSTANDING THE PASSAGE. If you can learn to focus on what's important in the writing, then you can learn to ignore the answer-choices that serve only to confuse and distract. If you concentrate on good reading skills, then the answering takes care of itself.

GOOD READING

What's true about good reading is true about anything that requires attention and discipline: if you do it right the first time, you don't have to spend a lot of effort cleaning up your own mistakes and redoing work. There is an old saying: the lazy man always works twice. Or the joke about the man who walks into a hardware store looking for a cheap axe. The clerk looks him up and down, and sees that he doesn't have a lot of money. "You can't afford a cheap axe," he answers.

What does the store clerk mean? It often costs us much more money and effort when we try to do things the cheap and easy way. Quality and success are never about being cheap. They're about doing and acting the right way. It just so happens, when we do things the right way, they end up taking us much less time, and significantly less effort. But you don't know that until you practice right action(!).

So, let's examine and begin to practice some good reading skills. The first thing is, get to know your passage before you try to read and answer questions. In the old days, this was known as *survey*. Some of you may have studied SQ3R, or *survey, question, read, respond, and review*. This traditional study method incorporates some significant research on how people learn. Particularly, it stresses an overview – or advanced organization – as the first step in preparing the way for more detailed examination. Further, it stresses multiple, though more specialized, readings as another key to comprehension and retention.

I call the first step, ***pre-reading***. This first pass is meant to get us familiar with the context, and help us lay the foundation for further reading.

Step #1: Pre-Read the passage or passages for Theme and Main Ideas.

In the case of the Critical Reading sections, our first pass should take us about 20 seconds for the longest passages, and 10 seconds for the shortest. Our attention should **only** be paid to the italicized blurb at the top (if there is one), the introduction, the topic sentences marking the entrance of new ideas or support, and the conclusion that brings the essay together, tying the beginning with the end. Short passages require that we read the beginning of each sentence until we get the 'gist' of what the author is trying to communicate.

Clues for Pre-Reading:

The blurb at the top, in italics, introduces the context.

The first paragraph (or first sentence) introduces the theme.

Each of the **topic sentences** in the body of the passage focuses on a unique but related idea (functioning like the beginnings of sentences in a well-structured paragraph). You might pay some attention to the ends of the paragraphs, as well. Often, a good clue to what is being said is how the author transitions from idea to idea.

The conclusion brings the essay together.

Essentially, pre-reading is about getting the gist rather than obsessing over detail. All of these clues and pieces frame the essay or passage; they provide the structure upon which everything else is built. The rest of the writing is all filling and flavor. If you know the basic structure of a passage, then you can be sure that everything else will make sense to you – if you begin in confusion about the structure, then you’re easy prey for the distracting answer choices.

But simply recognizing and even noting these clues seldom leads to perfect comprehension, especially for the reader just beginning to learn to pay active attention. Instead, *writing each of these things down* – the theme and main ideas, and the author’s aim and tone – helps establish both context and ground. *How* you write them down can be just as important.

Step #2: During a second ‘pre-reading’, make a map of the passage on your scratch paper. Be sure to leave space between main ideas, and set up your map in a way that makes clear how each paragraph relates to the passage as a whole, both in content and form.

Now that you’ve laid your basic ground for comprehension, it’s time to read and answer the questions. Notice that now is NOT the time to read the passage more carefully as a separate activity – you’ll read carefully through the process of answering the questions.

The important point is that good reading is never a passive activity. Rather, good reading is always about being completely engaged in the material, engaging in the process of trying to understand – rather than memorize. The question sets are never about what or how much you can remember. The material from the passage will be right in front of you the whole time you’re answering. The real question: do you know where to look?

What you’ll find is there are only **four types of questions** that are asked, regardless of the kind of passage or its difficulty.

Types of questions:

Main Ideas – asking about the major theme, or subject, or position of the author

Supporting Ideas – asking questions of direct detail or implication

Attitude or Tone – asking you to characterize the emotional or affective qualities of the writing; often asking you to identify an author's personal position

Process – asking you about the author's intentions, or rhetorical structures

Step #3: Actively read the passage more carefully as you answer each question – and be sure to be certain about what you understand BEFORE you look at any answer choice. In effect, you read in order to answer, rather than answering questions about what you've read!

ARTICULATION is perhaps the single most important step in reading comprehension, and because of this I advise that every student make at least a deliberate mental note – and at best a quick written note – of what each section under scrutiny means, represents or implies (depending on the type of question). Fundamental to doing well on the GRE is that you do the work necessary to understand the passage *before* looking at the answer-choices. In this way, distraction is minimized; correct answers are maximized.

At first, it will seem foreign and difficult to encapsulate so many words into so few – and extra work to come up with your own answer when you have five perfectly good options right there in front of you. But some practice, you'll see that such articulation forces you to think about and express key elements of the passage in your own words – forcing you, in other words, to *understand*. Without articulation, we are left with just a fuzzy feeling about what's in front of us, often paying the majority of our attention to a dialogue in our head about the material, a dialogue that is distracting at best. Deliberately noting what we understand in just a few words changes the focus of the dialogue – from distraction to the main idea and its support right in front of us.

Practicing with such notes, you'll start to see that the answer to almost every question will be closest to the main idea of the relevant section, usually telegraphed in the topic sentence! Chances are that there is just one answer choice quite similar to what you've written down on your own, in your notes. It's only after you understand what the passage is saying, on your own, that looking at answer-choices is helpful and advisable in order to find it. The rest of the answers, as you'll see, are either too specific (offering irrelevant information), contradictory to the basic facts of the passage, too strongly worded or simply nonsense.

But most students don't know that these problems are so easy, often making reading comprehension difficult for themselves by looking at the answers first and trying to guess. I often hear students saying that they doubted themselves because one or more of the other answers *sounded* better. But neither sound, nor looks, nor feeling is the point – *meaning* is. With the usual approach that students take, it's difficult not be distracted by answers that *do* sound right, *do* seem intelligent, *do* look 'critical' – but mean something other what you understand and what the author intended.

Remember: all the answers are clearly expressed in the passages, without ambiguity, right in front of you. One of the only pieces of good advice that most students hear about this section is to not answer questions based on anything from outside of the passage. The point of these questions isn't imagination, it isn't criticality, it isn't interpretation – it IS to see if you know how to read and find answers. Stay on track: pay attention to what's being said on the paper. *Then* find the answer that's closest to your own understanding.

In other words, each question is an opportunity to get more closely acquainted with the reading, and not a requisition for criticality. Chances are, if the question is about a **supporting idea**, no matter how they ask the question, what they're *really* asking you is to summarize what you've read. If it asks about an **implication**, or an **inference**, it's STILL asking you to summarize what you've read, from a different perspective. In other words, the GRE is like someone standing right next you while you're reading, asking, "What's he (or she) mean by that?"

Keep practicing until these tactics are second nature. You'll find that the techniques of **pre-reading** and **effective note-taking** are the keys to reading well in nearly anything. Applying them here, quickly and effectively, may take you a few weeks, or months – or you may take to them like a duck to water. Either way, they will serve you well, well beyond this exam.

Summary:

1. Quickly pre-read text for theme and main ideas
2. Make a second pass through the passage, and note this structure using a representative map that will serve as a recall pattern. Be sure to leave space

between main ideas, and set up your map in a way that makes clear how each paragraph relates to the passages as a whole, both in content and form.

3. Actively read the passage more carefully as you answer each question – and be sure to be certain about what you understand BEFORE you look at any answer choice. In effect, you read in order to answer, rather than answering questions about what you've read!