

THE CRITICAL READER

Fifth Edition

THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO  
**SAT<sup>®</sup>**  
**READING**

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A complete chapter devoted to each question type

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Strategies to improve speed and comprehension

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Test-style exercises to apply your skills

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Detailed explanations to help you answer challenging questions

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## Preface

Eight years elapsed between my last SAT®, which I took as a senior in high school, and the first time I was asked to tutor reading for the SAT. I distinctly remember sitting in Barnes & Noble at 82<sup>nd</sup> Street on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, hunched over the *Official Guide*, staring at the questions in horror and wondering how on earth I had ever gotten an 800 at the age of 17. Mind you, I felt completely flummoxed by the SAT after I had spent four years studying literature in college.

Somehow or other, I managed to muddle through my first reading tutoring sessions. I tried to pretend that I knew what I was doing, but to be perfectly honest, I was pretty lost. I had to look up answers in the back of the book. A lot. I lost count of the number of times I had to utter the words, “I think you’re right, but give me one second and let me just double-check that answer...” It was mortifying. No tutor wants to come off as clueless in front of a sixteen-year-old, but I was looking like I had no idea what I was doing. Grammar I could handle, but when it came to teaching reading, I was in way over my head. I simply had no idea how to put into words what had always come naturally to me. Besides, half the time I wasn’t sure of the right answer myself.

Luckily for me, fate intervened in the form of Laura Wilson, the founder of WilsonPrep in Chappaqua, New York, whose company I spent several years writing tests for. Laura taught me about the major passage themes, answer choices patterns, and structures. I learned the importance of identifying the main point, tone and major transitions, as well as the ways in which that information can allow a test-taker to spot correct answers quickly, efficiently, and without second-guessing. I discovered that the skills that the SAT tested were in fact the exact same skills that I had spent four years honing.

As a matter of fact, I came to realize that, paradoxically, my degree in French was probably more of an aid in teaching reading than a degree in English would have been. The basic French literary analysis exercise, known as a linear textual explication, consists of close reading of a short excerpt of text, during which the reader explains how the text functions rhetorically from beginning to end—that is, just how structure, diction, and syntax work together to produce meaning and convey a particular idea or point of view. In other words, the same skills as those tested on the SAT. I had considered textual explications a pointless exercise (Rhetoric? Who studies *rhetoric* anymore? That’s so nineteenth century!) and resented being forced to write them in college—especially during the year I spent at the Sorbonne, where I and my (French) classmates did little else—but suddenly I appreciated the skills they had taught me. Once I made the connection between what I had been studying all that time and the skills tested on the SAT, the test made sense. I found that I had something to fall back on when I was teaching and, for the first time, I found that I no longer had to constantly look up answers.

I still had a long way to go as a tutor, though. At first, I clung a bit too rigidly to some methods (e.g., insisting that students circle all the transitions) and often did not leave my students enough room to find their own strategies. As I worked with more students, however, I began to realize just how little I could take for granted in terms of pre-existing skills: most of my students, it turned out, had significant difficulty even identifying the point of an argument, never mind summing it up in five or so words. A lot of them didn’t even realize that passages contained arguments at all; they thought that the authors were simply “talking about stuff.” As a result, it never even occurred to them to identify which ideas a given author did and did not agree with. When I instructed them to circle transitions like *however* and *therefore* as a way of identifying the key places in an argument, many of them found it overwhelming to do so at the same time they were trying to absorb the literal content of a passage. More than one student told me they could do one or the other, but not both at the same time. In one memorable gaffe, I told a student that while he often did not have to read every word of the more analytical passages, he did need to read all of the literary passages—only to have him respond that he couldn’t tell the difference. He thought of all the passages as literary because the blurbs above them

all said they came from books, and weren't all books "literary?" It had never occurred to me to tell him that he needed to look for the word *novel* in the blurb above the passage in order to identify works of *fiction*. When I pointed out to another student that he had answered a question incorrectly because he hadn't realized that the author of the passage disagreed with a particular idea, he responded without a trace of irony that the author had spent a lot of time talking about that idea. Apparently, no one had ever introduced him to the idea that writers often spend a good deal of time fleshing out ideas that they *don't* agree with. And this was a student scoring in the mid-600s!

Eventually, I got it. I realized that I would have to spend more time—sometimes a lot more time—explaining basic contextual pieces of information that most adult readers took for granted and, moreover, I would have to do so at the same time I covered actual test-taking strategies. Without the fundamentals, all the strategy in the world might not even raise a student's score by 10 points. My goal here is to supply some of those fundamentals while also covering some of the more advanced skills the exam requires. This book is therefore intended to help you work through and "decode" College Board material. To that end, I have done my best to select texts that reflect the content and themes of the SAT, with an approximately equal mix of fiction, humanities, social science, and natural science passages.

Unfortunately, though, there is no such thing as a "pure" reading test. To some extent, your ability to understand what you read is always bound up with your existing knowledge. Research shows that when students whose overall reading skills are weak are asked to read about subjects they are highly familiar with, their comprehension is *better* than that of students with stronger general reading skills.<sup>1</sup> The more familiar you are with a subject, the less time and energy you will need to spend trying to understand a passage about it. You'll also be familiar with any vocabulary associated with the topic, which means you won't have to worry about keeping track of new terminology.

Moreover, you will probably find it much easier to identify correct and incorrect answer choices. While it is true that answers that are true in the real world will not necessarily be right, it is also true that correct answers will not be false in the real world. If you see an answer that you know includes a false statement, you can start by eliminating it; and if you see one that you know is factually true, you can save yourself a lot of time by checking it first.

Finally, encountering a passage about a subject you already know something about can be very calming on a test like the SAT because you will no longer be dealing with a frightening unknown. Instead of trying to assimilate a mass of completely new information in the space of a few minutes, you can instead place what you are reading in the context of your existing knowledge.

Provided that you have solid comprehension skills and contextual knowledge, success in Reading is also largely a question of approach, or method. Because the test demands a certain degree of flexibility—no single strategy can be guaranteed to work 100% of the time—I have also tried to make this book a toolbox of sorts. My goal is to provide you with a variety of approaches and strategies that you can choose from and apply as necessary, depending on the question at hand. Whenever possible, I have provided multiple explanations for questions, showing how you might arrive at the answer by working in different ways and from different sets of starting assumptions. The ability to adapt is what will ultimately make you unshakeable—even at eight o'clock on a Saturday morning.

~Erica Meltzer

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Willingham, "How Knowledge Helps," *American Educator*, Spring 2006.  
<https://www.aft.org/periodicalamerican-educator/spring-2006/how-knowledge-helps>

## How to Use This Book

As you may have noticed, this book contains a fair amount of material, and you might be wondering just how to go about using it. If that's the case, here's a quick guide:

### **Step 1: Take a full-length diagnostic test.**

The College Board has released four full-length adaptive digital exams. Note that you will need to create an account and download the Bluebook app.

### **Step 2: Identify what you need to focus on.**

Mark your right and wrong answers. Then, use the list of question stems on p. 11 to determine what type of material you need to work on. (Note: the question categories used in this book are slightly different from those used by the College Board.)

### **Step 3: Work through the relevant chapters.**

If your errors are primarily concentrated in a few specific categories, you can start by focusing on the corresponding chapters.

If your errors are more random or encompass a wider range of question types, or if you have a significant amount of time before the exam, you will probably be best served by working through all of the chapters in order.

You may want to take practice tests periodically to gauge your progress, or you may prefer to work through the entire book before taking another complete test.

### **Step 4: Build a “bridge” to the test.**

When you do the end-of-chapter exercises in this book, the strategy information will usually still be fresh, and you will also know in advance the concept that every question is testing. When you take full-length practice tests, however, all of the question types will be mixed together in unpredictable combinations. You will also need to recall a wide variety of strategies and, without any prompting, recognize when to apply them. That's a big strain on your working memory, and you may initially notice a gap between your performance on the individual exercises and your performance on practice tests.

If you find yourself in that situation, you must essentially create a “bridge” between the book and the test. Either set up a digital practice exam and ignore the timer; or, to remove the time constraint entirely, work through non-adaptive practice questions on Khan Academy.

Before you answer each question, stop and review the specific strategy it requires. For example, you can remind yourself to read before and after line references, play positive/negative, or focus on the conclusion. If you find it helpful, you can even write yourself notes in the margins of your test. The goal is to practice identifying which strategies are most appropriate in a given situation, and to become accustomed to applying them when no one (me) is holding up a sign telling you where to start. (As I used to tell my students when they stared at me pleadingly, “Don’t give me that look—I’m not going to be sitting there when you take the test. You tell *me* what you need to do to answer the question.”)

To reiterate, it does not matter how much time you spend on this step. If you find it helpful, you can sit with this book next to your test and flip to the corresponding chapter for each question, reviewing the relevant sections as you work. At this point, it is much more important to work carefully than to work quickly, particularly if you have a tendency to lose points for careless errors. If necessary, you can even do a second test this way—however long it takes for the process to become automatic. When things seem to be coming together, take a timed test and see what holds.

#### **Step 5: Review your mistakes.**

I cannot stress how important this step is. Do not move on from a test until you have reviewed every mistake and understood where things went awry, as well as what you need to do to avoid similar errors in the future. Note that working this way also reduces the chance that you will use up all of the official College Board material early in your preparation process.

#### **Step 6: Repeat as necessary until you are consistently scoring in your target range.**

To be sure, there is no way to control for every possibility. Reading is inherently less predictable than Math, and there may indeed be times when a correct answer genuinely hinges on something you do not fully understand and could not have foreseen. In many other instances, however, getting the right answer is likely to be a matter of slowing down, making sure you know exactly what you're looking for, and going step by step. If you control for everything you can reasonably control for, you can usually get pretty far.

So yes, working this way is not always pleasant. Yes, it is more involved than simply crashing through practice test after practice test, hoping that somehow things will just work themselves out. But ultimately, it tends to be pretty effective. And when your scores come back, you're a lot more likely to be happy—and possibly even done with the SAT for good.

## Question Stems by Category

### Vocabulary

- Which choice completes the text with the most logical and precise word or phrase?
- As used in the text, what does the word x most nearly mean?

### Big Picture/Main Idea

- Which choice best states the main idea of the text?
- Which choice best describes the overall structure of the text?

### Literal Comprehension

- According to/Based on the text, what is true about...?
- According to/Based on the text, why does x occur?

### Function

- Which choice best states the primary purpose of the passage?
- Which choice best states the function of the underlined sentence in the text as a whole?

### Text Completion

- Which choice most logically completes the text?

### Support/Undermine

- Which quotation from the text most effectively illustrates the claim?
- Which statement would most directly support the researchers' conclusion?
- Which statement would most directly undermine/weaken the researchers' conclusion?

### Graphic

- Which choice best describes data from the graph/table that supports the researchers' claim?

### Suggested Reading

*The New York Times* (particularly the Science section), [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

*Science Daily*, [www.sciencedaily.com](http://www.sciencedaily.com)

*Smithsonian Magazine*, [www.smithsonianmag.com](http://www.smithsonianmag.com)

*Scientific American*, [www.scientificamerican.com](http://www.scientificamerican.com)

*National Geographic*, [www.nationalgeographic.com](http://www.nationalgeographic.com)

*Newsweek*, [www.newsweek.com](http://www.newsweek.com)

*Time Magazine*, [www.time.com](http://www.time.com)

*The Atlantic Monthly*, [www.theatlantic.com/magazine](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine)

*Wired*, [www.wired.com](http://www.wired.com)

For links to many additional resources, Arts & Letters Daily: [www.aldaily.com](http://www.aldaily.com). University press releases and alumni magazines can also be an excellent source of SAT-level material.

Also see: Gerald Graff, Cathy Birkenstein, and Russell Durst: *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*, 2nd Edition. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2009.

**Fiction, suggested authors:** Julia Alvarez, Jane Austen, Charlotte/ Anne Brontë, Michael Chabon, Amy Tan, Jhumpa Lahiri

**Science and Social Science, suggested authors:** Daniel Kahneman, Malcolm Gladwell, Adam Grant, Daniel Levitin, Brian Greene, Stephen Hawking, Lisa Randall

# 1

## Overview of SAT Reading

The Reading and Writing portion of the digital SAT comprises two modules lasting 30 minutes with 27 questions each (54 questions total). Because the test is adaptable, performance during Module 1 determines the difficulty of the questions that appear in Module 2.

Questions can be answered in any order—the software permits skipping—so you should focus on answering everything you can answer easily upfront. If you do jump around, however, just make sure that you eventually answer every question. There is no additional penalty for incorrect answers, and thus there is no reason to leave questions blank.

Within the individual Reading/Writing modules, the first 15 questions or so are devoted to Reading, with the remainder testing Writing—the two types are not interspersed.

Nearly all passages consist of a one-paragraph text ranging from about 50 to 150 words, accompanied by a single question. The only exception is paired passages, which include two short texts accompanied by one question.

Each Reading section normally begins with fill-in-the-blank vocabulary questions and then progresses to more challenging items covering a variety of advanced reasoning skills. Passages cover a wide range of subjects but can be grouped into four major categories:

- **Fiction** (e.g., prose fiction, poetry, and very occasionally drama)
- **Humanities** (e.g., art, literature, music)
- **Social Science** (e.g., history, politics, sociology)
- **Natural Science** (e.g., biology, physics, astronomy)

Science passages, and less frequently Social Science passages, may also contain graphs or charts. In some instances, information from both the graphic and the passage will be needed to determine the answer; in others, the question can be answered based on the passage alone.

## What Does SAT Reading Test?

The SAT reading test is a literal comprehension test in some regards, but it is also an *argument* comprehension test. It tests not only the ability to find bits of factual information in a passage, but also the capacity to understand how arguments are constructed; what types of conclusions can logically be inferred from them; and what types of information would logically illustrate, support, or weaken them. In other words, comprehension is necessary but not sufficient.

The skill that the SAT requires is therefore something called “**rhetorical reading**.” Rhetoric is the art of persuasion, and reading rhetorically simply means reading to understand an author’s argument as well as the rhetorical role or **function** that various pieces of information play in creating that argument.

**Reading this way is an acquirable skill, not an innate aptitude. It just takes practice.**

It is tested in various ways across a variety of different question types:

- **Vocabulary** questions test your ability to use context clues to complete texts in a logical manner, and to recognize alternate meanings of common words.
- **Literal Comprehension** questions test your understanding of straightforward meaning, although they may target portions of the passage that are written in potentially confusing ways or that contain vocabulary that many students find challenging.
- **Big-picture/Main Idea** questions test your understanding of the passage as a whole. They may ask you to identify the central point or overall structure of a passage.
- **Text Completion** questions ask you to infer logical conclusions based on the information you have been given.
- **Support/Undermine** questions ask you to move beyond the passage and apply ideas in it to new situations.
- **Function or purpose** questions ask you to identify the **rhetorical role** (e.g., support, refute, criticize) of a passage as a whole, or of information within it.
- **Paired passage** questions test your ability to compare texts with different, often conflicting, points of view, and to infer how each author—or figures discussed in one or both of the passages—would likely react to the other’s point of view.
- **Graphic-based** questions test your ability to interpret information presented in graph or table form, and to determine how it relates to information in a passage.

Each chapter in this book is devoted to a specific type of question and is followed by exercises that allow you to practice that particular skill.

## Managing the Reading Test as a Whole

The 60 minutes you are given to complete 54 questions are both a blessing and a curse. On one hand, passages are short and accompanied by only a single question, making the digital test feel less tedious than the paper-based version of the exam. On the other hand, some questions can be fairly taxing, and after you've read passage after passage for more than an hour without interruption, things can start to blend together. As a result, you should try to use your time as efficiently as possible to avoid becoming unnecessarily fatigued.

Regardless of whether you are aiming for a 600 or an 800, your goal is simple: to correctly answer as many questions as possible within the allotted time. You are under no obligation to read the passages and/or answer the questions in the order in which they appear. In each module, you can divvy up the 30 minutes and 27 questions—both Reading and Writing—any way you wish.

If you are a strong reader across the board, or if you have a very strong aversion to jumping around, you may find it easiest to simply read the passages and answer the questions in the order they appear—no need for fancy strategies.

However, if you have very pronounced strengths and weaknesses or consistently run out of time, you should try to answer questions in an order that allows you to leverage your skills to maximum effect. If you can generally answer certain question types very quickly, completing them first will allow you to save energy, helping you to remain focused on more difficult questions. Keep in mind also that the Reading/Writing portion is followed by an hour of Math, and you do not want to already feel fatigued when you begin.

While “easy” and “hard” are of course somewhat subjective, there are some question types—for example, text completions, support/undermine, and graphics—that tend to involve more steps of logic than others. Alternately, if you have trouble deciphering more literary language, you may find prose fiction and poetry passages difficult.

**You should therefore practice recognizing which questions you are normally able to answer easily and which ones give you trouble so that you already have a clear sense of where to focus your attention when you walk into the test.**

If time is consistently a serious issue, you may even be better off planning from the start to guess on a small number of questions in order to give yourself a bit of extra time on ones that you are more likely to get right. If you are not aiming for a perfect score, trying to answer every question may actually make it *more* difficult for you to achieve your goal.

Keep in mind that unless you are absolutely set on trying to score 1600, you probably have more wiggle room than you think. You do not need to answer every question correctly to obtain a score that will make you a serious candidate at any number of selective colleges.

## The Answer Isn't Always *in* the Passage

One of the great truisms of SAT prep is that “the answer is always in the passage,” but in reality this statement is only half true: **the information necessary to answer the questions is always provided in the passage, but not necessarily the answer itself.** It’s a subtle but important distinction.

The SAT tests the ability to draw relationships between specific wordings and general ideas, so while the correct answer will always be *supported by* specific wording in the passage, the whole point is that you must make the connection. That, in essence, is the test.

As a rule, therefore, the correct answers to most questions will usually not be stated word-for-word in the text. In fact, **if an answer repeats the exact phrasing from the passage, you should approach that option very cautiously.** The correct answer will usually refer to an idea that has been discussed in the passage and that has simply been rephrased. Your job is to determine that idea and identify the answer that restates it using **synonyms. Same idea, different words.**

## Understanding Answer Choices

Although one or more incorrect answers may sound convincing, there is always a specific reason—supported by the passage—that wrong answers are wrong. Often, they describe a situation that *could* be true but that the passage does not explicitly indicate *is* true. They may also employ relatively abstract language that many test-takers find confusing or difficult to comprehend. That said, incorrect answers typically fall into the following categories:

- Off-topic
- Too broad (e.g., the passage discusses *one* scientist while the answer refers to *scientists*)
- Too extreme (e.g., they include words such as *never*, *always*, or *completely*)
- Half-right, half-wrong (e.g., right words, false statement)
- Could be true but not enough information
- True for the passage as a whole, but not for the specific lines in question
- Factually true but not stated in the passage

On most questions, many test-takers find it relatively easy to eliminate a couple of answers but routinely remain stuck between two plausible-sounding options. Typically, the incorrect answer will fall into either the “could be true but not enough information” or the “half-right, half-wrong” category. In such cases, you must be willing to read very carefully in order to determine which answer the passage truly supports.

## Strategies for Reading Passages

As a rule, you should always start by reading the question because it will tell you what aspect of the passage to focus on as you read. No less importantly, it will also tell you what information you do not need to worry so much about—knowledge that can prevent you from getting caught up in confusing language or irrelevant details, and from repeatedly reading sections of the passage that do not directly address the question.

Although passages on the digital SAT are very short, that should not be confused with “easy.” Science passages may be fairly dense and technical; fiction/poetry passages may include challenging old-fashioned language; and passages of all types may involve topics you have had limited exposure to in high school. Your essential goal when you read, therefore, is to focus on getting the gist of the information necessary to answer the question. If there are sections of the passage you find confusing, try to avoid spending time puzzling over the details (which may or may not ultimately be relevant) and repeatedly rereading sections you do not immediately grasp.

For example, if you are looking for answer to a main-idea or primary-purpose question, you should pay particular attention to the beginning of the passage since that’s where big-picture information is typically introduced; the middle of the passage is normally less important. (In a hundred-word passage, writers need to get to the point fast.)

On the other hand, if you are asked about the function of a sentence in the middle of a text, you probably want to skim through the beginning (for context) and then focus on the underlined sentence. If you cannot identify the answer from that portion alone, you can consider the information that comes immediately before and after.

Regardless of which portion of the text is most relevant, you should always be on the lookout for words or phrases that indicate points, goals, and conclusions (e.g., *point, intention, finding*); the word **important** and any of its synonyms (e.g., *significant, crucial, key*); and italicized words. If the author says something is important, it’s important. There’s no trick. You cannot determine what sort of information would illustrate, support, or weaken a point unless you know what the point is.

Second, you must be able to recognize when an argument changes, or when new and important information is introduced: transitions such as *however, therefore, in fact*; “unusual” punctuation such as dashes, italics, and colons; strong language such as *only* and *never*; and “explanation” words such as *reason* are “clues” that tell you to pay attention. If one of these elements appears in or near the aspect of the passage indicated by the question, the answer will typically be located close by.

What I would not recommend is reading the answer choices before you have looked at the passage. Unless you are a truly exceptional reader and test-taker with an intuitive sense of what correct answers sound like, this approach will almost certainly confuse you. Your goal should be to do some basic legwork before you look at the answers so that you have a sense of what you are looking for and are less likely to be distracted by plausible sounding but incorrect options.

## How to Work Through Reading Questions

While your approach will vary depending on the specific question, in general I recommend the following strategy:

### 1) Read the question slowly.

When you're done, take a second or two to make sure you know exactly what the question is asking.

This is not a minor step. If, for example, a question asks you the purpose of a sentence, you must reread it with the goal of understanding what role the sentence plays within the argument. If you reread it with a different goal, such as understanding what the sentence is literally saying, you can't work toward answering the question that's actually being asked.

### 2) Go back to the passage and find the relevant section. If the question seems to call for it, read from a sentence or two above to a sentence or two below.

Purpose/function questions often require more context and, as a result, you should be prepared to read both before and after the section reference. If the underlined portion begins close to the beginning of the passage, you should automatically read from the first sentence of the paragraph because it will usually give you the main point.

On the flip side, **only a very small section of a passage may sometimes be relevant, even—and perhaps especially—when a question asks about the text as a whole.** There is no sense in rereading fifteen lines when only a few key words at the beginning will suffice. Start by focusing on the first sentence or two, paying close attention to strong language, key transitions, and “interesting” punctuation, and you'll almost certainly have enough to go on.

### 3) Answer the question in your own words, and jot that answer down.

This step is unnecessary on very straightforward questions; however, it can be a big help on questions that require multiple steps of logic, particularly text completions, support/undermine questions, and Passage 1/Passage 2 relationship questions. Writing things down keeps you focused, reminds you what you're looking for, and prevents you from getting distracted by plausible-sounding or confusing answer choices.

The goal is not to write a dissertation or come up with the exact answer. You can be very general and should spend no more than a few seconds on this step; a couple of words scribbled down in semi-legible handwriting will suffice. The goal is to identify the general information or idea that the correct answer must include. Again, make sure you're answering the question that's actually being asked, not just restating what the passage says.

If you do this step, you should spend **no more than a few seconds** on it. If you can't come up with anything, skip to step #4.

### 4) Read the answers carefully, (A) through (D), in order.

If there's an option that contains the same essential idea you put down, choose it because it's almost certainly right. If it makes you feel better, though, you can read through the rest of the answers in order to be certain. Just make sure you don't get distracted by options that sound good and start second-guessing yourself. If you can't identify the correct answer....

### 5) Start by eliminating options that are clearly wrong.

Try not to spend more than a couple of seconds on each choice, and leave anything that's even a remote possibility. Remember: your understanding of an answer has no effect on whether that answer is right or wrong. You should never eliminate an answer because you're confused or haven't really considered what it's saying.

If you get down to two answers, go back to the passage again and start checking them out. Whatever you do, do not just sit and stare at them (or the wall). The information you need to answer the question is in the passage, not in your head or on the other side of the room.

First, see if there are any major transitions or strong language you missed the first time; you may have been focusing on the wrong sentence, or you may not have read far enough before or after the line reference. If that is the case, the answer may become clear once you focus on the necessary information. The correct answer will usually contain a synonym for a key word in the passage, so if a remaining choice includes one, there's a good chance it's correct.

You can also pick one specific word or phrase in an answer to check out when you go back to the passage. For example, if the lines in question focus on a single scientist and the answer choice mentions *scientists*, then the answer is probably beyond the scope of what can be inferred from the passage. Likewise, if an answer focuses on a specific person, thing, or idea not mentioned in the lines referenced, there's also a reasonable chance that it's off-topic. Keep in mind that the **more information** an answer contains, the greater the chance that some of that information will be wrong.

Finally, you can reiterate the main point of the passage, and think about which answer is most consistent with it. That answer will most likely be correct.

### 6) If you're still stuck, see whether there's a choice that looks like a right answer.

Does one of the answers you're left with use extremely strong or limiting language (*no one, always, ever*)? There's a pretty good chance it's wrong. Does one of them refer to the topic in the plural, whereas the passage has a narrow focus? It's probably too broad.

In addition, ask yourself whether all of the answers you're left with actually make sense in context of both the test and the real world. For example, an answer stating that no scientific progress has been made in recent years is almost certain to be wrong. Yes, you should be very careful about relying on your outside knowledge of a subject, but it's okay to use common sense too.

### 7) If you're still stuck, skip it or guess.

You can always come back to it later if you have time. And if you're still stuck later on, fill in your favorite letter and move on.

## A Few Notes About Computer-Based Testing

While the computer-based SAT is shorter and more streamlined than the traditional paper version, you should not let the new format lull you into working too quickly or feeling overly confident. Essentially, you will have to separate the way you work on your laptop in everyday life—scrolling quickly through web pages, flipping between multiple tabs, pausing to check your phone—and the highly focused state that the test requires. Clicking through screens on a digital test on your personal device may *feel* easier than wrangling a number two pencil and a bubble sheet, but it does not mean that the exam is *actually* easier.

Furthermore, many people find that they are more likely to miss information when they read on a screen as opposed to paper. And a substantial body of research suggests that people tend to approach electronic devices “with a state of mind less conducive to learning than the one they bring to paper.” (For a good SAT-style article on this topic, see “The Reading Brain in the Digital Age: The Science of Paper versus Screens,” <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/reading-paper-screens/>.) To be clear, it is perfectly fine to skim sometimes; however, you should do so deliberately, based on where important information is likely to be located—not because you associate reading on a screen with being in a semi-distracted state. When you study, you should practice reading more slowly and deliberately than you are accustomed to in order to counteract that tendency.

**The adaptive nature of the test also means that you need to be extra careful to avoid careless errors during the first Reading/Writing module.** While a strong performance on the first section will not automatically get you a high score, missing many questions there will prevent you from earning one. As a result, it is a good idea to get yourself into test mode before the exam begins. Try to do a few easy practice questions before you arrive at the testing center so that your brain is already warmed up when you begin.

## General Tips for Reading Prep

And now, before we get started for real, some tidbits of test-prep wisdom:

**If you’re not in the habit of reading things written for educated adults, start. Now.**

If you’re unsure where to begin, some good sources to start with are Smithsonian Magazine ([www.smithsonian.com](http://www.smithsonian.com), covers humanities, natural and social science) and Science Daily ([www.sciencedaily.com](http://www.sciencedaily.com), a compilation of press releases from major research institutions around the world; includes natural and some social sciences). In addition, most university homepages have a link to a “News” section; these articles, particularly ones involving scientific research, can also be a very good source of SAT-style writing—and usually not too long either.

You cannot, however, read passively and expect your score to magically rise. Rather, you must **actively** and **consistently** practice the skills introduced in this book. Circle/underline the point, major transitions, and words that reveal tone; pay close attention to the introduction and conclusion for the topic and the author’s opinion (see how quickly you can get the gist); notice when words are used in non-literal ways; and practice summarizing arguments briefly. The more you develop these skills independently, the easier it will become to apply them to the test. (And as a bonus, if you regularly read news from schools you plan to apply to, you can also obtain excellent material for “Why this college?” questions.)

**Outside knowledge does matter.**

One of the most frequently repeated pieces of SAT advice is that you have to forget all of your outside knowledge and just worry about what's in the passage. That's mostly true... but not completely. First, just to be clear, an answer can be both factually correct and wrong if it is not supported by the passage. That's what most people mean when they say to forget about outside knowledge. The reality, however, is that reading does not exist in a vacuum. It is always dependent upon ideas and debates that exist outside of the SAT. The more you know about the world, the more easily you'll be able to understand what you're reading. And if you see an answer you know is factually correct, it can't hurt to check it first.

**Read exactly what's on the screen, in order, from left to right.**

This piece of advice may seem overwhelmingly obvious, but I cannot stress how important it is. When students feel pressured, they often start glomming onto random bits of information without fully considering the context. Although it is not necessary to read every word of a passage to get the gist of it, skipping around randomly is unlikely to help you either! Pay attention to what the author is telling you to pay attention to: when you see italics or words/phrases like *important* or *the point is*, you need to slow down and go word by word.

**Be as literal as you possibly can.**

While your English teacher might praise you for your imaginative interpretations, the College Board will not. Before you can understand the function of a piece of information or draw a conclusion about it, you have to understand exactly what it's saying—otherwise, you'll have a faulty basis for your reasoning. When you sum things up, stick as closely as possible to the language of the passage. People often get themselves into trouble because they think that there's a particular way they're supposed to interpret passages that they just don't "get," when in reality they're not supposed to interpret anything. In short, worry about what the author is actually saying, not what she or he might be trying to say.

**Answering SAT Reading questions is a process.**

Working through Reading questions is sometimes a process of trial-and-error. You make an assumption based on how texts are usually put together and how the test is typically constructed, and much of the time it'll turn out to be right (it is a *standardized* test, after all). If you work from the understanding that main ideas are often stated in the last sentence, for example, you may sometimes be best served by looking at a set of lines at the end of the passage first. In other instances, it may make more sense to focus on a key word and start halfway through the passage.

When your initial assumption doesn't pan out, then your job is to reexamine your original assumption and work through the answers one-by-one, trying to figure out what you overlooked the first time around. If you're a strong reader willing to approach the exam with the attitude that you can reason your way systematically through each question, you'll eventually hit on the answer. Yes, this does take some time, but if you can get through most of the questions quickly, having to slow down occasionally won't make much of an impact. No, working this way is not easy to do when you're under pressure, but it does get results.

## Flexibility is key.

To obtain a very high score, you need to be able to adapt your approach to the question at hand. People who insist on approaching every question the same way tend to fall short of their goals, while those who start out scoring in the stratosphere tend to adjust automatically (even if they think they're just reading the passage and answering the question every time).

Sometimes you'll be able to answer a question based on your general understanding of the passage and won't need to reread anything. Sometimes you'll be able to go back to the passage, answer the question on your own, and then easily identify the correct answer when you look at the choices. Other times the answer will be far less straightforward, and you'll have to go back and forth between the passage and the questions multiple times, eliminating answers as you go.

It's up to you to stay flexible and find the strategy that will get you to the answer most easily. For that reason, I have done my best, whenever possible, to offer multiple ways of approaching a given question.

## The path to a perfect score is not linear.

Whereas math and writing scores can often be improved if you spend time internalizing just a few more key rules, the same cannot be said for reading. If you want a 750+ score, you *cannot skip steps* and start guessing or skimming through answers—you'll keep making just enough mistakes to hurt yourself. The SAT is a standardized test: if you keep approaching it the same way, you'll keep getting the same score. If you want your score to change radically, you have to approach the test in a radically different way. Raising your score is also not just about how much practice you do: it does not matter how well you know the test if you do not fully understand what you are reading. Getting into the right mindset can take five minutes or five months, but until you've absorbed it, your score will probably stay more or less the same.

## Don't rush.

I took the SAT twice in high school: the first time, I raced through the reading section, answering questions mostly on instinct, not thinking anything through, and finishing every section early. I was an incredibly strong reader and even recognized one of the passages from a book I'd read for pleasure, but I got a 710.

The second time I understood what I was up against: I broke down every single question, worked through it step-by-step, wrote out my reasoning process, and worked every question out as meticulously as if it were a math problem. It was one of the most exhausting things I'd ever done, and when I stumbled out of the exam room, I had absolutely no idea how I'd scored. I'd literally been focusing so hard I hadn't left myself the mental space to worry about how I was doing. Working that way was *hard*, but it got me an 800.

Summoning that level of focus is not easy. It's also terrifying because you don't have the "well, I maybe didn't try as hard as I could have" excuse. If you bomb, you have nowhere to put the blame. If you have excellent comprehension and can stand to do it, though, working that precisely is almost foolproof. It might take longer than you're used to in the beginning, but the more you go through the process, the more accurate you'll become and the less time you'll take. Skipping steps might save you time, but your score will suffer as a result.

### **Understand what the College Board wants.**

Every SAT passage has two authors: the author of the individual passage, and the writers of the test. The highest scorers are often able to use a combination of close reading skills and knowledge about the test itself (themes, biases, types of answers likely to be correct), and they are able to employ both of those skills as needed in order to quickly identify the answer choices most likely to be correct and then check them out for real.

When I was in high school and uncertain about an answer, I trained myself to always ask, “What would the test writers consider correct?” It didn’t matter that I couldn’t put the patterns into words then. The point was that I was able to convince myself that what *I* personally thought was irrelevant. To score well, you have to think of the test in terms of what the College Board wants—not what you want. You have to abandon your ego completely and approach the test with the mindset that *the College Board is always right, and what you think doesn’t matter*. Then, once you’ve reached your goal, you can put the test out of your mind and never have to worry about it again.

### **Be willing to consider that the test might break its own “rules.”**

For example, you can usually assume that answers containing extreme language such as *always, never, awe, incomprehensible, impossible*, etc. are incorrect and cross them off as soon as you see them. But you can’t *always* assume that a particular pattern holds without carefully considering what the passage is actually saying. Correct answers will very occasionally contain this type of phrasing. If you’re trying to score 800 or close to it, you need to stay open to the possibility that an answer containing one of those words could on occasion be correct.

General patterns are just that: general. That means you will sometimes encounter exceptions.

### **Fit the answer to the passage, not the passage to the answer.**

If an answer could only *sort of kind of maybe possibly be true if you read the passage in a very specific way*, it’s not right. Don’t try to justify anything that isn’t directly supported by specific wording in the passage.

### **Every word in the answer choice counts.**

One incorrect word in an answer choice is enough to make the entire answer wrong. It doesn’t matter how well the rest of the answer works; it doesn’t matter how much you like the answer or think it should be right. If the author of the passage is clearly happy about a new scientific finding and an answer says *express skepticism about a recent finding*, that answer is wrong. The fact that the phrase *a recent finding* might have appeared in the passage is irrelevant. On the other hand...

### **Just because information is in a passage doesn’t mean it’s important.**

One of the things the SAT tests is the ability to recognize important information and ignore irrelevant details. Reading SAT passages is not about absorbing every last detail but rather about understanding what you need to focus on and what you can let go. **If something confuses you, ignore it and work with what you do understand.**

### **Having a lot of time is different from needing a lot of time.**

While you are given time to work carefully and methodically through the questions, you should not let the process become slower than necessary. Some questions are very straightforward and can be answered quickly, and you should avoid overthinking them. Save your energy for when you really need it.

### **Keep moving.**

Students often become tired because they either 1) get hung up on a section of the passage that they find confusing—a part that sometimes turns out to be irrelevant—and fall into a loop of rereading it; or 2) get stuck between two answer choices and sit there staring at them. To avoid that trap, go back to the passage and check out a specific aspect of one of the answers, write down what you know, or highlight a key word in the text. Just do something to work towards the answer.

### **SAT Reading is not a guessing game.**

Yes, you might be able to jack up your score a bit by guessing strategically on a relatively small number of questions, but there is still no substitute for carefully thinking your way through each question. The chances of your reaching your score goal simply by being a lucky guesser on more than a few questions are very small indeed.

If you consistently get down to two choices and always pick the wrong one, that's a sign that you either don't really know how to answer the questions or that you're not reading carefully enough. Many students told me they always got down to two options and then guessed wrong when in fact they were missing the entire point of the passage. That's not a test-taking problem; that's a comprehension problem.

If you are just not reading carefully enough, slow down, even try putting your finger on the screen (yes, seriously!), make sure you're getting every single word, and make a concerted effort to think things through before you pick an answer.

On the other hand, if you really aren't sure how to choose between answers, you need to figure out what particular skills you're missing and work on them. If you're misunderstanding the passage and/or answer choices because you don't know vocabulary, you need to keep a running list of unfamiliar words. Anything you see once is something you're likely to encounter again.

If you're getting thrown by complicated syntax, you need to spend more time reading SAT-level material. If you can't figure out what the author thinks, you need to focus on key phrases and places (e.g., the first sentence, places with strong language or unusual punctuation).

**Finally, remember: just because an answer is there doesn't mean it deserves serious consideration.** If you look for reasons to keep answers, you'll never get down to one.

But on the other hand...

**Don't assume you'll always recognize the right answer when you see it.**

Answers are written to make incorrect options sound right and correct ones sound wrong. You might get away with jumping to the answers on easy and medium questions, but you'll almost certainly fall down on at least some of the hard ones unless you do some work upfront. The fact that there are answer choices already there does not excuse you from having to think.

Moreover, **confusing does not equal wrong**. If there's any chance an answer could work, you have to leave it until you see something better. Sometimes the right answer just won't say what you're expecting it to say; in those cases, you need to keep an open enough mind to consider that you've been thinking in the wrong direction and be willing to go back and revise your original assumption.

**There are no trick questions.**

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Reading questions may require you to apply very careful reasoning or make fine distinctions between ideas—but they're also set up so that you can figure them out. If you think your way carefully through a question and put the answer in your own words, then see an option choice that truly says the same thing, it's almost certainly correct.

**Go back to the passage and read.**

Even if you think you remember what the passage said, you probably need to go back and read it anyway (unless you can reason out the answer based on the main point). Stress makes memory unreliable, so don't assume you can trust yours. Don't play games or be cocky. Just take the extra few seconds and check.

**Don't ever read just half a sentence.**

Context counts. If you read only the first or last half of a sentence, you might miss the fact that the author thinks the *opposite* of what that half of the sentence says. You might also overlook the exact information you need to answer a question.

**If the answer isn't in the section you're given, it must be somewhere else.**

If you read the underlined portion referenced in the question and can't figure out the answer, chances are the information you need is located either before or after. Don't just assume you're missing something and read the same set of lines over and over again or, worse, guess. Again: be willing to revise your original assumption and start over. Yes, this will take time (although probably not as much as you think), but you have enough of it overall that you probably won't run out.

**When in doubt, reread the first and last sentences.**

The point of the passage is more likely to be located in those two places than it is anywhere else. If you get lost and start to panic, stop and reread it to focus yourself. It won't work all the time, but it will work often enough.

**Scratch paper is your friend.**

Most people don't have a huge problem writing down their work for math problems; the same, alas, cannot be said for reading. Unfortunately, one of the biggest differences between people scoring pretty well vs. exceptionally well is often their degree of willingness to write down each step of a problem.

The very highest scorers tend to view writing each step down as a crucial part of the process necessary to get the right answer, whereas lower scorers often view writing as a drag on their time or a sign of weakness that they should be above. It's not either of those things. You can jot things down quickly, and the only person who has to read your handwriting is you.

Writing also keeps you focused and takes pressure off of your working memory. If you're really certain what you're looking for, you probably don't need to spend the time. If you have any hesitation, though, it's worth your while. When you're under a lot of pressure, having even one less thing to worry about is a big deal. Besides, you probably wouldn't try to figure the hardest math problems out in your head, so why on earth would you work that way for reading?

### **Don't fight the test.**

It doesn't matter how much you want the answer to be (C) instead of (B). It never will be, and unless you want to file a complaint with the College Board, you're stuck. Instead of arguing about why your answer should have been right, try to understand why it was wrong. Chances are you misunderstood something or extrapolated a bit too far along the way. If you're serious about improving, your job is to adapt yourself to the mindset of the test because it certainly won't adapt itself to yours. Who knows, you might even learn something.



# 2

## Vocabulary in Context

We're going to start by looking at vocabulary-in-context questions, which are among the most frequently appearing questions on the SAT: you can expect about 10 of these questions per test, the vast majority of which will be sentence completions. Compared to other question types, they are quite straightforward; however, you do need to work carefully so as not to overlook key information.

The prefix CON- means "with," so *context* literally means "with the text." Vocabulary-in-context questions thus require you to use clues in the passage to determine the meanings of particular words. In some cases, you may also need to rely on your knowledge of literal definitions, or your ability to use information such as prefixes and roots to make reasonable assumptions about those definitions; other times, however, the standard dictionary definition will be beside the point and may even appear as a wrong answer.

On the digital SAT, there are two main types of vocabulary questions:

### 1) Sentence Completions

These are a version of traditional (pre-2016) SAT vocabulary questions, which have been revived for the digital exam. You will be given a short passage with one word omitted and will be asked to select the most fitting option. While you will need to use the information in the passage to determine the logical definition of the missing word, you will also generally need to know—or be able to make educated guesses about—the standard meanings of the various answer choices, which may include some challenging academic words such as *epitomize* and *succinct*.

### 2) Meaning in Context

These questions are primarily designed to test your ability to recognize when common words (e.g., *poor*, *want*) are being used in alternate definitions. So as a general rule, if you see the usual definition of a word among the answer choices (e.g., "knock over" for *spill*), you should assume that it is incorrect and only reconsider it if no other option fits. As long as you are able to 1) use information from the surrounding sentence(s) to determine the intended meaning; and 2) match one of the choices to that meaning, you should be able to find your way to the answer.

## Do you Really Need to Study Vocabulary?

The answer: it depends. While the vocabulary tested on the digital exam will not be outrageously difficult, you will be expected to be familiar with terms commonly found in advanced high school-level academic texts.

If you attend a rigorous school and have taken very challenging classes that require a substantial amount of reading and writing, you may already know most of the vocabulary that appears on the exam. If you have not been required to read and write extensively throughout high school, however, you may need to spend some time filling in the gaps. The only way to accurately gauge your level of preparation is to take a practice test or two: if you find yourself consistently missing questions because you do not know what various words mean, that's a sign you need to devote some time to learning new vocabulary.

That said, even if you are already a strong reader, it is still a good idea to spend 15 or so minutes a day reading a moderately serious publication such as the *New York Times* or *Scientific American*, keeping a running list of the vocabulary you do not know. As a general rule, any word whose meaning you are not 100% certain of, or that you cannot define out of context, should be looked up and written down. Encountering new words in relation to specific topics—ideally, ones that you find interesting—will make you more likely to remember them.

Keep in mind that a strong vocabulary will help you on the Reading and Writing test as a whole. Some of the same words that appear as answer choices to sentence completions will likely appear in passages accompanying other question types. Furthermore, some **Reading questions that appear to ask about other concepts may indirectly test vocabulary as well**. In certain cases, you may even be unable to determine an answer because you do not know the meaning of a word not specifically mentioned in the question. And finally, you do not want to get stuck on unfamiliar vocabulary in a passage and panic, overlooking the fact that you can get the gist of the passage and answer the question without knowing precisely what those words mean.

## How to Work Through Sentence Completions

As is true for everything on the SAT, working carefully and systematically through sentence completions is the key to answering every question correctly that you are capable of answering correctly. It does not matter how strong your vocabulary is if you make careless errors. The scoring software will not care whether you actually knew the answer—it will just assign a score based on the buttons you clicked.

### 1) Read the entire passage, and identify the key words or phrases.

It is crucial that you consider the missing word in context of the full passage. If you focus exclusively on the line with the blank, you are likely to miss important information and may even end up looking for a word that means the opposite of the correct answer. As you read, look for clues to the definition of the missing word, which will always be built into sentences or passages. (For a discussion of how to identify key words, please see the following page.)

### 2) Plug your own words into the blank.

If you do this and one of the words is contained in an answer choice, check it first. There's no guarantee that it'll be right, but when it is, you can save yourself a lot of time.

You should spend no more than a couple of seconds attempting to fill in your own word. It also doesn't matter if you just scribble down an approximate definition. The point is to reduce your margin of error by getting an idea, even a general one, of what belongs in the blank. You do not need to come up with the actual word (although if you can do that, great).

**Important:** If you can't define with certainty the word that belongs in a blank, do NOT try to plug in something that might only sort of work. Plugging in a word when you're not really sure what belongs is a great way to set yourself up to overlook the right answer. If you're not sure exactly what belongs in a blank, skip this step and go to step #3.

### 3) Play positive/negative.

Determine whether the word in question is positive or negative—it won't always be clear, but when it is, this is an incredibly effective strategy. If the blank is positive, draw a (+) on your scratch paper; if it's negative, draw a (-) on your scratch paper. Writing this down will reduce the strain on your memory and help keep you focused.

If you know that the word in the blank is clearly negative, for example, go through each answer from (A) to (D) and eliminate any **positive or neutral** word.

Do not skip around. Going in order keeps you thinking logically and systematically and reduces the chances that you'll make a careless error. This is especially important during the first Reading and Writing section, where incorrect answers can prevent you from receiving the more difficult second section and thus limit your score early on.

If you're unsure of whether an answer fits, keep it.

In many if not most cases, this approach should allow you to get rid of at least two answers, and if you're really lucky, three. Plug in the remaining options, if any, and see which works better.

**Important:** worry about what a word means, not how it sounds.

While some words can clearly be eliminated immediately because they sound thoroughly incorrect in context, you need to consider things much more closely if you get stuck between two answers. At that point, you need to ignore the fact that a particular word, one whose meaning is consistent with what the sentence requires, may sound odd or unusual to you (especially if a second meaning is involved). Whether you yourself would think to use a given word is irrelevant—you are simply responsible for identifying the word with the most appropriate meaning.

## Using Context Clues to Predict Meanings

Whenever you read a sentence, one of the first things you should look for is the presence of transition words: words that indicate logical relationships between parts of the sentence. Transitions fall into three basic categories:

### 1) Continuers

Continuers are words that indicate an idea is continuing in the direction it began.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Also</li> <li>• And</li> <li>• As well as</li> <li>• Furthermore</li> <li>• In addition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Just as</li> <li>• Likewise</li> <li>• Moreover</li> <li>• Not only ... but also</li> <li>• Similarly</li> </ul>
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When continuers appear, you need to look for words with a similar meaning, or the same meaning, as the word in the blank.

For example:

One of the hardest types of grain, sorghum is frequently used to make flour as well as to replace a variety of wheat-based products. It can be cultivated in unusually dry conditions and is especially important in regions where soil is poor and resources are \_\_\_\_.

The fact that the continuer *and* links the blank to the phrase *soil is poor* tells us that the word we're looking for goes along with the idea of poor soil and must be negative.

### 2) Cause-and Effect Words

Continuers also include cause, effect, and explanation words, which indicate that something is causing a particular result or explain why something is occurring.

Note that both words and punctuation marks can signal a cause-and-effect relationship.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• As a result</li> <li>• Because</li> <li>• Consequently</li> <li>• In that</li> <li>• Therefore</li> <li>• Thus</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Colons</li> <li>• Dashes</li> </ul>
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For example:

Before the launch of the first space shuttle in 1961, the astronauts were required to undergo mental evaluation because the \_\_\_\_\_ danger inherent in space travel was judged to be as important as the physiological one.

The transition *because* indicates that the word in the blank must go along with the idea of mental evaluation—it must mean something like “psychological.”

### 3) Contradictors

Contradictors are words that indicate that a sentence is shifting directions, or that contrasting information is being introduced.

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• (Al)though</li> <li>• But</li> <li>• In contrast</li> <li>• Despite/In spite of</li> <li>• For all (= despite)</li> <li>• However</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meanwhile</li> <li>• Nevertheless</li> <li>• On the other hand</li> <li>• Unlike</li> <li>• Whereas</li> <li>• While</li> </ul> |
|---|--|

When these types of words appear, you need to look for an answer that means the opposite of, or that is inconsistent with, key words in the sentence. For example:

From the outside, the Afar Triangle, one of the most geologically active regions in the world, seems quite \_\_\_\_\_. However, its external appearance is deceptive, obscuring the presence of the fiery pools of lava lying just beneath its surface.

The words *however* tells us that the two parts of the sentence contain opposite ideas, and the phrase *fiery pools of lava* tells us that the word in the blank must indicate the opposite of this description—it must mean something like “calm” or “peaceful.”

**Important:** Two key phrases that test-takers often find confusing are *for all*, which means “despite,” and *all but*, which means “essentially” or “more or less,” not “everything except.” If you do not know what these phrases mean, you can very easily misinterpret an entire sentence.

Even if the words in the answer choices are quite straightforward, fill-in-the blank questions have the potential to be quite challenging. The difficulty lies in determining what the correct word must mean. To answer these types of questions, you must be able to navigate lengthy, complex sentences, and to understand the relationships between different parts of them.

## Parallel Structure

Parallel structure simply refers to the fact that the constructions on either side of a transition (e.g., *and*, *but*) or word pair (e.g., *not only...but also*) must match. In such cases, the structure of the sentence itself tells you what sorts of words belong in the blanks. For example:

Emily Wilson's translation of *The Odyssey* has been praised for being both accessible and \_\_\_\_: while it captures the clarity of the original, it does so without sacrificing any of the work's subtlety or complexity.

Alternately, the sentence could be phrased in this way:

Because it captures the clarity of the original without sacrificing any of its subtlety or complexity, Emily Wilson's translation of *The Odyssey* has been praised for its accessibility as well as its \_\_\_\_.

In both cases, the two adjectives before the colon are intended to run parallel to the two ideas expressed in the sentence. Blank 1 = clarity (*accessible*), Blank 2 = subtlety and complexity.

The colon in the first version and the word *because* in the second indicate that the missing word must explain or elaborate on the idea that the translation is both subtle and complex.

## Two Negatives Equal a Positive

One construction that many students find particularly challenging involves the negation of negative words to indicate a positive idea. In such cases, it is necessary to distinguish between the "charge" of the individual words and the opposite meaning they create when put together.

For example, consider the question below.

Despite their physical attractiveness, some butterfly species are regarded as pests because in their larval stages they are capable of causing damage to crops or trees. Other species play a less \_\_\_\_ role in the ecosystem, however, because their caterpillars consume harmful insects.

The first sentence indicates that certain butterfly species are viewed negatively (*regarded as pests*) because they can damage crops.

In the second sentence, the contradictor *however* indicates an opposing relationship to the first sentence. That plus the statement *caterpillars consume harmful insects* indicate that the second sentence must convey a positive idea.

When we look at the blank, however, we can notice that it is modified by the word *less*. *Less + something good = negative*, which is the opposite of what we want. Logically, the sentence must be talking about something that is less *bad*. So even though the idea is positive, the word itself must be negative.

That is extremely important to work out upfront, because otherwise you might get confused when you look at the answer choices.

Despite their physical attractiveness, some butterfly species are regarded as **pests** because in their larval stages they are capable of causing damage to crops or trees. Other species play a less \_\_\_\_\_ role in the ecosystem, however, because their caterpillars consume harmful insects.

1

 Mark for Review

Which finding, if true, would most strongly support the scientists' theory?

- A exceptional
- B beneficial
- C significant
- D detrimental

If you mistook "positive idea" for "positive word," you would probably seize on B). In reality, however, *beneficial* (root *bene-*, good) is positive, as are *exceptional* and *significant*. *Detrimental*, meaning "harmful" (prefix *de-*, not), is the only negative option and thus the only possible answer.

### Roots Can Help You (to a Point)

As we've just seen, a familiarity with roots will allow you to make educated guesses about the meanings of words and to quickly identify answers likely to be correct and/or incorrect. In fact, learning how to take words apart in order to make reasonable assumptions about their meanings is just as important as knowing lots of words.

In some ways, it is actually *more* important: if you've simply memorized definitions, you'll have no way of figuring out whether an unfamiliar word works or not. Knowing how the components of a word can reveal its meaning, however, gives you much more flexibility as well as more control, which in turn can give you more confidence. The bottom line is that if you have a little background knowledge and think calmly and logically about what's being asked, you can usually come to a reasonable conclusion. You don't need to be 100% sure to get questions right.

So if you haven't been paying attention in Spanish or French class, you might want to start. For example, consider the word *facility*. In its first definition, *facility* is a noun referring to a building. On the SAT, however, this word is much more likely to be used in its second definition, "ease" (e.g., a *facility with numbers*). Even if you're not familiar with that usage, if you know that *fácil* means "easy" in Spanish, or that *facile* means "easy" in both French and Italian (albeit with different pronunciations), you can make a pretty good assumption about its meaning on the test.

To illustrate, let's look at the following question.

An award-winning reporter as well as the author of several books, Maria Elena Fernandez is considered an \_\_\_\_ in her field because unlike the vast majority of present-day journalists, her work is characterized by a prose style that readers find highly distinctive, even unique.

1

 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text with the most logical or precise word or phrase?

(A) anomaly

(B) innovator

(C) explorer

(D) activist

The passage tells us that Fernandez's work is *highly distinctive, even unique*, so the correct answer must reflect that idea.

*Explorer* and *activist* both clearly do not make sense, but let's say that you get stuck between *innovator* (which you know) and *anomaly* (which you don't). How do you decide?

It might seem like *innovator*—someone who does things in new ways—could fit because someone who does new things could be considered unique, right? The problem is that *innovator* does not **by definition** mean "unique." If that were the correct option, the passage would contain words or phrases that pointed directly to it, e.g., *groundbreaking* or *novel* (new) *approach*. But that is not the case here.

To confirm that *anomaly* is correct, consider that Fernandez is *unlike the majority of present-day journalists*—that is, she is not something. The prefix *a-* means "not", which is consistent with that requirement. (And if you wanted to go deeper, the root *nom-* means "name," so *anom* = without a name, which is also consistent with the idea of being completely unlike others.)

That said, roots and especially prefixes can on occasion mislead you: some positive words may have prefixes that normally indicate a negative, e.g., *discerning*, a positive word meaning "able to make fine distinctions"; or *provoke*, which can mean "deliberately attempt to anger." But those are exceptions. In general, any solid logical process you use will stand a good chance of getting you to the correct answer.

## Watch Out for Second Meanings

Although second definitions are the focus of meanings-in-context questions, it is entirely possible that fill-in-the-blank questions will test alternate usages as well. As a result, if you see what appears to be an extremely simple, common, and obviously wrong word among the answer choices, you should think twice before eliminating it.

To take a straightforward example:



MS ANH DAY SAT 1600  
HOTLINE: 0967 104 204

In the two-dimensional world of maps, sharp lines are used to demarcate where one country ends and another begins. In reality, however, boundaries between nations are typically much more \_\_\_, with border regions that are characterized by multiple languages and cultures.

1

Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text with the most logical or precise word or phrase?

(A) fluid

(B) precise

(C) rigid

(D) identifiable

If you looked at (A) and immediately eliminated it because not only does “stuff you can pour” have nothing to do with maps and countries and borders, but *it's also the wrong part of speech*, guess again.

First, all four answer choices will always be given in the same, correct part of speech. So if you see a word normally used as a noun appear along with three adjectives (as is true above), that word is being used as an adjective as well—a sure sign that a second meaning is involved.

That is exactly the case here. A common second meaning of *fluid* is “able to change shape” or “not rigid.” And that is exactly the definition required here: the word *however* sets up a contrast between the *sharp lines* on maps and the word in the blank, so (A) must be correct.

**Important:** When second meanings appear in answers to non-vocabulary Reading questions, you should pay extra attention to those choices. While these options are by no means guaranteed to be correct, they probably stand a higher chance of being right simply because so many test-takers will either misunderstand or jump to eliminate them.

### Exercise: Sentence Completions

1

 **Mark for Review**

In Ancient Egyptian art, human figures are presented in a rigid and \_\_\_\_\_ manner. In contrast, animals are often very well-observed and lifelike.

Circle or underline key words

Definition or (+/-): \_\_\_\_\_

Ⓐ dazzling

Ⓑ artificial

Ⓒ impressive

Ⓓ realistic

2

 **Mark for Review**

Female hyenas remain within their clan and inherit their mother's rank. As a result, sisters must compete with one another to obtain a \_\_\_\_\_ position in the hierarchy.

Circle or underline key words

Definition or (+/-): \_\_\_\_\_

Ⓐ relative

Ⓑ dominant

Ⓒ regular

Ⓓ secure

3  Mark for Review

Because music plays an essential role in facilitating social functions and is more effective than speech at improving people's moods, researchers are beginning to question whether it truly is as \_\_\_\_\_ as they once believed. In fact, they believe it may have evolved to promote societal cohesion.

Circle or underline key words

Definition or (+/-): \_\_\_\_\_

demanding

prevalent

frivolous

important

4  Mark for Review

The camera obscura—a darkened room with a small hole or lens through which an image is projected—was perhaps the earliest known imaging device. First referred to in a fourth-century Chinese text known as *Mozi*, it was \_\_\_\_\_ of the modern-day photographic camera.

Circle or underline key words

Definition or (+/-): \_\_\_\_\_

a forerunner

a relic

an heir

a proponent

5

 Mark for Review

For centuries, \_\_\_\_ have questioned the authorship of Shakespeare's plays. In total, no fewer than fifty alternative candidates, including Francis Bacon, Queen Elizabeth I, and Christopher Marlowe, have been proposed as the true writer.

Circle or underline key words

Definition or (+/-): \_\_\_\_\_

A partisans

B zealots

C advocates

D skeptics

Now, try some questions without the intermediate step.

All of the factors that allowed the Great Barrier Reef to \_\_\_\_ are changing at unprecedented rates. Over the next several decades, marine biologists believe, it is likely to decline below a crucial threshold from which it is impossible to recover.

6

 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text with the most logical or precise word or phrase?

A flourish

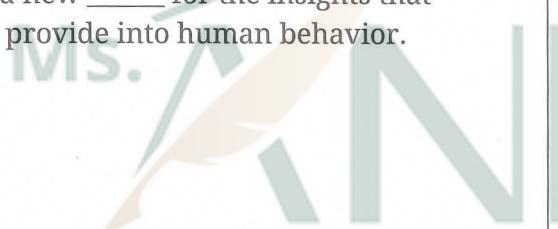
B diminish

C extend

D succumb

Although traditional historians and historical filmmakers differ in their choice of medium, the most respected ones share a scrupulous regard for facts and the rules of evidence that \_\_\_\_\_ their acceptability.

In the past, psychologists dismissed fiction as a way of understanding human emotions. In more recent times, however, they have developed a new \_\_\_\_\_ for the insights that stories can provide into human behavior.



Okakura Kakuzo is credited with the revival of Nihonga, painting done with traditional Japanese techniques, at a time when Western-style painting was threatening to \_\_\_\_ it. When, in 1897, it became clear that European methods were to be given prominence at the Tokyo Academy of Fine Arts, he resigned his directorship and shortly after helped found the Japanese National Arts Academy.

7

 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text with the most logical or precise word or phrase?

Ⓐ deny

Ⓑ complete

Ⓒ dictate

Ⓓ rely on

8

 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text with the most logical or precise word or phrase?

Ⓐ disregard

Ⓑ explanation

Ⓒ responsibility

Ⓓ appreciation

9

 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text with the most logical or precise word or phrase?

Ⓐ supplant

Ⓑ deny

Ⓒ salvage

Ⓓ challenge

Like many of the surgeons general before her, Joycelyn Elders became an outspoken advocate for a variety of controversial health issues. As a result, she quickly established a reputation for being \_\_\_\_.

## 10 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text with the most logical or precise word or phrase?

- (A) a pragmatist
- (B) a polemicist
- (C) a curiosity
- (D) an amateur

Chicago epitomized the remarkable \_\_\_\_ of urbanization during the nineteenth century. The city expanded from several hundred residents in 1830 to nearly two million just eighty years later.

## 11 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text with the most logical or precise word or phrase?

- (A) velocity
- (B) significance
- (C) mastery
- (D) influence

Lynn Margulis's revolutionary theory of eukaryotic cell development was initially met with almost unanimous \_\_\_\_ because it built upon ideas that had largely been discredited. In fact, her groundbreaking 1967 paper, "On the Origin of Mitosing Cells," was published only after being rejected by fifteen journals.

## 12 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text with the most logical or precise word or phrase?

- (A) scorn
- (B) jubilation
- (C) consideration
- (D) impatience

Proponents of the Arts and Crafts movement claimed that its simple but refined aesthetics would \_\_\_\_ the new experience of industrial consumerism. Individuals would become more rational and society more harmonious.

The whale is a remarkably \_\_\_\_ navigator, migrating thousands of miles each year without a compass and always arriving in precisely the same spot.



At its peak, roughly corresponding to the Middle Ages, Constantinople was one of the largest and most influential cities in the world. It \_\_\_\_ a powerful cultural pull and dominated economic life throughout the Mediterranean basin.

13

 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text with the most logical or precise word or phrase?

(A) contain

(B) elevate

(C) compromise

(D) enjoy

14

 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text with the most logical or precise word or phrase?

(A) docile

(B) advantageous

(C) adept

(D) precocious

15

 Mark for Review

Which choice completes the text with the most logical or precise word or phrase?

(A) defended

(B) exerted

(C) restrained

(D) thwarted

## How to Work Through Meaning-in-Context Questions

Meaning-in-context questions are less common than sentence completions, but you may encounter them occasionally. The principle on which they are based can be summarized as follows:

**Context determines meaning.**

Essentially, words can be used to mean whatever an author happens to want them to mean, regardless of their dictionary definitions.

As a result, when you see a question that says, *As used in the text, what does the word “fine” most nearly mean?* You can think of the question as saying, *As used in the text, what does the word \_\_\_\_\_ most nearly mean?* The fact that *fine* rather than some other word happens to be used is essentially irrelevant.

That said, in some cases a familiarity with common second meanings may be helpful. For example, *a want of* is often used to mean “a lack of,” especially in old-fashioned writing. In other cases, though, words will be used in ways unlikely to appear on any vocabulary list. A common alternate meaning may even appear as an *incorrect* answer. So while you may find the list of second meanings on p. 53 helpful, you should also be aware that it does not cover the full range of potential definitions.

### Strategies

Although the process for working through meaning-in-context question is not radically different from the process for working through sentence completions, it often involves a slightly different approach.

#### 1) Read the entire passage, and identify key words.

As is true for Sentence Completions, focusing only on the text immediately surrounding the blank can cause you to miss key information; however, you must also be careful to focus on what is truly important and ignore what is not.

#### 2) Plug in your own word and find the answer choice that matches.

If you are able to use this strategy effectively, it is the simplest and fastest way to answer these questions. The only potential difficulty is that sometimes, even if you provide a perfectly adequate synonym for the word in question, the correct answer will be a word that you find odd, or that you do not recognize as having the same meaning as the term you supplied. If you are a strong reader with a solid vocabulary, however, those issues should not pose a serious problem.

#### 3) Plug each answer choice into the sentence.

Frequently, you’ll be able to hear that a particular choice does not sound correct or have the right meaning in context. The only potential downside is that sometimes, as is true for #1, the correct word is not a word you would think to use, causing you to avoid it. As always, be careful with answer choices that are themselves second meanings.

#### 4) Play positive/negative, then plug in.

In many if not most cases, playing positive/negative will allow you to eliminate at least one answer. You can then plug in the remaining options, if any, and see which one is the best fit.

## Additional Points:

While some students feel most comfortable using a single approach for all vocabulary-in-context questions, it is also true that certain questions lend themselves better to certain approaches. On some straightforward questions you may find it easiest to plug in your own word, while on other, less clear-cut questions, a combination of positive/negative and process of elimination might provide the most effective strategy.

Second, you should pay particular attention to clues indicating that a word in question has a similar or opposite meaning to another word. For example, in the phrase *quiet and reserved*, the word *and* tells you that *reserved* must mean something similar to *quiet*; and in the phrase *delicate but sound*, the word *but* tells you that *sound* must mean roughly the opposite of *delicate*. On the other hand, if you cannot determine the meaning of a word from the sentence in which it appears, you must establish a slightly larger context. Read from the sentence above to the sentence below — one of those sentences will very likely include the information you need to answer the question.

Finally, don't get distracted by unfamiliar words in the answer choices. **It doesn't matter whether you know the definition of the wrong answers as long as you can identify the right answer.** The College Board is fond of using distractors whose definitions students are unlikely to know, while making correct answers relatively simple. As a result, you should never choose an answer because it looks sophisticated. If anything, it's more likely to be wrong. **As a rule, always work from what you do know to what you don't know.** If you're not sure about a word, ignore it and deal with everything you know for sure first.

Let's look at some examples.

### Meaning in Context #1

Every time a car drives through a major intersection, it becomes a data point. Magnetic coils of wire lie just beneath the pavement, registering each passing car. This starts a cascade of information: Computers tally the number and speed of cars, shoot the data through underground cables to a command center and finally translate it into the colors red, yellow and green.

1

Mark for Review

As used in the text, what does "registering" mean?

(A) preparing

(B) recording

(C) inscribing

(D) transmitting

The passage is talking about *magnetic coils of wire* that notify computers of the cars' presence, beginning a *cascade of information*. Logically, the coils of wire must be *recording* each car.

Otherwise, you can play process of elimination. *Preparing* doesn't fit, so (A) can be crossed out. If you don't know what *inscribing* (engraving) means, ignore (C) for the moment and deal with the words you do know first.

Now, be very careful with (D): the passage implies that the coils of wire transmit information about the cars to computers, but it is illogical to say that coils of wire *transmit each passing car*.

If you're stuck between (B) and (C), don't fall into the trap of assuming that the harder-looking word must be right. Instead, plug (B) into the sentence: *Magnetic coils of wire lie just beneath the pavement, recording each passing car*. Yes, that makes sense. So the answer is (B).

### Meaning in Context #2

Until the past few years, physicists agreed that the entire universe is generated from a few mathematical truths and principles of symmetry, perhaps throwing in a handful of parameters like the mass of an electron. It seemed that we were closing in on a vision of our universe in which everything could be calculated, predicted, and understood.

1

 Mark for Review

As used in the text, what does “closing in on” mean?

(A) experimenting

(B) approaching

(C) theorizing

(D) shutting down

The beginning of the passage discusses the fact that physicists believed they were beginning to understand how to describe the universe mathematically. Given that context, *closing in on* must mean something like “getting close to.” That is the definition of *approaching*, so (B) is correct.

Playing process of elimination, (A) can be crossed out because it does not make sense to say *It seemed that we were experimenting a vision of our universe...* Scientists could conduct experiments to gain a greater understanding of the universe, but it is not grammatically or logically possible to “experiment” a vision.

Be careful with (C). It is true that a synonym for this word, *predicted*, does appear in the passage, but that meaning does not make sense in this context. The two sentences make it clear that physicists believed they were on the verge of possessing a thorough understanding of how the universe works. They were not predicting *a vision of [the] universe in which everything could be calculated*, etc. because that vision was already firmly in place.

To eliminate (D), you can play positive/negative. The fact that scientists agreed that a major problem in physics was about to be solved tells you that all of the information before the word *however* has a positive focus. As a result, you can assume that the correct answer will be positive as well. Shutting down is negative and thus can be eliminated.

That again leaves us with (B) as the only possibility.

## Meaning in Context #3

When Saburo joined the track and field team at Bukkyo High School, the sport was enjoying a popularity it had not known before the war. At the time, few schools could afford baseball bats or gymnastic equipment. And there was something in the simplicity of the sport—the straight path to the goal, the dramatic finish line—that stirred the community to yells and often tears.

1

 Mark for Review

As used in the text, what does “stirred” mean?

(A) forced

(B) transformed

(C) disturbed

(D) inspired

This is an excellent example of a question that lends itself well to playing positive/negative. The passage is clearly positive—track and field is enjoying a new popularity, and families came outside to cheer—so you can assume that the correct answer will be positive as well. Don’t get thrown off by the reference to yells and tears. *Forced* and *disturbed* are negative, so (A) and (C) can be eliminated. *Transformed* is positive, but it does not make any sense when it is plugged back into the sentence. That leaves (D), which fits: logically, the spectators were *inspired* by the athletes.

## Exercise: Meaning in Context

Neuroscientists and humanists are tackling similar questions—by joining forces, they might vastly refine our understanding of the role that narrative plays in human cognition, for example, or explore with empirical precision the power of literature to represent consciousness.

1

 Mark for Review

As used in the text, what does “refine” mean?

(A) purify

(B) filter

(C) improve

(D) explain

In recent years, scientists have used powerful genome-sequence tools to investigate the associations between genes and disease risk, with the goal of preventing illnesses before symptoms occur. However, some researchers have cautioned against relying too heavily on genetic factors, arguing that estimates of an individual’s chances of developing a particular malady are more confounded by environmental factors than is usually recognized.

2

 Mark for Review

As used in the text, what does “confounded” mean?

(A) confused

(B) influenced

(C) deceived

(D) puzzled

Among humans, even thinking about yawning can trigger the reflex, leading some to suspect that catching a yawn is linked to our ability to empathize with other humans. For instance, contagious yawning activates the same part of the brain that governs empathy and social know-how. And some studies have shown that humans with more fine-tuned social skills are more likely to catch a yawn.

3

 Mark for Review

As used in the text, what does “governs” mean?

(A) elects

(B) requires

(C) controls

(D) suppresses

The following text is from Emily Brontë's 1847 novel *Wuthering Heights*. The narrator is bringing a boy named Linton to his father.

The boy was fully occupied with his own cogitations for the remainder of the ride, till we halted before the farmhouse garden-gate. I watched to catch his impressions in his countenance. He surveyed the carved front and low-browed lattices, the straggling gooseberry-bushes and crooked firs, with solemn intentness, and then shook his head: his private feelings entirely disapproved of the exterior of his new abode.

The following text is from Emily Dickinson's 1896 poem "Beclouded."

Eternities before the first-born day,  
Or ere the first sun fledged his wings of flame,  
Calm Night, the everlasting and the same,  
A brooding mother over chaos lay.  
And whirling suns shall blaze and then decay,  
Shall run their fiery courses and then claim  
The haven of the darkness whence they came;  
Back to Nirvanic peace shall grope their way.

As a painter, Georgia O'Keeffe is so closely tied to the American Southwest that it is hard to imagine her anywhere but the desert. In 1939, however, she accepted a commission to travel to Hawaii and paint scenes for a campaign promoting pineapple juice. Although serious artists did not normally take on commercial work, O'Keeffe was won over by images of palm trees and sandy white beaches.

4

 Mark for Review

As used in the text, what does "catch" mean?

Ⓐ acquire

Ⓑ gather

Ⓒ attain

Ⓓ observe

5

 Mark for Review

As used in the text, what does "claim" mean?

Ⓐ return to

Ⓑ pick up

Ⓒ plea for

Ⓓ assert

6

 Mark for Review

As used in the text, what does "tied to" mean?

Ⓐ held down

Ⓑ engaged with

Ⓒ fastened to

Ⓓ associated with

## Academic Vocabulary to Know

### **Branches of Science**

Astronomy – study of stars and planets

Botany – study of plants

Cognitive Science, Neuroscience – science of the brain

Ecology – study of the natural world

Entomology – study of insects

Genetics – study of genes

Geology – study of rocks

Ornithology – study of birds

Paleontology – study of fossils

Zoology – study of animals

### **Branches of Social Science and Humanities**

Anthropology – study of human behavior and social organization, usually on a large scale; can include linguistics, biology, and archaeology

Archaeology – study of historical human activity through the recovery or **excavation** (digging up) of physical objects

Economics – study of monetary systems

Ethnography – study of individual cultures

Folklore – study of traditional stories and myths

Sociology – study of everyday human social behaviors and interactions at a specific time

### **Key Science-Related Terms**

Advantageous – providing an advantage

Charge – in electricity, positive or negative

Control group – in an experiment, the group in which the variable being tested is not changed

Empirical – relying on hard data

Hierarchy (adj., hierarchical) – system of rank; opposite of **egalitarian**

Isotope – alternate form of an element

Indigenous – native

Inhibit – prevent, impede (e.g., a response)

Innovative – new and revolutionary

Metabolism – the process of converting food to energy

Microbial – relating to microscopic organisms

Pigment – color

Predisposed – having a tendency toward

Regenerate – regrow

Replicate – repeat (an experiment) and obtain the same results

Saturate – to become completely soaked with

Stimulus – something that provokes a specific response

Symbiosis (adj., Symbiotic) – interaction between two organisms living close together, benefits both

Taxonomy – classification system

Trait – characteristic

Velocity - speed

<b>Make a Claim</b>	<b>Draw a Conclusion</b>
Advance	Infer
Posit	Surmise
Proffer	
Speculate	<b>Provide Sources</b>
Hypothesize	Attribute
	Cite
<b>Support a Claim</b>	<b>Large Amount</b>
Bolster	Multitude
Buttress	Plethora
Substantiate	Profusion
	<b>Small Amount</b>
<b>Question a Claim</b>	Dearth
Ambivalence	Paucity
Skepticism	
Rebut	<b>Different, Diverse</b>
Refute	Disparate
	Heterogeneous
<b>Think about</b>	Eclectic
Grapple with	
Mull over	<b>Noticeable, Striking</b>
Ruminate about	Conspicuous
	Distinctive
<b>Coming Together</b>	Salient
Converge	
Integrate	<b>Harmless</b>
Intersect	Benign
	Innocuous
<b>Moving Apart</b>	
Diverge	<b>Inborn</b>
	Inherent
	Innate
	Intrinsic

<b>Additional General Vocabulary</b>	Judicial – related to the law
Adept – skilled	Marginal – unimportant
Adversary – opponent	Mitigate – make less severe
Align (oneself with) – support or adopt the position of	Preliminary – occurring before the main event
Authentic – genuine	Prevail – win; adj. Prevalent, Prevailing – widespread; generally accepted, e.g., the prevailing theory
Centrality – state of being central or essential	Reciprocate – respond to an action or behavior with the same action/behavior
Complement – to complete or perfect	Rudimentary – very basic
Comprehensive – thorough, complete (NOT to be confused with <i>comprehensible</i> , which means “understandable”)	Successor – person who inherits another’s position
Contingent – dependent upon	
Confer – give, grant	
Corollary – a statement or condition that logically results from a proven argument	
Contemporary – current	
Cultivate – grow, raise, e.g., crops	
Displace – to force someone or something from its home or habitat	
Disposition – personality	
Ideology – belief system	
Impede, Inhibit- prevent; get in the way of	
Indigenous – native	
Inherent, Innate, Intrinsic – inborn, existing in something by definition	

## Common Second Meanings

Afford – Grant (e.g., an opportunity)

Appreciate – To take into account, recognize the merits of, OR to increase in value

Arrest – To stop (not just put handcuffs on a criminal)

Assume – To take on responsibility for, acquire (e.g., to assume a new position)

Austerity – Financial policy to reduce excess spending on luxury or non-essential items

Badger – To pester or annoy (e.g., reporters repeatedly badgered the candidate after the scandal broke)

Bent – Liking for. Synonym for penchant, predilection, proclivity

Capacity – Ability

Chance – To attempt

Channel – To direct something (e.g., energy, money) toward a specific purpose

Check – To restrain, control, or reduce (e.g., the vaccine checked the spread of the disease)

Coin – To invent (e.g., coin a phrase)

Compromise – To endanger or make vulnerable (e.g., to compromise one's beliefs)

Constitution – Build (e.g., a football player has a solid constitution)

Conviction – Certainty, determination. Noun form of convinced.

Couch – To hide

Discriminating – Able to make fine distinctions (e.g., a discriminating palate)

Doctor – To tamper with

Economy – Thrift (e.g., a writer who has an economical style is one who uses few words)

Embroider – To falsify, make up stories about

Execute – To carry out

Exploit – Make use of (does not carry a negative connotation)

Facility – Ability to do something easily (e.g., a facility for learning languages)

Foil – v. To put a stop to (e.g., to foil a robbery)

Grave/Gravity – Serious(ness)

Grill – To question intensely and repeatedly (e.g., the police officers grilled the suspect thoroughly)

Hamper – To get in the way of, hinder

Harbor – To possess, hold (e.g., to harbor a belief)

Hobble – Prevent, impede

Plastic – Able to be changed, malleable (e.g., brain plasticity)

Provoke – Elicit (e.g., a reaction)

Realize – To achieve (a goal)

Reconcile – To bring together opposing or contradictory ideas

Relay - To pass on to someone else (e.g., to relay information)

Relate – To tell, give an account of (a story)

Reservations – Misgivings

Reserve – To hold off on (e.g., to reserve judgment)

Ruffled – Flustered, nonplussed

Sap – To drain (e.g., of energy)

Scrap – To eliminate

Shelve/Table – To reject or discard (e.g., an idea or proposal)

Solvent – Able to pay all debts (usually used in a business context)

Sound – Firm, stable, reliable, valid (e.g., a sound argument)

Spare, Severe – Unadorned, very plain

Static – Unchanging (i.e., in a state of stasis)

Sustain – To withstand

Uniform – Constant, unvarying

Unqualified – Absolute

Upset – To interfere with an expected outcome

## Words that Look Negative But Aren't

Critic/Criticism – A critic is a person who writes commentary—either positive or negative—about a subject, e.g., art, music, or sports.

Discern/discerning – To recognize or distinguish; perceptive

Ineffable – Indescribable, sublime, beyond words

Infallible – Unable to be wrong

Ingenious – Clever, brilliant

Ingenuous – Naïve

Inimitable – Unique, one-of-a-kind

Innate – Inborn, natural

Innocuous – Harmless

Intrinsic/Innate – Inborn, a natural part of

Invaluable – Having immense value, priceless

Unassuming – Modest

Unqualified – Absolute

## Answers: Sentence Completions

### 1. B

Negative; key words: *rigid, in contrast, lifelike*. “Artificial” is the only negative answer and is the opposite of *lifelike*.

### 2. B

Positive; key words: *inherit their mother's rank, compete with one another*. The correct word must mean something like “high.” A “dominant” animal is the one that has high status, so (B) is correct. Don’t get distracted by “secure”: the focus is on achieving a high rank, within the pack, not a stable one, as “secure” would imply.

### 3. C

Negative; key words: *essential role, more effective than speech, questioning*. The correct word must mean something like “unimportant.” “Demanding” and “prevalent” (dominant, widely accepted) do not make sense, and “important” means the opposite of the required word. “Frivolous” means “unserious,” so (C) is correct.

### 4. A

Neutral/positive; key words: *earliest known imaging device*; the correct word must mean something like “ancestor.” A “forerunner” is something that comes before, so (A) is correct. A “relic” (something surviving from an earlier time) and an “heir” are both things that come after, eliminating (B) and (C). A “proponent” is a person who is in favor of something, a definition that does not fit at all. (D) can thus be eliminated as well.

### 5. D

Negative; key words: *questioned*; the correct word must describe people who question whether something is true. That is the definition of “skeptics,” so (D) is correct. “Partisans” (people who take sides) and “zealots” (people who are fanatical about a cause) do not fit, eliminating (A) and (B). In (D), “advocates” are people who are in favor of something, the opposite of the required word.

### 6. A

The passage indicates that the Great Barrier Reef is *changing* in a way that will eventually result in its destruction, so the blank must be a positive word that indicates the opposite of *decline*. “Diminish” (become smaller) and “succumb” (give into, e.g., a disease) are both negative and can be eliminated. “Extend” (get longer) is positive but does not make any sense in context. Only “flourish” is a positive word that fits as the opposite of *decline*.

**7. C**

The sentence indicates that the *most respected [filmmakers]* hold facts in *scrupulous regard* (I.e., very high regard) along with the rules that \_\_\_\_\_ whether they (those facts) are acceptable. Logically, the word in the blank must be neutral/positive and mean something like "determine." "Deny" is negative, so (A) can be eliminated immediately. "Complete" does not make sense in context, so (B) can be eliminated as well. Be careful with (D): this answer states things backwards. Historians and historical filmmakers "rely on" the rules of evidence to decide which facts are sufficiently well-documented—the rules of evidence do not rely on the acceptability on facts. Only (C) creates a logical meaning. "Dictate" can be used to mean "determine" in the sense of "set the rules for," so this choice is correct.

**8. D**

The contradictor *however* indicates that the passage is contrasting the situation *in the past* with the situation in the present. If psychologists formerly *dismissed fiction*, then logically they must now have a much higher opinion of it. The blank must therefore be filled with a positive word meaning something along the lines of "liking for." "Disregard" is negative, so (A) can be eliminated immediately. "Explanation" and "responsibility" do not make sense, eliminating (B) and (C) as well. That leaves (D): if psychologists have revised their formerly negative opinion of fiction, they have developed a new "appreciation" for it.

**9. A**

Although the passage includes two sentence, this question can be answered with information from the first sentence only. There, we learn that Kakuzo is considered responsible for *the revival of Nihonga*—the implication is that this art form was dying out. Why? Because *Western-style painting was threatening to \_\_\_\_\_ it*. Logically, the blank must be filled with a word meaning something like "replace." That is the definition of "supplant," so (A) is correct. "Deny," "salvage" (save), and "challenge" all do not make sense in context.

**10. B**

Elders is described in the passage as *an outspoken advocate for a variety of controversial issues*, and the word in the blank must indicate how she was perceived *as a result*. Logically, the correct word must be somewhat negative and describe a person who is involved in controversy, or who is perceived as difficult. (A) does not fit because a "pragmatist" is someone who is concerned with practical solutions. (C) does not work either because someone who is "a curiosity" is viewed as odd or puzzling, which has nothing to do with controversy. The same is true for "amateur" (non-professional) in (D). A "polemicist," on the other hand, is someone who takes sides very strongly, which is consistent with being an outspoken advocate for controversial issues.

**11. A**

The second sentence indicates that Chicago grew from almost nothing to a city of two million in the space of just 80 years, so the blank must be filled with a word meaning "speed." That is the definition of "velocity," so (A) is correct. "Significance," "mastery," and "influence" do not fit the required definition.

**12. A**

The first sentence indicates that Margulis's theory *built upon ideas that had largely been discredited* (become considered inaccurate), and the second sentence illustrates that idea by emphasizing the many journals that rejected her groundbreaking paper. Given that context, the blank must be filled with an extremely negative word meaning "dislike." (A) is correct because something that is "scorned" is viewed as worthless. (B) is incorrect because "jubilation" is an extremely positive word meaning "joy"; in (C), "consideration" is positive as well. Although "impatience" is negative, this word is not a good match because it does not have a connotation of strong dislike.

**13. B**

The key phrases *simple but refined* and *rational and more harmonious* indicate that the word in the blank must be very positive and mean something like "improve." *Compromise* (weaken the quality of) has a negative connotation in this context, and "contain" is neutral/negative so (A) and (C) can be eliminated. "Enjoy" is positive but does not make sense when plugged in. *Simple but refined aesthetics* (concepts of beauty) cannot "enjoy" anything—only people can do that. (B) is correct because "elevate" (raise to a more sophisticated level) logically describes how proponents (people in favor of; prefix *pro-*) an artistic movement with *simple but refined aesthetics* would view its effect.

**14. C**

The sentence indicates that the whale *migrat[es] thousands of miles each year without a compass*, so logically the whale is an "excellent" or "exceptional" navigator. "Docile" (tame) and "advantageous" (bringing advantages) do not make sense. Someone who is "precocious" (pre-CO-cious, not pre-*cious*!) acquires or demonstrates an ability earlier than usual, but there is no information in the sentence consistent with that specific definition. Only "adept" (highly skilled) is both positive and makes sense in context, so (C) is correct.

**15. B**

If Constantinople was *one of the...most influential cities in the world*, then it "had" or "possessed" *a powerful cultural pull and dominated economic life throughout the Mediterranean*. "Defended" does not have the required connotation because the sentence says nothing about Constantinople being attacked. "Restrained" (held back) and "thwarted" (prevented) are both negative and do not make sense. Only "exerted" fits: something that "exerts a pull" brings force or power. (B) is thus correct.

## Answers: Meaning in Context

### 1. C

If [n]euroscientists and humans are...joining forces, then logically they might "improve" our understanding of narrative's role in human cognition. (C) is a direct match. "Purify" and "filter" are words commonly associated with "refine," but they do not fit the definition indicated by the passage, so (A) and (B) can be eliminated. Be careful with (D): neuroscientists and humanists want to "explain" the role of narrative in cognition, not *our understanding* of that role. (D) can thus be eliminated as well.

### 2. B

To determine the meaning of the underlined word, back up and read the sentence from the beginning. If *some researchers have cautioned against relying too heavily on genetic factors*, that is logically because *estimates of an individual's chance of developing a particular malady (illness) are "affected" by environmental factors*. "Confused" is the literal definition of *confounded*, but this word does not make sense at all in context. "Deceived" and "puzzled" likewise do not make sense. Only "influenced" means something like "affected" and fits in context: if people's chances of developing a particular are influenced by their environment, then genetic factors should not be given too much weight. (B) is thus correct.

### 3. C

The passage is discussing the part of the brain that \_\_\_\_\_ contagious yawning along with empathy and social-know how. The body's abilities are controlled by the brain, so in this context, *governs* must mean "controls." (C) is thus correct. "Elect" is a word that is often associated with governing, but in the context of the brain, it does not make sense. That eliminates (A). "Requires" does not mean "controls," so (B) can be eliminated as well. "Suppresses" (prevents) is exactly the opposite of the required meaning. The passage states that *catching a yawn is linked to our ability to empathize*, so all those skills must be activated together. That eliminates (D).

### 4. D

The beginning of the passage indicates that the boy was *fully occupied with his own cogitations* (that is, lost in his thoughts) during the ride, and the last sentence indicates that the narrator carefully watched the boy as he inspected his new surroundings. Given that context, *catch* must logically mean something like "see" (*countenance* means "face"). The best fit for this definition is "observe" – the sentence is essentially saying that the narrator wanted to see how the boy would react. (A) does not fit because it does not make sense to say that someone "acquired" another person's impressions. (B) does not fit because it is illogical to say that a person "gathered" (collected) impressions in someone's face. (C) likewise does not make any sense because a person must "attain" (achieve) their own facial reaction. (D) is thus correct.

## 5. A

Although you are given a fairly lengthy excerpt from this poem, the key phrase appears in the same sentence as the underlined word. Dickinson indicates that the *whirling suns [s]hall...claim the haven of the fiery darkness from whence they came* (from which they came). In other words, she is saying that the suns will "return to" the darkness that they emerged from. (A) is thus correct. Neither "pick up" nor "plea for" is consistent with this meaning, so (B) and (C) can be eliminated. Although "assert" is a common meaning of *claim*, it is being used in a very different sense here, so (D) does not fit either.

## 6. D

The passage indicates that *it is hard to imagine [O'Keeffe] anywhere but the desert*, so logically, she must be strongly "identified with" or "associated with" the American Southwest. (D) is a direct match for this meaning, so it is correct. "Held down" and "fastened to" do not make any sense in context, so (A) and (C) can be eliminated. O'Keeffe may have been "engaged with" the American Southwest in her paintings; however, this phrase does not fit the definition indicated by the passage.



# 3

## Making the Leap

Before we look more closely at the various question types, we're going to examine a key element of SAT reading—namely, the ability to move between specific wording and more abstract or general ideas. While you probably won't see questions that directly test this skill, it is nevertheless crucial for navigating challenging passages, no matter how short.

Let's start with the fact that one of the most common ways that both the authors of SAT passages and the test-writers themselves move between specific phrasings and more general language is by using **pronouns** (*this, that*) and **abstract nouns**, which refer to ideas (*observation, claim, conclusion*) rather than to physical objects. As a result, you must be able to connect pronouns back to their referents because without the ability to "track" an idea through a passage, you can easily lose track of the text's focus and argument.

For example, compare the following two versions of this passage. The first version uses only nouns, no pronouns. Notice how incredibly awkward and repetitive it is.

...Crowdsourcing is a wonderful tool, but crowdsourcing still fails in a very particular way, which is that any evaluation is swayed by the evaluations that have come before that evaluation. A barbershop with a one-star rating on Yelp as that barbershop's first review is subsequently more likely to accrue more negative reviews—and that same barbershop, were that barbershop to receive a four-star rating on Yelp as that barbershop's first review, would be more likely to accrue more subsequent positive reviews.

Now look at this version, which replaces the repeated nouns with pronouns:

...Crowdsourcing is a wonderful tool, but **it** still fails in a very particular way, which is that any evaluation is swayed by the evaluations that have come before **it**. A barbershop with a one-star rating on Yelp as **its** first review is subsequently more likely to accrue more negative reviews—and that same barbershop, were **it** to receive a four-star rating on Yelp as **its** first review, would be more likely to accrue more subsequent positive reviews.

Notice how much smoother this version is. You don't get tangled up in the constant repetition of the same phrase, so the meaning is much easier to process.

Pronouns won't always appear by themselves, though. Typically, a pronoun such as *this*, *that*, or *these* will appear in front of a noun, e.g., *this notion*, *these movements*, *such developments*. More straightforward, right? Well...maybe yes, maybe no.

Sometime around third grade, you probably learned that a noun was a person, place, or thing. Pretty self-explanatory. When you learned that a noun was a "thing," however, you probably understood "thing" to mean an object like a bicycle or an apple or a house. That's certainly true. But words like *idea* or *assertion* or *concept*—words that don't refer to actual physical objects—are also nouns. These nouns are sometimes referred to as **abstract nouns** or "**compression**" nouns because they compress lots of information into a single word.

**The ability to recognize the relationship between abstract nouns and the ideas that they refer to is central to making sense out of many passages.** If you can't draw the relationship between the noun, say, *phenomenon*, and the specific occurrence that it refers to, you probably can't answer a question that asks you to do exactly that. And you certainly can't answer a question that asks you to draw a conclusion from it or determine what sort of information would be most likely to support it.

What's more, these nouns, like pronouns, may appear **either before or after** the particular idea (argument, assertion, description, etc.) has been discussed. If you encounter a question that requires you to identify what such a noun refers to, you must generally **back up and read from before the place where the noun appears**, although in rare instances that information may be found afterward.

Very often, when students are confused about this type of phrase, they either reread the phrase in isolation and try to figure out what it's talking about (impossible) or start reading at the phrase and continue on for several lines, then become confused as to why they have no clearer an understanding of the phrase than they did when they started. As a result, they get caught in a loop of reading and rereading the wrong spot and consequently have no reliable means of determining the correct answer.

Starting on the next page, we're going to look at some examples in order to help you avoid getting stuck in this pattern. The pronoun or compression noun is given in bold, and the information that it refers to is underlined.

## Pronoun: Example #1

Let's start with something simple.

In a step toward creating robots capable of spontaneous learning, a new approach has expanded training data sets for robots that work in cluttered environments. Developed by Dmitry Berenson and Peter Lozano, doctoral students at the University of Michigan, it could cut learning time for new materials and environments down to a few hours rather than a week or two.

As Reading passages go, this one is fairly straightforward; however, it is useful to work with for illustrative purposes.

In the third line from the bottom, the pronoun *it* appears not only three lines down from its referent, *a new approach*, but in a different sentence altogether. If you read the full passage, the meaning of the pronoun would probably be so obvious you would not even think about. If you began reading at the pronoun and never backed up, however, you would have no way of figuring out what *it* referred to.

Next, we're going to look at something slightly trickier.

## Pronoun: Example #2

The distance between the Earth and the sun varies gradually over the course of the year because of the elliptical nature of Earth's orbit. At its closest approach, known as perihelion, the Earth is about 3 million miles closer to the sun than at its farthest point, called aphelion. As a result, sunlight on Earth is about 7% more intense at perihelion than it is at aphelion.

When you look at this passage, you can notice that *it* and *its* appear in both the second and third sentences. Although these words are both part of the same description, they do not all refer to the same singular noun.

In the second sentence, *it* and *its* both refer to *the Earth*. Note, however, that the first appearance of *its*, at the beginning of the second sentence, actually comes before the noun (although you may be able to assume that the referent is *Earth* based on the information in the first sentence).

In the third sentence *it* refers to not to Earth but to *sunlight*. Although the pronoun is the same, the referent is different.

Next, we're going to look at some examples with compression nouns.

### Pronoun: Example #3

Tracking pronoun-referent relationships requires you to pay attention to whether nouns are singular or plural. **Singular pronouns must have singular referents, and plural pronouns must have plural referents.**

So far, we've looked at examples that require only singular pronouns. Now we're going to consider an example that involves a plural one.

Many Artificial Intelligence (AI) systems involving speech recognition, computer vision, and medical imaging make use of neural networks—computing systems inspired by the architecture of the human brain. In neuroscience, **they** are often used to model the same kinds of tasks that the brain performs, in hopes that the models could lead to new insights in understanding how the brain itself performs those tasks.

In this case, the pronoun *they* indicates that the referent must be plural—that is, the noun that it corresponds to most likely ends in -s.

If we back up to the previous sentence, we can figure out that the referent of the pronoun *they* is the noun *neural networks*—logically, these would be used to *model the same kinds of tasks that the brain performs* (neural = referring to the brain).

Starting on the next page, we're going to look at some examples of compression nouns.

### Compression Noun: Example #1:

[T]he evolution of our communications system from a broadcast model to a networked one has added a new dimension to the mix. The Internet has made us all less dependent on professional journalists and editors for information about the wider world, allowing us to seek out information directly via online search or to receive it from friends through social media. But **this enhanced convenience** comes with a considerable risk: that we will be exposed to what we want to know at the expense of what we need to know.

The phrase *this enhanced convenience* (bold) is a classic example of a compression noun. It refers not to a single thing but rather to an entire idea presented in the sentence before it:

The Internet has made us all less dependent on professional journalists and editors for information about the wider world, allowing us to seek out information directly via online search or to receive it from friends through social media.

The phrase *this enhanced (improved) convenience* thus refers to the fact that the Internet has made people's lives much easier because it allows them to obtain information on their own.

If the author did not "compress" the information into the phrase *this enhanced convenience*, the second sentence would include a long and exceedingly awkward construction restating a large portion of the previous sentence, and the sentence would read like this:

The Internet has made us all less dependent on professional journalists and editors for information about the wider world, allowing us to seek out information directly via online search or to receive it from friends through social media. But **the fact that the Internet has made us less dependent on professional journalists and editors for information about the wider world, allowing us to seek out information directly via online search or to receive it from friends through social media, comes with a considerable risk...**