

Compression Noun: Example #2

While humpback dolphins look quite similar to other dolphins, their genetics tells a different story. Researchers collected 235 tissue samples and 180 skulls throughout the animals' distribution, representing the biggest dataset assembled to date for the animals. The team analyzed mitochondrial and nuclear DNA from the tissue, which revealed significant variations. Although the line between species, sub-species and populations is a blurry one, in this case, the researchers are confident that the humpback dolphin is distinct enough to warrant the “species” title. The mitochondrial DNA turned up genetic signatures distinct enough to signal a separate species, and likewise, differences in the dolphins' skulls supported **this divergence**. Although the nuclear DNA provided a slightly more confounding picture, it still clearly showed differences between the species.

The bolded phrase *this divergence* (i.e., *this difference*, fourth- and third-to-last lines) is another typical example of the type of language that frequently causes trouble.

A test-taker who looked to the following sentence for clarification would be mostly out of luck: although there is a mention of the *differences between the four species*, humpback dolphins are not mentioned. The student might grasp that different types of dolphins are involved somehow but could easily miss the main idea: humpback dolphins are sufficiently different genetically from other dolphins to be considered a separate species. That is something a question could easily ask about.

Furthermore, it is necessary to back up five lines to find the beginning of the sentence in which humpback dolphins are mentioned (remember: never start reading in the middle of a sentence). That's a long way back; however, there is no other way to determine exactly what *this divergence* refers to.

The Former and the Latter

One set of compression nouns that has a tendency to cause confusion is “the former” and “the latter.” These words are used when two referents are involved: *the former* refers back to the noun or phrase mentioned first, and *the latter* refers back to the noun or phrase mentioned second. Let’s start with a straightforward example:

In the nineteenth century, both Thomas Edison and Nikola Tesla were well-known scientists, but the former quickly came to be regarded as one of the greatest American inventors, while the latter fell into obscurity.

The beginning of the sentence refers to two individuals: Thomas Edison and Nikola Tesla. In the second half, *the former* refers to Edison because his name occurs first, while *the latter* refers to Tesla because his name occurs second (*latter* is like *later*). That’s easy enough to follow, but some passages may use these words in ways that you may have to work somewhat harder to follow. For example:

All bodies in the solar system are heated by sunlight. They rid themselves of this heat in two ways: (1) by emitting infrared radiation and (2) by shedding matter. In long-lived bodies such as Earth, **the former process prevails**; for others, such as comets, **the latter** dominates.

Let’s look closely at what’s going on in these sentences. First, the author states that bodies in the solar system eliminate heat from the sun in two ways. Next, he lists those two ways. The first way is by emitting infrared radiation, and the second is by shedding matter. When he refers to those ways again in the following sentence, *the former* = emitting infrared radiation, and *the latter* = shedding matter.

Therefore, the final sentence means that old planets like Earth eliminate heat by emitting infrared radiation, but other objects like comets eliminate heat by shedding matter.

Note that occasionally, *the latter* may appear **before** *the former*. For example, the paragraph above could be written the way it is below. Although the order of *the former* and *the latter* is switched, the last sentence has exactly the same meaning as the previous version.

*All bodies in the solar system are heated by sunlight. They rid themselves of this heat in two ways: (1) by emitting infrared radiation and (2) by shedding matter. For some objects such as comets, **the latter** dominates; in long-lived bodies such as Earth, **the former process prevails**.*

Exercise: Pronouns and “Compression” Nouns

In the passages below, underline the word, phrase, or sentence(s) within the passage that each indicated pronoun or noun refers to.

Artificial neural networks leverage the architecture of the human brain in order to improve systems ranging from medical diagnostics to credit card fraud to translation. In some areas, such as computational speed, (A) they demonstrate superhuman performance; however, when they learn sequentially, old information is often overwritten by new information. (B) This loss, which occurs when new pathways are formed, is known as catastrophic forgetting.

1



Mark for Review

Ⓐ

What does “they” refer to?

Ⓑ

What does “this loss” refer to?

In the past, efforts to identify cacao in ancient Mayan pottery centered on highly decorated ceramic vessels used in elite ceremonial contexts, an approach that resulted in the assumption that (A) it was only available to members of the elite. A study by Anabel Ford and Mattanah de Vries casts doubt on (B) this claim, however, suggesting that cacao was widely accessible and used in celebrations by all members of Mayan society.

2



Mark for Review

Ⓐ

What does “it” refer to?

Ⓑ

What does “this claim” refer to?

Soon after the Big Bang, there were tiny ripples: quantum fluctuations in the density of the seething ball of hot plasma. Billions of years later, (A) those seeds have grown into galaxy clusters — sprawling groups of hundreds or thousands of galaxies bound together by gravity. But there seems to be (B) a mismatch. Research suggests that as much as 40% of galaxy-cluster mass is missing when compared with the amount of clustering predicted by the ripples. (C) The findings have led theorists to propose physics beyond the standard model of cosmology to make up the difference.

3



Mark for Review

Ⓐ

What does “those seeds” refer to?

Ⓑ

What does “a mismatch” refer to?

Ⓒ

What does “the findings” refer to?

The sky is low, the clouds are mean,
A travelling flake of snow
Across a barn or through a rut
Debates if it will go.

A narrow wind complains all day
How some one treated him;
Nature, like us, is sometimes caught
Without her diadem.

4



Mark for Review

Ⓐ

What does “it” refer to?

Ⓑ

What does “her” refer to?

Flash organizations are teams that assemble temporarily to tackle specific, complex problems. Drawn from online labor markets, (A) they combine the flexibility of crowdsourcing with the managerial complexity of traditional companies. The workforce in a flash organization is fluid, called together quickly and often on short notice. In most cases, (B) it is organized into a clear hierarchy but can adapt by adding new teams or allowing workers to shift roles as the work evolves.

5



Mark for Review

Ⓐ

What does “they” refer to?

Ⓑ

What does “it” refer to?

To the education of her daughters Lady Bertram paid not the smallest attention. She had not time for (A) such cares. She was a woman who spent her days in sitting, nicely dressed, on a sofa, doing some long piece of needlework, of little use and no beauty, thinking more of her pug than her children, but very indulgent to (B) the latter when it did not put herself to inconvenience, guided in everything important by Sir Thomas, and in smaller concerns by her sister.

6



Mark for Review

Ⓐ

What does “such cares” (line 3) refer to?

Ⓑ

What does “the latter” refer to?

Carolyn Bertozzi's development of bioorthogonal chemistry stemmed from her interest in complex carbohydrate molecules known as glycans. Along with proteins and nucleic acids such as DNA, **these compounds** are one of the key building blocks of life. However, they are not well understood: because **(B) they** are challenging to synthesize in the laboratory, they have traditionally been among the most difficult molecules for scientists to analyze.

7

Mark for Review

- Ⓐ What does “these compounds” refer to?
- Ⓑ What does “they” refer to?

It would be difficult to find another man who lived so entirely for his duties. It is not enough to say that Akakiy laboured with zeal: no, he laboured with love. In his copying, he found a varied and agreeable employment. Enjoyment was written on his face: some letters were even favourites with him; and when he encountered **(A) these**, he smiled, winked, and worked with his lips, till it seemed as though each letter might be read in his face, as his pen traced **(B) it**.

8

Mark for Review

- Ⓐ What does “these” refer to?
- Ⓑ What does “it” refer to?

An ancient New Mexican lakebed is home to the preserved footprints of life that roamed the American southwest thousands of years ago. In addition to giant sloths and mammoths, ancestors of modern humans also left **(A) their mark**. Research published in *Science* in 2021 claimed that these footprints were “definitive evidence” of human presence in North America during the last ice age, which ended around 25,000 years ago; however, a study by geologists and paleontologists in Kansas, Oregon, and Nevada disputes **(B) that conclusion**. The researchers argue that it is more likely humans entered the Americas sometime between 14,000 and 16,000 years ago.

9

Mark for Review

- Ⓐ What does “their mark” refer to?
- Ⓑ What does “that conclusion” refer to?

From out the west, o'erhung with fringes grey,
The wind preludes with sighs its roundelay,

Then blowing, singing, piping, laughing loud,
(A) It scurries on before the grey storm-cloud;

Across the hollow and along the hill
It whips and whirls among the maples, till

With boughs upbent, and green leaves blown wide,
The silver shines upon **(B) their** underside.

10



Mark for Review

Ⓐ

What does “it” refer to?

Ⓑ

What does “their” refer to?

Most of the planets orbiting stars like the Earth's sun fall into one of two categories: the first group is around one-and-a-half times the size of the Earth, whereas the other faction is twice as large. Astronomers theorize that while members of **(A) the former** have retained their atmospheres, the atmospheres of **(B) the latter** may have dissipated over time, leaving nothing but rocky cores behind. Researchers studying **(C) this phenomenon**, known as planetary escape, developed models of it in order to more fully understand how heat and radiation could affect planets' atmospheres. Then, they created 70,000 simulated planets of different sizes, varying their atmospheric compositions and types of suns, and modeled what would happen to **(D) them**.

11



Mark for Review

Ⓐ

What does “the former” refer to?

Ⓑ

What does “the latter” refer to?

Ⓒ

What does “this phenomenon” refer to?

Ⓓ

What does “them” refer to?

Answers: Pronouns and “Compression” Nouns

1. (A): they = artificial neural networks; (B) this loss = old information is overwritten by new information

2. (A): it = cacao; (B): this claim = [cacao] was only available to members of the elite

3. (A): those seeds = tiny ripples; (B) and (C): the mismatch, the findings = 40% of galaxy-cluster mass is missing when compared with the amount of clustering predicted by the ripples

4. (A): it = a travelling flake of snow; (B): her = Nature

5. (A): they = flash organizations; (B): it = the workforce

6. (A): such cares = the education of her daughters; (B): her children

7. (A), (B): these compounds = (complex carbohydrate molecules known as) glycans

8. (A): these = some letters; (B): it = each letter

9. (A): their mark = footprints; (B): that conclusion = these footprints were “definitive evidence” of human presence in North America during the last ice age

10. (A): It = The wind; (B): their = the maples

11. (A): the former = the first group [that] is one-and-a-half times the size of the Earth; (B): the other faction [that] is twice as large; (C): this phenomenon = the atmospheres may have dissipated over time, leaving nothing but rocky cores behind; (D) them = 70,000 planets of different sizes

4

The Big Picture

Every SAT is virtually guaranteed to contain questions that test your ability to identify main ideas, claims, and purposes, as well as statements that would support or illustrate them. These questions can ask about the passage as a whole, or an idea that is presented in just one specific section.

While these questions are worded in a straightforward manner, they can also be challenging because they require a leap from seeing passages as masses of details to understanding them as coherent texts with larger ideas and purposes. This jump is obviously easier when texts are short, for the simple reason that there is less information that could potentially distract or confuse you. But even in the space of 10-15 lines, you will need to navigate complex sentence structure as well unfamiliar topics, names, references, and vocabulary in order to move beyond the individual words and recognize what they are actually saying.

Very often, smart, detail-oriented students have a tendency to worry about every single thing that sounds even remotely odd while missing something major staring them in the face. Frequently, they blame this on the fact that they've been taught in English class to read closely and pay attention to all the details. But this type of reading simply does not work on the SAT. It is much closer to the type of skimming you will need to do in college, where you may be assigned hundreds of pages of reading to be completed in a relatively short time.

Your professors will not expect you to read every last word, however. Rather, you will be expected to skim through it, identifying key points and then focusing more closely on a few key areas. As a result, the ability to quickly identify major points of interest in a text is one of the most important skills you can bring with you to college. (Unlike the books that are generally assigned in high school, most of what you read in college will not have easily digestible summaries available courtesy of [www.sparknotes.com!](http://www.sparknotes.com)) If you get the gist, you can figure a lot of other things out, whereas if you focus on one little detail, you'll get . . . one little detail.

All that said, to make the leap from specific information to larger ideas, you must start by identifying the most basic feature of the passage: the topic.

Identifying Topics

The topic is the person, thing, or idea that is the primary subject or focus of the passage. In most cases, it is the word or phrase that appears most frequently throughout the passage, either by name or in rephrased form (pronoun or compression noun). For example, a computer could also be referred to as *the machine*, *the invention*, or *the technology*.

Generally speaking, the topic will be presented in either **the first sentence of the passage or shortly afterward**. On the digital exam, passages are simply too short for topics to be introduced any later.

For example, look at the following sample first sentences. Each clearly indicates to readers what the text that follows will focus on.

- Make no mistake—**Dolley Madison** was as fiercely partisan as any male politician.
- Hidden inside the Earth—withn the first several hundred kilometers below the crust—there is **another ocean**.
- Some scientists conclude that **music's influence** may be a chance event, arising from its ability to hijack brain systems built for other purposes such as language, emotion and movement.

The ability to identify topics is crucial because **correct answer choices to main idea questions will refer to the topic**. In fact, the correct answer will sometimes be the *only* answer to mention it. Moreover, many incorrect answers are wrong because they are off-topic, and **you cannot recognize when a statement is off-topic unless you are clear about what the topic is**.

Let's look at an example of how that could play out in a passage.

Admired primarily for her exquisite calligraphy, **Otagaki Rengetsu (1791-1875) was among Japan's most celebrated artists**. She was also a writer and ceramicist, often inscribing her poems in her own calligraphy onto clay vessels—a distinctive blending of art forms not replicated by any other artist in Japanese history. Her work was in such great demand during the nineteenth century that every household in Kyoto was said to own her pottery, and today scrolls and ceramics bearing her calligraphy are sought after by collectors.

Here, the topic—Otagaki Rengetsu's art—is introduced in the very first sentence and then referred to in other words (*her work, her pottery, scrolls and ceramics*) in the following lines.

In this case, the connection between the various terms is evident; however, if you have difficulty drawing the connection between an original term and its variations, your comprehension may suffer. You may also misunderstand the **scope** of the passage—that is, whether it's **general or specific**.

When asked for the topic of a passage such as this, students sometimes say things like, "Ummm... it talks about Japan," or "it mentions calligraphy," or, a bit closer to the mark, "Japanese artists." (Incidentally, I've witnessed this type of uncertainty even in high-scoring students.)

As a matter of fact, the focus is not on "artists." It is actually on one specific artist, namely Otagaki Rengetsu. That fact would become very important if you saw a question like the one below.

Admired primarily for her exquisite calligraphy, Otagaki Rengetsu (1791-1875) was among Japan's most celebrated artists. She was also a writer and ceramicist, often inscribing her poems in her own calligraphy onto clay vessels—a distinctive blending of art forms not replicated by any other artist in Japanese history. Her work was in such great demand during the nineteenth century that every household in Kyoto was said to own her pottery, and today scrolls and ceramics bearing her calligraphy are sought after by collectors.

1

Mark for Review

Which choice best states the main idea of the passage?

- (A) Otagaki Rengetsu's artistic creations are prized for their unique qualities.
- (B) Inscribed clay vessels have traditionally played an important role in Japanese art.
- (C) The collaboration between writers and ceramic workers produced highly distinctive works of art in Japan.
- (D) Many households in Kyoto once featured scrolls produced by Otagaki Rengetsu.

Answering this question requires you to take information from multiple parts of the passage and recognize how they combine into a single overarching idea. This process is made considerably easier, however, if you start by focusing on the topic: Otagaki Rengetsu—one artist, singular—and her work. Only (A) directly refers to that information, and it is in fact the answer. (In the second sentence, *distinctive blending of art forms not replicated by any other artist in Japanese history* corresponds directly to "unique qualities").

(C), on the other hand, mentions *writers and ceramics workers*, plural, but as we've established, the passage focuses on only one person.

(B) is directly contradicted by the passage—the second sentence states that Rengetsu's calligraphy inscriptions of her poems on clay vessels were *not replicated by any other artist in Japanese history*.

(D) takes information from the passage and misstates it slightly. The last sentence states that *every household in Kyoto was said to own [Rengetsu's] pottery*; however, the answer refers to Rengetsu's scrolls. In addition, this answer focuses on a detail from the passage rather than its overall meaning.

What's the Point?

The point, aka the main idea, of a passage is the **primary idea** that the author wants to convey. After the topic, the point should be the first thing you look for. Once you have identified it and underlined it or written it down, you can often skim through the rest of the passage.

I cannot state this strongly enough: If you keep the main point in mind, you can often eliminate answers simply because they do not make sense in context of it or, better yet, identify the correct answer because it is the only option that is consistent with it.

What's more, focusing on finding the point means you don't have a chance to get distracted. It gives you a clear goal and reduces the chance that you'll spend unnecessary minutes trying to absorb a single confusing line while losing sight of the bigger picture.

That said, let me begin by saying what a main point (sometimes referred to as a **central claim**) is **not**.

- It is not a **topic** such as "social media" or "the disappearance of bees."
- It is not a **theme** such as "oppression" or "overcoming."

A main point is an argument that answers the question "so what?" It tells us *why* the author thinks the topic is important, or what primary information about it he or she wants to convey.

You can use this "formula" to determine the point:

Topic + So What? = Main Point

Sometimes the author will directly state the point, most often in the first sentence or two, and then state or refer to it again for emphasis in the last sentence. For example:

Although dark matter cannot be seen, its effects are visible in the world, and so scientists know that it must exist. Over the course of the twentieth century, particle physics and astronomy developed in tandem. As physicists were piecing together the standard model, which explains three out of four known fundamental forces (electromagnetic, weak and strong interactions, although not gravity), astronomers were beginning to discover that stars moved away from the Earth—proof of the universe's expansion. That movement was occurring too quickly to be explained by the stars' gravity, however. This finding ultimately led researchers to conclude that it was only possible because of the presence of matter that could not be perceived visually.

Here, the author presents the topic (dark matter) along with the "so what" (it is invisible but must exist) right at the beginning of the first sentence; devotes the following sentences to explaining how scientists arrived at that conclusion; and then reiterates the main takeaway at the end. When the point is presented this clearly, you may find it helpful to highlight it on the screen.

In other passages, however, the main point may not be presented quite so directly or quickly, or it may involve integrating information from the middle of the text.

In such cases, you should pay particular attention to any words or phrases that indicate the author is making a point: *the point is* (or: *the point is not*), *key*, *goal*, etc., along with words such as *important*, *significant*, *central*, and any *italicized words*. You should also be on the lookout for **dashes** and **colons** which signal explanations.

If the author does not state the point—or if you want to reduce your margin of error—you should jot it down, by hand, on your scratch paper yourself. The physical act of writing will reinforce the idea in a way that hitting letters on a keyboard cannot.

Even though the passages will be short, **do not underestimate the importance of this step**. Remember that the incorrect answers are explicitly designed to distract and confuse you. Your job is to not allow that to happen—and having key information written down in front of you makes it much easier to keep your head clear and stay laser-focused on the information that the correct answer must contain. This is particularly true for text completions, support/undermine questions, and graph-based questions, which may require multiple steps of logic.

In order to write a strong main point, you must understand just what it is and how it differs from simply summarizing the text.

Describing Content – Recounting the information presented in the text without necessarily distinguishing between main points and supporting evidence and/or counterarguments. The goal is simply to relate a condensed version of what is being conveyed, often in sequential *first x, then y, and finally z* form.

Summarizing an Argument – Identifying the essential point that the author, or a person discussed in the passage, wants to convey and eliminating any unnecessary detail. This requires you to move beyond simply recounting information (concrete) to recognizing which parts of the passage are most important and relating them to more general ideas (abstract).

To illustrate, we're going to work with the following passage.

Sometime near the end of the Pleistocene, a band of people left northeastern Asia, crossed the Bering land bridge when the sea level was low, entered Alaska and became the first Americans. Since the 1930s, archaeologists have thought these people were members of the Clovis culture. First discovered in New Mexico in the 1930s, the Clovis culture is known for its distinct stone tools, primarily fluted projectile points. For decades, Clovis artifacts were the oldest known in the New World, dating to 13,000 years ago. But in recent years, researchers have found more and more evidence that people were living in North and South America before the Clovis.

When many students are asked to summarize the main point of a passage like the one on the previous, they generally respond in one of two ways:

1) They state the topic

The Clovis People



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2) They summarize the content

Uh... so the guy basically talks about how these people, I think they were called the Clovis people, right? They were like the first people who came across the Bering Strait to America... Oh no, wait, they weren't actually the first people to come across, it's just that they thought that those people were first. But so anyway those people settled in New Mexico, I think it said like 13,000 years ago? Only now he's saying that there were other people who were actually there before the Clovis.

Notice how long, not to mention how vague, this version is. It doesn't really distinguish between primary and secondary information; everything gets mashed in together, and frankly it doesn't make a lot of sense. That summary gives us exactly zero help in terms of figuring out the main point. It also wastes *colossal* amounts of time.

This is not what you want to do.

Argument Summary:

New evidence shows the first inhabitants of the Americas were NOT Clovis people.

Notice how this version just hits the big idea and omits the details. All the details.

Argument Summary in super-condensed SAT terms:

New: CP ≠ 1st/ Am.

Now notice how this version cuts out absolutely everything in order to focus on the absolute total utter bare essentials. It doesn't even attempt to incorporate any sort of detail beyond the subject of the passage (the first inhabitants of the Americas) and its result, the "so what?" – the part that tells us why the main focus of the passage is important (it's new evidence, which means that an old theory has been overturned).

So in four words and a number, we've managed to capture the essential information *without wasting any time*. It doesn't matter if anyone else would understand it as long as we know what it's saying.

Same Idea, Different Words

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, correct answers to main idea questions may refer to the topic or a key figure verbatim, or they may reword it using close synonyms.

For example, consider the following question.

Kente, the traditional fabric of Ghana's Asante people, **has evolved into a symbol of many meanings**—political and cultural, African and American, honorary and everyday. "What is called kente is many things," says Doran H. Ross, director of the Fowler Museum of Cultural History, though he notes its origin is Ghana's strip-woven cloth. But Ross says kente appears just as widely today in Western-style tailored clothing, and in other ways that make it the most recognizably African textile.

1

 Mark for Review

Which choice best states the main idea of the text?

- A Kente can only be produced by specialized weavers.
- B Many different type of African textiles are used in modern clothing.
- C The origins of kente are somewhat controversial.
- D Kente has acquired a wide range of associations.

In this case, the correct answer essentially rephrases the first sentence. The fact that kente *has evolved into a symbol of many meanings*, which are then listed, directly corresponds to the statement in (D) that it "has become associated with a wide range of areas." The answer merely phrases the information from the text in different, slightly more general language.

Note that the information you need to answer the question is located right around the dash. This is a classic instance of a key statement being signaled by "interesting" punctuation.

Old Idea vs. New Idea

The “old idea” vs. “new idea” template is one of the most important concepts necessary for making sense out of social science and science passages. It can essentially be summed up as “people used to believe *x*, but now they believe *y*” or “many people believe *x*, but in fact *y* is true.” Authors using this model typically devote the first paragraph or two to discussing a traditionally accepted idea or theory, then shift to explaining why that theory is wrong and why a new theory—the theory that scientists or other researchers now believe—is actually correct.

Although authors will sometimes state flat-out that a particular idea is wrong, in other cases they will be less direct. They’ll imply skepticism by putting particular words or phrases in quotation marks, or ask rhetorical questions such as *but is this really the case?* When the shift to the “new idea” occurs, you must pay close attention to that place because **the result or theory discussed will almost certainly be the point of the passage**. In some cases, opposing arguments or potential objections to the theory (counterarguments) will be discussed later in the passage, but in general, authors tend to stick to discussing “new ideas” once they’ve transitioned to them.

Certain words and phrases commonly signal when authors are discussing old vs. new ideas:

Old Idea

- Some/Many/Most people (scientists, researchers) believe...
- It is commonly thought that...
- Accepted/conventional wisdom holds that...
- In the past/For decades, people thought that...
- Traditionally it was believed that...

New Idea

- However, But in fact...
- Actually, In reality...
- But is it really true/the case that...?
- It now seems (clear)/Researchers now think that...
- Recently, it has been found that...
- New research/evidence shows/suggests that...
- Another possibility is that...

As you read, it’s up to you to keep track of what the old vs. new ideas are, and why they are false vs. true. **Don’t rely on your memory: write each viewpoint on your scratch paper in very abbreviated terms.** Yes, this can be annoying; it can also be extremely effective.

If you are a strong reader, this is less about trying to get questions right than about ensuring you don’t get them wrong. You may remember most things, but if you don’t make the main positions clear for yourself, you might eventually choose an answer that says the opposite of the correct one.

Note: In earlier versions of *The Critical Reader*, this framework is presented in terms of the “They Say/I Say” model developed by Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein in their book of the same name. Although I have eliminated that discussion because the passages used on the post-2016 SAT are less aligned with the type of reading they discuss, I do still strongly recommend their book as a superb aid for the transition to college-level reading and writing.

Using the “Old Idea” to Predict Main Point and Attitude

One of the reasons it is so crucial you be able to recognize the types of phrases that signal “old ideas” is that those phrases often allow you to identify the point of the passage *before the author even states it.*

Think of it this way: if a phrase such as *many people think...* appears near the beginning of a passage, that’s an absolute giveaway that the idea that follows has been questioned or discredited, and that the researchers discussed in the passage will view it negatively. Moreover, you can infer that the “new idea”—the one that scientists now view positively—will be the opposite.

Likewise, the word *however* or *but* in the middle of a passage often signals the presence of this structure: the “new idea” will virtually always be introduced **after** that transition.

Knowing whether the author, or a particular figure discussed in the passage, agrees or disagrees with a given idea can also help you on Text Completions and Support/Undermine questions, as well as on Passage 1/Passage 2 relationship questions. If you know that a person’s attitude toward the “old idea” is negative, and that their attitude toward the “new idea” is positive, you can easily make a solid assumption about whether they would agree or disagree with a particular statement. For example, consider the following opening lines:

Example #1

Conservationists have **historically** been at odds with the people who inhabit wildernesses.

The word *historically* implies that conservationists are no longer in conflict with people who inhabit wildernesses. Their attitude toward them is now more positive.

Example #2

Some scientists conclude that music’s influence may be a chance event, arising from its ability to hijack brain systems built for other purposes such as language, emotion and movement.

The phrase *some scientists* suggests that the writer is presenting an “old idea,” (disagree, negative opinion), and that the passage will go on to explain why music’s influence is not in fact a chance event.

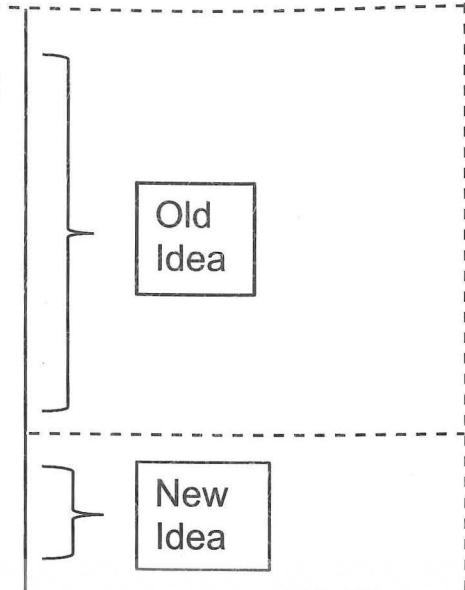
Example #3

Most people believe that there is an objective reality out there and that our senses and our science directly convey information about the material world.

The phrase *most people* suggests that the writer is about to discuss a theory based on the idea that there is no such thing as objective reality.

Now let's come back to a passage we looked at earlier. This time, we're going to examine it from the perspective of old idea/new idea.

Sometime near the end of the Pleistocene, a band of people left northeastern Asia, crossed the Bering land bridge when the sea level was low, entered Alaska and became the first Americans. Since the 1930s, archaeologists have thought these people were members of the Clovis culture. First discovered in New Mexico in the 1930s, the Clovis culture is known for its distinct stone tools, primarily fluted projectile points. For decades, Clovis artifacts were the oldest known in the New World, dating to 13,000 years ago. **But in recent years, researchers have found more and more evidence that people were living in North and South America before the Clovis.**



In this case, the “new idea” is not introduced until the very last sentence, although the phrase *Since the 1930s, archaeologists have thought...* hints that it is coming. It is, however, the key piece of information.

In order to avoid confusion, jot down for yourself the “old idea” and the “new idea.” And by “jot down,” I mean scribble in shorthand. You don’t get points for neatness, and it should take you a few seconds at most.

Old = CP 1st NA (Clovis people first in North America)

New = Ppl in NA pre-CP (People were in North America before Clovis)

As you answer the question, **you must remember to look back at your notes!** I’ve witnessed many students identify the exact sentence where an answer was located but still get the question wrong because they forgot to look back at what they’d written. And that was in paper format—the chances you will skip important steps or overlook essential information when working on the computer is considerably greater.

Main Point and Fiction Passages

In terms of writing main points, fiction passages pose a challenge because they are obviously not written to make arguments or discuss findings from studies. Nevertheless, these passages do generally focus on a particular trait or quality of a character or place.

Furthermore, in fiction passages key information is often located in the same places as in other passages, namely the beginning and the end. That's hardly a surprise because most writers, regardless of genre, tell their readers upfront why a topic or situation is important and then make sure to reemphasize that idea as they conclude. So if you're not sure what's important, focus on those two places and do your best not to get overly caught up in the details.

That said, fiction passages can be structured more unpredictably than non-fiction passages, and if you are a strong reader accustomed to quickly getting the gist of social science and science passages, you may need to slow down. Try to get a sense of who's involved and what they want (or don't want) while being careful not to waste too much time on unfamiliar or confusing language.

As is true for all other types of passages, you should also pay careful attention to major transitions, unusual punctuation (semicolons, colons, dashes, quotation marks, and italics), and strong language because they will virtually always appear in important places.

In addition, you should be careful to consider only the information provided by the author and not attempt to speculate about any larger meaning. What counts is your ability to understand the literal events of the passage and how they are conveyed by specific words and phrases. That's it. If you do go looking for some larger symbolism or start to make assumptions not explicitly supported by the passage, you can easily lose sight of the basics. In fact, most students have difficulty with passages like these not because there's a profound interpretation that can only be perceived through some mystical process, but rather because they aren't sufficiently *literal*.

Let's look at an example.

In our family, the women made the ink. We stayed home. We all worked—me, GaoLing, my aunts and girl cousins, everybody. Even the babies and Great-Granny had a job of picking out stones from the dried millet we boiled for breakfast. We gathered each day in the ink-making studio. According to Great-Granny, the studio began as a grain shed that sat along the front wall of the courtyard house. Over the years, one generation of sons added brick walls and a tile roof. Another strengthened the beams and lengthened it by two pillars. The next tiled the floors and dug pits for storing the ingredients. Then other descendants made a cellar for keeping the inksticks away from the heat and cold. "And now look," Great-Granny often bragged. "Our studio is an ink palace."

Although the passage contains a fair amount of information, it also follows the “key information at the end” pattern. Most of the paragraph provides a general/historical overview of the narrator’s family’s ink-making business, but in the last two sentences, the statement from the narrator’s great grandmother indicates the great pride the family takes in its process.

For a main point, then, we could write something like:

- Work hard w/family → ink.

Or, from a slightly different angle:



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- Ink = family tradition f/generations.

Note that these statements do not even try to cover all of the events, nor do they “interpret” anything—they merely condense the information directly stated by the narrator and summarize the **main idea** that she wants to convey.

Since we now have a good idea of the point, we’re going to look at a question:

1 Mark for Review

Which choice best states the main idea of the text?

- | | |
|---|---|
| Ⓐ | A character describes the establishment of her family’s business by her ancestors. |
| Ⓑ | A character works well with her relatives but struggles to collaborate with those outside her family. |
| Ⓒ | A character expresses pride in the family business and explains the role she plays within it. |
| Ⓓ | A character admires her relatives but is disappointed by their failure to acknowledge her work. |

Knowing the main point allows you to jump pretty much directly to the answer here: (C) fits so well that there is no need to seriously consider the other options, allowing you to save both time and energy.

Not all big-picture questions will be this straightforward, but if you take those few extra seconds to scribble down the main point for yourself, you might be surprised at how quickly you’re able to answer some of them.

Main Point and Poetry Passages

Finding the “point” of a poem can be tricky because the literal meaning may sometimes not be directly stated—a poet may convey the central idea indirectly, using images or metaphors. At the same time, however, you cannot go too far outside the bounds of the poem and make assumptions that are not clearly supported by the specific wording in the text.

Let’s start with a relatively straightforward example.

I’d love to write of the beautiful,
I’d love to write of the brave,
And read the minds of others,
And note their winning ways.
I would not judge the beautiful
By the beauty of their faces,
By suppositions or the like,
Or their pretended graces.

The text is divided into two equal parts, each consisting of four lines: in the first section, the speaker describes wanting to study and record the actions of admirable people; then, in the second section, indicates an intention to look beyond people’s surface qualities or superficial actions (*the beauty of their faces/their pretended graces*) when assessing who is “beautiful.”

As a result, we could say that the main idea is that the speaker is uninterested in superficial characteristics, or wishes to portray people who are internally beautiful. Knowing that information upfront would lead you directly to the answer for the question below.

I’d love to write of the beautiful,
I’d love to write of the brave,
And read the minds of others,
And note their winning ways.
I would not judge the beautiful
By the beauty of their faces,
By suppositions or the like,
Or their pretended graces.

1

 Mark for Review

Which choice best states the main idea of the text?

- | | |
|-----|--|
| (A) | The speaker is drawn to people who are attractive and graceful. |
| (B) | The speaker does not feel suited to the task of judging others. |
| (C) | The speaker believes that external features are a reliable indicator of internal ones. |
| (D) | The speaker is unconcerned with superficial appearances. |

(D) states the main point we determined beforehand, so it is correct.

Sequence of Events

A slightly more involved type of big-picture question involves identifying how passages are structured. This simply involves identifying the events that occur as well as a character's, or characters', reactions to them.

Although the answer choices accompanying these questions may seem very complex, you can simplify them by focusing on a straightforward section of each option. For example, if each choice refers to the end of the passage, identify what happens there, and eliminate any answer that says something else. For example:

The gaslight shone yellow through the frosted transom above the door of Number 31. Gordon took out his key and fished about in the keyhole—in that kind of house the key never quite fits the lock. The darkish little hallway—in reality it was only a passage—smelt of dishwater and cabbage. Gordon glanced at the japanned tray on the hall-stand. No letters, of course. He had told himself not to hope for a letter, and nevertheless had continued to hope. A stale feeling, not quite a pain, settled upon his breast. Rosemary might have written! It was four days now since she had written [...] The one thing that made the evening bearable was to find a letter waiting for him when he got home. But he received very few letters—four or five in a week at the very most.

1

 Mark for Review

Which choice best describes the overall structure of the text?

- (A) It presents a character who has repeatedly failed to receive an important letter and then explains why it has not been sent.
- (B) It depicts a character's inability to enter his home and retrieve a letter and then describes his reaction to that situation.
- (C) It describes the reaction of a character to an upsetting occurrence followed by his happiness at receiving a letter.
- (D) It portrays a character's desire to receive a letter and subsequent disappointment when none is found.

Try not to get too caught up in the details of each answer choice. If you read the passage straight through and take a moment to sum it up for yourself, you should be able to identify the correct answer without too much trouble.

What is the essential action? A character (Gordon) arrives home, enters his house, checks to see whether a letter has arrived, and does not find it (*No letter, of course*). How does he feel about this? Not happy (*A stale feeling, not quite a pain, settled upon his breast*). The correct answer must be consistent with those events.

(B) can quickly be eliminated because Gordon does enter his home—he merely has a bit of trouble with the lock. The same is true for (C) because he does not receive a letter and is unhappy.

(A) is a bit less clearly wrong, but this answer does not fit either because the passage does not explain why the letter has not been sent.

(D) is correct because it is consistent with the idea that Gordon hopes for a letter and is then disappointed not to find one.

Exercise: The Big Picture

The following text is adapted from Henry James' 1880 novel *Washington Square*. Mrs. Penniman is a widow who lives with her brother.

Mrs. Penniman was a tall, thin, fair, rather faded woman, with a perfectly amiable disposition, a high standard of gentility, a taste for light literature, and a certain foolish indirectness and obliquity of character. She had a passion for little secrets and mysteries—a very innocent passion, for her secrets had hitherto always been as unpractical as addled eggs. She was not absolutely veracious; but this defect was of no great consequence, for she had never had anything to conceal.

Among the thousands of species that have made their way around the world since European exploration began in the fifteenth century, knotweed is widely regarded as one of the most intractable. Removing it completely requires extracting the land itself; if anything is left behind, the weed can return repeatedly, regenerating from minuscule fragments after as long as twenty years. One study found that knotweed could regrow from a root fragment weighing just 0.3g—about as much as a pinch of salt.

1

 Mark for Review

Which choice best states the main idea of the text?

(A) Mrs. Penniman is a puzzling and mysterious figure.

(B) Mrs. Penniman is a passionate reader of novels.

(C) Mrs. Penniman is frequently difficult to get along with.

(D) Mrs. Penniman is romantic and sentimental.

2

 Mark for Review

Which choice best states the main idea of the text?

(A) Knotweed was among the earliest plant species to be transported between continents.

(B) Knotweed can regenerate even when the land it grows on has been removed.

(C) Knotweed is exceptionally difficult to eradicate permanently.

(D) In comparison to other plants, knotweed takes much longer to reach its full size.

The following text appeared in Josephine Heard's 1890 work, "On receiving Tennyson's Poems from Mrs. M. H. Dunton, of Brattleboro, Vt."

Dear Friend, since you have chosen to associate
My humble thoughts with England's poet laureate,
I trust that he will bear me pleasant company,
And soon we shall far more than mere
acquaintance be.

Since childhood's days his name I have revered,
And more and more it has become to me
endeared;
I blush not for the truth, I but confess,
I very wealthy feel since I his "works" possess.

3

 Mark for Review

Which choice best states the main idea of the text?

- (A) She is impressed by her friend's personal acquaintance with Tennyson.
- (B) She views Tennyson with respect and wishes to understand his work deeply.
- (C) She is embarrassed by her poor understanding of Tennyson's work.
- (D) She believes that her own poetry is equal to Tennyson's.

Navajo pawn originated in the 1870s as a bartering system that was altogether different from traditional banking. Based on relationships of mutual trust, it evolved to be a fully integrated part of Navajo life. By the middle of the twentieth century, it had become a highly sophisticated and complex practice, with more than 150 active trading posts. Today it remains a pivotal aspect of Navajo society.

4

 Mark for Review

Which choice best states the main idea of the text?

- (A) Pawn has played a significant role in modern Navajo culture.
- (B) During the twentieth century, pawn was gradually replaced by other banking options.
- (C) Pawn is more complex than traditional banking.
- (D) Pawn became popular in Navajo society because it was based on personal relationships.

Although publishers and critics classified Octavia Butler's novels as science fiction—a genre that Butler enjoyed deeply and referred to as "potentially the freest genre in existence"—her works attracted a diverse readership, and Butler resisted being associated exclusively with that form. Indeed, she was also the author of a number of essays, and her book *Parable of the Sower* was adapted into an opera by the mother-and-daughter team Bernice Johnson Reagon and Toshi Reagon. Combining African-American spirituals, soul, rock and roll, and folk music, it debuted at The Public Theater in New York City in 2015.

5

Mark for Review

Which choice best describes the overall structure of the text?

- A work is presented, and its effects are considered.
- An interpretation of a novel is described, and an opposing view is introduced.
- Examples of an author's writing are given, and their significance is discussed.
- A claim is made, and supporting examples are provided to illustrate it.



Answers: The Big Picture

1. D

Throughout the passage, Mrs. Penniman is described as someone unserious and unconcerned with everyday matters: she has *a taste for light literature* and *a passion for little secrets and mysteries*, and is *unpractical as addled eggs*. These phrases convey an image of someone who is “romantic and sentimental,” making the answer (D). (A) and (C) are both entirely unsupported by the passage — there is nothing to suggest that Mrs. Penniman is either mysterious or difficult to get along with. (B) is incorrect because the passage states only that Mrs. Penniman has *a taste* (a liking) for *light literature*, which is much less extreme than a “passion”.

2. C

The main focus of the passage is on the difficulty of eradicating (getting rid of) knotweed: the first sentence states that it is *intractable* (immovable), and the second indicates that the only way to remove it completely is to extract the land it sits on. That corresponds directly to (C). (A) is incorrect because the passage does not state that knotweed was one of the earliest to plants to travel. (B) is directly contradicted by the passage, which states that knotweed can be removed when the land it sits on is extracted. (D) is entirely off-topic: the figure (0.3g) mentioned in the last sentence serves only to emphasize the minuscule amount of knotweed capable of regenerating a new plant.

3. B

The lines *Since childhood's days [Tennyson's] name I have revered/And more and more it has become to me endeared, and I very wealthy feel since I his "works" possess* indicate that Heard is extremely proud to have received Tennyson's poems and has an extremely positive attitude toward the poet. (C) is negative and can be eliminated. (A) misstates the essential situation: Heard's friend does not personally know Tennyson; as indicated in the title in the blurb before the passage, she has merely given a book of his poems as a gift. (D) is incorrect because Heard refers to her *humble thoughts*, indicating that she does not consider herself Tennyson's equal. Only (B) correctly characterizes Heard's attitude of “respect” and desire to “understand [Tennyson's] work deeply.”

4. A

The key information appears in the second sentence and last sentence, where pawn is described as *a fully integrated part of Navajo life* and *a pivotal aspect of Navajo society*. In other words, it “plays a significant role in Navajo culture,” making (A) correct. (B) is entirely unsupported by the passage. (C) and (D) are incorrect because the passage states only that pawn is *different from traditional banking* and is *based on relationships of mutual trust*—it cannot be inferred that pawn is “more complex than traditional banking” or that it “became popular...because it was based on personal relationships.”

5. D

Don't get too caught up in the seeming complexity of the answer choices. In reality, the structure of the passage is fairly straightforward. The first sentence presents a claim—Octavia Butler resisted being identified exclusively with science fiction novels (i.e., *that form*)—and the rest of the passage serves to support it with specific examples (she also wrote essays and had one of her books turned into an opera). The only answer that corresponds to that organization is (D). The passage does not focus on one specific work or novel, eliminating (A) and (B). (C) does not fit either because the passage does not discuss the significance of either of the works mentioned.

5

Literal Comprehension: Same Idea, Different Words

Literal comprehension questions ask you to identify what a passage states or indicates. They can be phrased in the following ways:

- According to the text, what is true about character X?
- According to the text, why was the team's discovery significant?
- Based on the text, how does character X respond?

Although these types of questions are not a major focus of the digital SAT, you can expect to encounter one or two of them during a given Reading and Writing module.

As the most straightforward type of comprehension question, they essentially require you to understand ideas well enough to recognize accurate **summaries** of them. Because this is the SAT, however, those summaries will not use the exact same wording as that found in the passage—that would make things too easy! The test is whether you understand the ideas well enough to recognize when they're stated using **different, often more general, language**.

Correct answers thus require you to recognize **paraphrased** versions of ideas, ones that contain **synonyms for key words** in the passage. Essentially, you can treat these questions as a sort of matching game. If you understand the idea, you'll probably be fine; if you're too focused on the details, or do not read the correct lines—something that may require you to back up to the beginning of a sentence or passage—you might miss it completely.

Although these questions are asked in a straightforward way, they can also be challenging because you must sometimes navigate very challenging syntax and vocabulary. Furthermore, you must connect the specific words of the correct set of lines to the more abstract language of the answers.

Starting on the following page, we're going to look at some examples.

According to new research, viral DNA embedded in human genomes during ancient infections protects human cells against certain modern-day viruses. Earlier studies have shown that fragments of ancient viral DNA—known as endogenous retroviruses—in the genomes of mice, chickens, cats and sheep provide immunity against modern viruses that originate outside the body by preventing them from entering host cells. Though the new study, conducted by researchers at Cornell University, was performed with cultured human cells in a laboratory, it shows that the antiviral effect of endogenous retroviruses likely also exists for humans.

1

 Mark for Review

Based on the text, what is true about the study conducted by Cornell researchers?

- (A) It tested for the presence of viral material in a range of species.
- (B) It suggests that endogenous retroviruses behave differently in humans than in animals.
- (C) It did not test for the presence of retroviruses in human bodies.
- (D) It demonstrated that fragments of ancient viral DNA can infect modern humans.

Although the question itself is asked in a straightforward way, it does have the potential to be quite tricky if you do not focus on the necessary section of the passage.

A very common approach would be to scan the passage for the information about the Cornell study, which is mentioned in the last sentence, and then focus on the information after the word *shows*. That is an entirely logical approach, but unfortunately it won't get you the answer. To reiterate: never read just half a sentence. If you back up to the beginning of the sentence, you'll find the key information: the Cornell study involved *cultured human cells in a laboratory*, i.e., not actual human bodies. And that is what (C) says. Same idea, different words—but maybe not in the place you were expecting. All of the other answers are either unsupported or directly contradicted by the passage.

Let's look at another question.

A family of ten children will be always called a fine family, where there are heads and arms and legs enough for the number; but the Morlands had little other right to the word, for they were in general very plain, and Catherine, for many years of her life, as plain as any. She had a thin awkward figure, a sallow skin without colour, dark lank hair, and strong features—so much for her person; and not less propitious for heroism seemed her mind.

1

 Mark for Review

According to the passage, what is true about Catherine Morland?

- (A) She was as unremarkable in appearance as the rest of her family.
- (B) She was more intelligent than her siblings.
- (C) She was less attractive than the other members of her family.
- (D) She possessed characteristics typically associated with heroism.

To answer this question, focus on the portion of the passage where Catherine is introduced. What do we learn about her and her family there? That the Morlands were *in general very plain* (that is, unattractive or dull-looking), and that Catherine was *as plain as any*. In other words, she was just as “unremarkable in appearance as the rest of her family.” That corresponds directly to (A).

(B) is entirely off-topic—the passage says nothing about any of the Morlands’ intelligence; (C) is directly contradicted by the passage, which indicates that Catherine’s appearance is similar to that of her parents and siblings; and (D) is contradicted by the passage as well—the narrator indicates that her mind was *not less propitious for heroism*, i.e., unsuited for heroism. Remember, however, that it does not matter whether you know what *propitious* means. If you can recognize that (A) fits, you do not need to worry about the details of the other answers.

One more question.

Much of what we know about the physical and mental toll of chronic stress stems from seminal work by Robert Sapolsky beginning in the late 1970s. Sapolsky, a neuroendocrinologist, was among the first to make the connection that the hormones released during the fight-or-flight response—the ones that helped our ancestors avoid becoming dinner—have deleterious effects when the stress is severe and sustained. Especially insidious, chronic exposure to one of these hormones, cortisol, causes brain changes that make it increasingly difficult to shut the stress response down.

1

Mark for Review

According to the passage, what is significant about sustained stress?

- A It inhibits the production of cortisol.
- B It can create a sense of excitement.
- C It becomes progressively harder to reduce.
- D It allows people to escape from dangerous situations.

Don’t get bogged down in the scientific language. Instead, focus on the last sentence, where the phrase *especially insidious* (dangerous in a sneaky way) and the word *cause* indicate the presence of key information. What do we learn there? That *chronic exposure to...cortisol causes brain changes that make it increasingly difficult to shut the stress response down*. Translated into simpler language, the longer a person experiences chronic stress, the harder it gets for them to stop being stressed, i.e., the stress “becomes progressively harder to reduce.” (C) is therefore correct.

(A) is directly contradicted by the passage, which indicates that chronic stress results in chronic exposure to cortisol; and (B) is incorrect because excitement is not mentioned in the passage at all.

Be careful with (D)—the passage does state that stress once *helped our ancestors avoid becoming dinner*; however, that refers to the fight-or-flight response, which is contrasted with the negative effects of stress that is *severe and sustained*. Again, that leaves (C) as the answer.

Exercise: Matching Phrases

Set #1

1. Investigate an occurrence _____	A. Bolster a hypothesis
2. Become more widely accepted _____	B. Broaden comprehension
3. Strengthen a conjecture _____	C. Study a phenomenon
4. Expand understanding _____	D. Develop immunity
5. Become resistant _____	E. Gain currency
6. Reject a possibility _____	F. Suggest an explanation
7. Posit a theory _____	G. Discard an option

Set #2

1. A reason for hope _____	A. A disputed assertion
2. An esteemed figure _____	B. A cause for optimism
3. An egalitarian system _____	C. A reason for panic
4. A creative approach _____	D. A highly regarded individual
5. A controversial claim _____	E. A persistent enigma
6. A cause for alarm _____	F. A non-hierarchical arrangement
7. A continuing mystery _____	G. An innovative take

Exercise: Literal Comprehension

“My Day,” the nationally syndicated newspaper column written by Eleanor Roosevelt, long outlasted her time as first lady. The sheer frequency of the column, which ultimately ran six days a week in 90 newspapers across the United States for more than 20 years, extended Roosevelt’s influence immeasurably: it made her a continual presence in the lives of her readers in a manner that anticipated the social-media age.

1

 Mark for Review

Based on the passage, what is true about “My Day”?

- It overshadowed Eleanor Roosevelt’s accomplishments as first lady.
- It exposed a large new audience to Eleanor Roosevelt’s work.
- It was among the most widely read newspaper columns in the United States.
- It was published more frequently than any other column of its time.

Although the Cherokee had a different relationship with the environment than American settlers did, they still altered the landscape around them in distinct ways. Throughout the Tennessee River, for example, Cherokee tribe members constructed stone weirs, rock obstructions designed to catch fish. The weirs did not halt the flow of the river and create large, stagnant pools of water the way dams constructed by settlers did, however. Rather, they depended on the water’s continuous motion to sweep fish into traps—a cooperation of sorts between the built and the natural worlds.

2

 Mark for Review

According to the text, how did weirs function differently from dams?

- They had no effect on their surrounding environments.
- They prevented rivers from flowing.
- They relied on the water’s existing movement.
- Their effects on their surrounding environments were unpredictable.

To interrupt people's stereotypes of one another, researchers at Stanford Business School developed an intervention called the daily diary technique, in which randomly assigned people in two countries were given each other's diary to read for a week. They found that over time, this strategy reduced cultural distance compared to when they read diaries written by their compatriots. Participants in the first country began to perceive participants from the second as more ethical, whereas participants from the second country began to view participants from the first as warmer and less rigid.

3

 Mark for Review

According to the text, what effect did the intervention developed by Stanford researchers have on participants?

- A It promoted perceptions of similarity between cultures.
- B It decreased feelings of antipathy among citizens of the same country.
- C It caused them to behave in a more ethical manner.
- D It improved their satisfaction with aspects of their own culture.

The following text is from Georgia Douglas Johnson's 1922 poem "Youth."

The dew is on the grasses, dear,
 The blush is on the rose,
 And swift across our dial—youth,
 A shifting shadow goes.
 The primrose moments, lush with bliss,
 Exhale and fade away,
 Life may renew the Autumn time,
 But nevermore the May!

4

 Mark for Review

According to the text, in what way is youth unlike the autumn of life?

- A It is untouched by shadows.
- B It cannot be extended.
- C It remains perpetually fresh.
- D It is full of bliss.

Geophysicists first began to appreciate the smoldering origins of the land under the sea, known formally as ocean crust, in the early 1960s. Sonar surveys revealed that volcanoes form nearly continuous ridges that wind around the globe like seams on a baseball. Later, the same scientists strove to explain what fuels these erupting mountain ranges, called mid-ocean ridges. Basic theories suggest that because shifting tectonic plates pull the ocean floor apart along the ridges, molten rock deep within the earth's interior must rise to fill the gap. This material is produced in the second layer of the Earth's interior — the mostly solid upper mantle — and makes its way up through the crust. The collision of two plates can also result in a volcano.

The following text is adapted from Edith Wharton's novel *The Custom of the Country*. Mrs. Spragg has recently arrived in New York City with her daughter.

The room showed no traces of human use, and Mrs. Spragg herself wore as complete an air of detachment as if she had been a wax figure in a show-window. Her attire was fashionable enough to justify such a post, and her pale soft-cheeked face, with puffy eye-lids and drooping mouth, suggested a partially-melted wax figure which had run to double-chin.

5

 Mark for Review

Based on the passage, why do undersea volcanoes develop?

- (A) Because breaks in the ocean floor allow liquid rock from the mantle to enter.
- (B) Because mid-ocean ridges pull apart when the pressure beneath them increases.
- (C) Because tectonic plates accumulate along the ocean floor.
- (D) Because the Earth's crust collides with the mantle.

5

 Mark for Review

According to the text, what is true about Mrs. Spragg?

- (A) She feels anxious in her environment.
- (B) Her clothing is not suited to her position.
- (C) Her features are sharp and distinctive.
- (D) She appears aloof and disconnected from her surroundings.

The Importance of Being Earnest is an 1895 play by Oscar Wilde.

ALGERNON: Did you hear what I was playing, Lane?

LANE: I didn't think it polite to listen, sir.

ALGERNON: I'm sorry for that, for your sake. I don't play accurately—any one can play accurately—but I play with wonderful expression. As far as the piano is concerned, sentiment is my forte. I keep science for Life.

7

 Mark for Review

Based on the text, what is true about Algernon?

- (A) He is embarrassed that Lane has overheard him playing the piano.
- (B) As a musician, he is more concerned with emotion than technical correctness.
- (C) Science appeals to him for the same reasons that music does.
- (D) He wishes that he could play the piano more accurately.



Answers: Matching Phrases

Set #1

1. C
2. E
3. A
4. B
5. D
6. G
7. F

Set #2

1. B
2. D
3. F
4. G
5. A
6. C
7. E



Answers: Literal Comprehension

1. B

The key information appears before the colon (“Interesting punctuation”) in the third-to-last line. There we learn that Roosevelt’s column *extended [her] reach immeasurably*, which is another way of saying that it “exposed a large new audience to [her] work.” That makes (B) correct. (A) is incorrect because the passage states that “My Day” *outlasted* Roosevelt’s time as first lady, but not that it “overshadowed” her achievement in that role. (C) does not fit because the passage emphasizes the wide reach of “My Day” (*six days a week in 90 newspapers*) but does not explicitly indicate that it was “among the most widely-read columns.” (D) does not work either because the passage refers only to the *sheer frequency* of “My Day’s” publication but does not make comparisons to any other column.

2. C

In this case, the answer is located in a key location, namely the last sentence. There we learn that weirs relied on *the water’s continuous motion*, or how the water naturally moves (“its existing movements”). (C) is thus correct. (A) and (B) are contradicted by the passage, which states that weirs *altered the landscape around them in distinct ways* and that they *did not halt the flow of the river*. Be careful with (D): the passage states only that weirs’ effects were *distinct*, not that they were unpredictable.

3. A

The key phrase is in the second sentence, which states that *over time, this strategy* (i.e., reading the diary of a person in another country) *reduced cultural distance*. In other words, it “promoted perceptions of similarity,” which is what (A) says. (B) incorrectly concerns citizens of the same country, whereas the findings involved citizens of different countries. Note that you can eliminate this answer for that reason even if you do not know what *antipathy* (dislike) means. (C) is incorrect because reading the diaries only caused participants to perceive people in the *other* country as more ethical—the passage does not state whether it affected their own behavior. Likewise, (D) is incorrect because the passage makes no mention of how participants’ perceptions of their own cultures changed.

4. B

The answer is found in a key place, namely the end of the passage. In context of the poem’s title and subject, “Youth,” the statement that *Life may renew the Autumn time,/But nevermore the May* means that old age (Autumn) can stretch out for a long time, whereas youth (May) must end—i.e., “it cannot be extended.” (A) is incorrect because the poem states that *swift across our dial – youth,/A shifting shadow goes*. (C) is incorrect because it states exactly the opposite of the correct answer: by definition, something that “cannot be extended” does not “remain perpetually (forever) fresh.” Be careful with (D): the poem only states that youth is *lush with bliss*, but the question asks how youth is “unlike” old age, and the passage does not make that particular comparison.

5. A

The key information appears in the fourth and fifth sentences, which indicate that “erupting mountain ranges” (i.e., volcanoes) are believed to form when the ocean floor is pulled apart and molten (liquid) rock from the upper mantle rises into the resulting space. That corresponds directly to (A). (B) is incorrect because the ridges are pulled apart by shifting tectonic plates, not by pressure. (C) is entirely unsupported by the passage. (D) is incorrect because the passage states that volcanoes can result from “the collision of two plates,” not from the collision between a plate and the mantle.

6. D

All the information you need to answer this question can be found in the first sentence: the phrases *no traces of human use* and *as complete an air of detachment as if she had been a wax figure in a show-window* correspond directly to “aloof and disconnected” in (D). (A) does not work because the passage only states that Mrs. Spragg is completely detached from her environment, not that she is “anxious.” (B) is incorrect both because the passage indicates that Mrs. Spragg is dressed fashionably and because it says nothing about her actual position. (C) is directly contradicted by the passage, which indicates that Mrs. Spragg’s features recall *a partially melted wax figure*.

7. B

In his short speech, Algernon reveals that he is uninterested in playing the piano accurately (“technical correctness”) and is much more concerned with sentiment (“emotion”), information that eliminates (D) and points directly to (B). (A) is incorrect because rather than being embarrassed by his presumably terrible piano-playing, Algernon seems quite proud of it. (C) is contradicted in the last two sentences, in which Algernon indicates his desire to keep music and science separate.



6

Reading for Function

If you've already spent some time studying for the SAT, you've most likely had the following experience: you see a question that asks you the primary purpose of a few lines or a passage. You go back, read the lines, and feel pretty confident that you understand what they're saying. When you look at the answers, however, they don't seem to have anything to do with what you've just read.

You go back to the passage, frantically rereading, trying to figure out what you've missed, then look back at the answers. Clear as mud. You get rid of a couple that are obviously wrong but find yourself stuck between (B) and (C), which both seem equally plausible. You remember hearing that (C) is the most common answer, so you decide to just pick it and hope for the best.

This scenario typically stems from the fact that most test-takers don't truly understand that function questions are not asking *what* the lines say but rather *why* they say it. In short, you cannot understand function without understanding content, but understanding content alone is not enough to understand function. Why? Because the SAT not only tests the ability to comprehend *what* is written in a passage but also *why* it's written. Essentially, **function questions ask you to move beyond the literal meaning of a section of a passage, or a passage as a whole, to understanding their larger purpose.**

These questions also generally require you to identify the point that the information in question supports. In this sense, function questions are very similar to the "illustrate" questions discussed later on, in Chapter 8: both ask you to work backwards from supporting examples to larger ideas.

However, while answers to function questions are based on the specific wording in the passage, you should keep in mind that **the answers themselves are not stated word-for-word in the text**. In fact, the answers may be phrased in much more general or abstract language than what appears in the passage; you are responsible for drawing the connection between the two. That said, you should **always keep in mind the topic of the passage because the correct answer may refer to it**, either directly or in rephrased form.

Types of Function Questions

Function questions can ask about individual sentences, or even just portions of a sentence, in which case the relevant material will be underlined. They can also ask about passages as a whole. You can expect to encounter both types of question regularly.

They are typically phrased in the following ways:

- The primary purpose of the passage is to...
- Which choice best states the function of the underlined sentence?
- The underlined portion primarily serves to...

And their answers fall into two categories:

- 1) Those that can **only** be answered by looking at the specific wording in the lines provided in the question. In such cases, the lines will typically contain phrasing, punctuation, or a key transition that points to a particular answer.
- 2) Those that **cannot** be obtained by looking at the lines provided in the question but that instead depend on contextual information.

For the second type of question especially, a sentence reference simply tells you where the information in question is located—it does not tell you the information's relationship to anything else in the passage. The section necessary to obtain the answer will often be located either before the portion referenced in the question or, less frequently, after.

Unfortunately, there is no way to tell upfront which category a particular question will fall into. As a result, **you should generally be prepared to read a sentence or two before and after the sentence referenced**, then focus on the appropriate lines as necessary.

Important: If the underlined section falls relatively close to the beginning of the passage, you should back up and begin reading from there. First sentences will very often give you the main point, making it much easier for you to understand the role of a particular piece of information within the passage. If the lines in questions are located in the middle of the passage—especially if the passage is on the longer side—you probably do not need to go all the way back to the beginning but can instead back up a sentence or so as necessary.

Because SAT Reading focuses heavily on relationships between ideas, it follows that questions are frequently based on the places in a passage where ideas come into contact with one another—that is, where new information is introduced, or where there is a change in focus.

The relationships between these ideas are sometimes indicated through the use of specific words, phrases, and types of punctuation, which correlate with particular function words. The chart on the next page lists some of the most common examples, along with their functions.

Functions of Key Words and Punctuation

Continuers	Contradictors
Continue Additionally Also And As well as Finally First Furthermore In addition Moreover Next Then	Speculate Could If It is possible May Maybe Might Perhaps
Illustrate, Support For example For instance One reason/another reason	Call attention to Underscore, Highlight Emphasize Indeed In fact Let me be clear
Explain. Because Explanation That is The answer is The reason is	Capital letters Exclamation point Italics Repetition (of a word, phrase)
Define That is (to say) Properly speaking	Indicate Importance Central Crucial Essential Fundamental Important Key Significant The point/goal is
Colon Dash Parentheses	Draw a conclusion As a result Consequently Hence So Thereby Therefore Thus
Compare As Just as Like(wise) Much as Similarly	Qualify Dashes Parentheses
	Day SAT Question, Imply skepticism But is it really true...? Question mark Quotation marks

Now let's look at some examples.

Example #1

To drivers, the color red means stop, but on a map it tells traffic engineers to leap into action. Traffic control centers like the one on the seventh floor of Boston's City Hall—a room cluttered with computer terminals and live video feeds of urban intersections—represent the brain of a traffic system. The city's network of sensors, cables and signals are the nerves connected to the rest of the body. "Most people don't think there are eyes and ears keeping track of all this stuff," says John DeBenedictis, the center's engineering director. But in reality, engineers literally watch our every move, making subtle changes that relieve and redirect traffic.

1

Mark for Review

Which choice best describes the function of the underlined portion in the text as a whole?

- | | |
|-----|---|
| (A) | To describe a problem commonly faced by traffic engineers |
| (B) | To point out some important differences between traffic control centers and the human brain |
| (C) | To discuss the purpose of items found in traffic control centers |
| (D) | To provide examples of ways in which drivers' actions can be monitored remotely |

If we wanted to simplify this question, we could say something like, "Why does the passage mention *sensors, cables, and signals?*" Or, "What point is the reference to *sensors, cables, and signals* used to support?"

The line reference is smack in the middle of the paragraph, where supporting evidence usually appears. To figure out what point it supports, we must focus on the beginning and the end of the paragraph, where main points are typically stated.

The beginning of the paragraph introduces the comparison between a traffic control center and the brain. Logically, the sentence that includes the key phrase (*The city's network of sensors, cables and signals...*) must serve to further develop that comparison.

The problem here is that no answer is consistent with that idea. As a result, we must read the rest of the paragraph, paying close attention to the last sentence. The presence of the word *but* suggests that it will be very important.

What idea is presented in the last sentence? Traffic engineers are able to watch people's every move. Why? Because of the sensors, cables, and signals that relay information from the streets back to them. So the phrase in question is there to explain how traffic engineers can monitor drivers' behavior from a distance, i.e., remotely. That makes the correct answer (D).

Granted, this question isn't easy; figuring it out without consulting the answers is a challenge. At the same time, however, you cannot assume that you will automatically recognize the correct answer when you see it. Sometimes you will have to do a bit more work upfront than you'd prefer, in order to avoid confusion.

If we wanted to play process of elimination:

(A) To describe a problem commonly faced by traffic engineers

The passage doesn't discuss a problem at all. This is completely off-topic.

(B) To point out some important differences between traffic control centers and the brain

The author draws a comparison between traffic control centers and the brain, but this answer just mentions "differences," which aren't discussed at all. This answer describes exactly the opposite of what's going on in the passage. **One wrong word makes the whole answer wrong.**

(C) To discuss the purpose of items found in traffic control centers

Be careful here. The passage does mention traffic control centers and sensors, cables, and signals in very close proximity to one another; however, it states only that computer terminals and live video feeds are found in traffic control centers. In the next sentence, we learn that sensors, cables, and signals are the *nerves* present throughout the *city*. So (C) is out.

Again, that leaves (D).

If you're stuck between this option and another answer, you can follow the same steps described earlier and read to the end of the paragraph. When you get to the last sentence, you can see that the statement *engineers literally watch our every move* directly corresponds to the idea of monitoring drivers' actions remotely.

Example #2

In August 2009 a consortium of European observatories reported the discovery of COROT-7c, a second planet orbiting COROT-7. Using the data from both planets, they were able to calculate that COROT-7b has an average density about the same as Earth's. This means it is almost certainly a rocky planet made up of silicate rocks like those in Earth's crust. Not that anyone would call it Earth. The planet and its star are separated by only 1.6 million miles, 23 times less than the distance between the parboiled planet Mercury and our Sun. Because the planet is so close to the star, it is gravitationally locked to it in the same way the Moon is locked to Earth.

1

Mark for Review

Which choice best describes the function of the underlined portion in the text as a whole?

- A It emphasizes an important distinction between COROT-7b and Earth.
- B It suggests that COROT-7b could eventually come to resemble Earth.
- C It supports the hypothesis that Earth and COROT-7b may share a common origin.
- D It explains how Mercury came to occupy its position within the solar system.

Before we look at any of the answer choices, we're going to start by restating the question so that we understand exactly what it is asking:

Rephrased:



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What is the purpose of the underlined statement within the passage as a whole?

OR:

What point does the underlined statement serve to support?

Next, we're going to check the lines in question and make sure we understand exactly what they're referring to:

The planet and its star are separated by only 1.6 million miles, 23 times less than the distance between the parboiled planet Mercury and our Sun.

The sentence begins with *the planet*, so we need to back up as far as necessary and determine what "that planet" is. We find the answer in the second sentence: COROT-7b. This is the noun referred to as *it* in the third and fourth sentences. That fact becomes very important because the fourth sentence gives us the purpose of the underlined sentence. So that's the part we're really interested in.

What does the fourth sentence tell us? That no one would mistake COROT-7b for Earth. In other words, it is an extremely different place. Logically, the purpose of the underlined sentence must be to expand on that idea. And that is exactly what (A) says.

One more.

Example #3

Scientists have long known that color plays a role in warning animals about danger. Only recently, however, have they begun to understand how wavelengths of light (and thus color) appear at different depths and how various marine creatures' eyes perceive this light and each other—far differently than humans see them. Where waters are murky, the majority of creatures employ nonvisual forms of communication such as smell, taste, touch, and sound. But in the clear waters of coral reefs, which make up less than 1% of the world's oceans, light abounds, vision predominates, and animals drape themselves in blazing color—not only to menace potential enemies but also to evade predators, hunt for prey, and even hide in plain sight.

1

Mark for Review

Which choice best describes the function of the underlined portion in the text as a whole?

- | | |
|-----|---|
| (A) | It explains how reef animals use color to hide from predators. |
| (B) | It describes an unusual form of marine communication. |
| (C) | It presents a novel theory about underwater perception. |
| (D) | It emphasizes the controversy surrounding a claim about reef animals. |
| | |

In this case, we can get most of the information we need from the underlined sentence itself, although it is also helpful to look at the previous sentence.

The first thing to notice is that the underlined sentence begins with the word *but*, indicating that it includes information opposing the previous sentence or statement, and that it presents a “new idea.” So it’s not a bad idea to back up and get the context.

The previous sentence tells us that *the majority of [marine] creatures* employ non-visual means of communication, whereas the underlined sentence tells us that reef creatures—which, based on the 1% statistic, we can infer make up only a minuscule percentage of sea life—use vision. Essentially, the underlined sentence is describing a very unusual, or “exceptional” situation.

(B) is thus correct. The relationship is so straightforward that it is unnecessary to seriously consider any of the other answers.

Main Point vs. Primary Purpose



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Thus far, we’ve only looked at questions asking about a specific section of a passage. However, some questions ask about the purpose of a passage as a whole. These questions straddle two categories: they are big-picture questions, but they are function questions as well and must be approached from that standpoint. Otherwise, the answer choices may not fully make sense.

Often, however, when students encounter questions asking about the primary purpose of a passage, they reiterate the main point and then become confused when an option rephrasing it does not appear.

Although the purpose and the point of the passage are related, they are not precisely the same thing, and it is important to understand the difference so that you are not surprised by the wording of the answer choices.

Main Point – The primary argument the author is making. It is usually stated more or less directly in the passage, usually in the introduction and conclusion.

Primary Purpose – The rhetorical goal of the passage as a whole (e.g., *explain*, *emphasize*, *describe*). While the primary purpose is based on the overall passage, there is often a key sentence that will point to a particular answer.

In many cases, if you’re clear on the main point, making the jump to the primary purpose is relatively straightforward. For instance, if the point of a passage is that Douglas Engelbart’s invention of the mouse was inspired by rolling wheels called planimeters (in super-condensed SAT terms, “DE used plnmtrs → mouse”), the answer to a primary purpose question might be something as close and simple as “To describe Engelbart’s invention of the mouse.”

In other cases, however, the wording may change somewhat between the main point and the purpose. Continuing with the example above, the answer to a primary purpose question could be phrased in more general terms, along the lines of, “To describe the inspiration behind an invention.” In that case, you would need to make the connection between the specific noun *mouse* and the more abstract words *inspiration* and *invention*.

Using the First Sentence

If a question asks about the purpose of a passage as a whole, it might seem reasonable to assume that you will need to consider, well, the whole passage. In reality, however, you may sometimes be able to identify the most likely answer based primarily on a single sentence, or even just part of a sentence. And when it comes to purpose-of-a-passage questions, that sentence is likely to be the first one. Just make sure you read that sentence—the whole thing—carefully, and that you skim through the rest of the passage to confirm your answer. Trust, but verify.

For example, consider the following passage.

Throughout the dinosaurs' time on Earth, there was an amplification of boniness and spikiness; however, the advantage of skull frills and back plates is hardly self-evident. The solid-domed skull of Pachycephalosaurus seems made for butting—but for butting what? The skull would be all but useless against a predator with the size and power of Tyrannosaurus Rex. The skulls of some Pachycephalosaurs, moreover, were flat and thin—a bad design for contact sports—and the spikes protruding from them were most probably blunt rather than sharp.

1

Mark for Review

Which choice best states the main purpose of the text?

- (A) To suggest that a longstanding hypothesis about dinosaurs may be incorrect.
- (B) To introduce a study and raise some questions about the validity of its findings.
- (C) It describes a dinosaur species in order to illustrate a puzzling trend.
- (D) It presents an emerging mystery and discusses an attempt to solve it.

What do we learn from the first sentence? That the *advantage of skull-frills and back plates is hardly self-evident*. In other words, the advantage is unclear. So logically, the purpose of the passage is to discuss that lack of clarity.

Furthermore, the presence of the word *however* in the first sentence suggests that what follows is the “new idea”—no further information will be introduced to contradict it.

The only two answers that contain words consistent with the information we’ve established should be present are (C) (“puzzling”) and (D) (“mystery”). The passage does not provide a possible explanation (“a hypothesis”) for the phenomenon in question, nor does it mention a study.

In terms of choosing between (C) and (D), look at how the answer choices are worded. If the mystery were “emerging,” the passage would indicate that it was new, but there is nothing here to suggest that is the case. That eliminates (D). In contrast, (C) merely refers to “a puzzling trend.” The rest of the answer is consistent with the description of Pachycephalosaurus.

For a fiction example, we're going to revisit the passage below. In Chapter 4, we looked at it in terms of the main point ("proud of family's ink business"), but now we're going to consider it in terms of its primary purpose.

In our family, the women made the ink. We stayed home. We all worked—me, GaoLing, my aunts and girl cousins, everybody. Even the babies and Great-Granny had a job of picking out stones from the dried millet we boiled for breakfast. We gathered each day in the ink-making studio. According to Great-Granny, the studio began as a grain shed that sat along the front wall of the courtyard house. Over the years, one generation of sons added brick walls and a tile roof. Another strengthened the beams and lengthened it by two pillars. The next tiled the floors and dug pits for storing the ingredients. Then other descendants made a cellar for keeping the inksticks away from the heat and cold. "And now look," Great-Granny often bragged. "Our studio is an ink palace."

1

 Mark for Review

Which choice best states the main purpose of the text?

- A To describe the process by which a character masters a difficult task
- B To convey a character's role and sense of accomplishment in her family's work
- C To explain the influence of a distinguished relative on a character and her family
- D explore the effects of a character's decision on the members of her family

If you encounter a purpose-of-a-passage question right after you've finished reading, your first thought might be, "Oh no, I was so focused on trying to get what was going on that I wasn't really thinking about the purpose. You mean now I have to go back and reread the passage?"

In this case, if you keep the main point in mind, the primary purpose isn't much of a leap at all. In fact, the correct answer, (B), simply rewords it from a slightly different angle: the narrator takes great pride in her family's business and her role within it, and the passage serves to convey that fact. There is no need to complicate things further.

Playing Positive and Negative with Function Questions

One of the simplest ways to approach function questions and eliminate answer choices quickly is to play positive/negative. Positive passages or portions of passages typically have positive answers, while negative passages and portions of passages typically have negative ones.

Although answer choices often contain function verbs that are more neutral than the language of the passage itself, the information in the rest of the answer may be distinctly positive or negative. Even if this strategy alone does not get you all the way to the correct answer, it can allow you to quickly eliminate one or two choices upfront, giving you more time to focus on smaller distinctions between the remaining answers.

The chart on p. xx provides some examples of common positive, negative, and neutral function words that are likely to appear in answer choices.

Let's look at an example:

On what seems like a monthly basis, scientific teams announce the results of new experiments, adding to a preponderance of evidence that we've been underestimating animal minds, even those of us who have rated them fairly highly. New animal behaviors and capacities are observed in the wild, often involving tool use—or at least object manipulation—the very kinds of activity that led the distinguished zoologist Donald R. Griffin to found the field of cognitive ethology (animal thinking) in 1978: octopuses piling stones in front of their hideyholes, to name one recent example; or dolphins fitting marine sponges to their beaks in order to dig for food on the seabed; or wasps using small stones to smooth the sand around their egg chambers, concealing them from predators.

1

 Mark for Review

Which choice best describes the function of the underlined portion in the text as a whole?

- To describe ways that animals hide from predators
- To highlight the lack of complexity in animal tools as compared to human ones
- To provide instances of novel animal behavior in the wild
- To emphasize the limits of animal consciousness

This is a science passage, so its tone is relatively neutral. If we look closely at the first sentence, however, the phrase *a preponderance* (very large amount) of *new evidence* implies that the author has a positive attitude toward the subject. This suggests that the correct answer will be either positive or neutral and that any negative option can be eliminated.

When we look at the answer choices, we can notice that (B) and (D) contain negative phrases (*less complex* and *limits*). Both answers can thus be eliminated immediately.

That leaves us with only two possibilities, but we still have to be careful. Remember that answers to function questions are often found **before** the underlined portions, and (A) refers to something mentioned **after**. The answer is constructed this way because many students will begin reading at the beginning of the lines referenced and overlook the information before it. Here, small stones are discussed only in relation to wasps; they are unrelated to the other animals/examples mentioned.

The point is actually found all the way back in the second sentence: *New animal behaviors and capacities are observed in the wild, often involving tool use.* In addition to the word *new*, the dashes in that sentence indicate that it is important. (C) rephrases that sentence, so it is correct.

Shortcut: (C) uses the word *novel* in its second meaning ("new"). Even in the absence of any other information, that usage suggests that (C) has an above-average chance of being correct.

Very important: While most answers contain neutral function words (e.g., *describe*, *emphasize*), you may occasionally encounter more extreme ones, either positive (*prove*) or negative (e.g., *condemn*). Answers with this type of wording are usually **incorrect**. In particular, Science and Social Science passages often discuss theories that are taken seriously but have not yet been definitely (dis)proven, so answers indicating otherwise are inconsistent with how scholarly research works.

Common Function Words and Phrases

Positive	Negative	Neutral
Support Advance (a claim) Affirm Bolster Claim Defend Exemplify Illustrate Prove* Provide (evidence) Offer (an example) Substantiate	Refute Attack* Challenge Condemn* Contradict Criticize Debate Decry Deny Discredit* Dismiss Dispel Disprove* Imply skepticism Question Undermine*	Describe Characterize Convey Depict Discuss Dramatize Evoke Portray Present Represent Show Trace
Praise Celebrate		Indicate Identify Point out Reveal
Acknowledge	Warn Raise concern	
Propose Imply Suggest	Make fun of Mock* Satirize Scoff at*	Introduce Shift Change Digress*
Emphasize Call attention to Focus on Highlight Reinforce Reiterate Underscore	Concede Acknowledge Recognize	Restate Paraphrase Summarize
Explain Account for Articulate Clarify Define Explicate Justify* Qualify Specify	Exaggerate	Hypothesize Speculate
	Downplay Minimize*	Analyze Consider Describe Develop Explore Reflect on
Persuade Advocate Encourage Promote	Lament* Bemoan*	Attribute Cite Allude to

*Signals an answer that is likely to be incorrect.

For a glossary of selected terms, see p. 117.

Exercise: Function

Far below the mid-ocean ridge volcanoes and their countless layers of crust-forming lava is the mantle, a 3,200-kilometer-thick layer of scorching hot rock that forms the earth's midsection and surrounds its metallic core. At the planet's cool surface, upthrusted mantle rocks are dark green, but if you could see them in their rightful home, they would be glowing red- or even white-hot. The top of the mantle is about 1,300 degrees Celsius, and it gets about one degree hotter with each kilometer of depth. The weight of overlying rock means the pressure also increases with depth about 1,000 atmospheres for every three kilometers.

1

 Mark for Review

Which choice best states the function of the underlined sentence within the text as a whole?

- To convey the intense pressure that pervades the mantle
- To suggest that scientific understanding of mantle rocks is limited
- To describe a difference between mantle rocks and other types of rock
- To emphasize a difference between mantle rocks in different locations

The Awakening is an 1890 novel by Kate Chopin. Edna Pontellier, the protagonist, is on vacation with her husband and children at Grand Isle resort in Louisiana.

Edna Pontellier could not have told why, wishing to go to the beach with Robert, she should in the first place have declined, and in the second place have followed in obedience to one of the two contradictory impulses which impelled her. A certain light was beginning to dawn dimly within her. In short, Mrs. Pontellier was beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her.

2

 Mark for Review

Which choice best states the primary purpose of the text?

- To highlight Edna's tendency to behave in contradictory ways
- To present a situation in which Edna must make a momentous decision
- To describe Edna's newfound insight into her interior and exterior existence
- To convey Edna's sense of duty toward her family

In order to better understand people's receptiveness to opposing viewpoints, public policy scholars Julia Minson of Harvard University and Frances Chen of the University of British Columbia reviewed dozens of studies spanning 1984 to 2021. Among their findings was the fact that people who feel strongly about an issue can be receptive to others' views without altering their own opinions. As the researchers point out, two thoughtful people might examine each other's ideas seriously and, recognizing that it is possible for reasonable people to hold either perspective, respectfully agree to disagree.

3

 Mark for Review

Which choice best states the function of the underlined sentence within the text as a whole?

- (A) It highlights a potential outcome of a strong disagreement.
- (B) It describes a process by which people's opinions can evolve.
- (C) It emphasizes the importance of considering multiple perspectives.
- (D) It discusses a strategy that permits opposing parties to reconcile their differences.

To be a female artist in the nineteenth century was challenging enough, but to be a female sculptor was nearly unthinkable. Not only were sculptors expected to have a familiarity with the human form that no woman in that age could acquire, but they had to work with heavy materials, such as blocks of marble weighing many hundreds of pounds. Nevertheless, a few intrepid American women wound their way to Italy and learned to sculpt.

4

 Mark for Review

Which choice best describes the function of the underlined sentence in the text as a whole?

- (A) It discusses some of the expenses involved in becoming an artist.
- (B) It emphasizes the antagonism between women and the nineteenth-century artistic establishment.
- (C) It explains the virtual impossibility of becoming a female sculptor in the nineteenth century.
- (D) It describes some of the physical limitations placed on nineteenth-century women.

The following text is from Charlotte Grimké's poem "Wordsworth."

Poet of the serene and thoughtful lay!
In youth's fair dawn, when the soul, still untried,
Longs for life's conflict, and seeks restlessly
Food for its cravings in the stirring songs,
The thrilling strains of more impassioned bards;
 Or, eager for fresh joys, culls with delight
 The flowers that bloom in fancy's fairy realm —
 We may not prize the mild and steadfast ray
 That streams from thy pure soul in tranquil song

5

Mark for Review

Which choice best describes the function of the underlined portion in the text as a whole?

- | | |
|-----|--|
| (A) | To criticize the human tendency toward conflict |
| (B) | To describe the power of music to express emotions |
| (C) | To highlight the consequences of uncontrolled restlessness |
| (D) | To convey the soul's youthful desire for excitement |

One of the most persistent and problematic biases in science involves motivated reasoning—that is, the tendency to interpret observations to fit preconceived notions. According to Professor Brian Nosek, a specialist in human biases and co-founder of the Center for Open Science at the University of Virginia, psychologists have demonstrated that “most of our reasoning is in fact rationalization.” In other words, people begin by making decisions about what to think or do, and their “explanation” later serves as a means to justify what they believed or how they intended to act in the first place.

6

Mark for Review

Which choice best states the primary purpose of the text?

- | | |
|-----|--|
| (A) | To describe a phenomenon detrimental to the reliability of scientific findings |
| (B) | To suggest that true objectivity in science cannot be attained |
| (C) | To emphasize the inaccuracy of many scientific conclusions |
| (D) | To call attention to the dangers of motivated reasoning |

In recent years, many companies have shifted from a model in which workers are placed in individual cubicles to one based on open-office plans, with the goal of fostering employee interaction and collaboration. Studies suggest, however, that such strategies may backfire, increasing job dissatisfaction and leaving workers no more likely to work together than before. Researchers at Harvard Business School theorize that employees' tendency to avoid one another in open offices may be attributable to the "fourth wall"—the imaginary curtain that prevents actors from being distracted by the audience and preserves the imaginary world of a play. To preserve a sense of psychological autonomy, employees in open offices establish their own fourth walls, which their colleagues quickly come to respect.

7

Mark for Review

Which choice best describes the function of the underlined portion in the text as a whole?

- A To describe a drawback of open offices
- B To present an explanation for an unintended phenomenon
- C To emphasize the importance of collaboration in the workplace
- D To compare office work to theatrical work



Glossary of Function Words

Account for – explain

Acknowledge (a point) – recognize the merit or validity of an idea

Advocate – synonym for *promote* and *encourage*



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Bolster – support, provide additional evidence for an idea

Concede (a point) – recognize the merit or validity of an opposing idea

Discredit – disprove (literally, demonstrate a lack of credibility)

To reiterate: SAT passages are typically concerned with weighing evidence, considering prevailing theories, and proposing new explanations. Although authors and various experts cited in passages may have strong opinions about what is and is not true, passages do not, as a rule, contain sufficient information or evidence to definitively prove or disprove anything. *Discredit* is therefore unlikely to appear as a correct answer.

Dismiss – deny the importance or validity of an idea

Downplay – deliberately understate, imply that something is unimportant

Evoke – summon, call up (a memory, impression, etc.), recreate through description

Explicate – explain in great detail

Highlight – emphasize, call attention to

Minimize – deliberately understate the importance of an idea. Synonym for *downplay* and *trivialize*.

Mock – make fun of

Qualify – provide more information about a statement in order to make it seem less strong or blunt, or to indicate the conditions under which it would be true.

For example, a statement like, “The SAT is the worst test EVER” is very extreme.

To **qualify** it, however, you could say something like, “At least that’s what it feels like when you’re a junior in high school.” That sentence reduces the impact of the first sentence, clarifies when and for whom it would be true, and makes it seem less extreme.

It can be helpful to know that qualifying phrases are sometimes **parenthetical**—that is, they are found within parentheses or dashes—and are almost like asides to the reader. For example, consider the following sentence:

In his discovery of the law of gravity, which would transform the course of scientific thought, Newton was struck by—if the story can be believed—an apple that fell from a tree above the spot where he was reclining.

The phrase between the dashes is intended to suggest that this story may not in fact be true. In other words, it is intended to provide information about the questionable truth of—that is, to *qualify*—the idea that Newton was struck by an apple.

As discussed earlier, answer choices that contain familiar words used in unfamiliar ways are generally correct since the second meaning itself is being tested. Since *qualify* is not being used in its most common sense of “fulfill requirements for,” it has a higher than average chance of being correct.

So here's a shortcut: If you have difficulty coming up with an answer on your own and see “qualify a statement” as an option, you should probably begin by taking a very close look at it. This is NOT to say that you should choose it without thinking, simply that you should consider it first, making sure to look back to the passage and see if it does in fact describe the function of the statement or phrase in question.

Satirize – make fun of by using irony, sarcasm, or parody

Scoff at – make fun of, suggest that something is unworthy of serious consideration

Substantiate – give evidence or support for, prove; usually too extreme to be correct

Undermine – weaken or attack the foundation of; usually too strong to be correct



Answers: Reading for Function

1. D

This is a good example of a function question whose answer depends only on the underlined sentence itself rather than on the information before or after it. The key word *but* occurs halfway through the sentence and indicates that its purpose is to describe a contrast: the first half of the sentence describes mantle rocks at the surface (green), whereas the second half describes them deep beneath the earth (very hot). In other words, it “emphasizes a difference between mantle rocks in two locations,” making the answer (D). (A) is incorrect because the underlined sentence focuses on heat, not pressure. (B) is entirely off-topic, and (C) does not fit because the underlined sentence describes mantle rocks only.

2. C

The transitional phrase *In short* at the beginning of the last sentence signals that the author is about to summarize an essential idea, and indeed, the key information is located right afterwards. It involves Edna’s sudden realization (“newfound insight”) about herself and her position relative to the world around her (“her interior and exterior existence”). That corresponds to (C). (A) is incorrect because it takes a word from the passage (*contradictory*) and twists it beyond the scope of the passage: the narrator states only that Edna experiences contradictory impulses when Robert asks her to accompany him to the beach—we cannot infer that she has a general “tendency to behave in contradictory ways.” (B) is incorrect because it is Edna’s realization that is “momentous,” not her decision. (D) is contradicted by the passage: the primary focus is on Edna’s discovery about herself, not on her sense of obligation towards her family.

3. A

The underlined sentence begins with the phrase *As the researchers point out*, indicating that the information that follows will focus on an implication or conclusion of the research described in the previous sentences. The previous sentence discusses the finding that *two people who feel strongly about an issue can be receptive to others’ views without altering their own opinions*, and the underlined sentence expands on that idea. (A) is correct because disagreeing respectfully is something that people with strongly opposing opinions might choose to do at the end of an argument—that is “a potential outcome.” (B) and (D) are both contradicted by the passage. The focus here is on people whose views do not evolve, or who do not reconcile (bring together) their differences. Although the passage does discuss how individuals with different perspectives might interact, (C) is incorrect because the sentence in question does not mention “the importance of multiple perspectives.”

4. C

The underlined sentence appears close to the start of the passage (second sentence), so start by backing up and reading from the beginning. The first sentence states that *to be a female sculptor in the nineteenth century was nearly unthinkable*, and the examples given in the underlined sentence (familiarity with human form, weight of materials) logically serve to support that claim. (A) and (B) are completely off-topic and can be eliminated. (D) refers to nineteenth-century women, not *female artists*, and is outside the scope of the passage. (C) correctly relates the idea from the first sentence that the second sentence is used to support (nearly unthinkable = virtual impossibility).

5. D

Although the underlined portion appears close to the start of the poem, in this case the first sentence is simply an exclamation that does not provide any useful information for the question. As a result, it is necessary to focus on the wording of the underlined portion, which describes the soul's search for *life's conflict, food for its craving, the thrilling strains of impassioned bards*—in other words, “excitement,” which corresponds to (D). (A) is incorrect because the poem is strongly positive, whereas “criticize” is negative. (C) is fairly negative as well, and the underlined section does mention any “consequences.” (B) is off-topic: while the word *songs* appears in the sentence, music is not the focus.

6. A

Although the question asks about the passage a whole, you can get a sense of the answer by using only the first sentence. (In a passage this short, the primary purpose is essentially required to be presented very close to the beginning.) The phrase *One of the most persistent and problematic biases in science* indicates that the passage will present and discuss this problem. The language is moderate and neutral, suggesting that the correct answer will be so as well. (A) is consistent with the stated purpose and does not go outside the bounds of the passage, so it is correct. (B) is too extreme—the passage only states that motivated reasoning is a problem, not that “true objectivity cannot be attained.” Be careful with (C): the passage only indicates that scientists have *a tendency to interpret observations to fit preconceived notions*—it does not go so far as to emphasize that “many scientific conclusions” are actually wrong, only that they have been arrived at in a way that is not fully objective. (D) is too extreme and too negative, and the passage never explicitly discusses any dangers.

7. B

The fastest way to answer this question is to focus on the word *theorize* in the underlined portion—it indicates that the sentence in question serves to present an argument or explanation. The only answer consistent with this purpose is (B), which contains the word “explain.” Otherwise, (A) is incorrect because the underlined portion does not “describe a drawback of open offices” but rather offers a theory about why a drawback (increased job dissatisfaction) exists. The beginning of the passage indicates that open offices are intended to promote collaboration but then moves to a discussion of why it does not take place, making (C) incorrect. Although the underlined portion does draw a comparison between open-office workers’ behavior and the “fourth wall,” which is an element of the theater, the main purpose of the underlined sentence is not to compare office and theatrical work but rather to explain why open offices backfire.

7

Text Completions

Every SAT contains a number of text completions: short passages that present a theory or argument and that ask you to identify the statement that logically completes the text. For example, consider the passage below. We'll look at the answer choices on the next page.

Up close, regal angelfish flash eye-popping bands of yellow, violet, and white. But recent studies show that as regals swim against a coral reef's visually complex background, their contrasting lines merge in a predator's brain, allowing them to evade capture. According to marine biologist Gil Rosenthal, as a reef fish retreats, distance and motion can make it difficult for predators to perceive fine details and distinguish closely spaced outlines of contrasting colors. Therefore, from far away, _____

To answer this question, you must use the information presented before the blank in order infer how reef fish would be perceived by a predator far away.

Although you must make a leap of logic in order to answer a question such this, it is only a very small leap. The most important thing to understand about text completions is that they are essentially literal comprehension questions with a twist. All of the necessary information is there; you just have to put the pieces together and make explicit an idea the passage leaves unstated.

Although answers will not normally be stated word-for-word in the passage, the text will always contain specific wording that clearly corresponds to a particular statement in the correct answer. And very often, the key information will appear very close to the blank, the earlier part of the passage serving primarily to provide background for the argument.

To minimize your chances of confusion, you can follow the sequence below. You don't need to adhere to it rigidly for every question, but it provides a solid general roadmap.

1) Carefully read the claim or theory in question.

Usually this will be presented right before the blank.



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2) Restate it for yourself in your own words.

If it is particularly dense or confusing, jot down a quick (3-6) word summary on your scratch paper. For the passage on the previous page, we could write something like "RF retreat → blend w/background." (When reef fish retreat, they blend in with their background.)

3) Work out the implications, sticking as close to the passage as possible.

Given the summary above, we can conclude that *from far away*, predators have a hard time seeing brightly colored reef fish because they blend in with their background. If that seems too obvious, well... that's the point.

4) Look for the answer that matches.

Keep in mind that it may use wording very different from that in the passage.

Having gone through steps #1-3, we're going to look at the answers.

Up close, regal angelfish flash eye-popping bands of yellow, violet, and white. But recent studies show that as regals swim against a coral reef's visually complex background, their contrasting lines merge in a predator's brain, allowing them to evade capture. According to marine biologist Gil Rosenthal, as a reef fish retreats, **distance and motion can make it difficult for predators to perceive fine details and distinguish closely spaced outlines of contrasting colors**. From far away, _____

1

Mark for Review

Which choice most logically completes the text?

- | | |
|-----|--|
| (A) | the bright colors of the fish can easily be perceived, even when the water is clouded by sediment. |
| (B) | marine predators must rely on the visual aspects of their prey. |
| (C) | spots and stripes blur together, allowing even stationary fish to merge into the background. |
| (D) | the fish appear as a single mass rather than a group of individual creatures. |

(A) and (B) are both directly contradicted by the passage—the whole point is that predators cannot rely on visual information to identify reef fish that they hunt. Be careful with (D): the issue is not that predators see the fish as a group, but rather that they cannot distinguish the fish from the background of the reef at all. (C), the correct answer, is directly consistent with the correct idea, which we determined beforehand: for a faraway predator, the bright patterns on the fish blend into, i.e., "merge," with the background, allowing them to escape capture.

When Is a Conclusion Valid?

When working through text completions, it can also be helpful to know something about how wrong answers are constructed. Some incorrect options will be directly contradicted by the text or be so far outside its bounds that they obviously do not fit. Identifying and eliminating these answers is a straightforward matter of reading the passage carefully and understanding the necessary vocabulary.

Other answers will be wrong in subtler ways, though. For example, they may involve **speculation** – that is, an answer *could* be true based on the information in the passage, but there isn't enough information to determine whether it is *actually* true. Half-right, half-wrong options may sound so plausible that it seems as if they should be true. (In fact, some of them may even be true in the real world.) Answers in this category can be tempting because they generally refer to claims or people that are directly mentioned in the passage.

Remember, however, that correct answers are likely to include language somewhat different from that used in the passage. It is thus crucial to not eliminate any answer without making sure you really understand what it is saying. **You must be able to distinguish between wording that rephrases important ideas from the text (valid inference) vs. wording that is genuinely off-topic (invalid).**

In addition, keep in mind that **one of the simplest ways to create a logical inference is to rewrite a statement from a different angle** – something that may involve negative language, e.g., the word *not* or the prefix *-un* or *-im*. For example, if a researcher claims that a star is **older** than the Earth, a correct answer might state that the star is **not younger** than the Earth.

You should also pay particularly close attention to answers that contain **double negatives**, which create a **positive meaning**. For instance, something that is “not impossible” is possible, and something that is “not unimportant” is important. This language can be very tricky, and you may need to take a few moments to work out exactly what it means.

All that said, we're going to look at a few examples of how valid conclusions can be formed.

Example #1

Researchers in Japan and Brazil have found that a particular type of muscular contraction, which occurs only when people lower weights, is most effective at increasing muscle strength and size.

There are a couple of key pieces of information here. First, the passage concerns a type of muscular contraction that is most effective at increasing muscle strength and size. We can therefore conclude that all other types of muscular contractions are less effective or not as effective at producing this outcome.

Next, this type of contraction occurs *only when people lower weights*, i.e., when they are not raising them.

If we put those statements together, we can logically conclude that people who want to build muscle strength and size should focus on exercises that involve lowering weights; or that raising weights is a less effective way of building muscle strength and size than lowering weights is.

Example #2

Sea turtle conservation efforts largely focus on protecting vulnerable hatchlings once they emerge. The newly hatched turtles are directed away from the bright lights of towns and encouraged to move towards the sea.

The first sentence states that conservation efforts *largely focus on protecting...hatchlings once they emerge*. We can therefore conclude that conservation efforts are less focused on protecting hatchlings before they emerge, i.e., while they are still in their shells.

Because the first sentence tells us that sea turtle hatchlings are vulnerable and need protection, we can conclude from the second sentence that *the bright lights of towns* represent danger, and that encouraging the hatchlings to move towards the sea is a way of protecting them.

We **cannot**, however, conclude that protecting sea turtles only after they hatch is the only way or the best way to conserve the species. The same is true for directing the hatchlings away from towns and toward the sea. The passage only tells us that these methods are used—it tells us nothing about their effectiveness, either in absolute terms or in comparison to other approaches.

Example #3

About 14% of major earthquakes since 2000 have been supershear events, which occur when a fault ruptures faster than seismic shear waves can travel through rock. Until recently, these earthquakes were believed to occur much less frequently because researchers had mostly looked for them on land.

We can draw several conclusions from these statements.

- If 14% of earthquakes since 2000 have been supershear events, then most earthquakes (76%) since 2000 have been other types.
- Supershear quakes occur much more frequently than researchers used to believe.
- If researchers obtained their inaccurate estimate by looking mostly at supershear quakes on land, then many supershear quakes must not occur on land. Logically, they must occur underwater instead—that is the only other option on Earth.

We **cannot**, however, draw conclusions about earthquakes—supershear or otherwise—before 2000.

Likewise, we **cannot** infer anything about why researchers focused primarily on land and neglected to consider the oceans.

Now we're going to work through a couple of additional test-style examples.

Let's start with something relatively straightforward. You don't get to see the answers just yet.

Some people naturally exhibit a low response to training—an inability to reap the full physiological benefits of aerobic exercise. A study led by Sarah Lessard at the Joslin Diabetes Center found that participants with a low response had high levels of blood sugar—a condition known as hyperglycemia. While this condition is often associated with diabetes, it is common in non-diabetics as well. Lessard and her colleagues predicted that if people with hyperglycemia received a drug designed to lower blood sugar levels, they would therefore

We're going to begin by summarizing the scenario presented in the simplest possible terms. Do not underestimate the importance of writing things down when you are asked to juggle multiple ideas.

- People with hyperglycemia show low response to exercise.
- So: if a drug reduces hyperglycemia, the response to exercise should get higher.

Or, in super-condensed SAT language:

- HG ↑, exercise response ↓
- If drug makes HG ↓, exercise response ↑

The correct answer should therefore indicate Lessard + colleagues predicted that taking a drug to reduce hyperglycemia would result in an improved response to exercise.

Notice that there's nothing in there about diabetes—that information is just a distraction from the main argument. Keep that in mind when you look at the answer choices.

- | | |
|---|---|
| Ⓐ | be more likely to incorporate exercise into their daily routine. |
| Ⓑ | lower their risk of developing diabetes. |
| Ⓒ | demonstrate an improved physiological response to aerobic training. |
| Ⓓ | experience less severe spikes in blood sugar after consuming certain foods. |