

# Reading Review and Practice

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## DESCRIPTION OF THE READING TEST

Knowing the variety and the amount of reading that await you in college, the writers of the ACT have included a 35-minute Reading Test in the examination. Answering the questions gives you an opportunity to show your ability to read and understand the kind of materials required in college coursework. The test contains reading passages from four content areas.

<i>Content Area</i>	<i>Subject</i>	<i># of Questions</i>	<i>% of Test</i>
1. Prose Fiction	novel or short story	10	25%
2. Social Studies	anthropology, archaeology, business, economics, education, geography, history, political science, psychology and sociology	10	25%
3. Humanities	architecture, art, dance, ethics, film, language, literary criticism, music, philosophy, radio, television, and theater	10	25%
4. Natural Science	anatomy, astronomy, biology, botany, chemistry, ecology, geology, medicine, meteorology, microbiology, natural history, physiology, physics, technology, and zoology	10	25%
<b>Scoring:</b>	Two subscores reported:		
	1) Prose fiction and Humanities	20 questions	
	2) Social Studies and Natural Science	20 questions	

Each passage is about 750 words, or roughly two pages of a typical book. The passages are arranged by level of reading difficulty, with the easiest passage first and the hardest, last. On a given ACT, the prose fiction passage may be first; second, third, or fourth. The same holds true for the other passages. The order is not announced ahead of time.

The passages are meant to be comprehensible to college-bound high school students. They aren't supposed to stump, trick, or frustrate you. On the other hand, they aren't totally transparent. To grasp them you'll have to read carefully and thoughtfully, being ever alert to all the facts and ideas they contain. Everything you need to know to answer the questions is right in the passage, although you may have a slight advantage if you happen to know something about the topic.

Each passage is followed by 10 multiple-choice questions—40 questions in all. Fourteen of the questions test what the passages say explicitly. These are what the ACT calls *referring* questions, because they "refer" precisely to what is stated in the passages.

Many more of the questions—almost twice as many—ask what the passage implies or suggests. The ACT calls these *reasoning* questions, because they call for answers that you must reason out by interpreting ideas, making generalizations, and drawing inferences and conclusions.

The ten questions about each passage are arranged according to level of difficulty, the easiest question being first and the hardest, last. The focus of the questions is objective—on what the author of the passage thinks and says—not on what readers believe the author ought to think or say.

In addition to the total score, two subscores are reported. One is for Prose Fiction and Humanities, the other for the Social Studies and Natural Science reading passages.

## STRATEGY

Whatever your reading style, it can be changed if you're not satisfied with it. For example, you can learn to increase your reading speed as well as your comprehension in a fairly short time. Doing so won't be easy, but if you have the determination to alter habits that keep you from getting the most out of reading, you can do it. By trying out some, of the ideas that follow, you could make changes in your reading that will stay with you for the rest of your life.

**1 Developing a positive, aggressive attitude.** *Get psyched for success.* Maybe it sounds simpleminded, but you can go far if you think positively. Successful people often attribute success to their positive mental attitude. Set a reading goal for yourself, one that's attainable in the time between now and the ACT. Specify what you will do: read 200 pages a week, take a book to bed with you every night, meet a daily reading quota. State your goal in short-term measurable quantities, in time and in numbers of pages to be read or books to finish.

**2. Finding time for reading.** *Add reading time to your daily life.* If you set aside about 30 minutes a day for reading, one year from today you will have read over thirty books. Look at the figures. An average-size book contains about 75,000 words. Reading at an average rate of 250 words a minute, a rate that's neither slow nor fast, you can read 7500 words in 30 minutes. At that rate, you'd finish a book every ten days. In a month you'd read three books, in a year three dozen.

Let's be realistic, though. Some books are long and hard, and on some days you won't have half an hour to read. Conservatively, then, during the next twelve months you can read more than twenty books. Keep a book at your side wherever you go, and you'll be surprised how easily you'll fill up vacant minutes with reading.

If you're committed to add reading to your life, 30 minutes a day will suffice, but if you want to become a reader in the fullest sense of the word, don't set a time limit. Just read, read, read, and enjoy yourself.

**3. Reading more than books.** *In addition to books, include high-quality magazines and newspapers in your reading diet.* Growth in reading power doesn't depend on the size of the page or the style of type. It does, however, depend on the quality of the material you read. Turn to the well-written, first-rate articles you invariably find in such magazines as *U.S. News & World Report*, *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, *Time*, and *The Atlantic*, and in such newspapers as *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Christian Science Monitor*. Regular reading of any of these publications. is superb preparation for the ACT. In fact, don't be surprised to find passages on the ACT that first appeared in one of these highly regarded publications.

**4. Improving your reading.** *Check your reading ability for deficiencies.* Everybody's reading can be improved. The fact is that most people don't read as well as they think they do, especially when the reading material bores them. Even if you read a lot, do well on tests, and feel confident that you understand almost everything you read, you may be missing some of the contents without realizing it. One way to check yourself, regardless of how well you think you read, is to read aloud for several minutes into a tape recorder. Pick something hard, something written in a mature style with difficult words and long sentences, something a lot more demanding, for example, than your daily newspaper. Read it with expression, as though you want to tell an audience something important. When you play back the tape, follow the text and listen carefully to the way you read. Still better, get someone to listen with you and to help you answer the following self-assessment questions:

Did you stumble or hesitate?

Did you fail to pause between any sentences?

Did your voice fail to drop slightly at the end of each sentence?

Did you misread any of the numbers?

Did you skip parenthetical material?

Did you omit any individual words in your reading?

Did you accidentally substitute one word for another?

Did you invert words?

While reading, did you ever lose track of where you were in the passage? While reading, did you ever stop concentrating, even for an instant, and think about something else—about your voice, your pronunciation, or anything else?

A yes answer to any of these self-assessment questions could suggest a weakness in your reading, but not one that you necessarily need to be concerned about. Omitting a word here and there, for instance, usually doesn't signify a problem. Readers often skip words with their eyes but their minds fill in the blank space. You need to attend only to those reading errors that interfere noticeably with your comprehension of the passage.

At the same time, several yes responses on the self-assessment can indicate that your reading needs considerable improvement, that you are not getting the most out of what you read. An imperfect reading of one difficult passage, however, doesn't prove that you have a "reading problem." Before you draw such a conclusion, tape yourself reading several passages with varying degrees of difficulty. If you have trouble with easy-to-read material, ask a reading specialist to check your reading.

On the other hand, maybe all you need to improve your reading is to change your reading habits. For example, instead of doing all your reading just before bedtime, the time when your mind is usually least alert, read earlier in the day. Instead of slouching in an easy chair, sit at a table. Turn off the TV and CD player while you read. If necessary, get out of the house and find a quiet place, the library, for instance. If your eyes bother you after reading for a while, get a stronger light or have your vision checked. You may need reading glasses. In short, treat reading like something that really matters.

You should also get a good college-level dictionary to keep by your side as you read. Look up unfamiliar words that can't be figured out from the context. An unfamiliar word might be crucial to a full understanding of what you are reading. Reading builds vocabulary, and reading with a dictionary improves the odds of your remembering new words.

5. **Developing reading speed.** *Train yourself to pick up the pace of your reading.* Anyone can read faster by following a few basic principles of rapid reading and by learning to skim. On tests, where speed matters, rapid reading and skimming will save you lots of time.

First, you need to know that different kinds of material require different reading speeds. Many students read everything at the same speed, usually at a deliberate word-by-word pace, which covers perhaps 200 to 250 words per minute and sometimes less. The appropriate speed depends not only on the nature of the material but on your reason for reading it. Clearly, reading something on which you'll be tested requires more care than reading something only for pleasure.

You may know people who, without realizing it, move their lips as they read. Mouthing words slows them down because they read no faster than their lips can move. To prevent your lips from moving, hold a finger to your mouth as you read.

Watch the eyes of slow readers. Then watch the eyes of fast readers. You'll notice that the eyes of slow readers stop several times as they cross a line of print. They might stop as often as the number of words in the line, nine, twelve, maybe fifteen times. In contrast, the eyes of fast readers make few stops, no more than three or four per line.

Fast readers take in groups of words at a time, while slow readers plod along word by word. In actuality, when you are reading at a fast rate, your eyes often skip words. But your mind grasps the meaning nevertheless.

Fortunately for one-word-at-a-time readers, grouping words into meaningful clusters is fairly simple. And it's equally simple for faster readers to expand the size of their groupings. A reader whose eyes stop only twice while traversing a line of text can read up to 33 percent faster than a reader whose eyes make three stops.

Skimming takes you across the surface of a passage at a still higher speed, perhaps three to five times your normal reading rate. While skimming, your eyes are taking in large quantities of print in one fell swoop. Skilled skimmers can glance at an ACT reading passage for a few seconds and tell you generally what it's about. They can also pick out answers to specific detail questions with little apparent effort. Although they'll take somewhat longer to find specific ideas in a passage, they can do that, too—a great deal more rapidly than someone who hasn't learned to skim.

The good news is that there's nothing mysterious about skimming. It's a simple technique, easy to master and easy to use. Moreover, skimming rates climb with only a little bit of practice. Skimming isn't meant for serious reading, of course. But for people who want a little bit of information in a hurry, it's a valuable technique.

6. **Concentrating.** *Force yourself to pay close attention to what you are reading.* Most reading errors come from a lack of concentration. The obvious remedy, then, is to figure out ways to help you stay focused on the material. Here's an example of a quick lesson in concentration: Suppose that you're in the middle of a gripping adventure novel. On page 164, the author digresses from the story and describes in great detail how Ace Harris, the hero, lands his Piper Cub in a storm. By the time you've read three sentences you are lost. So you skim the rest of the page and resume reading on page 165. A week later you happen to be a passenger in a private Piper Cub when the pilot suffers a coronary attack. Your life is at stake. You turn to page 164 of your novel, but this time you don't get lost after three sentences. You follow Ace Harris step by step through the landing process, and you bring the aircraft safely down to earth. Bravo!

What made the difference! Obviously, you focused on the passage this time because your life literally depended on it. The example is extreme, but the message is clear: force yourself to concentrate on what you read. How you build the power of concentration is up to you, but the most obvious way to start is to read in a quiet place when your mind is fresh and the light is good. It's better to sit up straight than to slouch or lie down, and far better to be a little ill<sup>s</sup> ease than too comfortable. Using trial, and error, you'll find what works best for you, and when you sit down to take the ACT, you'll know how to focus intently on any reading passage presented to you.

7. Keeping a **reading record**. *Do' more than just read and forget.* To give reading a meaningful place in your life, you should probably do more than just pick books off the shelf at random, read them, and put them back. Start compiling a lifetime reading list by recording the names and authors of the books you read. A personal comment or a one-line summary next to each entry will refresh your memory of the book in future years. After spending hours in a book's company, give yourself a record of the experience.

For still richer personal remembrances, some people keep reading journals, a book of blank pages that they fill up with thoughts and ideas inspired by their reading. A reading journal is ordinarily a place to record and reflect on the experience of journeying through a book. Hence, the *word—journal*. Books often ignite imagination; provoke thought, and kindle memories.

Reading can be more of a pleasure, too, when you share your books with others. Some people derive great joy from talking about their reading. The give-and-take of ideas stimulates them. They learn not just about the books they've read but about themselves, too. When you and a friend have read the same book, you suddenly have more in common. You've shared the kind of experience that strengthens friendships. In short, reading expands you and your world as almost no other activity can.

8. **Selecting your reading.** *Read books of quality that you enjoy;* this is by far the best preparation for the ACT Reading Test. Cramming is no substitute for a years-long habit of good reading.

Following is a list of suggested books for high school students preparing to take the ACT. Titles on the list have been chosen for their quality and for their consistent ability to please readers. The majority of the listed books come from the fiction shelf, mainly because high school students generally prefer reading fiction. Yet, well-rounded readers need nonfiction, too—biography, accounts of true experience, history, works about culture, and books that explore important issues of our day.

## SUGGESTED BOOK LIST

### Prose Fiction

James Agee, *A Death in the Family*  
Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio*  
Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*  
Richard Bach, *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*  
Judy Blume, *Summer Sisters*  
Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre*  
Emily Bronte, *Wuthering Heights*  
Pearl Buck, *The Good Earth*  
Willa Cather, *My Antonia*  
Sandra Cisneros, *House on Mango Street*  
Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness; Lord Jim*  
Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*  
Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield; A Tale of Two Cities; Great Expectations*  
Theodore Dreiser, *An American Tragedy; Sister Carrie*  
Louise Ehrlich, *Love Medicine*  
George Eliot, *Silas Marner*  
Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*  
F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*  
Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary*  
Arthur Golden, *Memoirs of a Geisha*  
William Golding, *Lord of the Flies*  
David Guterson, *Snow Falling on Cedars*  
Thomas Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge; Return of the Native; Tess of the d'Urbervilles*  
Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter; House of the Seven Gables*  
Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*  
Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea; A Farewell to Arms; For Whom the Bell Tolls*  
Herman Hesse, *Siddhartha; Demian*  
Khaled Hossein, *Kite Runner*  
Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*  
Henry James, *Turn of the Screw; Daisy Miller*  
Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*  
Sue Monk Kidd, *Secret Life of Bees*  
Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal Dreams, The Poisonwood Bible*  
John Knowles, *A Separate Peace*  
Jhumpa Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies*  
D. H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*  
Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*  
Sinclair Lewis, *Main Street; Babbitt*  
Richard Llewellyn, *How Green Was My Valley*  
Yan Martel, *The Life of Pi*  
W. Somerset Maugham, *Of Human Bondage*  
Alice McDermott, *Charming Billy*  
Herman Melville, *Moby Dick; Billy Budd*  
Toni Morrison, *Beloved*  
George Orwell, *1984*  
Alan Paton, *Cry, the Beloved Country*  
Ann Packer, *The Dive from Clausen's Pier*  
Ayn Rand, *The Fountainhead*  
O. E. Rolvaag, *Giants in the Earth*  
Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things*  
J. D. Salinger, *A Catcher in the Rye*  
Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*  
John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath; East of Eden*  
Bram Stoker, *Dracula*  
William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*  
Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina; War and Peace*

Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn*  
Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., *Slaughterhouse Five*  
Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*  
Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men*  
Joseph Weisberg, *10th Grade*  
Edith Wharton, *Ethan Frome; The Age of Innocence*  
Richard Wright, *Native Son; Black Boy*

### Humanities

Sally Barnes, *Terpsichore in Sneakers*  
Tracy Chevalier, *Girl with a Pearl Earring*  
Aaron Copland, *What to Listen for in Music*  
Marcia Davenport, *Mozart*  
H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*  
Stephen Greenblatt, *Will in the World*  
Billie Holiday, *Lady Sings the Blues*  
Debra Jowitt, *Jerome Robbins*  
Peter Kurth, *Isadora: A Sensational Life*  
Sidney Lumet, *Making Movies*  
Norman Mailer, *Picasso*  
Mary McCarthy, *The Stones of Florence*  
John McPhee, *The Ransom of Russian Art*  
Richard and Sally Price, *Enigma Variations*  
Frank Rich, *Ghostlight*  
Gladys Schmidt, *Rembrandt*  
Marcia B. Siegal, *The Shapes of Change*  
Piero Ventura, *Great Painters*  
Susan Vreeland, *Girl in Hyacinth Blue*  
Simon Winchester, *The Professor and the Madman*

### Social Studies

Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House*  
Mitch Albom, *Tuesdays with Morrie*  
Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday; Since Yesterday*  
Stephen Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage*  
Judy Blunt, *Breaking Clean*  
Bruno Bettelheim, *The Children of the Dream*  
Daniel Boorstin, *The Americans*  
Coraghessan Boyle, *The Tortilla Curtain*  
Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*  
Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation*  
Dee Brown, *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*  
Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War*  
Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*  
Catherine Clinton, *Harriet Tubman*  
Alistair Cooke, *Alistair Cooke's America*  
Richard D'Ambrosio, *No Language but a Cry*  
Hannah Cratts, *The Bondwoman's Narrative*  
Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dime*  
Joseph Ellis, *His Excellency: George Washington*  
Jen Gish, *Mona*  
Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence*  
Arthur Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*  
John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage*  
Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*  
Anthony Lewis, *Gideon's Trumpet*  
Oscar Lewis, *La Vida; A Death in the Sanchez Family*  
James McBride, *Color of Water*  
Frank McCourt, *Angela's Ashes, 'Ps*  
David McCullough, *1776*  
Milton Meltzer, *Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?*  
Jessica Mitford, *Kind and Unusual Punishment*  
Judith Moore, *Never Eat Your Heart Out*

Sandra Day O'Connor, *Lazy B: Growing Up on a Cattle Ranch in the American Southwest*  
Steven Phillips, *No Heroes, No Villains*  
Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation*  
Richard Rodriguez, *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*  
Christine Spaks, *The Elephant Man*  
Studs Terkel, *Hard Times; Working*  
Pin Thomas, *Down These Mean Streets*  
Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror*  
Barbara Wertheimer, *We Were There*

### **Natural Science**

Joy Adamson, *Born Free*  
Henry Beston, *The Outermost House*  
Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*  
Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*  
Gerald Durrell, *The Amateur Naturalist*  
Loren Eiseley, *The Immense Journey*  
Colin Fletcher, *The Man Who Walked Through Time*  
Jill Fredston, *Rowing to Latitudes*  
Martin Gardner, *The Relativity Explosion*  
Atul Gawande, *Complications: A Surgeon's Notes on an Imperfect Science*  
Thomas Goldstein, *Dawn of Modern Science*  
Jane Goodall, *In the Shadow of Man*  
Stephen Jay Gould, *Ever Since Darwin*  
Gail K. Haines, *Test-Tube Mysteries*  
James Herriot, *All Creatures Great and Small*  
Homer H. Hickam, *October Sky*  
Bert Holldobler, et al., *Journey to the Ants*  
Margaret O. and Lawrence E. Hyde, *Cloning and the New Genetics*  
Robert Jastrow, *Until the Sun Dies*  
Sebastian Junger, *The Perfect Storm*  
Gary Kinder, *Ship of Gold in the Deep Blue Sea*  
Jon Krakauer, *Into Thin Air*  
Mark Kurtansky, *Salt: A World History*  
Erik Larson, *Isaac's Storm*  
Aldo Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*  
Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression*  
Peter Matthiessen, *The Birds of Heaven: Travels with Cranes*  
John McPhee, *The Curve of Blinding Energy; In Suspect Terrain*  
Jonathan Miller, *The Body in Question*  
Raymond A. Moody, *Life after Life*  
Farley Mowat, *Never Cry Wolf*  
Jennifer Niven, *Ada Blackjack*  
Christopher Reeve, *Still Me*  
David Ritchie, *The Ring of Fire*  
Oliver Sachs, *Dr. Tungsten*  
Carl Sagan, *Cosmos; The Dragons of Eden*  
Mary Lee Settle, *Water World*  
Ken Silverstein, *The Radioactive Boy Scout*  
Anne Simon, *The Thin Edge*  
Dava Sobel, *Longitude; Galileo's Daughter*  
John and Mildred Teal, *Life and Death of a Salt Marsh*  
James Watson and Francis Crick, *The Double Helix*  
Simon Winchester, *Krakatoa*

## TACTICS

You've probably observed that people cope with tests in a variety of ways. Considering the number of different test-taking styles, it would take a very long list to describe every tactic that has helped other students taking the ACT Reading Test. What works for them may not work for you and vice versa. Nevertheless, some tactics help everyone, regardless of ability or test-taking style. Many of the following tactics can improve your score. Give them an honest chance 'to work for you.

1. **Pace yourself.** You have less than nine minutes per passage. If you spend five minutes reading a passage, you still have four minutes left to answer ten questions, or almost 25 seconds per question. These numbers may vary, depending on the level of difficulty of the passage or the questions.
2. **Understand the test directions.** Know what the directions say before you walk into the exam room. The directions will be similar to the following:  
 This test consists of four passages, each followed by ten multiple-choice questions. Read each passage and then pick the best answer for each question. Fill in the spaces on your answer sheet that correspond to your choices. Refer to the passage as often as you wish while answering the questions.
3. **Decide on a reading technique.** On the ACT, different approaches to a reading passage carry different gains and losses.

OPTION	TECHNIQUE	GAINS/LOSSES
A	<i>Read the passage carefully from start to finish.</i> Don't try to remember every detail. As you read, ask yourself, "What is this passage really about?"  You can usually get the general idea in two or three lines. When finished reading, state the author's main point. Even an incorrect statement gives you an idea to focus on as you work on the questions.	Takes longer at the start, but allows you to make up the time later.
B	<i>Skim the passage for its general idea.</i> Read faster than you normally would to figure out the type of passage it is: fiction, humanities, social science, or natural science. At the same time, try to sense what the author is saying. Read the passage just intently enough to get an impression of its content. Don't expect to keep details in-mind. Refer to the passage as you answer the questions.	Saves time and keeps your mind free of needless details.
C	<i>Skim the passage to get its general meaning; then go back and read it more thoroughly.</i> Two readings, one fast and one slow, enable you to grasp passage better than if you read it only once. During your second reading, confirm that your 'impression was accurate. Proceed to the questions.	Requires the most time but offers you the firmest grip on the passage.
D	Read the questions first; then read the passage.	Alerts you to the content of the passage. (For details, see Tactic 7.)

4. **Concentrate on paragraph openings and closings.** Since ACT passages are generally written in standard English prose, most of them are constructed according to a common pattern—that is, they consist of two or more paragraphs. Except for paragraphs in fictional passages, most have a topic sentence supported by specific detail. More often than not, the topic sentence is located near the beginning of the paragraph. Sometimes, too, the final sentence of the paragraph suggests, perhaps with a mere phrase or two, the main point of the paragraph.

Knowing how passages are constructed can speed up your reading and also guide your search for answers to the questions. When reading quickly for the gist of a passage, for instance, focus on paragraph openings and closings. Skip the material in between until you need the details to answer certain questions.

**5. Use paragraphs as clues to help you understand the passage.** Writers generally take pains to organize their material. They decide what goes first, second, third. Usually, the arrangement follows a logical order, although sometimes material is arranged to build suspense or to surprise the reader. Most often, though, paragraphs are used to build the main idea of a passage. Each paragraph in some way reinforces the author's point.

Sometimes, authors state their main point early in the passage. They use the remaining paragraphs to support what they said at the beginning. At other times, authors reverse the process, writing several paragraphs that lead inevitably to the main idea. Occasionally, a main idea shows up somewhere in the middle of a passage, and, at other times, it doesn't appear at all. Rather, it's implied by the contents of the whole passage. It's so apparent that to state it outright is unnecessary.

There's no need on the ACT to figure out the main point of each paragraph. The point of one paragraph in a difficult passage, though, may provide a clue to the meaning of the whole passage. Understanding the second paragraph, for example, may clarify the point of the first one, and the two together may reveal the intent of the entire passage.

**6. Decide whether to use an underlining technique.**

Option A. Underline key ideas and phrases. Since you have a pencil in your hand during the ACT, use it to highlight the important points of a reading passage. When you come to an idea that sounds important, quickly draw a line under it or put a checkmark next to it in the margin. Underlining may be better, because you'll be rereading the words as your pencil glides along. On the other hand, underlining is time-consuming. Whatever you do, though, use your pencil sparingly or you may end up with most of the passage underlined or checked.

Option B. Don't underline anything. The rationale here is that, without having read the passage at least once, you can't know what's important. Furthermore, underlining takes time and you may be wasting seconds drawing lines under material that won't help you answer the questions. The time you spend underlining might better be spent rereading the passage or studying the questions. Anyway, a 750-word passage won't contain so much material that you can't remember most of it when you start to look for answers to the questions.

Option C. Underline answers only. After you have read the questions and returned to the passage, use your pencil to identify tentative answers to the questions. Underline only a word or two, no more than is necessary to attract your attention when you look back to the passage for answers. Consider using checks or other marks; they take less time than underlining but serve the same purpose.

**7. Decide when to read the questions.**

Option A. Read the questions before you read the passage. Because it's almost impossible to remember ten, or even five or six, questions about material you haven't read, just review the questions in order to become acquainted with the kinds of information you are expected to draw out of the passage. Identify the questions, as "MI" (main idea), "SD" (specific detail), "Interp" (interpretation of phrase or idea), and so on. (You can devise your own system.) When you know the questions beforehand, you can read a passage more purposefully. Instead of reading for a general impression, you can look for the main idea of the passage, seek out specific details, and locate the meaning of a phrase or idea. Exercising this option requires you to become familiar with the varieties of questions typically asked on the ACT, an effort that could save you precious time during the test itself.

Option B. Read the questions after you read the passage. With the passage fresh in your mind, you can probably answer two or three questions immediately. On other questions, you can eliminate one or two obviously wrong choices. Just "x" them and forget them. With a few questions and choices eliminated, direct your second reading of the passage to the remaining questions. You'll read still more purposefully if you note the question types beforehand, as suggested by Option A.

Option C. Read the questions one by one, not as a group. After reading the passage, start with the first question and answer it by referring to the passage. Then go on to the next question. This approach is slow but thorough. It's comfortable, too, since you needn't keep large amounts of information in mind all at once, just a question at a time. Don't be a slave to the order of the questions. If you can't answer a question, skip it for the time being and go on to the next one. Go back later if you have time. Whatever you do, don't even think of answering a question before reading the passage from start to finish. Misguided students first read a question, then start to read the passage in search of an answer. Before they know it, time runs out, and they're far from finishing.



**8. Suspend your prior knowledge.** Occasionally, a reading passage may deal with a subject you know about. Because all the questions are derived from the passage in front of you, all your answers should be, too. Cast aside your prior knowledge and read both passage and questions with an open mind.

**9. Identify each question by type (referring or reasoning).** With experience you can learn to spot question types quickly. Without getting bogged down in making small distinctions, label each question by its type. Usually the wording of a question will tell you whether you can find the answer by *referring* directly to the passage or by using your *reasoning* powers. Questions that ask what a passage *indicates*, as in "What does the second paragraph indicate about . . .?," are almost always referring questions. Other referring questions can often be recognized by their straightforward wording and by certain tag phrases such as

"according to the passage, . . ."

"the passage clearly indicates . . ."

"the passage says . . ."

The words used in reasoning questions vary according to the intent of the questions. Those that begin with something like "On the basis of information in the passage, which . . .?" are usually reasoning questions, which can also be identified by such tag phrases as •

"infer from the passage that . . ."

"the passage implies that . . ."

"the passage suggests that . . ."

"probably means that . . ."

"one can conclude that . . ."

"the main idea . . ."

"the main thought . . ."

"the primary purpose . . ."

With a little practice you can easily learn to identify referring and reasoning questions. Once you know how to distinguish between them, you can vary your approach to find the right answers. For example, when a question asks you to identify what the author of the passage *says*, you'll know instantly that you are dealing with a referring question and that you should search the passage for explicit material. In contrast, a question that asks about the main thought of a passage calls for a different approach, perhaps rereading the passage's opening and closing paragraphs and inferring the author's purpose. -

Identifying your strengths and weaknesses will enable you to practice the skills needed to boost your score. If, for instance, you repeatedly stumble on questions that ask you to reason out the main idea of a passage, you may be reading the passages too slowly, paying too much attention to details to recognize the main flow of ideas. The problem can be remedied by consciously pressing yourself to read faster.

On the actual test, answer first the types of questions you rarely get wrong on ACT practice exercises, perhaps the main idea questions or those that ask about specific details. Then devote the bulk of your time to the types that have *given* you more trouble. The order in which you answer the questions is completely up to you. You alone know which question types you customarily handle with ease and which types give you trouble.

**10. Answer general questions before detail questions.** General questions usually ask you to identify the author's point of view or the main idea of the passage. A reader with a good understanding of the whole passage can often answer general questions without rereading a word. That's not always so with detail questions. When you're asked for a specific fact or for an interpretation of a word or phrase, you may have to return to a particular place in the passage to find the answer. That takes time, and, since speed is important on the ACT, it makes sense to get the easier questions out of the way before tackling the more time-consuming ones.

Some people claim that broad questions are harder than questions about details because you need to understand the whole passage to answer them. Don't believe it. They're neither harder nor easier. As with so much in life, it all depends. . . In any case, the first five questions about a reading passage are usually detail questions. The general questions come later,

**11. Do the easy passages first.** Although the passages on the ACT are supposed to be arranged according to difficulty, with the easiest one first, don't count on it. After all, if you've always experienced success with natural science passages, and you have trouble with fiction, go first to the natural science passage, even if it's last on the test. In short, lead with your strength, whatever it may be. If you're equally good in everything, then stick with the order of the test.

**12. Stay alert for "switchbacks."** These are the words and phrases frequently used to alert you to shifts in thought. The most common switchback word is *but*. You may know *but as a* harmless conjunction, but it may turn into a trap for an Unwary reader. (Notice how the second *but* in the preceding sentence is meant to shift your concept of the word—i.e., think of *but* not merely as a harmless conjunction, *but* think of it also as a trap!) If you ignore *but*, you miss half the point. Here's another example:

Candidates for public office don't need to be wealthy, *but* money helps.

Other switchback words and phrases that function like *but* include *although* ("Although candidates for public office don't need to be wealthy, money helps"), *however*, *nevertheless*, *on the other hand*, *even though*, *while*, *in spite of*, *despite*, *regardless of*.

In your normal reading, you may hardly notice switchback words. On the ACT, however, pay attention to them. Many questions are asked about sentences that contain switchbacks. The reason: a test must contain questions, that trap careless readers. Therefore, don't rush past the switchbacks in your hurry to read the passages and find answers. In fact, you can improve your vigilance by scanning a few of the practice passage's in this book with the sole purpose of finding switchbacks. Circle them. In no time you'll start to pick them up almost automatically.

### Summary of Test-Taking Tactics

1. Pace yourself.
2. Understand the test directions.
3. Decide on a reading technique.  
Option A: Read the passage carefully from start to finish.  
Option B: Skim the passage for its general idea.  
Option C: Skim the passage to get its general meaning; then go back and read it more thoroughly:
4. Concentrate on paragraph openings and closings.
5. Use paragraphs *as* clues to help you understand the passage.
6. Decide whether to use an underlining technique..  
Option A: Underline key ideas and phrases.  
Option B: Don't underline anything.  
Option C: Underline answers only.
7. Decide when to read the questions:  
Option A: Read the questions before you read the passage.  
Option B: Read the questions after you read the passage.  
Option C: Read the questions one by one, not as a group.
8. Suspend your prior knowledge.
9. Identify each question by type.
10. Answer general questions before detail questions.
11. Do the easy passages first.
12. Stay alert for "switchbacks."  
  
... and a thirteenth for good measure: *Practice, practice, practice!* Then decide: Which of these twelve tactics help you to do your best?