ACT Reading: The Passage Types

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Overview of Passage Types

(Note: the passages always appear in the following order on the reading section):

1. **Prose:**
   - Consists of excerpts from novels or short stories.
   - Passages usually have a plot (a sequence of actions) and characters
   - Questions usually ask about the plot of the passage, character development, tone, style, narrator bias, and the relationships between characters.

2. **Social Science**
   - Informative writing that may focus on a variety of subjects, including anthropology, biography, business, education, geography, history, political science, and psychology.
   - Passages focus on analysis.
   - Questions usually ask about the chronology of events, cause-effect relationships, the author’s opinion, and contrasts between different views or concepts mentioned.

3. **Humanities**
   - Excerpts from memoirs, personal essays, and non-fiction prose in the areas of art, music, philosophy, television, and theater.
   - Passages are expository (inform or explain) or descriptive and often focused on appreciation of the arts.
   - Questions usually ask about the chronology of events, cause-effect relationships, the author’s opinion, and contrasts between different views or concepts mentioned.

4. **Natural Science**
   - These passages present scientific arguments or experiments and explain the reasoning behind them and their significance.
Questions usually ask about cause-effect relationships, comparisons, and conflict between scientists or theories.

How to read the passages: General strategies

- Hopefully, if you read the reading strategies, you’ll remember that it’s important not to read the passage in order. You’ll also remember why it’s important to read the passage before answering the questions.

- Mark up your passage! In a few minutes, we’ll talk about what exactly it is you should be marking. Marking up your booklet is crucial! When you search for a few key items in each paragraph, you prompt yourself to evaluate what is most important and avoid becoming bogged down in all the details. This also gives you a kind of roadmap so you can easily find the answers to questions later.

- Don’t worry about details! Many students mistakenly believe that to do well on an ACT passage, they must read very carefully and try to absorb as much information as they can to answer the questions. Nope! While there are some questions about details, those questions usually provide line references so you’ll know exactly where to look in the passage.

- The questions on the ACT encourage reading to see the “big picture,” to notice major ideas and determine author intent. Macro-reading requires readers to follow a series of aggressive strategies to get what they need within a short period of time.

This brings us to the two sweep strategy for tackling ACT reading passages.

How to read the passages: The killer two-sweep technique

Sweep 1 and Sweep 2

- 1st sweep – intelligently “size up” the passage, in about 20 to 30 seconds.
- 2nd sweep – read at a somewhat faster pace than normal, to obtain a general understanding of the passage.

Let’s talk about both parts of this strategy a little bit more.

The first sweep:

- Determine which passage you are looking at--prose literature, social science, humanities, or natural science. Remember that they will always be in that order.
• Note the source of the passage. Who is the author and from what larger text was this passage excerpted? Do you know anything about these?
• Adjust strategy according to type of passage:

  **Prose**-- quickly scan to locate names of characters and a sense of where and when this story is taking place

  **Social science and humanities passages**-- quickly scan for key words that signal the topic and discipline being discussed. For example, a social science segment may feature a variety of topics within the disciplines of history, political science, economics, psychology, or sociology. Humanities pieces could examine a topic about art, music, theater, architecture, literature, or other aspects of culture.

  **Natural science passage**-- notice whether the topic falls within biological or physical science. Then scan for clues of a cause-effect relationship, of why or how something happens.

• Quickly skim the opening paragraph, and the first sentences of the subsequent paragraphs, and the concluding paragraph. What does this passage seem to be about? Try to establish a general sense of the focus of this passage.

Hopefully, after doing just a 20-30 second sweep, you’ll be feeling a lot more comfortable with the topic and structure of the passage. Now, instead of blindly throwing yourself into a long, tedious passage, you already feel like you know something about it. Doing this 30-second sweep for the general gist of the passage will also help you if you are running out of time. If you end up pressed for time, you can usually answer 5 of the 10 questions correctly, even without doing the second sweep!

**The second sweep:**

• Read the passage from start to finish, setting a pace that is a little faster than normal reading.
• Concentrate on the central message. Why is the author telling you this? What seems most important to this author? Does the author express a viewpoint or attitude related to this topic?
• Draw inferences as you read. On the ACT, there are a lot of questions that require you to identify messages that are implied—not stated explicitly. Try to get into the habit of generating “I wonder” statements as you read. “I wonder why the author feels . . .” “I wonder if this is about . . .” “I wonder whether this means . . .” This strategy can help you get used to making predictions, recognizing hunches, and drawing conclusions.
• Mark up your passage!! Here’s what to look for:

**Prose passage**—mark up:

1) Emotional content-- (verbs like “sighed,” “winced,” or “smirked,” for example, all signal emotional qualities and should be marked).
2) Any insight into the relationship between characters. Do the characters seem to get along? Are there any implied tensions or disagreements? Is a “history” between these characters suggested?
3) Does the passage have a tone or mood, such as exhilaration, ominousness, resentment, or anger?

**The other three passages**—mark up:

1) Cause/effect dynamics-- how or why does something happen? Do certain results appear from certain conditions?
2) Author’s opinion/overall purpose: why is the author telling me these things? What point is the author making about this topic? Is the author supportive/critical/neutral?
3) Examples—Why are they there? How do they bolster the author’s argument?
4) Comparisons/contrasts

The ACT folks **always** ask the same kinds of questions about the same parts of passages. Marking up this information will make it easy for you to easily answer the questions on test day.

How can marking up this information help you on the questions? Good question! For further ACT reading prep, please make sure to read our overview and strategies for the ACT question types. You’ll see why marking up this particular information is so important.