

ACT Reading

Types of Passages on ACT Reading

There are four sections within Reading with passages from the **humanities, natural sciences, social studies, and literary fiction**. Usually these sections each have one long passage, but occasionally you might also encounter two shorter passages. All of the passages are prose, so you don't have to worry about interpreting poetry or anything too experimental or subjective.

Passages in these fields might draw from these subtopics:

- **Humanities:** architecture, art, dance, ethics, film, language, literary criticism, music, philosophy, radio, television, and theater.
- **Social studies:** anthropology, archaeology, biography, business, economics, education, geography, history, political science, psychology, and sociology.
- **Natural sciences:** anatomy, astronomy, biology, botany, chemistry, ecology, geology, medicine, meteorology, microbiology, natural history, physiology, physics, technology, and zoology.
- **Literary fiction:** short stories, novels, memoirs, and personal essays.

The passage-based questions that follow each reading are meant to test certain **skills of analysis and reading comprehension**.

Skills Tested On the ACT Reading

According to the ACT, you're expected to use referring and reasoning skills to

- determine **main ideas**
- locate and interpret **significant details** (sometimes the question will refer you to a specific line, but other times you'll have to track down the detail yourself)
- understand **sequences** of events
- make **comparisons** (you'll especially see these questions if you have two short passages instead of one longer passage)
- comprehend **cause-effect relationships**
- determine the **meaning of words, phrases, and statements in context** (these are usually straightforward, but you should understand how they function in context)
- draw **generalizations**
- analyze the **author's or narrator's voice and method**

In order to test these skills, the ACT Reading will ask you **6 main types of questions**. (I know we're going through background, but stay with me - this is important to understand why my reading strategy works. We'll talk about the actual reading strategy very soon).

Types of ACT Reading Questions

The Reading section asks you **40 questions in 35 minutes**. These questions might test your understanding of what was directly stated in the passage or what various lines implied. For examples of each question type from official ACT questions, check out this detailed breakdown of the ACT Reading section. To give a quick review, these are the **6 main types of Reading questions you'll encounter**:

1. **Main idea** - the main point or theme of the passage.
2. **Detail** - usually refers directly to a line in the text and asks what it means or how it functions.
3. **Vocabulary** - vocabulary words are usually straightforward, but they might be used in an unusual way in context.
4. **Development** - how are ideas arranged within the passage?
5. **Implied ideas** - these are inference questions. While this might seem subjective, there will only be one unambiguously correct answer.
6. **Voice** - what is the author or narrator's tone, style, attitude, or perspective?

You can see how these types of questions link directly to the skills tested. By asking what the author's tone is, for example, a question tests your ability to analyze an author's voice or method. In addition to studying literary terms, you should **practice locating evidence within text that directly supports your answer.**

All of this might sound like a tall order in only 35 minutes! The biggest challenge lots of students have on the Reading section is simply getting through all the passages and questions in time. So **how can you read the passages for understanding without wasting time** that you could be using to answer questions?

How to Read the Passages

Prepping for the ACT is incredibly helpful for many reasons. One is that it allows you to **try out a few different strategies and figure out which one works best for you.** I'll present a few options for reading the passages that work well for most students. Then you can determine which option you prefer. Let's take a look at how to read the passages, **step by step.**

Step 1

All students should quickly **read the introductory line or blurb at the beginning of the passage.** This introduction will tell you where the passage is from and who the author is. Right away you can gain a sense of the passage's context, which is helpful for understanding its main purpose.

In an excerpt taken from a textbook called *Introduction to Psychology*, for example, **you can infer that the writing will most likely be informational, academic, objective, and explanatory.** Be cautious about making assumptions before you even start reading - instead, use the blurb to inform you, while remaining open-minded about the passage's content and meaning.

After this first step, you might jump right into reading the passage. Other students choose to look over the questions first before reading. Let's consider both of these options as part of Step 2.

Step 2

Students differ in what they feel is their best reading strategy. I'll present the options in terms of what I think works best for the largest number of people. In my eyes, Option C, while preferred by some, can be a time waster that's not as effective as the first two methods.

Option A: Read the Questions First, then Skim the Passage Second

With this option, you start by **reading over the questions before reading the passage**. This way you'll have a sense of what content you're looking for, and you can read with a discerning eye. If questions refer to any specific lines within the passage, then **make a mark on the passage next to that line so you'll know to pay attention to it when you read**.

As for the main point or general purpose questions, **circle those and leave them for last**, after you've had time to read the passage, process it, and pick it apart with some other, more detail-oriented questions first.

In this example, I circled questions 31, 33, and 39, because they ask about main ideas and main purposes. Question 33 is just asking about the **purpose of a paragraph**, so I made a mark by Paragraph 4 and noted "main purpose." I underlined and marked specific line references, as well as **the important points of each question**. This helps indicate that you should be on the lookout while skimming for information about "female eels' pupils" and "larvae found by Schmidt."

Passage IV

NATURAL SCIENCE: This passage is adapted from *Consider the Eel* by Richard Schwed (©2002 by Richard Schwed).

The known facts, as they are pretty much universally accepted among biologists and naturalists today, are that all the eels in all the rivers of eastern North America and the Caribbean countries, and all the eels in all the rivers of eastern and western Europe, are born in the same area of the Sargasso Sea, a huge area within the Atlantic Ocean, between Bermuda and the Azores, the surface of which is frequently covered with sargassum seaweed. In fact, the word "Sargasso" comes from the Portuguese *sargaso*, meaning seaweed. The sea is about 2,000 miles long and 1,000 miles wide, set off from the surrounding waters of the Atlantic by strong currents. It includes the area known in popular legend as the Bermuda Triangle.

Eels hatch in the Sargasso as larvae and are carried by the ocean currents to either Europe or the United States, a journey that can cover thousands of miles and take years. Where they end up depends on which of two similar species they belong to. Those that are *Anguilla anguilla* invariably wind up in European rivers, and those that enter North American rivers always belong to the species *Anguilla rostrata*. The first person to find eel larvae in the Sargasso Sea was Danish researcher Johannes Schmidt, who published his findings in 1924, after spending 18 years hauling nets in search of eels.

The larvae of both species are shaped like small oval leaves and are called leptocephali. Each leptocephalus begins to assume the form of a tiny eel, called an elver or glass eel, when it gets close to the coasts of either Europe or the Americas. By the time it reaches brackish water, where fresh and salt water mix, it is thin and transparent, hardly bigger than a hair, with a pair of eyes like black dots at one end.

From the estuaries and mouths of rivers, the tiny eels frequently continue upstream, particularly the females, who sometimes go great distances inland. American eels have been found as far up the Mississippi River system as the rivers of Iowa. They keep going upriver until something tells them they've reached home, and then they stop. Whatever it is that signals to eels that they are home is definitive—they settle in and live there for as long as 20 years, growing up to a yard long before beginning their journey back to the Sargasso Sea. Scientists determine an eel's age using a microscope to read the growth rings of its otolith—a small, hard calcium deposit at the base of its skull.

In preparation for the return journey to the Sargasso, sexually mature female eels feed voraciously and change color from the muddy-yellow/green of adult eels, often called yellow eels, to a darker green on top and snow-white on their bellies. At this stage, they are called silver eels. They swim downriver in the fall, on the first leg of their journey to the Sargasso, and when

they reach estuarine waters, they rest, completing their final transformation as silver eels. They will have eaten heavily and will be about 28 percent body fat. They will never eat again, and their digestive systems will atrophy. Their pupils will expand and turn blue. They will need a new kind of sight adapted to the depths of the sea, where there is little light. They will also have to go through a drastic adjustment, via osmosis, in their blood chemistry, to prepare for the tremendous change in water pressure, going from some 14 pounds of fresh-water pressure per inch of their bodies to over a ton of ocean pressure per inch. Once they are back in the Sargasso Sea, the females produce eggs for the males to fertilize, and then the adults die.

At least that is what today's marine biologists and naturalists tell us, although adult eels have never been seen swimming, reproducing, or dying in the Sargasso. In fact, live adult eels have never been seen there at all. The only two adult eels ever reported in the Sargasso Sea were dead, found in the stomachs of other fish. The eel's migration back to its birthplace and what it actually does when it gets there are assumed to take place far below the water's surface and, as of the year 2001, were still completely unobserved. However, the eel larvae—the leptocephali that Schmidt found in the Sargasso—were so small that it was certain they had been born recently, and nearby. Such small larvae have never been seen elsewhere, and while eels have never been observed reproducing in the Sargasso, they have never been seen doing so anywhere else either. Scientists believe the larvae hatch out of eggs at a depth of 100–300 yards and rise slowly toward the light at the sea's surface.

One of the main ideas established by the passage is that:

- A. researchers have nearly exhausted their resources after spending decades investigating the Sargasso Sea.
- B. significant gaps still remain in researchers' understanding of the life cycle of eels.
- C. eels live their entire lives in the Sargasso Sea, but no one has ever seen them there.
- D. female eels turn into silver eels toward the end of their lives.

Learning about which of the following had the largest impact on scientists' current understanding of where eels breed?

- F. The direction in which ocean currents carry eel larvae.
- G. The relationship of the yellow eel stage to the silver eel stage.
- H. Schmidt's discovery of eel larvae in the Sargasso Sea.
- J. The adult eels found in the stomachs of other fish.

33. The main purpose of the fourth paragraph (lines 34–47) is to describe the:

- A. eels' transition from freshwater to the ocean.
- B. method of determining the age of eels.
- C. complexity of the Mississippi River system.
- D. river stage of the eel life cycle.

34. The passage states that the Sargasso Sea is set off from the rest of the Atlantic Ocean by:

- F. the Azores.
- G. several Caribbean countries.
- H. powerful winds.
- J. strong currents.

35. The passage notes that the Sargasso Sea includes:

- A. the eastern North American shore.
- B. the Bermuda Triangle.
- C. certain coastal estuaries.
- D. the mouth of the Mississippi River.

36. As it is used in line 13, the word *popular* most nearly means:

- F. well liked.
- G. commonly known.
- H. scientifically accepted.
- J. most admired.

37. As it is used in line 45, the word *read* most nearly means to:

- A. learn from print.
- B. observe.
- C. think about.
- D. predict.

38. The passage and turn b

- F. must less l
- G. are a chem
- H. no lo source
- J. need fertil

39. The passage of osmosi

- A. shallo
- B. feedi
- C. immat
- D. silver

40. According

- the best Sargasso
- F. Size
- G. Shape
- H. Color
- J. Spec

Once you've marked the passage and questions, you can go ahead and **read through the passage quickly**. Don't do a close reading intent on understanding every line. Instead, skim the passage, paying particular attention to the **last line of the first paragraph (usually the thesis), the introductory sentences of paragraphs, and the conclusion**. It's also helpful to watch out for transition words that mark a continuation of or shift in ideas, like "furthermore" or "however."

In my opinion, this is the best strategy for reading the passages, since it eliminates the potential to waste time on unimportant parts of the passage. While you might enjoy curling up with a good book at home and getting lost in the story, the ACT Reading does not leave time for close, intensive reading. This approach helps you **pick out the important details and streamline your time management**. Let's take a look at the second option for Step 2, which a lot of students swear by, as well.

Option B: Skim the Passage First, then Read the Questions Second

Some students find it distracting to glance over the questions before reading. They prefer to **skim the passage first and then look at the questions**, once they have a sense of its content, structure, and purpose. In this approach, the same rules of skimming as described above still apply, and you can still mark up the passage once you start working to help yourself locate important details and ensure that you have evidence to back up your answers.

To figure out which approach you prefer, I recommend **trying both with timed practice tests**. After scoring your tests and reflecting on how well it worked for you, you can decide if you're more focused and relaxed reading the questions first or the passage first.

The third option for Step 2 is my least favorite, because I don't think it's a particularly efficient way to approach the passages.

Option C: Read the Passage Closely

In this third option, you might **do a close reading of the passage, rather than skimming it for important points**. Then you'd go on to read and answer the questions. I feel this option not only wastes time, but also does not reflect the purpose of the Reading section, which, whether you like it or not, **involves speed and efficiency**.

You only have about 52 seconds per question, less if you include the time you spent reading, so **most students are better off skimming** and then going back to look for concrete evidence once they start filling in answers. Now let's take a look at Step 3, which is a bit more straightforward.

Step 3

Simply put, this is where you start answering the questions. Even if you chose Option B in Step 2, it's **helpful to answer the detail and line specific questions first and leave the general purpose questions for the end**.

It's also helpful to **come up with your own answer to a question before looking at the four answer choices**. They might confuse you by all sounding plausible. If you have a sense of what the correct answer is right off the bat, then you can look for it in the answer choices.

If you're not sure about the answer after reading the answer choices, you should try to use process of elimination to locate the right answer. While the ACT might word questions like they're open to interpretation, they are not. **There is only ever one 100% correct answer choice**. If you find yourself overthinking or over-rationalizing an answer choice, it's probably not the correct one. Some wording that can make you start overthinking are questions like,

- The author **would most likely agree with...**

- In line 15, 'intense' **most nearly** means...

This sample ACT question, for example, tries to sound open to interpretation, but it's really only got one correct answer.

Which of the following **most nearly paraphrases** Helen Hunt Jackson's statement to Emily Dickinson that "it is wrong to the day you live in, that you will not sing aloud" (lines 35-36)?

- A. It is morally reprehensible of you not to let other poets read your work.
- B. It is unacceptable for you to continue writing; you should become a singer.
- C. It is stingy and wrong of you not to read out loud to those who like your work.
- D. It is unfair to this age that you do not share your poetry with the world.

The answer here is D, based on other information from the passage to which it refers, as well as the line itself: "it is wrong to the day you live in." The "day you live in" is reflected in "this age" in answer D. While F and H seem plausible, they don't incorporate this reference to the age, time, or era of the day.

In this case, the **process of elimination could help you narrow down your answer choices** until you hone in on the correct one, or, if need be, make your best guess. After reading and answering the questions, what's your final step in completing the Reading section of the ACT?

Step 4

Rather than going back and forth between your test booklet and bubble sheet, it can save time to **answer the questions in your test booklet and then transfer them to the bubble sheet**. I would recommend doing this in chunks after you complete the set of questions about each passage. Make sure to keep an eye on time, though - you wouldn't want to run out of time having answers in your test booklet that you haven't marked on the answer sheet yet.

If you're struggling with timing, you might consider **starting with the passages you feel most confident about**, whether it's natural sciences, social studies, humanities, or literary fiction, and answering those questions first. That way you can get through more questions faster.

However, **don't let a time saver become a time waster!** This strategy is only worth it if you can go straight to your preferred passage and get working, but not if you're spending time looking over the passages simply to arrange them in order from easiest to hardest.

With these four steps of approaching the Reading passages, you should be able to get more and more efficient at reading, locating evidence, and zero-ing in on correct answers. Read on for a few more tips for conquering the Reading section of the ACT.

Tips and Strategies for ACT Reading

Just as you're strategic about how to read the passages, you also want to **tackle the questions with a set of strategies**. These tips are ones that students have found to be the most helpful as they work their way through the ACT Reading section. First, and perhaps least obvious, your mindset, or how you think and feel about the Reading section, can actually have a big impact on your performance.

Cultivate a Positive Mindset

You know how if you're bored in a class, it's a struggle to pay attention to the lecture or plod your way through the work? Stress and anxiety can also put up obstacles to learning, actually **using up your mental energy so it's not available to comprehend the task at hand**. On the opposite side, if you're really intrigued by a lesson or activity, you feel engaged and like it flies by. You also actually **absorb the information or practice much more efficiently, because you're personally involved in it**. As an added bonus, you're also having fun.

It might seem like we can't control what we like and what we don't like, but this is actually not entirely true. **We have a good deal of [control over shaping our thoughts, feelings, and mindset](#)**, which is a skill we can develop through practice, like any other. So how does this idea about our own psychology relate to the Reading section of the ACT?

If you can approach the passages with **a mindset of open and genuine interest in what information they have to teach you**, then you'll be able to both read more efficiently, process faster, and retain more information. Whether it's an excerpt from a psychology book, a science article, or a Charlotte Bronte book, it can teach you some lesson from social studies, natural sciences, humanities, or literary fiction. So approach the passages with a proverbial smile on your face, and **you'll probably find that the more you prep, the more interested in (and skilled at understanding) the passages you'll become**.

Apart from taking control of your attitude and mindset, let's discuss a few more technical strategies for answering the Reading questions. The following section expands on the importance of using process of elimination to hone in on the right answer choice.

Use Process of Elimination

In an ideal situation, you might read the question, know exactly what the answer is, and have it jump out at you from the answer choices. However, this usually isn't the case, especially in inference questions where the answer choices might be harder to predict. **Setting out to [eliminate wrong answers](#) can help you locate the correct one**.

As mentioned earlier, there will only ever be one 100%, unambiguously correct answer choice. The others are designed to sound plausible, but they will all have some error of logic or factual inaccuracy. Some common errors in answer choices include being **far too specific, much too broad, presenting a relationship in reversed order, or just presenting a totally unrelated concept**. Often, extreme concepts or words like "always" or "never" in an answer choice also don't signal that it's the correct answer.

Let's look again at the Emily Dickinson sample question I posted above.

Which of the following **most nearly paraphrases** Helen Hunt Jackson's statement to Emily Dickinson that "it is wrong to the day you live in, that you will not sing aloud" (lines 35-36)?

- A. It is morally reprehensible of you not to let other poets read your work.
- B. It is unacceptable for you to continue writing; you should become a singer.
- C. It is stingy and wrong of you not to read out loud to those who like your work.
- D. It is unfair to this age that you do not share your poetry with the world.

As you saw, the correct answer is D. But why are A, B, and C wrong? Answer choice A might fall into the **too specific category**, as Helen Hunt Jackson does not refer specifically to "other poets." It also represents an extreme in a way with its term, "morally reprehensible." This expresses an extreme sentiment that is not present in the original quote.

Answer B, if you read the rest of the passage and have some sense of who Emily Dickinson was - an introverted, even reclusive poet - presents an **unrelated concept**. Just as you will be determining words in context, here you should discern that "sing aloud" is a poetic turn of phrase, not to be interpreted literally.

Finally, Answer C, like Answer A, is **too extreme**. It might seem like the most likely answer choice after D, as the original quote does use the word "wrong." However, Jackson says nothing about Dickinson's stinginess, and the rest of the passage shows that Answer C is **too specific**. Jackson is not referring only to "those who like your work," but to the entire "day," or time period, in which they live.

Process of elimination becomes especially important when you've wavering between answer choices and have to root out the right one - a common scenario on the ACT Reading. Next time you try some sample questions or a practice test, don't just look for the right answer. **Ask yourself why the other answer choices are wrong.**

This approach will eventually become second nature, and you'll have a deeper understanding of how ACT Reading questions are commonly structured. Plus you'll have a **solid defense against tricky answer choices designed to distract you**. A second strategy that you should use specifically when answering questions is locating specific evidence within the text to support your answers.

Locate Specific Evidence

Just as you want to eliminate wrong answer choices, you also want to **back up your answers with specific evidence from the passage**. This is likely in line with your English teachers' mantra of, "Use supporting evidence!" Don't just rely on intuition. Pretend that someone will put you on trial about your answer choice, and you'll have to defend it and prove it to the jury with **the most foolproof evidence you've got**.

With detail and line-specific questions, this is usually a pretty easy task. The questions themselves will usually point you back to a specific word or line. Even with inference questions, though, you can use this same approach. They are **never actually that subjective**. If they were, then the [ACT scorers](#) would have a lot of [controversy](#) on their hands. There can only be one correct answer, and this is taken directly from the passage itself.

Along with locating evidence as you study, you should also **locate and analyze key literary terms**.

Study and Practice Key Literary Terms

In addition to practicing your reading comprehension, you also want to make sure you **understand and are able to determine key literary terms like theme, style, tone, imagery, symbolism, simile, metaphor, irony, foreshadowing, and hyperbole**, to name a few. Obviously, you can't answer a question about an author's tone if you're not really sure what that is.

However, studying definitions will only take you so far. A passage is not going to directly state that an author's tone is playful, condemning, or encouraging. Through practice questions, **make sure you can interpret** tone, foreshadowing, or the way a phrase like "sing aloud" is symbolic for sharing your poetry with the world. Finally, all of these tips are only helpful if you have the time and motivation to study and prep.

Be a Self-Studier

Practice, practice, and practice some more. Through studying, you can figure out your reading strengths and weaknesses, what you need to learn, and what's your best approach for reading the passages. You can **improve at managing your time and figuring out how to pace yourself** between the four passages.

Especially if English is your strong subject or you're intending to study the humanities or social sciences in college, you want to demonstrate your skills with a strong score in this section. Even if you're not a humanities person, you want to demonstrate to colleges that **you have college-level reading skills and will be able to succeed academically once you get to campus.**

With focused and customized test prep, you can ensure that you have the skills you'll need and are **familiar with exactly what you're going to encounter on the Reading section.**

Source: <http://blog.prepscholar.com/the-best-way-to-read-the-act-reading-passage>

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