

Part 6 ACT Reading Test

Designed to measure your skill in reading, the ACT Reading Test asks you to answer 40 questions—10 questions about each of four passages—in 35 minutes. The passages in the Reading Test come from published materials, such as books and magazines, that are like those a first-year college student can expect to read for a class.

Content of the ACT Reading Test

The ACT Reading Test contains one passage from each of the following four categories:

- **Prose Fiction** (passages from short stories or novels)
- **Humanities** (architecture, art, dance, ethics, film, language, literary criticism, memoir, music, personal essays, philosophy, radio, television, theater)
- **Social Studies** (anthropology, archaeology, biography, business, economics, education, geography, history, political science, psychology, sociology)
- **Natural Sciences** (anatomy, astronomy, biology, botany, chemistry, ecology, geology, medicine, meteorology, microbiology, natural history, physiology, physics, technology, zoology)

Your Reading Test score will tell you how you did on all 40 questions of the Reading Test. You'll also receive a Social Studies/Sciences subscore (based on how you do on the 20 questions in the social studies and natural sciences sections of the test) and an Arts/Literature subscore (based on how you do on the 20 questions in the prose fiction and humanities sections of the test).

You'll have 35 minutes to read the Reading Test's four passages and answer the 40 multiple-choice questions. This means you'll have about 8 to 8½ minutes to read each passage and answer the questions that follow. That's not a lot of time, but it's more than you might think. Once you've read through this section, you'll have a better idea of what the Reading Test is all about and what you need to do in order to do your best on it.

The Reading Test evaluates your ability to understand the passages that appear in the test. It does not test your ability to remember relevant facts from outside the passage. You don't need to be knowledgeable about the subject area that a passage covers in order to do well on the questions, but you do need to read attentively and to think carefully about what you read. The passages may deal with subjects you're familiar with, or you may know almost nothing about the subjects of the passages. It doesn't matter, though: the passages contain all the information you need to answer the questions.

Types of Passages on the ACT Reading Test

Just as going to see the latest action movie is different from watching a wildlife special on public television, reading a novel or short story is a different experience from reading a scientific essay. As you read the different passages in the Reading Test, you may find it helpful to keep their essential differences in mind.

Prose Fiction

Prose fiction passages generally include a narration of events and revelation of character. Think about how you read fiction. What do you look for? Do you read fiction hoping to find facts, or to be entertained? Although we learn a great deal when we read fiction, most of us read for the story—to “find out what happens”—or because we’re interested in the characters. The questions on prose fiction passages ask about the kinds of things you pay attention to when you read a short story or novel—plot, characters, and mood, among other things.

As you read a prose fiction passage, don’t just note events. Try to be aware of the passage’s mood or tone, the relationships of the characters, and the emotion implied by what the characters say as well as how they say it. An author often uses dialogue not only to explain a situation to a reader, but also to reveal character. Refer to the sample passages on pages 91 and 92 for examples of the type of prose fiction passage you can expect on the ACT Reading Test.

Humanities

Humanities passages describe or analyze ideas or works of art. Although some humanities passages taken from memoirs or personal essays may seem a bit like prose fiction passages, there is one important difference: the memoirs and personal essays are written as fact, and prose fiction is, well, fiction.

Humanities passages present information, but you’ll also need to pay attention to the author and his or her point of view. Sometimes, a question will ask you to project the author’s likely response to a hypothetical argument or situation based on what the passage tells you about the author’s opinions and what the language implies.

These passages might have characters, but they’re not characters like those in a short story. Rather, they’re historical figures or contemporary people—people who have actually lived. In these passages, the kinds of relationships you’ll be asked to infer or identify are those between events, ideas, people, trends, or modes of thought. Refer to the sample passage on page 95 for an example of the type of humanities passage you can expect on the ACT Reading Test.

Social Studies

Social studies passages typically present information gathered by research. A social studies passage might be about Japanese history or political action committees or a psychological experiment. You'll find names, dates, and concepts in these passages. You'll also need to pay close attention to what name goes with what concept in a discussion of political systems and to keep track of who said what in a passage discussing different views of a constitutional amendment. Watch for cause-effect relationships, comparisons, and sequences of events. Pay careful attention to the specifics, especially the way in which they help you shape an idea of the passage's subject. Refer to the sample passages on pages 93 and 94 for examples of the type of social studies passage you can expect on the ACT Reading Test.

Natural Sciences

This kind of passage usually presents a science topic and an explanation of the topic's significance. A natural sciences passage requires a different sort of analysis than a prose fiction passage. For instance, in a natural sciences passage, the author is typically concerned with the relationships between natural phenomena, not the relationships between characters. As with social studies passages, you should pay special attention to cause-effect relationships, comparisons, and sequences of events. Keep track of any specific laws, rules, and theories that are mentioned, but don't try to memorize them.

Many of the Reading Test's nonfiction passages, especially natural sciences passages, will include some specialized or technical language. Don't let new words throw you. If knowing the meaning of a word is necessary to answer a question, the passage will provide clues to the word's meaning. Do your best to figure out the meaning from the context, and then go on. Don't devote extra time to a single word unless it comes up later in one of the questions. Refer to the sample passages on pages 96 and 97 for examples of the type of natural sciences passage you can expect on the ACT Reading Test.

Types of Questions on the ACT Reading Test

On the Reading Test, all of the questions fall into one of two basic categories: referring and reasoning. Referring questions ask you to find or use information that is clearly stated in the passage. Reasoning questions ask you to do more: they ask you to take information that's either stated or implied in the passage and use it to answer more complex questions.

You shouldn't worry about these categories while you're taking the Reading Test. It's most important that you focus on the questions themselves and on what they ask you about a given passage. Because each passage is different, the kinds of questions you see will vary from passage to passage. Still, there are some general types of questions you're likely to encounter. Most questions will ask you to do one of the following:

- identify and interpret details
- determine the main idea of a paragraph, paragraphs, or a passage
- understand comparative relationships (comparisons and contrasts)
- understand cause-effect relationships
- make generalizations
- determine the meaning of words from context
- understand sequences of events
- draw conclusions about the author's voice and method

This list gives you an idea of what kinds of questions are asked most frequently on the Reading Test. Sometimes, the Reading Test contains other types of questions, but don't worry. Just make sure you read each passage and its questions carefully. You'll find that the information you need to determine the best answer for a question is always available in the passage. Questions that illustrate each of the most common types of questions on the Reading Test follow.

Representative ACT Reading Test Questions

Details. Some test questions ask you to pick out a detail from a passage. A detail can be something as seemingly simple as a characteristic of a person, place, or thing, or a particular date. Other questions of this type require you to do a bit more interpreting of minor or subtly stated details, as in the following example, based on a social studies passage on Eleanor Roosevelt (ER), which is found on page 93:

1. The passage states that ER believed the relationship between a people and their government should be:
- A. begun and carried out as if it were an isolated, individualist adventure.
 - B. formed and modeled by the White House.
 - C. based on organized, widespread citizen participation.
 - D. controlled through radio broadcasts and formal channels.

You'll have to look around the passage for the information you need—not unusual for this kind of question. According to the author, ER's "abiding conviction . . . was that nothing good would happen to promote the people's interest unless the people themselves organized to demand government responses" (lines 55–58). Because ER felt "a people's movement required active citizen participation" (lines 58–59), it's clear that C is the best answer. A, B, and D violate the spirit of the quoted lines: ER wanted collective action and active citizen participation, not isolated individualism (A), White House domination (B), or control through radio broadcasts and formal channels (D).

Questions about details sometimes ask you to find the one detail that does not support a particular point. Such questions are usually signaled by words such as NOT and EXCEPT. You need to pay careful attention to these questions. When you answer them, remember that the usual question format is being reversed. Here's an example of this kind of "reverse" question, based on a prose fiction passage about a girl and her friend Eugene (page 91):

2. Which of the following questions is NOT answered by information in the passage?
- F. Has the narrator ever walked around inside Eugene's house?
 - G. What hobby or interest do Eugene and the narrator share?
 - H. What makes Eugene's house different from other houses on the block?
 - J. What careers other than teaching has the narrator considered pursuing?

Three of the questions presented in the answer choices are answered by the passage, while the fourth one—the one you're looking for—isn't. Of the four, the only question not answered by the passage is J: we never learn what other careers besides teaching the narrator has considered pursuing. All three of the other questions are answered in the passage. We learn from lines 81–82 that although the narrator has watched the house "for so many years," she only dreams about going inside, ruling out F. We know from lines 39–40 and lines 63–66 that Eugene and the narrator are both interested in books, so G is out. According to the narrator, Eugene's house is "the only house on the block that had a yard and trees" (lines 5–6), so H, too, is incorrect.

Detail questions aren't the only kind of question that can make use of the "reverse" format. Don't worry, though—just watch for words such as NOT and EXCEPT in questions, and you'll be fine.

Main Ideas. To answer this kind of question, you need to be able to determine the focus of a passage or of a paragraph or paragraphs in a passage. You shouldn't count on finding this information summed up in the first paragraph of a passage or in the first sentence of a paragraph. You may have been advised to make the first sentence of each paragraph the "topic sentence" in your own writing, but not every writer does that. You'll need to figure out what the author's main point is in one of more paragraphs or in an entire passage by reading the paragraph(s) or passage carefully.

Main idea questions can be fairly straightforward. The following question, based on a social studies passage about the development of perceptual abilities (page 94), is pretty direct:

3. The main point of the passage is that:
- A. during the first four to seven months of life, babies learn at an accelerated pace.
 - B. organisms deprived of critical life experiences may or may not develop normal sensory performance.
 - C. the development of perceptual abilities is the result of the interaction between nature and experience.
 - D. research concerned with physical skills and abilities adds little to our knowledge of the growth of the mind.