

1. A Tale of Two Tests

Once upon a time, there was no such thing as the ACT Reading section. There was instead the ACT Social Studies test, which required basic knowledge of American history in addition to reading comprehension. With apologies to Charles Dickens: it was the best of tests, it was the worst of tests. It was beloved (or at least tolerated) by history teachers; but most colleges didn't even care about the section, which wasn't very good at predicting how kids would do in their freshman years. On top of this, the ACT was in some serious financial trouble. The big, bad SAT was accepted by more colleges, which made it more popular with students, which meant more money for the SAT and less for the ACT. Something had to change if the ACT was to stay in business and keep writing their tests.

In 1989, the folks at ACT decided that if you can't beat 'em, join 'em. They totally removed all the history content from the Social Studies test, refashioned it as an examination of "pure" reading, and called their new test the "Enhanced" ACT Reading test. In other words, they made it more like the SAT. And it worked like a charm! Colleges that had previously shunned the ACT found that they could use the new Reading test interchangeably with the SAT Verbal (nowadays, Critical Reading) section. By 2006 every college in the country accepted the ACT, and by 2012 the ACT had become even more popular than the SAT. Finally, a story with a happy ending... right?

Not quite. A [recent study](#) showed that the ACT Reading test (as well as the Science test) was much worse than the English or Math tests at predicting how students would do in college. Students who did better on the Reading section than the English or Math section were 59% more likely to drop out of college in their freshman years than students who did better on the English or Math section. The authors of the study called upon ACT to discard the Reading test. The ACT, of course, said that the Reading test was just fine as it stood. But who knows? The next big change to the Reading section may be just around the corner!

2. 40 Questions, 35 Minutes, 4 Passages

The ACT Reading section is extremely predictable in *almost* every way. It always has 40 questions for you to do in 35 minutes. There are always 4 passages with 10 questions each. Moreover, the passages always go in the same order:

1. Prose Fiction (an excerpt from a short story or novel)
2. Social Science (a passage about history, economics, politics, etc.)
3. Humanities (a passage about art, literature, music, etc.)
4. Natural Science (a passage about science)

Whenever you do an ACT Reading section, therefore, you know exactly what to expect.

But not so fast! There are two unpredictable things in the Reading test. Firstly, the passages don't go in order of difficulty. Sometimes the Prose Fiction passage will be murderously confusing, and the Natural Science passage a piece of cake. Sometimes it will be the other way around. There's no way to tell in advance. This means that if the first passage is an excerpt from [Finnegans Wake](#), don't make the rookie mistake of blowing all your time on it: the next passage will almost certainly be easier.

Secondly, the questions go in no discernable order. Unlike SAT Critical Reading questions, which at least go roughly in the order of the passage, ACT Reading questions are all jumbled up. The first question could be about the last line, and vice versa. Also, there's no order of difficulty: the first question could be easy and the last one hard, or vice versa. A major component of ACT Reading strategy, therefore, will be deciding in what order you should tackle the questions. We'll deal with this issue in **Section 4** below.

These two unpredictable elements lead to our first rule of ACT Reading:

ACT Reading Rule #1: If a passage or question seems hard, it probably *is* hard. Skip it for now and come back later if you have time.

Remember, also, that the ACT doesn't have a guessing penalty. If you don't have time to do that hard question, guess away.

3. Tick, Tock, Goes the Clock

When you take your first ACT Reading test, you will almost certainly be struck by the intense time pressure. 35 minutes is not a lot of time to read 4 lengthy passages and do 40 questions. That means you have **slightly under 9 minutes to read a passage and answer 10 questions about it**. If you're like most students, you will probably run out of time before you finish. At the very least, you will be scrambling to get through the last few questions under the time limit. You'll also likely notice that you made a few careless errors because you were so rushed. (If none of these apply to you, congratulations! You are probably going to do great on the Reading section even without reading this guide.)

Time pressure is therefore the number one obstacle for most students on the Reading section. It can be *extremely* frustrating. If ACT would only let students do the Reading section off the clock, quite a few of them could achieve epic scores every time. But the draconian time constraints force students to read more quickly than they'd like, which results in wrong answers and lower scores. In my opinion, a time-pressured reading drill has about as much relevance to college readiness as does an encyclopedic knowledge of Pokémon characters. But, since ACT doesn't much care about *my* opinion (or yours), we'll just have to deal with it.

In **Section 4** below we will discuss a bunch of strategies that are specifically designed to help you overcome the ridiculous time pressure. They include going straight to the questions, skipping certain time-consuming questions and attacking others first, and using active reading to deal with the passage more efficiently. But if you try these strategies on timed sections, and you still have trouble completing all the questions before time runs out, check out **Section 5**. There we will discuss the concept of "sacrificing" a passage, which for some students is the key to maximizing their score.

No matter what time-management strategies you eventually adopt, there is one über-strategy that rules them all. It is, essentially, to treat each of the Reading passages as a mini-section. When you hit your time limit on a passage, guess on any unanswered questions and move on with a clear conscience. This is the best way to keep yourself from spending too much time on any one passage, and thereby dooming your chances on the others. You must learn to manage the clock, lest you be managed *by* the clock.

ACT Reading Rule #2: Know your time limit on each passage and stick to it. When you run out of time on a passage, guess on the remaining questions and move on.

Because accurate time-management is so important, you should get used to using a wristwatch as you take your practice tests. (No iPhone timers, please!) You don't know what the clock situation in your testing center is going to be like -- Analog or digital? Right in front of you or awkwardly placed behind you? -- so the solution is to bring your own portable clock with

which you are comfortable.

ACT Reading Rule #3: Use a digital wristwatch to keep track of your time spent on each passage. Don't use the stopwatch function because your proctor may not allow it during the test.

Also, make sure to turn off the alarm function so you don't embarrass yourself. (Yes, one of my students once forgot to do this. And it was as bad as you'd think.)

4. ACT Reading Passage Strategies

To read or not to read... that is the question. It's a difficult decision, made moreso by the fact that every test prep book seems to recommend a different strategy. Kaplan says you should read the passage first; the Princeton Review says you should go straight to the questions. They can't both be right, can they?

There is so much confusion about the "right" strategy for ACT Reading because *different strategies work for different students*. And the reason for this is the *intense time pressure of ACT Reading*. Students who can cruise through Moby Dick in a couple of days will have no problem reading the passage first before attacking the questions. By contrast, students whose daily dose of literature comes on the back of a cereal box must go straight to the questions, since they will otherwise run out of time halfway through the section.

The strategies listed below present various different ways of dealing with time pressure. Read them all carefully, and pick a few that seem like they might be suited to you. Try out your chosen strategies on a practice passage or two. If you have trouble finishing the passages in time, or if you get tons of questions wrong and don't know why, try mixing it up with a different strategy. It's all about finding what works best for you.

One more thing: you'll notice that "just read the passage first" is not a strategy I've listed below. That doesn't mean that it won't work for some students. If you can read the passage first, get all of the questions right, and still have time to bake a cake before the proctor calls time, well... bully for you! You don't need to use any special reading strategies. Different strokes for different folks, though.

Without further adieu: your list of ACT Reading Passage Strategies. Bon appetit.

1. *If you're really pressed for time on the Reading section...*

...go straight to the questions and underline key words and phrases in each question before you look at the passage. Key words include names, places, line numbers, etc. -- anything that is *specifically* mentioned in the passage. Here's a sample question with key words underlined:

The passage implies that Madison's change of position on the question of state sovereignty came about as a result of which of the following?

In this sample question, "Madison's" is underlined because it's a name; and "change of position" and "state sovereignty" are underlined because they are specific topics that are discussed in the passage. When we find these key phrases in the passage, the answer will usually be found within a sentence or two on either side. Do these key word

questions first, because they don't usually require a broad understanding of the passage.

Some questions, however, don't have key words. For example:

Which of the following best characterizes the author's tone?

There are no key words or phrases that you can track down here. Star or circle this question, and save it for the end. It's alright to guess on it if you run out of time.

2. *If there's one passage that's always the hardest for you...*

...save it for last! The hardest passage on the test is worth no more than the easiest one. In a sense, it's worth less, because you have to work harder for the same number of points.

Some kids hate the Fiction passage: all that talk about characters and feelings is soooooooooo boring. Others can't stand the Social Sciences passage, with all those boring facts and figures; yet others detest the Natural Sciences passage, with all its technical mumbo-jumbo. If one of these passages consistently vexes you, then you've found your hardest passage. Do it after the others or sacrifice it (as described in **section 5** below).

3. *If you have trouble tracking down the answers to questions in the passage...*

...try starting with the line number questions. Questions that mention specific line numbers are not always the easiest ones, but at least you know where to look to find the answers. First scan the questions to identify the ones that mention specific lines. Then write the question number in the margin of the passage next to the line it mentions. For example, if question 12 mentions "lines 35-37", write a big old "12" next to lines 35-37 in the passage. Once you've done this for all the line number questions, read several lines before *and* after the line number in question: you will *always* need context to answer line number questions. Finally, read *actively*. As you're reading, keep the question firmly in your mind, and try to answer it in your own words before you look at the answer choices.

If you follow these steps, you can approach each passage with confidence because you will know exactly which questions to do first.

4. *If whenever you narrow it down to two answer choices, you always seem to pick the wrong one (argh!)...*

...try answering questions in your own words *before you look at the answer choices*. This is by far the best way to protect yourself against those infuriatingly tempting trap

answers. “But”, you say, “I don’t have the time to answer questions in my own words!” To which I respond: “yes, you do.” It’s okay to guess on an extra question as long as you get more of the questions you attempt right. Quality over quantity.

Also, pay careful attention to **section 7** below, which is all about the trap answers that ACT plants in questions in order to confuse you. Once you’re familiar with the different kinds of trap answers, you can spot ‘em coming a mile away.

5. *If you sometimes get stuck on a question and blow all your time on it...*

...repeat after me: *one question ain’t worth it. One question ain’t worth it. One question ain’t worth it.* A single hard problem won’t affect your score much, whether you get it right or wrong. But if you let that question get under your skin and suck away time that could be used better elsewhere -- then it can do some serious damage.

When you realize that you’re dealing with a hard or time-consuming question, drop it like a hot potato. Come back if you have time left after you’ve done the other questions. Seriously: the hardest questions on a section are the least important ones. They’re difficult and they don’t give you any more points than the easy ones. Take this advice to heart, and the hard questions will flow harmlessly past you like a gently burbling stream.

6. *If you keep zoning out while reading the passage...*

...try reading *actively*. Make quick, 2-3 word notes in the margin of each paragraph as you read, summarizing what each paragraph is about. Make yourself do this, even if that paragraph seems boring or pointless to you -- *especially* if it seems boring or pointless.

Also, consider trying out **strategies 1 and 3** above. When you underline key words in the questions or track down the line number questions, you can focus on answering those as you read the passage. Reading with a distinct purpose -- that is active reading!

5. “Sacrificing” a Passage (optional)

Perhaps you’ve tried some or all of the strategies listed in **Section 4**, but you still run out of time before you can even attempt the last few questions. Or you make it through the whole section, but you’ve left heaps of wrong answers in your wake. It’s time for desperate measures. You may be a good candidate for “sacrificing” a passage.

When you sacrifice a passage, you declare: “this particular passage is the hardest and most time-consuming one for me. It’s not worth my time, so I will guess on all its questions. I will divide up the time I would have spent on this passage among the other passages.” You have more time to spend on the other passages, so you make fewer silly mistakes. You make sure that you get to do all the easier passages and questions while avoiding the harder ones. It’s a win-win if you find the time pressure on the Reading section really intense.

Whether and how you choose to sacrifice affects how much time you will have to do each passage. Here are your options:

1. If time pressure is not a major issue for you, then you should commit yourself to attempting every passage. You will have **almost 9 minutes per passage**. Guess on any remaining questions on a passage (preferably the harder ones!) if you hit your time limit.
2. If the time pressure on the Reading section gives you nightmares, then you may want to “sacrifice” a passage. You will only be attempting three of the four passages, and you will have **almost 12 minutes per passage**. Guess on any remaining questions on the passages you attempt if you hit your time limit. Totally guess on the questions that go with the sacrificed passage.
3. If you’re somewhere in the middle -- you don’t have *quite* enough time to finish every question, but you’d feel bad totally leaving a passage blank -- then you can go halves on sacrificing a passage. On the passage that is hardest for you, spend less time. For that hard passage, do only the easy questions. (For many students, this means answering questions about specific lines and key words and guessing on general questions.) You might call this the *10-10-10-5 Strategy*, because it gives you **10 minutes each for the three easier passages, and 5 minutes for the hardest passage**. Again, guess on any unanswered questions when you hit your time limit on each passage.

When you’ve decided on your time limit, stick to it like glue. Once you have your test timing under control, you will be an unstoppable juggernaut of reading comprehension!

6. Tricky Reading Questions

So you've got yourself a strategy for dealing with the time pressure. You know how you're attacking the passage, and you even know in what order you're going to do the questions. Still, maybe there are a few questions on the test that you're sure you nailed... and then you find out you got them wrong. Let's discuss a few of these tricky question types.

1. **Questions that use words such as “suggest”, “infer”, or “imply”**

It's time for a little lesson on how suggest/infer/imply questions work. The ACT uses these words differently from the way we do normally. In the real world, an inference is a kind of logical hop -- something that *might be true* based on the available evidence. On the ACT, an inference is something that *must be true, even though it's not necessarily directly stated*.

For example, let's say that your friend walks in the door and his hair and clothes are wet. You might infer that it's raining outside -- and you *might* be right. But the folks at ACT headquarters would say: “**WRONG!** Maybe your friend just got hit by a water balloon! Or maybe he jumped into a swimming pool with all his clothes on! Betcha didn't think about that, huh?!” Trust the pedants at ACT to come up with improbable conclusions such as these.

An ACT inference, by contrast, is something that *must be true, even if it's not directly mentioned*. For example, let's say that I drop my book and it falls onto the floor. What is suggested by this? Well, for starters, I can infer that gravity exists -- otherwise my book wouldn't have fallen. It is also implied that I was holding the book above the floor before I let go -- else my book wouldn't have had anywhere to fall. You see, there are LOTS of things that you can infer in a given situation. You can never tell which one ACT is going to pick to be the correct answer. All you know is that it will be the answer that *must be true* -- NOT one that *might be true*.

Here's a brief passage with an inference question for you to try on your own.

“Some commanders of ships take their Departure from the home coast sadly, in a spirit of grief and discontent. They have a wife, children perhaps, some affection at any rate, or perhaps only some pet vice, that must be left behind for a year or more. I remember only one man who walked his deck with a springy step, and gave the first course of the passage in an elated voice. But he, as I learned afterwards, was leaving nothing behind him, except a welter of debts and threats of legal proceedings.” (from The Mirror of the Sea by Joseph Conrad)

8. The passage suggests that the man who “walked his deck with a springy

step” (lines 4-5) did so because:

- A. he was elated to say goodbye to his wife and children.
- B. he would finally be able to face his creditors.
- C. he was relieved to escape from his onshore troubles.
- D. his legal proceedings were ultimately successful.

What’s the right answer here? If you said “A” or “D”, you selected something that *might be true*. “C” is the only answer that *must be true*, even though it’s not directly stated. After all, that man is clearly happy (“spring step”, “elated voice”), and he was leaving behind him “debts and threats of legal proceedings”, so it must be true that he was relieved to leave his troubles behind him.

That’s how suggest/infer/imply questions work. If you always ask yourself, “which of these answers *must be true*?”, then you will get these questions right.

2. **Questions that use words such as “EXCEPT” or “NOT”**

EXCEPT/NOT questions are always time-consuming, and they are sometimes extremely difficult. They are like cluster-bombs: four mini-questions in one. You have to track down each answer choice separately and determine whether it is true or false. Also, you have to make sure that you don’t get mixed up: the right answer on an EXCEPT/NOT question is the one that is false, not the one that’s true. Here’s a question that relates to the passage above:

9. According to the passage, all of the following are true of commanders of ships EXCEPT:
- A. they usually depart from shore with heavy hearts.
 - B. they are often in debt and threatened by legal proceedings.
 - C. Many of them have family whom they are sad to leave behind.
 - D. Their voyages sometimes last for more than a year.

Three of the answer choices are true: “A”, “C”, and “D”. “B” is the one that is false: only one of the commanders is said to be leaving behind “debts and threats of legal proceedings”, and we can’t generalize about the others. Therefore, that is the correct answer.

If you find these questions frustrating, by all means skip them and save them for the end, or guess on them entirely. There’s no sense wasting your valuable time on questions that you find frustrating.

3. **Tone and Attitude Questions**

Questions that ask about the author's tone or attitude (or the tone or attitude of a person talked about in the passage) are quite difficult *if you don't answer them in your own words*. Sometimes, all of the answers may appear to be possibilities. But if you answer these questions in your own words *before you look at the choices*, you will breeze through them. Here's another sample question relating to the excerpt above. Remember, try to answer it in your own words before you look at the answer choices!

10. The attitude of the author towards sea captains can best be described as:
- A. sympathetic interest.
 - B. affected dismay.
 - C. wry humor.
 - D. heartfelt compassion.

We have here several answers that are designed to lead you astray: "B" plays on some of the negative emotions attributed to the commanders (but not to the author). "C" doesn't fit the whole passage. "D" is too extreme. Only "A" captures the mood of the whole. Did what you came up with help you find the correct answer?

7. Trap Answers

It's high noon at the ACT Corral. You're staring down that last question on a passage, practically daring it to make a move. Just two answer choices remain. Which one will you choose? Suddenly, you notice something out of the corner of your eye -- in an instant, your #2 pencil flashes from its holster (er, pencil case), blowing away that sneaky answer choice just as the proctor calls "time"... but [it's a trap!](#)

We've all been there. You're positive that you've found the right answer, but it turns out that you've been suckered by one of the trap answer choices, which ACT calls "distracters". How can you learn to spot them? You have to know what ACT's favorite kinds of trap answers are. Fortunately, there are only a few of them.

1. *The too-obvious quote*

ACT questions are quite literal. Oftentimes they use phrases that are drawn directly from the passage; if you track down those key words in the passage, you will find the answer nearby. The answer choices, however, are a different story. On the first three passages (Prose Fiction, Social Sciences, Humanities), the right answer will rarely quote key words from the passage. In fact, an answer choice that DOES quote key words from the passage is liable to be a "too-obvious quote" trap.

The definition of a too-obvious quote trap is an answer choice that quotes several words or phrases used in the passage, but doesn't actually answer the question. Sometimes the too-obvious quote will be a jumble of key words that don't actually reflect the content of the passage; at other times the too-obvious quote might be true, but it doesn't answer the question.

Look at **Question 8** in **Section 6** above for two examples of too-obvious quote traps. Answer choice "A" uses the word "wife", "children", and "elated", all of which are quite prominent in the passage; but there is nothing to indicate that the man with "a springy step" was happy to leave his wife and children. Instead, it is implied that he is happy to be leaving behind debts and lawsuits. Again, answer choice "D" mentions the "legal proceedings" which are talked about in the passage; but there is nothing in the passage that indicates whether or not the legal proceedings were successful. Both of these answer choices are too-obvious quote traps.

How can you tell when a quote from the passage is too obvious? It's a fairly fine distinction. If it's more than two words in a row, it's almost certainly a too-obvious quote. If it's only one or two words, then you've got a judgment call to make. If you practice looking for too-obvious quotes, you'll eventually get a feel for them.

One more thing: the fourth passage in the Reading section (Natural Science) tends to be more detail-oriented than the others. The right answers in Natural Science questions are as likely to quote from the passage as the wrong answers. So, don't worry about spotting too-obvious quote traps when you're working on the Natural Science passage.

2. ***The sneaky opposite***

Sometimes ACT gives you an answer that seems right... until you read it carefully! When you actually figure out what it means, you realize that it's the opposite of the correct answer. This "sneaky opposite" trap can involve switching the order of a few words, hiding the word "not" in the answer choice, or turning the truth upside down in some other way.

Again, take a look at **Question 8 in Section 6** above for an example of a sneaky opposite. Answer choice "B" says that the man with "a springy step" is relieved to face his creditors (i.e. the people to whom he owes money). But he is actually relieved to be at sea, as far as possible from his creditors! If you read this answer choice too quickly, you might miss this detail and fall for the trap.

The way to avoid the sneaky opposite is to *slow down*. Read the answer choices word-by-word, and double-check your answer before you finalize your selection. As long as you're not rushing, you should be able to handle the sneaky opposite with aplomb.

3. ***Extremes***

Some answer choices are driving in the right direction, but blow by the exit without even slowing down. An "extreme" trap begins with an idea that sounds reasonable and takes it to absurd lengths. The following statement, for instance, is extreme:

Patients who suffer from chronic back ailments are always in pain.

Although patients with chronic back ailments probably have a lot of pain, it's crazy to say that *all of them* are in pain *all the time*. It's just too extreme.

Look out for characteristic words such as "always", "never", "completely", "perfectly", "only", which all convey a fairly extreme position. An answer choice with such words can only be correct if it is directly supported by the passage. On Tone/Attitude questions, watch out for answers that represent an extreme version of what the author (or character) feels. For example, check out **Question 10 in Section 6**. Answer choice "D" is an extreme trap. Although the author is clearly sympathetic to the plights of ship commanders, he doesn't exactly wear his heart on his sleeve. "Heartfelt compassion" is just too extreme.

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