

The Critical Reader

***The Complete Guide to
SAT Critical Reading***

by

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***Sentence completion explanations by
Elizabeth Foster***

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Dedication

To Ricky, who pestered me to write this book until I finally acquiesced

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Preface

I did not want to write this book. No matter how much you don't want to take the SAT, I assure you that I didn't want to write this book just as badly. In fact, I resisted writing it for as long as I possibly could. So why, you ask, did I do it? After all, I didn't *have* to. No one was going to refuse my college application if I didn't. Well, there are a couple of reasons. First, one of my students badgered me incessantly for months, insisting that there wasn't a single prep book out there for smart, motivated, high-scoring students that accurately explained in a straightforward, no-nonsense manner exactly what Critical Reading was testing and how to ace it. The other reason, however, was that I kept encountering smart, motivated, high-scoring students who nevertheless had surprising and significant gaps in their knowledge – gaps that had never been addressed or even noticed in school, and that prevented them from dealing with the test at the level of what it was actually testing and thus from getting those last 50-150 points. What often looked like a simple case of getting down to two answers and then picking the wrong one consistently turned out to be something much deeper. So to put it bluntly, I wrote this book because it had to be written. Critical Reading tests skills so different from – and, I would argue, more important than – those emphasized in American schools that most high school students quite simply don't even have a vocabulary for understanding it. Besides, there didn't seem to be anyone else who was crazy enough (or had enough time on their hands) to do it. And once I got started, I simply kept going, determined to get it over with as quickly as possible. I knew that if I stopped, I would immediately become so overwhelmed by the sheer immensity of the project that I simply wouldn't be able to bring myself to start again.

Although I was initially concerned that the book would be too sophisticated for high school students (devoid as it was of references to video games and reality television), when I showed the book to the student who had begged me to write it, he reassured me that the style was perfect. It would, he said, come as a relief to serious, highly motivated teenagers who were sick of being talked down to and just wanted to know what Critical Reading questions were really asking. That said, I realize this is a less accessible book than *The Ultimate Guide to SAT Grammar*, and I am aware of the inevitable criticisms that it will bring: It's too dry. The language is too hard. It doesn't have any fun pop-culture references. It makes Critical Reading seem too complicated. I can only imagine the grimaces that the section on pronouns will incur. I can almost hear people wondering, "Could this book *possibly* get any more pedantic?" But here's the thing: I've tutored a lot of kids in Critical Reading. And I've seen the sometimes very considerable misconceptions about reading that they bring to the test – even the ones consistently scoring above 700. This book represents my attempt to address those misconceptions directly. The fact is that most high school students do not read or write like adults. That's why they're in high school and not writing for, say, *The Journal of International Affairs*. Most American teenagers do not regularly use words such as *assertion* or *notion* in their own writing, nor do they, unprompted, spend half a page addressing the subtleties of viewpoints they don't agree with. As a result, they have an awful lot of trouble understanding what's going on when they read writing that's jam-packed with those elements. And if they have consistent difficulty recognizing passage topics, they need to be given specific tools for identifying them. Naming and discussing – not to mention trying to remedy – problems that already exist is not the same thing as creating those problems. If that's dry and boring, so be it.

Introduction

Note: this part is primarily intended for parents and tutors. If you're a student preparing for the SAT, you're welcome to read it too, but you can also start on p. 15.

Eight years elapsed between my last SAT, which I took as a senior in high school, and the first time I was asked to tutor Critical Reading. I distinctly remember sitting in Barnes and Noble, hunched over the Official Guide, staring at the questions in horror and thinking, “Oh wow, this test is *hard*. How on earth did I ever get an 800 on this thing when I was seventeen?” Mind you, I felt completely flummoxed by Critical Reading *after* I had earned a degree in literature.

Somehow or other, I managed to muddle through my first Critical Reading tutoring sessions. I tried to pretend that I knew what I was doing, but to be perfectly honest, I was pretty lost. I had to look up answers in the back of the book. A lot. I lost count of the number of times I had to utter the words, “I think you’re right, but give me one second and let me just double-check that answer...” It was mortifying. No tutor wants to come off as clueless in front of a sixteen year-old, but I was looking like I had no idea what I was doing. Grammar I could handle, but when it came to teaching Critical Reading, I was in way over my head. I simply had no idea how to put into words what had always come naturally to me. Besides, half the time I wasn’t sure of the right answer myself.

Luckily for me, fate intervened in the form of Laura Wilson, the founder of WilsonPrep in Chappaqua, New York, whose company I spent several years writing tests for. Laura taught me about the major passage themes, answer choices patterns, and structures. I learned the importance of identifying main point, tone and major transitions, and the ways in which that information can allow a test-taker to spot correct answers quickly, efficiently, and without second-guessing. I discovered that the skills that the SAT tested were in fact the exact same skills that I had spent four years honing.

As a matter of fact, I came to realize that, paradoxically, my degree in French was probably more of an aid in teaching Critical Reading than a degree in English would have been. The basic French literary analysis exercise, known as the *explication de texte linéaire*, consists of close reading of a short excerpt of text, during which the reader explains how the text functions rhetorically from beginning to end – that is, just how structure, diction, and syntax work together to produce meaning and convey a particular idea or point of view. In other words, exactly the skills tested on Critical Reading. I had considered *explications de texte* a pointless exercise (Rhetoric? Who studies *rhetoric* anymore? That’s so nineteenth century!) and resented

being forced to write them in college – especially during the year I spent at the Sorbonne, where I and my (French) classmates did little else – but suddenly I appreciated the skills they had taught me. Once I made the connection between what I had been studying all that time and the skills tested on the SAT, the test suddenly made sense. I suddenly had something to fall back on when I was teaching, and for the first time, I found that I no longer had to constantly look up answers.

I still had a long way to go as a tutor, though: at first I clung a bit too rigidly to some methods (e.g. insisting that students circle all the transitions) and often did not leave my students enough room to find their own strategies. As I worked with more students, however, I began to realize just how little I could take for granted in terms of pre-existing skills: most of them, it turned out, had significant difficulty even identifying the point of an argument, never mind summing it up in five or so words. A lot of them didn't even realize that passages contained arguments at all; they thought that the authors were simply describing things. As a result, it never even occurred to them to identify which ideas a given author did and not agree with. When I instructed them to circle transitions like *however* and *therefore* as a way of identifying the key places in an argument, many of them found it overwhelming to do so at the same time they were trying to absorb the literal content of a passage – more than one student told me they could do one or the other, but not both at the same time. In one memorable gaffe, I told a student that while he often did not have to read every word of the more analytical passages, he did need to read all of the literary passages, only to have him tell me that he couldn't tell the difference. He thought of all the passages as literary because the blurbs above them all said they came from books, and weren't all books "literary?" It never occurred to me to tell him that he needed to look for the word "novel" in the blurb above the passage in order to identify works of *fiction*. When I pointed out to another student that he had answered a question incorrectly because he hadn't realized that the author of the passage disagreed with a particular idea, he responded without a trace of irony that the author had spent a lot of time talking about that idea – no one had ever introduced him to the idea that writers often spend a good deal of time fleshing out ideas that they *don't* agree with. And this was a student scoring in the mid-600s!

Eventually, I got it: I realized that I would have to spend more time – sometimes a lot more time – explaining basic contextual pieces of information that most adult readers took for granted and, moreover, I would have to do so at the same time I covered actual test-taking strategies. Without the fundamentals, all the strategy in the world might not even raise a score by 10 points.

Unfortunately, the focus of most high school English classes in the United States has very little to do with the skills that get tested on the SAT; most of the students I've worked with had barely even heard the term "rhetoric," and if they had heard it, they weren't really sure what it was. Reading rhetorically – reading to understand the structure of an argument and the roles that various pieces of information played within it – was a skill they had simply never been asked to develop. Only the very strongest readers, the ones who had read extensively on their own since childhood, were able to intuit on their own just what they were expected to do. It was no wonder that the rest of them were baffled by the kind of reading the SAT required and concluded that since the only place they had ever been asked to do it was on the SAT, the test was therefore stupid and pointless and utterly irrelevant to everything else in life.

That is, incidentally, a criticism I hear a lot. Truth be told, defending a test that nearly everyone over the age of 16 in the United States quite frankly hates is not exactly pleasant (although at this point I'm so accustomed to it that it no longer really fazes me). So that said, why on earth *should* anyone care about Critical Reading, especially since the only thing that SAT scores have ever been demonstrated to correlate with is freshman college grades – and even then the correlation isn't particularly strong? Well, if you'll bear with me, there are a few reasons I find particularly compelling.

First, the kind of reading required on the SAT, while very different from the kind of reading typically done in high school, is essentially the same kind of reading required in college – even if college assignments (hopefully!) bear no resemblance to the kind of multiple-choice questions that appear on the SAT. High school students typically do two kinds of reading: on one hand, they read textbooks, which are dry, factual, and generally devoid of any obvious point of view. Important information is often clearly marked, and there is little room for critical engagement or consideration of why the information is presented in the way that it's presented. Many textbooks are also written well *below* grade level: beginning in the late 1940s, when school enrollments rose dramatically, there was a precipitous drop in the level of language used in textbooks¹ – a drop reflected in the abrupt decline of SAT Verbal scores between the mid-1960s and late 1970s, when the baby boom generation applied to college. Students may occasionally be assigned supplemental material intended for older readers (in History class, for example), but otherwise, they have minimal exposure to the class of adults engaged in serious ongoing written conversation and debate about *ideas*. And because of their limited experience with this type of writing, they have difficulty identifying arguments (especially when they are couched in unfamiliarly dense language), keeping track of points of view, and differentiating between what authors think vs. what authors say “other people” think.

In English class, on the other hand, high school students read classic works of fiction – but there, too, they are taught to read descriptively rather than analytically. They are taught to focus almost entirely on the content of what they read (themes, symbols, characters) and are never asked to consider texts as constructions made up of rhetorical moves deliberately intended to convey particular ideas and impressions, and to elicit particular reactions from the reader. The rhetorical purpose or *function* of words, phrases, and even punctuation is all but ignored. Furthermore, their teachers tell them that the mark of great literature is that it is ambiguous and open to interpretation, and they are encouraged to come up with their own unique interpretations of what they read – interpretations that often involve either relating the book to their own lives or speculating about the underlying motivations or psychology of the characters in ways not always directly supported by the text. Because they are so used to focusing on their *own* ideas, they do not know how to identify the *author's* intention, nor are they accustomed to reading with the word-for-word precision that Critical Reading demands.

¹ A study by Hayes, Wolfer, and Wolfe found that the level of contemporary twelfth grade reading is often below that of *seventh or eighth grade* reading from the 1940s. See “Schoolbook Simplification and Its Relation to the Decline in SAT Verbal Scores.” Donald P. Hayes, Loreen T. Wolfer, and Michael F. Wolfe. *American Educational Research Journal*, 33(2), 1996, pp. 489-508 (http://www.education-consumers.org/briefpdfs/1.8-SAT_verbal_decline.pdf)

While I would never dispute the fact that great literature is in fact ambiguous and open to interpretation, there is plenty of reading out there that is not fiction and that is not quite so open to interpretation. Although non-fiction authors may encourage their readers to reflect on particular ideas or experiences, they are writing primarily to convey a point. And usually they're not particularly shy about telling the reader what that point is. Sometimes they're even nice enough to say flat-out "the point is..." or "my goal in writing this is..." It's up to the reader to identify and pay attention to what the author indicates is important, not to pick out the bits and pieces they happen to like and invent their own idea of what they might mean. That tendency to read "around and beyond" the text explains why so many students who earn straight A's in English, even in so-called "AP courses," are unable to break 700 – or sometimes even 600 – in Critical Reading.

The problem is not, however, just confined to the SAT. The vast majority of the reading assigned in college is almost guaranteed to be the type of non-fiction reading that appears on the SAT; even in a literature class, non-fiction criticism is regularly assigned to accompany the primary text. And sometimes there's a lot of it: as part of a challenging liberal arts curriculum, professors will often assign hundreds and hundreds of pages per week. While they do not expect their students to absorb and beautifully annotate every single word of their reading, they do expect that students will be able to skim through very large quantities of information and get the gist of it without too much trouble; that means recognizing when to slow down and pay attention (when an author is making an important point) and when to skim (when an author is giving a tenth example), even when the topic isn't 100% familiar and the reading is less than fully engaging. Academic writing isn't always good writing – sometimes it's overblown, jargon-laden, and pretentious – but whether or not students like it or agree with it, they have to be able to understand it. Plenty of students don't acquire this skill until they get to college – that's why most schools have a required freshman seminar – but those who get it down earlier will find their transition to college much smoother.

One of the most common SAT passage structures, "they say/I say," is also the basic model for most serious texts students will encounter in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities. Academics and professional writers do not focus exclusively on their own arguments, ignoring nuances and failing to consider potential objections the way high school students often do.² They "converse" with influential figures in their field, both past and present, review the background of their research, and spend a good amount of time discussing prevailing explanations and their strengths and weaknesses before they even begin to discuss their own ideas. A student who becomes comfortable with keeping track of multiple arguments and points of view in high school is far less likely to feel overwhelmed by college-level reading.

Furthermore, a major difference between high school and college is the shift from summarizing other people's arguments to actually "dialoguing" with and evaluating those arguments and deciding whether or not they have merit – and there's really no way to evaluate an argument critically or formulate a cogent response without understanding

² A major difference between twelfth graders and professional writers is that the former rarely use concession words (e.g. *however*) to recognize others' viewpoints. See Bill Williams, "Rhetorical and Grammatical Dependency," *Syntax in the Schools*, Vol. 12 no. 1, Sept. 1995.

precisely what it's literally saying – rather than what one merely *imagines* it might be saying – and how it's put together. An author who continually relies on “personal anecdote” to support a point is probably on much shakier ground than one who repeatedly cites specific facts and figures or the opinions of multiple experts in a field (although those can certainly be manipulated as well to suit an argument). If a reader can't recognize personal anecdote vs. citation of an expert, they can't even begin to make a judgment about whether an argument is reliable. As Gerald Graff, Cathy Birkenstein, and Russell Durst point out in *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*, their superb introduction to college-level writing, the ability to “converse” with people who hold opposing viewpoints – without reducing those viewpoints to parody – is a crucial skill for members of a democracy.³

Studying for Critical Reading teaches students to think, well, critically – to move beyond taking a piece of writing at face value and actually consider how its component parts work together to convey a particular idea. That may seem obvious, but it's actually an extraordinarily important component of media literacy. Given the sheer quantity of information with which most twenty-first century teenagers are constantly bombarded, the ability to focus on important information and filter out irrelevant details is crucial, as is the ability to understand how written and visual media are put together to persuade people to buy a product, vote for a candidate, or take part in a social movement. An advertisement, for example, consists of images and texts specifically chosen to elicit specific emotions. The ability to break it down and understand how it is intended to seduce/inspire/flatter makes people less likely to take it at face value and consider whether a product, a social media trend, or a political movement is truly worth buying into. And given the simplistic level of most political and media discourse in the United States, the ability to recognize nuances and understand that arguments are not necessarily black and white is an increasingly vital ability.

Moreover, the use of rhetorical devices such as euphemism – the replacement of a harsh or offensive word or phrase with a more innocent-sounding one – can have profound social and political implications. It may be mildly amusing when someone says “vertically challenged” rather than “short,” but a newspaper that blandly refers to civilians killed in war as “collateral damage” is doing something considerably less innocuous (for a student interested in that idea, I would recommend George Orwell's essay “Politics and the English Language”). Someone who can't recognize a euphemism probably won't think about why an author used one instead of saying flat-out what they meant, and what they *didn't* want the reader to think about.

None of this, of course, is directly covered on the SAT; the passages on the test are carefully chosen and edited to be as inoffensive as possible. But there's no fundamental difference between reading an SAT passage critically and a *New York Times* article critically. Rhetoric is rhetoric is rhetoric.

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New York City
March 2013

³ Gerald Graff, Cathy Birkenstein, and Russell Durst. *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2009, p. 13.

A Quick Note About This Book (for Students)

This book has two main goals: the first goal is, of course, to help you improve your score on the Critical Reading section of the SAT. The second goal, however, is to prepare you for the type of reading you'll be asked to do in college. College reading is fundamentally different from high school reading in that it is primarily based on non-fiction texts that require you to keep track of multiple points of view held by scholars and professionals in various disciplines, and to understand the relationships between those points of view. In college, you will also be expected to read many more pages and in much less time than you are given in high school – staying on top of your work will, to a large extent, depend on your ability to read “from the top down,” focusing primarily on the big picture and understanding details in relation to main points. You simply cannot read a 500 page book about political science or anthropology or sociology the same way you would read a work of literature. You'll need to know how to figure out which information you need to pay attention to and which information you can skim past. If you try to get every last word, you'll never finish. If you can get an accurate gist, on the other hand, you don't have to worry about knowing every last detail because you'll understand how things fit together. This is the type of reading that the SAT tests.

Unlike many of the other SAT guides out there, this book treats you like an adult. Its goal is to bring you up to the level of the authors you'll encounter on the SAT, not bring them down to the level of some hypothetical average teenager. It does not sugarcoat Critical Reading or claim that it's easy enough to be “outsmarted” with a few simple tricks. It does, however, aim to give you the tools necessary to approach Critical Reading with a sense of mastery. Although there are many patterns you can use to make educated guesses even if you're not totally sure what a passage or an answer choice is saying, there are few 100% hard and fast rules. Critical Reading is, in some ways, an intellectual game, but it's an adult game, one based on a very dry, subtle humor. If you get to know the test well enough, you can spot when the test-writers at ETS were clearly having a good time, either because an answer choice is blatantly absurd or because an answer that has all the characteristics of a typical right answer is indisputably wrong. So yes, Critical Reading does have the potential to be “fun,” but probably not in a way that you're accustomed to.

While some of the passages here are reasonably straightforward and perhaps even mildly interesting to read, other are dry and very challenging – they were chosen to reflect the content and difficulty of College Board exams (whenever possible, I have chosen excerpts from the same authors that ETS has used), and some of them discuss concepts and include language that are probably unlike anything you've encountered in school. But that's the point: Critical Reading is a test of whether you are *already* reading at a college level. So if you have difficulty understanding some of the passages and answers, don't panic! After all, you're still in high school. But that said, you might have to put in a lot of work if you really want to catch up to the kids who devour hundreds of books for pleasure, the ones who magically absorbed the skills the SAT tests somewhere along the way – although granted if you've been struggling with this Critical Reading for a while, you probably already know that.

The fact that this book *recognizes* that the SAT is hard does not, however, mean that it tries to *make* things hard; on the contrary, it tries to teach you to simplify texts and recognize patterns that will get you to the answer as quickly and confidently as possible. But unlike other prep books, this book also deals with the nitty-gritty of the underlying comprehension skills – the things that most educated adult readers do automatically but that you might not yet know how to or think to do. Although some of those things may seem quite challenging at first, the goal of this book is to teach you to actually answer the questions, competently and confidently, rather than simply play process of elimination and hope for the best. For that reason, I have placed considerably less emphasis on identifying wrong answers than many guides do, and considerably more emphasis on helping you understand just what Critical Reading questions are actually asking as well as their relationships to answers that seem vague or confusing or just plain weird. This book also focuses heavily on close reading skills, teaching you to identify authors’ intentions and beliefs through careful attention to and analysis of their language and rhetorical forms. At every step, I have done my best to emphasize the underlying logic on which Critical Reading is based, and to make that logic seem as straightforward and accessible as possible.

Each chapter of this book covers a particular type of Critical Reading question, moving from most concrete (literal comprehension) to most abstract (paired passage relationships). If you are already scoring around 700 and have consistent difficulty only with a particular type of question (e.g. tone, inference), I strongly recommend that you begin by focusing on the corresponding chapter. If, however, your errors are more random and encompass a variety of question types, you may simply be best served by working through the chapters in order. There is unfortunately no single “trick” guaranteed to raise a score those last 50-150 points. Almost inevitably, even my students in the mid-700s are typically missing important pieces of contextual knowledge simply because they haven’t yet read extensively enough to be able to recognize the conventions of “serious” non-fiction writing, and haven’t yet learned to use their knowledge of those conventions to gain the sort of rapid and accurate “big picture” understanding that translates into immediate recognition of correct answers. This book attempts to help you recognize and understand many of those conventions – conventions that you will encounter again and again in college and beyond.

Provided that you have solid comprehension skills, however, success in Critical Reading is also largely a question of approach, or method. Because the test demands a certain degree of flexibility – part of what makes Critical Reading so difficult is the fact that no single strategy can be guaranteed to work 100% of the time – I have also tried to make this book a toolbox of sorts. My goal is to provide you with a variety of approaches and strategies that you can choose from and apply as necessary, depending on the question at hand. That ability to adapt is what will ultimately make you unshakable – even at eight o’clock on a Saturday morning.

1. Overview of Critical Reading

There are three Critical Reading sections, containing a total of 67 questions, distributed more or less evenly throughout the test. In the case that an Experimental section consists of Critical Reading, however, two consecutive sections may appear.

- The first two sections last 25 minutes and contain 24 questions (although very occasionally one will contain 25).
- The third section lasts 20 minutes and contains 19 questions.
- The beginning of each section contains between 5 and 8 sentence completions, which test vocabulary and the ability to determine words logically from context.

In total, sentence completions comprise slightly less than one-third of Critical Reading. The remainder of each section is devoted to passage-based reading questions.

The breakdown of passages per test is typically as follows:

- Two short (10-20 line) passages, always presented consecutively.
- One short paired passage set. 4 questions.
- One medium passage (approximately 50 lines), social science, science or art. 5-7 questions.
- One long passage (approximately 85 lines), social science, science or art. 9-12 questions.
- One long fiction passage from either a classic (nineteenth century) or modern novel written either originally in English or translated into English from a foreign language. 9-12 questions.
- One long paired passage set. 9-12 questions.

Although sentence completions are arranged in order of difficulty, passage-based reading questions are arranged according to the order of information of the passage itself, and the difficulty level is entirely random. A question rated level 5 (most difficult) may therefore be placed next to a level one (easiest) question, and there is no way to predict when or where either will occur. For that reason, it is very much to your advantage to skip around, answering all the questions that you can answer easily before turning to the ones that are more difficult and time-consuming.

Passages cover a wide range of topics, themes, and genres, with most passages drawn from “serious” recent works of non-fiction written for an educated adult audience. (For an overview of common passage topics and themes, see p. 92).

Scoring and Strategies

Because Critical Reading contains more questions than either Math or Writing, and because it is traditionally the most difficult section for most test-takers to obtain a high score on, the Critical Reading curve is noticeably more generous than the curves for the other two sections. While it is usually necessary to answer every single Math question and nearly every Writing question correctly to score an 800, it is sometimes possible to miss up to three or skip up to four Critical Reading questions and still receive the highest possible score.

That said, the distance between a 700 and an 800 is larger than the distance between a 600 and a 700. To earn a 600, it is only necessary to obtain a raw score (the number of questions correct minus .25 times the number of questions incorrect) of about 45-47, slightly more than $\frac{2}{3}$ of the total points. It is therefore possible to skip more than 20 questions, or 6-7 per section, and still score a very respectable 600. If you consistently miss around 6 questions per section and are looking for a quick fix to get your score just over the 600 mark, it is well worth your while to experiment with skipping some of the questions you are genuinely uncertain how to answer.

To earn a 700, on the other hand, you must generally attain a raw score of about 57-58, which requires you to answer just over 85% of the questions correctly. To do so, you can attempt to answer every question and get no more than 7 wrong ($67-7 = 60$), with an additional two points subtracted for the incorrect questions ($7 \times .25 = 1.75$, which rounds to 2). Alternately, if you are a strong reader and feeling very brave, you can attempt to simply skip the 10 questions you find most difficult. If that feels too risky, you can also try skipping three or four questions. That way, if you get four questions wrong, you’ll end up with a raw score of 58 or 59, which usually translates into a 700 or 710.

Regardless of what sort of score you are aiming for, you should not attempt to answer a question if you have absolutely no idea what the answer could be – and no tools for making even a slightly educated guess – even if you can narrow the answer down to two possibilities. I understand that this is a controversial position, but while I am in no way a statistician, I *have* seen firsthand many, many, many times (did I say that enough?) what happens when people make wild guesses, and my own thoroughly anecdotal and completely unscientific observation is that they almost always get those questions wrong. If you think you’re the exception, you’re welcome to ignore my advice; just don’t say you weren’t warned.

What Does Critical Reading Test?

It is important to understand that the Critical Reading is so named for a reason. It is not a reading comprehension test, nor is it a test of literary analysis and interpretation. **It is rather a test about the construction of arguments and the ways in which specific textual elements (e.g. words, phrases, punctuation marks) work together to convey meaning. The focus is on moving beyond *what* a text says to understanding *how* the text says it. Comprehension, in other words, is necessary but not sufficient.**

To sum up, the SAT does not simply test the ability to find bits of factual information in a passage, but rather the ability to do the following:

Sentence Completions

- Use contextual clues to recognize words that would fit logically within a sentence.
- Use roots to make educated guesses about the meaning of unfamiliar words.

Passage-Based Reading

- Distinguish between main ideas and supporting detail.
- Understand how the diction (word choice), syntax, structure, and rhetorical devices convey meaning and tone/attitude.
- Understand the rhetorical role (e.g. supporting, emphasizing, criticizing) that various pieces of information play within an argument.
- Keep track of multiple viewpoints and understand relationships between arguments, perspectives, and attitudes.
- Make logical inferences and generalizations from information not explicitly stated.
- Understand nuances of arguments and recognize that it is possible for an author to agree with some aspects of another person's idea while rejecting others.
- Draw relationships between specific wordings and general/abstract ideas.
- Use contextual information to determine the meanings of unfamiliar words, and recognize when common words are being used in uncommon ways.

The skill that the SAT requires is therefore something I like to call "**rhetorical reading.**" Rhetoric is the art of persuasion, and reading rhetorically simply means reading primarily to understand an author's argument as well as the rhetorical role or *function* that various pieces of information play in creating that argument. **Reading this way is an acquirable skill, not an innate aptitude. It just takes practice.**

The Answer Isn't Always *in* the Passage

One of the great truisms of SAT prep is that “the answer is always in the passage,” but in reality this statement is only half true: **the information necessary to answer the questions is always provided in the passage, but not necessarily the answer itself.** The SAT tests the ability to draw relationships between specific wordings and general ideas – so while the correct answer will always be *supported by* specific wording in the passage, the whole point is that you are responsible for making the connection. That, in essence, is the test.

As a rule, therefore, the correct answers to most questions will virtually never be stated word-for-word in the text. In fact, **the more directly the phrasing in an answer choice mimics the phrasing in the passage, the more likely it is to be wrong!** The correct answer choice, on the other hand, will refer to an **idea** that has been discussed in the passage and that has simply been **rephrased**. Your job is therefore to identify that idea and look for an answer choice that rewords it with **synonyms**. Same idea, different words.

Understanding Incorrect Answer Choices

Each Critical Reading question is accompanied by five answer choices, labeled (A) through (E). Despite the multiple-choice format, the presence of multiple answers does not somehow make incorrect answers any more valid or make correct answers any less so.

Although one or more incorrect answers may sound convincing, there are always specific textual elements that prevent an incorrect answer from being acceptable. Incorrect answers are written to sound plausible. Often, they describe a situation that *could* be true but that is *not necessarily true* according to the information explicitly stated in the passage. They also tend to employ relatively sophisticated vocabulary and highly abstract language that many test-takers find confusing or difficult to comprehend. That said, incorrect answers typically fall into the following categories:

- Off-topic
- Too broad (e.g. the passage discusses *one* author while the answer refers to *authors*)
- Too extreme (e.g. the passage is slightly negative but the answer extremely negative)
- Half-right, half-wrong (e.g. right information, wrong point of view)
- Could be true but not enough information
- True for the passage as a whole, but not for the specific lines in question
- Factually true but not stated in the passage

On most questions, many test-takers find it relatively easy to eliminate two or three answers but routinely remain stuck between two plausible-sounding answers. Typically, the incorrect answer will fall into either the “could be true but not enough information” or the “half-right, half-wrong” category. In such cases, you must be willing to read very carefully in order to determine which answer the passage truly supports.

How to Work Through Critical Reading Questions

While your approach may change depending on the question, in general I recommend the following strategy:

1) Read the question *slowly*

Put your finger on each word of the question as you read it; otherwise you may miss key information, and every letter of every word counts.

When you're done, take a second or two to make sure you know exactly what it's asking. If the question is phrased in an even slightly convoluted manner, rephrase it in your own words in a more straightforward way until you're clear on what you're looking for. If necessary, scribble the rephrased version down.

This is not a minor step. If, for example, the question asks you the purpose of a particular sentence, you need to be prepared to re-read it with the goal of understanding what role the sentence plays within the argument or impression the author is trying to convey; if you re-read it with a different goal, e.g. understanding what the sentence is literally saying, you can't do any meaningful work toward answering the question that's actually there.

2) Go back to the passage and re-read the lines given in the question. If the question seems to call for it, read from a sentence or two above to a sentence or two below.

“Purpose” or “function” questions often require more context and, as a result, you should be prepared to read both before and after the line reference. In contrast, inference and “support/undermine” questions typically involve only the information in the line reference itself. If the line reference begins (or ends) halfway through a sentence, however, make sure you back up (or keep reading) so that you cover the entire sentence in which it appears. If a line reference begins close to the beginning of a paragraph, you should automatically read from the first sentence of the paragraph because it will almost always give you the point.

There is unfortunately no surefire way to tell from the wording of a question whether the information necessary to answer that question is included in the line reference. Most of the time it will be there, but sometimes it will appear either before or after, and very occasionally in another paragraph entirely.

If you read the lines referenced and have an inordinate amount of difficulty identifying the correct answer, or get down to two answers and are unable to identify which is correct, that's often a sign that the answer is actually located somewhere other than in the line reference. Go back to the passage, and read from a sentence or two above to a sentence or two below.

For long line references: a long line reference is, paradoxically, a signal that you *don't* need to read all of the lines. Usually the information you need to answer the question will be in either the first sentence or two, the last sentence or two, or in a section with key punctuation (dashes, italics, colon). Start by focusing on those places and forgetting the rest; they'll almost certainly give you enough to go on.

3) Answer the question in your own words, and write that answer down

The goal is not to write a dissertation or come up with the exact answer ETS has written. You can be very general should spend no more than a few seconds on this step; a couple of words scribbled down will suffice. The goal is to identify the general information or idea that the correct answer must include, keeping in mind that the correct answer may present that idea worded in a way that you're not entirely expecting.

It is, however, important that you write down something in your own words because that answer serves to focus you. It reminds you what you're looking for and prevents you from getting distracted by plausible-sounding or confusing answer choices.

Again, make sure you're answering the question that's actually being asked, not just summarizing the passage.

You should take **no more than a few seconds** to do this. If you can't come up with anything, skip to step #4.

4) Read the answers carefully, (A)-(E), in order

If there's an option that contains the same essential idea you put down, choose it because it's almost certainly right. If it makes you feel better, though, you can read through the rest of the answers just to be sure, but make sure you don't get distracted by things that sound vaguely plausible and start second-guessing yourself.

When you cross out an answer, put a line through the entire thing; do not just cross out the letter.

If you can't identify the correct answer...

5) Cross out the answers that clearly don't work; leave *everything* else

Try not to spend more than a couple of seconds on each answer choice. If an option clearly makes no sense in context of the question or passage, put a line through the entire thing, not just the letter. As far as you're concerned, it no longer exists.

Any answer that could even slightly work, even if you're not quite sure how it relates to the passage or question, you should leave. Remember: your ability to understand an answer choice has no bearing whatsoever on whether it's right or wrong, so you should never cross out anything simply because you don't fully grasp what it's saying.

When you get down to two or three answers, go back to the passage again and start checking them out. Whatever you do, do not just sit and stare at them. The information you need to answer the question is in the passage, not in your head.

There are several ways to approach the remaining answers.

First, when you go back to the passage, see if there are any major transitions or strong language you missed the first time around; you may have been focusing on the wrong part of the line reference. If that is the case, the correct answer may become clear once you focus on the necessary information.

Very often, the correct answer will also contain a synonym for a key word in the passage, so if a remaining choice includes this feature, you should pay very close attention to it.

You can also pick one specific word in each answer to check out when you go back to the passage. For example, if the lines in question focus on a specific author and the answer choice mentions “authors,” then the answer is probably beyond the scope of what can be inferred from the passage. Likewise, if an answer focuses on a specific person, thing, or idea not mentioned in the lines referenced, there's also a reasonable chance that it's off-topic.

Remember: that the more information an answer choice contains, the greater the chance that some of that information will be wrong. Short, “vague,” general answers are often correct, and you should give them careful consideration.

Finally, you can reiterate the main point of the passage or paragraph, and think about which answer is most consistent with it. That answer will most likely be correct.

6) If you're still stuck, see whether there's a choice that looks like a right answer

If you still can't figure out the answer, you need to switch from reading the passage to “reading” the test. Working this way will allow you to make an educated guess, even if you're not totally sure what's going on. Does one of the answers you're left with use extremely strong or limiting language (*no one, always, totally incompatible*)? There's a pretty good chance it's wrong. Does one of them use a common word (e.g. *qualify, conviction*) in its second meaning? There's a pretty good chance it's right. Is one answer very long and detailed and the other very broad and general? You might want to pay particularly close attention to the latter.

In addition, ask yourself whether all of the answers you're left with actually make sense in context of both the test and the real world. For example, an answer choice that states an author is “criticizing the prominent role of the arts in society” is simply out of keeping with the SAT's humanistic bent. No author who seriously believed that the arts should not play an important role in society would ever be approved for inclusion on the test. Likewise, an answer containing information that is historically false (e.g. it suggests that a man who lived during the eighteenth century held radically feminist views) is equally unlikely to be right. Yes, you should be very careful about relying on your outside knowledge of a subject, but it's ok to use common sense too!

7) If you're still stuck, skip it

You can always come back to it later if you have time.

Understanding and Marking Line References

One of the major advantages of the SAT as opposed to the ACT is that Critical Reading questions are always organized chronologically in order of the passage, *and* the test-writers at ETS are nice enough to tell you what lines to focus on. But line references aren't nearly as much of a gift as many people think. The most important thing to understand is that a line reference simply tells you where in the passage a particular word, phrase, or set of lines is located. Consider a question that reads: "The author's attitude toward 'that alternative' (line 35) can be best be described as..." This question is telling you that the words 'that alternative' appear in line 35. That's it. The answer is not necessarily in line 35. It could be in line 33 or line 37 or line 40. If the author is playing "they say/I say," it could even be suggested in line 5. Yes, much of the time, the information you need to answer the question will in fact appear in the lines provided, but sometimes it will also be in a neighboring line, either before or after. Occasionally it may be in a different paragraph entirely.

In one popular Critical Reading strategy, the test-taker goes through all of the questions and marks all of the line references in the passage before reading it so that she or he will "know where to focus." While this can be a very successful strategy for helping people whose minds would otherwise wander, and I would not discourage anyone from using it if they find it particularly helpful, I do have a couple of caveats about it. First, as discussed above, the answer may not actually be in the lines provided in the question. If it doesn't occur to you to read elsewhere when you can't figure out the answer, you'll often get stuck between two options and have no clear-cut way of figuring out which one is correct. And that's a shame since often the answer will be fairly straightforward; it will simply be somewhere else.

Second, this strategy can drain significant amounts of time that could be better spent answering questions. If you have difficulty finishing sections on time, you probably shouldn't be using it. There's no reason you can't go back and block off the lines as you come to them.

Third, this strategy is to some extent based on a misunderstanding of how the test functions: **the most important places in the passage, the ones that you need to pay the most attention to, are not necessarily the ones indicated by the questions.** Remember: the details are only important in context of the point. Focusing excessively on a particular set of lines can therefore cause you to lose sight of the big picture – and often it's the big picture you actually need to answer the questions. At the other extreme, only a small part of the line reference may sometimes be important. There's no point in meticulously blocking off eight lines if all you need to focus on is the first sentence or a set of dashes.

I've worked with a number of students who diligently marked line references and who, not coincidentally, were stuck around 700. They were good students and fairly strong readers, but they lacked flexibility – they insisted on working through every question the same way. They did fine when the information they needed was present in the lines referenced, but when it wasn't, they floundered. It didn't occur to them how much they needed to consider ideas and parts of the passage not explicitly mentioned by the question. At some level, they also didn't really understand what the test was asking them to do. The ones who were willing to approach questions from a variety of angles improved; the ones who insisted on staying in their comfort zone and only reading the lines they were given did not.

Now let's actually look at an example:

- There's a certain way jazz musicians from the 1930s pose for photographs, half-turned to face the camera, symmetrically arrayed around the bandleader, who can be identified by his regal smile and proximity to the microphone.
- 5 Publicity stills of the period were the equivalent of English court paintings, hackwork intended to exalt their subjects and attract admiration to their finery. Band-leaders often took titles borrowed from the aristocracy: Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Earl Hines . . . well, Earl was actually the man's given
- 10 name, but he lived up to it in a way no modern celebrity could approach.

- There's a picture of Hines with his band on the stage at the Pearl Theater in Philadelphia, exuding swank. Their suit pants, which bear stripes of black satin down the seams, break
- 15 perfectly over their gleaming shoes; their jacket lapels have the span of a Madagascar fruit bat; their hair is slicked. They were on top of their world. The year was 1932, and about one in four Americans was out of work.

The author mentions the "given name" (lines 9-10) in order to

- (A) characterize the appearance of English court paintings
- (B) praise Earl Hines for his elegance and style
- (C) promote a particular type of music
- (D) criticize the practice of borrowing titles from the aristocracy
- (E) indicate an exception to a common occurrence

If we're going to try to answer the question on our own, the first thing we need to do is make sure we understand what it's actually asking. The phrase "in order to" indicates that it's a "purpose" or "function" question. We could therefore rephrase as it, "Why does the author use the phrase 'given name' right there," or "What's the point of using the phrase 'given name' right there?" Although you might be rolling your eyes right now and saying, "Duh, yeah, that's *obviously* what it's asking," taking a moment to rephrase the question is crucial because it forces you clarify your thinking and allows you to approach the passage with a precise idea of what you're looking for.

The fact that it's a "purpose" question tells us that we need to establish **context**, so we're *not* going to start reading where the line reference tells us to read – we're going to start reading **before** it, where the sentence begins, all the back to line 7. (The colon in line 8 tells us that there's important information there.) What do we learn from that sentence? That "band leaders often took titles borrowed from the aristocracy." In other words, they took names that weren't their own (i.e. their **given names**). So the fact that Earl Hines used his own name meant that he was *different* from other musicians. The correct answer must therefore have something to do with that idea. When we scan through the choices, we see that (E) is the only option that goes along with that idea – "exception" is the only word in any of the answers that captures the idea of being different. And (E) is in fact correct.

If that seems like a reasonable – not to mention simpler – way to work, great. Although it’s true that the above question was not written by ETS, you can use this method of working to answer many real SAT questions. The test is set up so that you can often jump immediately to the right answer if you’ve taken the time to identify the idea it must contain.

You might, however, also be thinking something like, “Well *you* make it seem easy enough, but *I’d* never actually be able to figure that out on my own.” Or perhaps you’re thinking something more along the lines of, “Ew... that seems like way too much *work*. I just want to look at the answer choices.” So for you, here goes. One by one, we’re going to consider the answer choices – very, very carefully.

(A) characterize the appearance of English court paintings

This is pretty obviously not the answer. The author does draw a comparison between the pictures of jazz musicians and English court paintings, but the mention of Hines’ given name clearly has nothing to do with that. Besides, it’s just not the focus of the passage. So it’s wrong because it’s **off topic**.

(B) praise Earl Hines for his elegance and style

It would be pretty easy to assume that this was the answer. After all, the author talks about Earl Hines, and he clearly likes him and his style a whole lot. There’s only one little problem, though: the question isn’t asking what the author is doing throughout the passage as a whole – it’s asking **why** the author uses the particular phrase “given name” at the particular spot in the passage. And unfortunately, that little detail isn’t included to support the overall point of the passage; it’s included to support a different point: that Earl Hines, unlike Duke Ellington and Count Basie, truly did have a name (*Earl*) that was also an aristocratic English title.

So it’s *a* right answer. It just isn’t *the* right answer to this particular question.

(C) promote a particular type of music

Yes, the author does talk about “a particular type of music” (i.e. jazz), but he isn’t really “promoting” anything in the sense that *promote* = try to get people to listen to jazz. Now, it might seem reasonable to infer that since the author thinks these musicians were so amazing, he must be promoting their music, but there’s nothing in the passage that explicitly supports that idea. He’s just talking about how sleekly jazz musicians presented themselves during the 1930s, and even though he’s clearly impressed by them, being impressed with something is not *by definition* the same thing as trying to get other people to do it. It’s too much of a leap.

This type of answer plays on **associative thinking**, which involves making connections between ideas even when no direct relationship between them is indicated by the passage, and it can get you in a lot of trouble on Critical Reading.

Besides, the when the word “promote” appears in an answer choice, that answer is pretty much always wrong. But we’ll get to that later.

(D) criticize the practice of borrowing titles from the aristocracy

Like (A), this is an answer choice that's also relatively easy to get rid of, mostly because it's so far away from the focus of the passage. Notice, however, that this answer includes a phrase taken directly from the passage ("borrowed from the aristocracy") – it's the first part of the answer, the word "criticize," that makes the whole thing incorrect. If you really didn't understand (or think about) either 1) what the passage was saying, or 2) what the question was asking, however, you could get fooled by the fact that the answer choice contains identical wording to that in the passage.

You could also fall prey to associative thinking again: you might assume that since the SAT is an American test and America is a democracy, the author would probably be against a form of social organization that gave people status based purely on family background, and so it would make sense for him to be criticizing it. Unfortunately, there is absolutely nothing whatsoever in the passage to support that interpretation. It's also completely unrelated to the question. Being aware of the SAT's biases *can* be useful in some instances, but that goes way, way too far. **Right words, wrong idea.** It's also **too broad**. The passage only talks about jazz musicians who named themselves after aristocratic titles; it says nothing about the practice in general.

Remember: when the exact same words appear in the answer as appear in the passage, that answer is most likely wrong.

(E) indicate an exception to a common occurrence

If you're like many test-takers, you probably eliminated that answer almost immediately. After all it doesn't really seem to have anything to do with the passage – but in fact, that's precisely why you should pay extra-close attention to it.

Don't forget that the question asked us to consider *why* the author used the particular phrase "given name." In other words, how does the use of that phrase support the idea that the author is trying to convey? As we saw in (B), the point is that Earl Hines was *different* (i.e. an exception) from other jazz musicians in that his real name was an aristocratic title (*Band-leaders often took titles borrowed from the aristocracy: Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Earl Hines . . . well, Earl was actually the man's given name, but he lived up to it in a way no modern celebrity could approach.*) The word "often" tells us that it was **common** for jazz musicians to take such names (taking such names = an occurrence).

So (E) is right because it simply restates what's going on in the passage, albeit in very, very different language – language that you probably weren't expecting and might not have been sure how to connect to the question or the passage. We'll look at that issue later on, in Chapter Two, but for now, just one more thing to point out: although the question tells you to look at line 9, the information you need to answer the question actually comes *earlier*. If you start at the line you're given, you have no way of figuring out the answer, whereas if you back up and start in line 7 at the beginning of the sentence, you at least have a chance.