

Test Prep 101: Read for Speed & Scoring

“How do I read faster?”

Simple: read faster. (And practice reading as fast as possible).

There is no short cut to reading faster. There are no “tricks and tips” or “test-taking strategies” that apply to becoming a solid reader. There is only a lifetime of practice. When to practice: Now. What to practice on – well, anything. A few months ago, 3RPrep started the NY Times “Daily Read.” It is an article from the NYT that is sent out by us four times each week: Monday – Thursday. Email us to get on the distribution list (and ask for a list of quality publications and books to read). Reading anything non-fiction is worthwhile. Go over it as quickly as possible trying to identify the main point and the supporting arguments.

Reading Strategies and Techniques for Comprehension and Scoring.

There are 2 types of passages on the SAT and 3 on the ACT (if you include Science as reading, which we do).

Grammar Passages

The easiest score to improve is Grammar: SAT Writing (section 2) and ACT English (test 1 of the 4 test sections). The grammar sections are nearly identical, so this applies to both tests. The first thing to do is to relearn and remember the basic rules of grammar that are tested. This is easily done with following the 3RPrep method and using a good test prep grammar book (Meltzer). The second thing to do is develop a reading strategy that fits your style, one that you will be comfortable with on test day.

There are two broad reading styles on the grammar section: 1. Read the whole passage, a page at a time, and 2. Read the questions/underlined portions and go question to question reading what you need. We are fans of both styles – both techniques work. Try them out and see what fits you. The grammar portion is written at a lower level than the reading comprehension. The passages are often light-hearted and enjoyable (unlike the SAT passage from 1839 about slavery or women’s rights – ugh). Always pay attention to the title of the passage, it will often answer a question about author’s intent.

Grammar is meant to be a “proof-read” or a “peer review.” It can be easily done by a 7th grader who is in the final stages of learning grammar for writing essays and stories. If you are following technique #1: Read the whole page and take notes on what is being presented. Annotating is an excellent use of your time and will get you to understand the passage better. Then answer the questions page by page. Rereading what you need to in order to answer correctly. If following technique #2: go for it, read what you need and get to the answer as quickly as possible.

Reading Passages.

Both the SAT (section 1) and the ACT (test 3) have reading passages followed by 10 or so questions about the passage. What is the best technique? Do you read the whole thing first, skim, or the questions first? The answer is yes! All three styles work, so practice and see what fits you.

Read the whole thing. Many students will never be comfortable answering questions unless they read the entire passage (Technique #1). Okay. If that is you, by all means, read the passage! Some students skim the passage and move to the questions knowing that they will have to turn back to read in more detail based on the questions (Technique #2). And some will want to read the questions in order to focus on what they need to get out of the passage to score (Technique #3). Like grammar, all styles work, if they work for you. Be adventurous and try out the techniques to see what your optimum style is.

The key words and phrases. If you have tutored with 3RPrep at all, you have heard of “key words.” The answer is IN the passage. That is the correct answer must agree with the passage and wrong answers will have something that is either not IN the passage or disagrees. If one word is wrong with the answer choice, then the entire answer is wrong. On the SAT in particular, the key word is a vocabulary matching game. It takes years of intentional reading to build a vocabulary.

50/50. Often students will narrow it down to two great answer choices. But remember, one of them must be incorrect – there can only be ONE objectively correct answer choice. So, SWITCH from answering the question correctly and prove the incorrect answer wrong! The 3RPrep slogan is: “On Wednesdays, we wear pink.” Be a mean girl to the wrong answer and eliminate it.

ACT Science

The ACT Science test (Test #4) is also a lot of technical non-fiction reading with infographics of charts and graphs. Practice the two main techniques of reading the whole thing or skimming and simply doing the questions. We recommend that you read the table headings and the axis labels of the graphs, there is sure to be questions with those words quoted. Know where they are and find the answer.

The best technique is to practice. Do as many tests as you need to achieve your goal. And GOOD LUCK!