

CHAPTER 6

Reading: Information and Ideas

Questions on the Reading Test can be sorted into three categories: (1) Information and Ideas, (2) Rhetoric, and (3) Synthesis. This chapter focuses on the first category, Information and Ideas.

Information and Ideas: The Author's Message

Information and Ideas questions ask you to think carefully about the author's message. To interpret that message, you'll need to consider both what's stated and what's implied in the passage. By "stated," we mean the things that the author mentions directly and explicitly, such as facts, figures, and other kinds of main points and key details. "Implied," by contrast, refers to what isn't directly stated but is otherwise strongly suggested and can reasonably be inferred.

Let's examine the specific sorts of questions that make up the Information and Ideas category and what kinds of skills and knowledge these questions expect of you.

Questions in this category are of six main types:

- **Reading Closely:** Determining what's stated or implied in a passage and applying what you've learned from it to a new, similar situation
- **Citing Textual Evidence:** Deciding which part of a passage best supports either the answer to another question or a given conclusion
- **Determining Central Ideas and Themes:** Understanding the main point(s) or theme(s) of a passage
- **Summarizing:** Recognizing an effective summary of a passage or of a part of a passage
- **Understanding Relationships:** Establishing connections (such as cause-and-effect, comparison-contrast, and sequence) between people, events, ideas, and the like in a passage

- **Interpreting Words and Phrases in Context:** Figuring out the precise meaning of a particular word or phrase as it's used in a passage

Let's explore each of these types in turn.

Reading Closely

Reading Closely is the most general of the question types on the Reading Test. It includes a broad range of questions that deal with interpreting what an author has said explicitly or implicitly and applying that information to new contexts. You may be asked to locate a point or detail in a passage or to reach a supportable conclusion or inference based on what's been stated directly, or you may be asked to think about how the information and ideas in the passage could be applied to another analogous case or situation.

The questions themselves don't follow an easily recognized pattern, but in each case, you'll have to read attentively and consider what the author is trying to say directly or indirectly. There are also often one or more clues within the question that hint at the kind of work you'll have to do. If the question uses "according to the passage," "states," "indicates," or something similar, it's likely that you should look for something said explicitly in the text. On the other hand, if the question uses "based on the passage," "it can reasonably be inferred," "implies," or the like, you'll probably need to interpret the passage to figure out an implicit message.

Citing Textual Evidence

Questions of this type ask you to determine which portion of the passage provides the best textual evidence for the answer to another question or for a conclusion offered in the question itself.

Consider this brief excerpt from a speech by Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, who was discussing the nature and seriousness of the impeachment of a president in the U.S. political process. The sentences that are the focus of the first of two paired questions have been highlighted here for convenience, but they wouldn't be if this were a real test. (The full passage, along with more thorough answer explanations, can be found in Chapter 9.)



REMEMBER

Keywords in the question will often clue you in on whether you're being asked about information that was explicitly stated in the passage or about an implicit message that was suggested by the passage. Being aware of this will help you approach questions more effectively.

. . . The North Carolina ratification convention: “No one need be afraid that officers who commit oppression will pass with immunity.” **“Prosecutions of impeachments will seldom fail to agitate the passions of the whole community,”** said Hamilton in the *Federalist Papers*, number 65. **“We divide into parties more or less friendly or inimical to the accused.”** I do not mean political parties in that sense.

The drawing of political lines goes to the motivation behind impeachment; but impeachment must proceed within the confines of the constitutional term “high crime[s] and misdemeanors.” Of the impeachment process, it was Woodrow Wilson who said that “Nothing short of the grossest offenses against the plain law of the land will suffice to give them speed and effectiveness. Indignation so great as to overgrow party interest may secure a conviction; but nothing else can.” [. . .]

Adapted from a speech delivered by Congresswoman Barbara Jordan of Texas on July 25, 1974, as a member of the Judiciary Committee of the United States House of Representatives.

In lines 46-50 (“Prosecutions . . . sense”), what is the most likely reason Jordan draws a distinction between two types of “parties”?

- A) To counter the suggestion that impeachment is or should be about partisan politics
- B) To disagree with Hamilton’s claim that impeachment proceedings excite passions
- C) To contend that Hamilton was too timid in his support for the concept of impeachment
- D) To argue that impeachment cases are decided more on the basis of politics than on justice

The above question isn’t our main interest here, but we need to consider it briefly in order to make sense of the second of the two questions. The best answer here is choice A. In the paragraph containing the highlighted sentences, Jordan quotes Alexander Hamilton, who talks about how people “divide into parties” of those who oppose or support impeachment (those who are “more or less friendly or inimical to the accused”). She then goes on to say, “I do not mean political parties in that sense.” Here, she draws a distinction between informal groups of people — those simply for and against impeachment, as Hamilton meant — and organized political parties, such as the modern-day Republican and Democratic parties. The most likely reason Jordan goes to this trouble is because she’s worried about being misinterpreted. (This becomes clear elsewhere in the passage, where she indicates that, in her view, impeachment shouldn’t be about pure politics but rather about serious violations of the law by a president.)



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When you’re asked to explain why the author of the passage includes a specific statement, carefully consider the context of the statement as well as the author’s broader point of view in the passage overall.



REMEMBER

Many Citing Textual Evidence questions will require you to select the statement from a passage that best supports the answer to a previous question.

But how do we know choice A is the best answer? That’s where textual evidence comes in, and it’s the basis for the second question in the pair. Before we look at the actual question format, though, consider the following brief quotations from the larger passage. Ask yourself: Which one best supports the answer to the previous question?

It is wrong, I suggest, it is a misreading of the Constitution for any member here to assert that for a member to vote for an article of impeachment means that that member must be convinced that the President should be removed from office.

The division between the two branches of the legislature, the House and the Senate, assigning to the one the right to accuse and to the other the right to judge—the framers of this Constitution were very astute.

The drawing of political lines goes to the motivation behind impeachment; but impeachment must proceed within the confines of the constitutional term “high crime[s] and misdemeanors.”

Congress has a lot to do: appropriations, tax reform, health insurance, campaign finance reform, housing, environmental protection, energy sufficiency, and mass transportation.

The first of the four quotations talks about impeachment, but other than that, it doesn’t really have anything clearly to do with the answer to the previous question. The second quotation is about a kind of division, but, again, it has little to do with the matter at hand. The fourth quotation merely offers a list of the many things Jordan feels Congress should be concerning itself with.

That leaves the third quotation. In it, Jordan claims that while a desire to achieve political goals can lead some to want to start impeachment proceedings against a president (“the drawing of political lines goes to the motivation behind impeachment”), the process is too serious for that to be a good basis for such proceedings. Instead, impeachment should only be sought if the president is believed to have committed a serious offense (“must proceed within the confines of the constitutional term ‘high crime[s] and misdemeanors’”). This third quotation, then, serves as the best of the four options in terms of textual evidence.

In test format, this Citing Textual Evidence question looks like the following:

Which choice provides the best evidence for the answer to the previous question?

- A) Lines 13-16 (“It . . . office”)
- B) Lines 20-23 (“The division . . . astute”)
- C) Lines 51-54 (“The drawing . . . misdemeanors”)
- D) Lines 61-64 (“Congress . . . transportation”)

Each of these answer choices refers to one of the quotations presented earlier, only this time, passage line numbers stand in for the full quotation. The words marking the beginning and the end of the quotation are included to make it easier to find the lines in the passage.

You'll see questions like this throughout the Reading Test, and you should approach each in a similar way: finding the best answer to the first question and then deciding which part of the passage offers the best support for that answer. It's OK to work on both of these questions at once and to reconsider your answer to the first question after you read the second. Sometimes looking at the choices in the second question will help you rethink your original answer to the first question. Just don't overthink it or second-guess yourself too much.

It's possible you'll see variations on the above format as well. One sort is when the question itself provides a conclusion (instead of the test asking you to come up with it on your own in another question) and asks you which choice provides the best support for it. This is fundamentally the same sort of question as the previous Citing Textual Evidence example, only it's a one-part instead of a two-part question.

Determining Central Ideas and Themes

Some questions on the Reading Test may ask you to figure out what the main points or themes of a passage are. These two concepts are very similar, although many people (and the Reading Test) tend to refer to "theme" instead of "main idea" when talking about the central message of a literary text. In either case, you're typically looking for an overarching statement that succinctly encapsulates a key point the author is trying to make. Main ideas and themes may be stated explicitly or, especially in more challenging passages, only implied. While "theme" questions tend to be only about a passage as a whole, "main idea" questions can be about one or more paragraphs or an entire passage. Generally, words such as "main idea," "main point," "central idea," or "theme" help signal the intent of the question. Because you're looking for the main idea (or theme), you'll want to avoid picking an answer that only refers to a detail or that fails to capture the entire point the author makes.

Summarizing

When you successfully summarize a text, you've conveyed the most important ideas (generally in the order presented) without adding your own interpretation or including minor details. Although the Reading Test doesn't ask you to create your own summary of a passage or a part of a passage, you may be asked to choose which one of four options offers the best summary, or perhaps to recognize where a proposed summary falls short (maybe because it's inaccurate in some way or includes extraneous details). These sorts of questions generally use some form of the word "summary" as a clue to their purpose.



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Citing Textual Evidence questions often come as part of a pair, with the answer to the evidence question being related to the answer to an earlier question. You may sometimes find it helpful to revisit your answer to the previous question after reading the answer choices in the evidence question.



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Keywords such as "main idea" and "theme" clue you in to the fact that you're looking for the answer choice that captures the overarching point the author makes in one or more paragraphs or in the passage as a whole. Be wary of answer choices that focus in on specific details.

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As you read the passage, take special note of keywords that signal causes and effects (e.g., “because”), comparisons (“more,” “less”), and sequences (“first,” “after”). You may be asked one or more questions that test your understanding of these relationships.

**REMEMBER**

On Interpreting Words and Phrases questions, don’t rely solely on your vocabulary knowledge. Tested words will often have multiple definitions, so be sure to consider the context in which the word or phrase is being used.

Understanding Relationships

Some questions on the Reading Test may ask you to determine the relationship between people, ideas, events, and the like in passages. These questions tend to fall into one of three subtypes:

- **Cause-and-effect:** Understanding how one thing caused another to happen; often signaled by words such as “because” and “since”
- **Comparison-contrast:** Understanding how two things are similar and/or different; often signaled by words such as “more” and “less”
- **Sequence:** Understanding the order in which things happened; often signaled by words such as “first,” “last,” “before,” and “after”

These sorts of questions can be found with all types of passages. You may, for example, have to determine sequence when figuring out what happened and when in a passage from a novel or which step came first in a science experiment. As noted previously, Understanding Relationships questions will often use words that suggest the kind of relationship you’re looking for. This relationship may be directly stated, or you may have to infer it from information in the passage.

Interpreting Words and Phrases in Context

Interpreting Words and Phrases questions ask you to determine the precise meaning of a particular word or phrase as it’s used in a passage. You’ll again be offered four answer options, one of which most closely matches how the author is using the word or phrase. Remember from our previous discussion of “intense” in Chapter 4 that these tested words will often have multiple dictionary definitions, meaning that you can’t rely solely on your vocabulary knowledge. Having a broad vocabulary can be helpful, but you’ll also have to think about how the word or phrase is being used in a particular case.

Although there are some variations, Interpreting Words and Phrases questions typically come in the format of “As used in line *x*, [word or phrase]’ most nearly means,” where *x* is a line in the passage and *word or phrase* is the tested vocabulary. Often, you can try substituting each answer choice into the relevant sentence of the passage to get a better idea of which choice makes the most sense. Note, however, that simply reading the sentence containing the word or phrase isn’t always enough; you may need to consider a larger portion of the text — multiple sentences or the surrounding paragraph — or even the passage as a whole to confirm the intended meaning.

Chapter 6 Recap

Information and Ideas questions are, at heart, questions about the message the author is trying to convey. Questions in this category will ask you to read closely, to cite textual evidence, to determine central ideas and themes, to summarize, to understand relationships, and to interpret words and phrases in context. In some cases, the answer can be found word for word (or nearly so) in the passage, but because the Reading Test is also a test of your reasoning skills, you'll often have to do much of the work yourself by making supportable inferences and drawing logical conclusions.

