4 reading comprehension basics

It is very hard—next to impossible—for us to change the way that we walk. You can try it if you'd like. We can do it for five minutes, maybe ten, but soon enough, we'll end up walking the same way we always do. The same thing goes for how we drive, and how we talk. Our conscious efforts are no match for such ingrained and instinctual habits.

All of this also applies to how we read. Reading is one of the most amazing things that human beings can do, and it's something we do by habit, because it takes skills that are well beyond our conscious ability. That's why it's very difficult to change, or even just impact, the way that we read. We can't do it on a purely conscious level (that is, we can't read differently just by telling ourselves to read differently).

But here's the thing: your brain knows how to walk differently in different situations. It is incredible at adapting. When you walk by someone you find attractive, the way that you walk literally changes—whether you know it or not. If a tiger is chasing you, you'll change your walk into a really fast version—a *run*—and you won't need to think about this on a conscious level for it to happen.

Your brain also knows how to adapt to different reading situations. It's amazing at it. Your brain reads a newspaper article differently than it does a recipe, or a work e-mail, or a letter from a friend. It knows that sometimes its job is to be critical, and at other times its purpose is to be empathetic. Again, we adapt almost perfectly, without any conscious effort.

The problem is that your brain does not know how to read LSAT passages. It doesn't yet have the information or experience to have correct instincts. What we need to do is supply it with exactly the right information about how to approach LSAT reading passages. We also need to get plenty of experience, with specific and useful reinforcement, so that we can turn these reading instincts into habits.

Take a look at this next passage, and try your best to answer the accompanying questions. Keep track of your time, but don't prioritize timing for now.

We read by habit, and we can't change how we read just by wanting to

Sample Passage and Questions

On this page and the next are an LSAT passage and all the questions that accompanied that passage when it originally appeared. Time yourself as you read the passage and solve the questions, but do not, at this point, worry about sacrificing accuracy for speed. We will discuss the passage and questions in detail in just a bit.

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* Note that because passages have been reformatted, they are presented here without the original line numbers. Questions that refer-
ence line numbers will thus include a brief description, in italics, of where to find the relevant information.

LSAT Reading Comprehension

Imagine that you answer a help wanted ad in your local newspaper, and somehow end up writing Reading Comprehension questions for the makers of the LSAT. They supply you the passage and ask you to come up with some questions. What types of questions would you come up with? I imagine that most of you would be able to come up with some very good ones.

Could the scene above actually play out? The part that's perhaps most suspicious is that the LSAC, the makers of the LSAT, gives you this assignment to write questions without more specific instruction—without far more specific instruction. Keep in mind that the LSAT is a standardized test, a *highly* standardized test, which means that each challenge presented to the test taker has been accounted for and carefully calculated.

LSAT Reading Comprehension questions are not about random reading issues. They are very carefully constructed, and their designs are extremely consistent from passage to passage and exam to exam. LSAT Reading Comprehension passages test us on just a few very specific skills, and they test us in the same ways over and over again.

Therefore, as I mentioned before, the key to Reading Comprehension success is to train yourself so that your reading strategies and priorities perfectly align to the challenges that are typically present on the LSAT—the challenges the test writers are interested in. You want to read an LSAT reading passage in a very different way than you read other things in your life; in fact, the way that you want to read LSAT reading passages is likely very different from how you've read passages on other standardized tests. We want to make this reading method so habitual that you don't have to consciously control it (because you can't anyway). When your reading habits align with the specific challenges of Reading Comprehension, you will find yourself anticipating certain questions, and you will find the challenge of differentiating between right and wrong answers to be far more clear cut.

What Reading Comprehension Tests

In Lesson 1, we broke down all three sections in terms of the two skill sets that they test: reading ability and reasoning ability. Whereas Logical Reasoning tests both skill sets about equally, and the Logic Games section prioritizes your reasoning ability, Reading Comprehension is almost entirely about your reading ability. Two or three questions per section may ask you to use a bit of reasoning—to find an answer to strengthen the author's point, for example—but by and large almost all of the challenges presented in the section are designed to test your reading, rather than reasoning, abilities.

Additionally, there is one particular reading skill that is of the most interest to the test writers: your ability to recognize and correctly understand reasoning structure. We've discussed reasoning structure already in the Logical Reasoning introduction: Reasoning structure is the relationship between the various components of a passage. If you understand what parts are meant to be main points, what parts are meant to support those points, and so on, then you have a clear understanding of reasoning structure.

Reading Comprehension questions are carefully constructed, and their design is consistent from passage to passage, and exam to exam

Your ability to read for reasoning structure will be the key determinant of your success

The Challenges of Reading Comprehension

In light of what we've just discussed, let's consider the general challenges that the Reading Comprehension section presents:

One: Passages can be dense and full of complex or subtle details.

Furthermore, the most difficult questions tend to be associated with those passages that have the most complex or nuanced content. Not only are these complex details necessary for answering certain questions, they impact our ability to read for reasoning structure. Most of us are not as good at using our reading ability when we are faced with unfamiliar subject matter.

Two: Central issues or passage structure can be complex or subtle.

When you think about a great piece of clothing, it can be great because of the materials (the substance of it) or the design (the use of that substance). Reading Comprehension passages can be difficult because of the content (the details involved) or because of the reasoning structure (the relationship between those details).

As you'll see with more experience, most reading passages will present two opposing viewpoints on some sort of issue (one opinion versus another on how a certain law should be interpreted, or an old scientific theory versus the one that replaced it). However, the relationship between these two sides is not always clear cut—in fact, it can be extremely subtle. Furthermore, most passages will inform us of the author's opinion of the content, but often this opinion will be given to us in vague ways, and the opinion can also be somewhat complex. Perhaps a passage will present two sides of an argument, and the author will hint that she somewhat agrees with one side, and feels uncertain about the other.

Three: Questions require us to see the forest *and* the trees.

That is, in order to answer questions successfully, we need to have a strong sense of the general structure of the passage, and, at the same time, we need to have a very clear sense of the details that are directly relevant to specific questions.

Many test takers end up trying to focus on both the big picture and the details as they read. In fact, most other preparation books, by giving you a laundry list of thirty specific and general things to notice as you read, indirectly point you toward just that tactic. But here's the thing—we can't do both well at the same time. Trying to see both the forest and the trees turns us into schizophrenic readers, and we end up doing both poorly. The key to success is to focus on the big picture as you initially read the passage, and to utilize specific details during the problem-solving process. We'll discuss this strategy quite a bit more in the lessons to come.

We are not very good at reading for the big picture and for small details at the same time, and there is no need for us to try

Characteristics of Top Scorers

Of course, just as no two people walk in exactly the same way, no two test takers, even top scorers, read in exactly the same way. Still, there is great commonality among those who are able to complete Reading Comprehension sections with few or no misses. Here are some of the key ones:

Top scorers...

...naturally and intuitively read for reasoning structure. It's not just that they know it's important—it's what they think about as they read. That is, as they are reading that super-complicated sentence about a physics experiment, they are less concerned with understanding all of the intricacies of the experiment, and more concerned with figuring out *why*, exactly, the author has chosen to tell us this information.

...are able to recognize when to slow down to carefully absorb important details. As we discussed, trying to absorb every single detail in a passage is an exercise in futility. Effective reading is about prioritizing. Top scorers are able to focus in on details when it is important for them to do so. During the initial read, the details most important to absorb are those that tell us of the main point at issue, and those that hint at the author's opinion. During the process of answering questions, other details will become important when they need to be used to confirm right answers and eliminate wrong ones.

...always know to look out for and are able to recognize subtle hints that point toward author bias or opinion. Most passages give us hints as to what the author feels about the issue at hand. Often these hints are subtle and *seemingly* secondary to the more important parts of a passage, but any hint of author bias is extremely important, for it gets to the heart of understanding reasoning structure—understanding why the author wrote a particular passage and structured it the way he did. Though generally very little text in a passage is dedicated to opinions, the opinions discussed in passages are generally central to the questions, and, in particular, you can expect at least a question or two that hinges on an understanding of the author's opinion. A top scorer understands how important this opinion is and is always able to dig it out.

...have a clear understanding of what each question is asking. LSAT writers do not mince words. Many Reading Comprehension questions sound similar, but subtle differences in wording (such as "according to the passage" versus "the passage suggests") can have a significant impact on what is required of the right answers and what defines wrong answers. We will spend several lessons discussing how to think about and solve specific types of questions. A top scorer, by the time she goes into the exam, will have an exact understanding of all the different types of Reading Comprehension questions that can be asked.

...are able to anticipate characteristics of the right answers for most questions. They are able to do so based on what they are given in the question stem. Now, there are some questions that, per their design, do not have answers that are predictable (such as "The passage mentions which of the following?"). However, most question stems give you a more specific sense of what to look for in a right answer, and top scorers are able to use this understanding to perform the next two steps well.

...are able to consistently and confidently eliminate incorrect answers. There are few characteristics that differentiate top scorers more than the ability to eliminate incorrect answers. If you understand the passage and your task well, the characteristics of incorrect answers become much clearer and more obvious. Furthermore, top scorers recognize that eliminating wrong choices first not only increases overall consistency and accuracy, it also helps make the search for the right answer easier.

Finally, top scorers know when they are certain that an answer is correct, and when they are not. Most top scorers will still have at least a couple of Reading Comprehension questions per section for which they cannot feel certain that they got the correct answer (it's really helpful, in these instances, to have strong elimination skills). However, they will rarely, if ever, have a situation in which they feel certain they got a question right, only to find out they did not. Top scorers know the feeling of matching an answer exactly to the task presented in the question stem, and, more importantly, they have systems for confirming their work. You can feel certain of your answer if it matches what you anticipated, and if you are able to verify it based on the relevant text. Top scorers have these skills.

why do we miss questions?

How do you think you did on the sample passage? If you think you nailed all of the questions, great. If you missed some, even better! Early on in your process, misses are fine—they are better than fine. They are really useful, for they show us exactly what we need to improve on to get the score we want. This test is conquerable, and the best students are the ones who are best at identifying and reacting to challenges (forgive me if I repeat that a few more times throughout the book). We'll talk about assessing our issues in much greater detail in later lessons, but for now, here are a few basic and effective ways to think about your misses. When we miss questions, we do so for one or more of three reasons:

We misunderstand the reasoning structure of the passage

The most significant issues have to do with not recognizing the main points (reading passages very commonly juxtapose two opposing main points about a central issue), and not recognizing the author's opinion about the subject matter. Misunderstanding the reasoning structure of a passage has exactly the same impact that mis-diagramming a Logic Game has: you may just have a small hint that you're doing something wrong as you make your mistake, but the consequences truly reveal themselves at the point of the questions. If you truly understand reasoning structure, most questions will play out as you expect. If you misunderstand it, every question will feel like an uphill battle.

We do not read carefully enough

There is a Catch-22 here. If you try to read the entire passage as carefully as you possibly can, giving each word ample due, chances are you'll do a terrible job of actually understanding what you are reading. Reading is about bringing words together, and you need a certain distance to do that. What you want to do is float like a butterfly and sting like a bee; be a generalist, but zero in on details when it's necessary to do so. One such necessary moment is during the evaluation of answer choices. Their challenge is often in the wording, and often right and wrong answers are differentiated by subtle wording issues.

We approach the question incorrectly

LSAT questions ask very specific things, and require very specific steps from us. Sometimes, we miss questions because we don't think about the answer choices in exactly the right way in relation to the question being asked, and sometimes we miss questions because we don't think about the things we should be thinking about per what we are being asked to do. A question stem is an incredibly useful tool—it generally tells us exactly what we need to look for in an answer, and, if you read carefully enough and know what to look for, it also often tells us how to go about getting that answer. As you become more and more familiar with the exam and the questions, you should expect this last one to become less and less of an issue.

Sample Solution

Here is a solution to the passage and questions you tried earlier. Much of the solution is presented in terms of the real-time thoughts a top scorer might have during an exam.

Real-Time Thoughts

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- background: passage is about consequences of increasing CO_2 levels

- opinion: increased CO_2 could lead to lush green world, which could lead to decreased rate of global warming. This is probably the central issue

- author opinion: CO_2 would impact plants differently, and so wouldn't lead to overall lushness

- support

- confirmation of main point from previous paragraph

- CO_2 increase also unlikely to lead to more absorption of CO_2/decrease in global warming

- support

Why Did the Author Write the Passage?

The author wrote this passage to evaluate a specific theory about the consequences of increasing CO_2 levels on global warming: that increased CO_2 could lead to a more lush world, which would lead to more plants that could absorb CO_2, thus lowering the rate of global warming. This theory, and the background necessary to understand it, is presented at the beginning of the passage, and the author spends the rest of the passage presenting points and evidence that are meant to challenge and go against the theory.

How Is the Passage Structured?

In paragraph 1, we are given a general scenario (CO_2 levels are rising, and that is known to cause global warming) and a theory about the scenario (increasing CO_2 will actually lead to lushness, which will lead to a slower rate of global warming).

Paragraph 2 takes issue with one aspect of the theory (lushness), and presents evidence to challenge that idea.

Paragraph 3 takes issue with another aspect of the theory (increased CO_2/decreased rate of global warming) and presents evidence to challenge that idea.

Sample Solution

Stem: asking for main point—passage presents theory that increased CO_2 could lead to more lushness, which could lead to slower rate of global warming, then spends majority of text countering that theory.

Answers: You want to always eliminate wrong choices first—(A) is more like the opposite of the main point, so we can cut it. (B) is tempting, but the author does not discuss findings that contradict one another, and (B) does not represent well the *main* point the author is making, so we can cut it. (C) seems like a good answer, so we can leave it. (D) is a part of the passage, but not the main point—cut. (E) goes beyond the text—nowhere does the author state that the rate of global warming is likely to increase. (C) is the only answer remaining—double check it. The theory in the first paragraph is about a possible benefit of increasing CO_2 levels, and the rest of the passage presents information that indicates that the theory may not be correct. (C) is the right answer.

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Stem: asking for a flaw with the theory being challenged—the right answer could be a lot of things, so I should first try to eliminate obvious wrong answers.

Answers: (A) is not something the author states, and we can cut it. (B) looks really good—that's basically what the last paragraph was about. (C) is wrong relative to what the text says, so we can cut that, too. (D) seems attractive—I'll leave it. (E) is what the theory proposes, so it's not something the theory fails to take into account.

Down to (B) and (D). (B) still looks good, but looking at (D) again, it's a bit suspicious—it's not changes in patterns of plant growth that alter "distribution of peat." Rather, the author discusses temperature directly impacting peat. (D) is wrong. The part of the last paragraph starting with "Some studies" and ending with "liberated more CO_2 into the atmosphere" seems to support (B). It's correct.

Stem: asking for the function of the last paragraph—we know it's meant to counter the theory in the first paragraph.

Answers: (A) is almost definitely correct. It's what I anticipated—leave it. Take a quick scan though the rest of the choices—(B), (C), (D), and (E) clearly misrepresent the reasoning structure. (A) is correct.

Stem: asking about what Patterson and Flint would agree with (they are mentioned in the second paragraph)—showed that important crops may show reductions because of weeds.

Answers: "Most species of plants" in (A) goes well beyond what they discussed—cut. "Most" in (B) helps us cut that too. (C) doesn't match text (which is about highly photosynthetic plants having trouble) too well—cut. (D) is easy to match with text, and almost definitely correct—leave. (E) clearly goes against the text—cut.

(D) seems to be correct—check it again. Weeds growing faster than corn—yup. They would agree with (D), and it's correct.

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Stem: I know that most of the passage is about why the author *questions* the conclusion reached. Let's see what I can do with these answers.

Answers: (A) is something the author does agree with—it will certainly help rates of certain plants. Leave it. (B) is clearly wrong—"abundance of important crops" goes against the stuff about corn. (C) goes against big point the author is making, so we can cut it. (D) is not correct either—the author does think it will lead to abundance of *certain* plants. Cut. (E) is just silly—of course the author believes the theory is correct in this regard.

(A) is the only decent answer. Let me confirm with the text—yup. Text says that certain crops with higher photosynthetic efficiencies may lose their edge (meaning others plants will increase their photosynthetic rates and catch up). (A) is correct.

Stem: I know that the peat grew at a lot faster rate with higher temperature, and more peat = more CO_2.

Answers: (A) seems to match the text well—leave it. (B) doesn't match what the text says about the peat—cut. (C) also doesn't match text—temperature only impacts *rate* of decomposition. (D) goes beyond text and is too general a blanket statement (*all* regions at lower latitudes?)—cut. (E) doesn't match text at all.

(A) is the only attractive answer—let me confirm. Text says increase in temperature leads to increase in peat, so it definitely supports (A). (A) is correct.

Sample Solution

Stem: asking about something that goes against hypothesis that with more CO_2, crops with higher photosynthetic efficiencies will lose edge to those with lower efficiencies.

Answers: (A) is tempting, but not clear if trees also had high photosynthetic properties—cut. (B) also is missing high vs. low factor—cut. (C) definitely goes against the theory—it's probably correct. (D) and (E) are both missing the high vs. low factor. (C) is correct, for it shows high beating low in an environment rich in CO_2.

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Stem: asking about Billings—looking back, in Billings' study, global warming led to increased plant growth in wet tundra grasslands, but increased CO_2 because of increase in decomposition of peat.

Answers: Billings doesn't compare areas, so (A) is out. (B) is too specific—cut. Not sure if his study addresses (C) exactly, but it's tempting—leave it. (D) is also tempting, I guess—leave it. He doesn't compare areas, so (E) is out.

I don't love any answer, but I'm down to (C) and (D). Checking (C) against the text, it does seem to match it pretty well—the plants are growing more, but there is also more CO_2 (which the text tells us leads to global warming). Looking at (D) again, it's just too specific—doubling seems pretty drastic, and his research is about what happens to plant growth with warmer temperatures, not with increased CO_2. (D) is definitely incorrect, and so (C) is correct.

The Road Map to Mastery

Even if you are in terrific physical shape, if you are used to just doing a few particular activities, you will often find that when you switch activities—learning a new sport for example—you'll end up using certain muscles you've been unknowingly neglecting, or you'll end up using the same muscles you've used before but in a slightly different way. You'll realize you are "in shape" for certain activities but not others, and as a result, you'll wake up feeling sore the next day.

Most of us are in pretty good reading shape. However, LSAT reading requires more from us, and it requires us to exercise our mental muscles in relatively unique ways. None of us, at first, are in optimal "shape" to read the LSAT. Through practice and drilling, you can drastically improve your reading shape as it pertains to this exam.

How are we going to get there? Our Reading Comprehension training plan is going to take us through three main phases:

Phase one: We'll learn how to read LSAT passages.

As we mentioned before, the Reading Comprehension on the LSAT is unique, and if you approach it without much of a strategy, or if you approach it with a general understanding of what it is that they are testing, you simply will not be able to represent your abilities at their best. Reading the passage in the right way is the most important aspect of your Reading Comprehension success.

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details, details

basic facts about reading comprehension

One of your four scored sections will be a Reading Comprehension section.

Each Reading Comprehension section contains four passages, along with six to eight questions per passage.

Your Reading Comprehension section will most likely contain 27 questions.

Each full section contains one passage on each of the following subjects: law, science, history, and the humanities.

The subjects are chosen to not give an unfair advantage to any particular group. The subjects will either be arcane (e.g., Willa Cather) or very general (e.g., weather patterns).

Questions will be asked about the passage as a whole and about particular paragraphs, sentences, phrases, or individual words.

Questions will test your understanding of why the author wrote the passage, and they will test your ability to recognize and understand the correct meaning of specific components.

The reading ability most tested and most important is your ability to read for reasoning structure. Questions will test that you understand the structure of the passage as a whole, and they will test whether you correctly understand the roles specific components play.

As with the other sections, our job is never to choose between two viable answers. There is always one absolutely right answer and four absolutely wrong answers.

All questions require careful reading. Wrong answers are often wrong because of subtle wording issues. Most questions require very little extrapolation, and most right answers are directly related to the given text.

In general, the first passage will be the easiest passage, but this will not always be true.

The Reading Comprehension section is very carefully designed to test particular skills in particular ways. It's very clear exactly what they are testing, and what they are not. In this phase, we will focus on developing a clear understanding of exactly how LSAT Reading Comprehension is designed, and we'll work on developing reading strategies that align with LSAT passages and questions. We'll practice all of this while working through real LSAT passages.

Phase two: We'll develop question-specific strategies.

Once you feel comfortable with the basic structure of LSAT passages, and once you have a base of understanding in terms of what this section is designed to test, we will delve into question-specific strategies. We'll discuss each of the different types of questions that you can encounter, work through what you can expect in the right answer and four wrong choices, and of course give you plenty of practice to help facilitate the natural flow between your learning, strategies, and experience.

Phase three: We'll work to set final habits.

In this last phase, we will work to ensure that everything we have learned, and all of the strategies we've derived, can be seamlessly integrated into your performance. Focusing primarily on practicing and reviewing real LSAT passages, we'll make sure you are ready to go into the exam with a specific skill set that aligns with the exam, and that you go into the exam in awesome reading shape.

We will learn how to read passages, develop question-specific approaches, and set effective habits

Recap of Lessons One through Four

Here is a quick summary of some of the main points that we have discussed in these first four lessons:

The LSAT is a test of reading ability and reasoning ability. It is also a test of mental discipline. The Logical Reasoning section tests both reading and reasoning ability, most commonly by testing your ability to understand and critique *arguments*. The Logic Games section primarily tests your ability to reason, and the Reading Comprehension section, as we've been discussing, is primarily designed to test specific aspects of your reading ability.

Success on the LSAT is most directly dependent on two factors: your skills and your habits. Therefore, the primary purpose of your training should be to develop skills and effective habits. We do so by increasing our understanding, by developing effective strategies, and by gaining more experience with the exam. Our skills and habits grow most quickly and effectively when these three components—understanding, strategies, and experience—influence one another. The *Trainer* is designed to help you first develop the skills and habits that are most *fundamentally* important for success on the exam. From there, we will work to carefully grow our skill set and habits until we've addressed every specific aspect of the exam.

The Road Ahead

If you are following one of the suggested study schedules, the next step for you will be to take a full-length diagnostic. This will give you a good sense of what the questions feel like in real time, and it will, of course, also give you a good sense of what your initial strengths and weaknesses are. At this point, there is no need to review the exam afterwards in depth (though you are certainly welcome to if you'd like). The reason I mention that is because you will be assigned to do all of the problems from this practice test again as part of your homework, and, when you do these problems again later in your process, it will likely be easier for you to evaluate them more objectively and accurately.

Starting from the next lesson, we are going to focus for several lessons at a time on one section type at a time, so that we can get fully immersed. In time, we will gradually cycle through multiple sets of lessons on Logical Reasoning, Logic Games, and Reading Comprehension lessons.

Here's a look ahead at the next few sets:

Lessons 5 through 9 are going to be our first set of Logical Reasoning lessons. We will use these lessons to develop our ability to understand and critique arguments.

Lessons 10 through 15 will get us immersed into Logic Games preparation. We will use these lessons to lay out all the various possibilities for Logic Games and to develop our ability to diagram any and all such scenarios.

Then, for Lessons 16 through 20, we will go back to Logical Reasoning, and we'll start to discuss more specifically how to apply our assessment of the stimulus to the various tasks that different types of questions present. We'll have our first set of in-depth Reading Comprehension lessons after that.