

The Hidden Patterns of SAT Passage-Based Reading Questions

There are four important hidden patterns in SAT Passage-Based Reading Questions. Learning these patterns makes it easier to find correct answer choices.

Hidden Pattern 1: Word Usage

You can usually expect that every passage on the SAT will have a question about the use of a word in a particular line. The correct answer to the question is ALMOST NEVER the most common meaning of the quoted word. For example, imagine a question like this:

In line 63, the word “close” most nearly means

- (A) near
- (B) similar
- (C) miserly
- (D) quiet
- (E) strong

We can be fairly sure that (A) is a wrong answer, since “near” is the most common meaning for the word *close*.

Hidden Pattern 2: Ordered, Relevant Citations

Many of the Passage-Based Reading questions will refer you to a specific part of the text to find the answer for a question. For the most part, the citations will lead you through the text in order. In other words, Citation Questions will usually be ordered so that the questions with early citations come early in the section, and the questions with later citations come later in the section.

Why do we care about this? The ordering of the Citation Questions means that we can use our answers to those questions to gain a good understanding of the passage.

The SAT cites all the important portions of the passage—IN ORDER—so that you don’t have to read the passage. You can simply read the citations, which you would have to do anyway in the course of answering the questions. Then, when you go back and do all the General Passage Questions, you can answer them with the information you gained from answering the Citation Questions.

Hidden Pattern 3: Wrong Answers

Like every other question type on the SAT, the Passage-Based Reading Questions have recurring patterns of wrong answers that we can use as clues in our search for the right answer. There are four major types of wrong answers that we’ll run into. To

demonstrate them, we'll use a fake line of text from an imaginary reading passage, along with four wrong answer choices.

Example Citation:

. . . Researchers have shown that Benjamin Franklin's sister was visually impaired, which might explain the amount of energy that Franklin invested in the invention of bifocals. . . .

Example Question:

According to the citation, research suggests that Benjamin Franklin invented bifocals because

Wrong Answer Type 1: Extra Information

In this wrong answer we find some information that was mentioned in the citation, and some information that was never mentioned in the citation at all.

(A) his sister was having difficulty seeing the equipment that she used to run her dress shop.

In this example, the wrong answer adds information about the specific problems that the sister was having with her vision.

Wrong Answer Type 2: Direct Contradiction

This type of wrong answer directly contradicts something in the citation.

(B) his sister's perfect vision served as an inspiration.

Here, the wrong answer choice contradicts the cited fact that the sister has poor vision.

Wrong Answer Type 3: Complete Irrelevance

This type of wrong answer has absolutely nothing to do with the cited text. These wrong answers can actually be very tempting to a lot of students. They can't believe the SAT would offer them an answer choice that's obviously wrong, but that's exactly what the test does.

(C) he wanted to be able to read his newspapers without putting on a different pair of glasses.

This wrong answer has nothing to do with anything mentioned in the passage.

Wrong Answer Type 4: Confused Concepts

This type of wrong answer uses a lot of the ideas mentioned in the citation, but messes up the relationships between them.

(D) his sister invested in a cure for his vision problems.

This one mentions the sister, the investing, the vision problems, and the idea that the bifocals would correct the problem, but it messes up the relationships between those ideas.



Those Wrong Answer Types, or combinations of them, will account for most of the wrong answers for Passage-Based Reading Questions. Basically, they all boil down to the idea that wrong answers provide information that differs from the information found in the citation.

Hidden Pattern 4: Right Answer Pattern

There is only one Right Answer Pattern in the Passage-Based Reading Section. Right answers are often direct restatements of the words and phrases in the citation. Right answers address the question completely. They don't leave anything out, and they don't add any extra information.

(E) of his sister's difficulty in seeing.

Here, the phrase *difficulty in seeing* is very similar to the phrase *visually impaired* in the citation. Nothing more, nothing less.

This is really the only Right Answer Pattern for Passage-Based Reading Questions. Since there's only one pattern, you can usually find it in the same way, over and over. It gets to be easy!