

Tips And Tricks For SAT Writing:

The Literature Passage

On every SAT exam, there's one fiction passage from "U.S. or World Literature" (yeah, that does basically mean anything in the world, as long as it's written in English). The literature passage is always the first passage in the Reading section.

The SAT likes relatively recent fiction, but it's not unheard-of to see something older--works anywhere from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century are pretty fair game. There is a broad range of unheard-of writing traditions and time periods that the story might come from. There are two things you can be sure the Reading passage won't be, though: written in totally antiquated English (such as Milton's *Paradise Lost*) or taken from a young adult series (such as *Twilight*. Sorry, Bella).

A few times the literature passage will be the easiest reading in the entire section, and sometimes it will be the hardest. You'll usually know within the first paragraph. Sometimes you'll think the story is engaging, which is such a nice bonus. But don't get too caught up in the tale. This is the SAT, after all. Questions are coming, and we need to be ready to answer them.

Here are some tips on approaching the Literature passage:

1. Read the Intro Information

Before every SAT Reading passage on the SAT, there are a couple of sentences that tell you where the text is taken from and give you a Lil bit of background further info, if necessary. You should everytime read this, especially when it's a fiction passage. For one, it tells you it's fiction: that affects what your note-taking strategy will be (more on this every time in a

moment). Besides that, it might give you some more important is every background info on the setting and characters to help orient you. The copyright date in the passage is also an important clue regarding the era a passage was written in, which can tell you a lot about the author and his or her world.

2. Gradually Describe Characters

As you read above, keep track of the characters you meet in the passage. There will only be a few—maybe two or three—so this shouldn't be too tough. But as you read, build up a clean list of descriptions of those characters. Focus on their personalities and motivations; how does the author paint them? Any adjectives words you see to describe their personas are worth circling or underlining. It's good to be thinking about the author's intentions when you're doing this. Is the author's attitude toward a character positive, negative, or neutral?

3. Describe the Relationships Between the Characters

You want to build up not just an image of each personality, but also a description of the relationships between them. Take care to note how characters feel about each other or react to each other. The SAT exam will almost always ask you about this.

4. Write Character Traits in Your Notes

Jot down notes about the characters alongside the paragraph & passage as you read. They don't need to be extensive. "Mary = mean-spirited; Susan = naive" will suffice. This will be a really helpful guide for when you answer questions about characters.

5. Note the Turning Point(s)

There might be every literature passage on the SAT exam is going to have some type of “turning point” where something happens to a character, a character remembers something happening to them, or a character has a revelation.

This turning point is often crucial to understanding the point of the story, in terms of the SAT. Put a big star by the turning point when you find it. As a bonus tip or extra tip, looking for the turning point helps keep you actively engaged in your reading.

The Nonfiction Passages

After the Literature passage, you’ll see two History/Social Studies passages and two Science passages--typically alternating. These passages might be approached a little uniquely than the Fiction passage. Here’s what you need to know:

1. One of the Social/History Studies passages and one of the Science passages are going to include a few graphic. We will be talking about how to deal with the questions on graphics in the upnext section, but for now, I would suggest not focusing on the chart graphics graph at all when you are reading until you get to the question(s) on it. The questions might be very specific or pretty general, and you never know exactly what they are going to ask. There is going to be a lot more information in the graphic than you need to answer the question, so don’t waste your time until the question tells you exactly what you need to find.

2. One of the Social Studies/History passages is going to be from a U.S. Founding Document or the Great Global Conversation. It is extremely

important to check the author and the date on these passages, which will appear in a smaller font before the passage. You might be familiar with the author (“Oh, hello there again, Dr. Martin Luther King or Harriet Tubman!”) or the time period in which it was written (“Hmmm, 1775 sounds suspiciously like the start of the American Revolution”). Although the questions will never rely on outside knowledge, some familiarity with the author or situation will orient you before you begin reading so you can get more out of the passage without having to piece together the clues.

3. Just because it’s non-fiction doesn’t mean the author won’t have a personal perspective.

The History/Social Studies passage maybe something like a memoir; in this case, it may sound almost like a fiction passage. Or it might be a letter or a speech that is making a persuasive (and personal) argument. If it seems pretty personal, be prepared for questions that ask about the author’s feelings or attitudes.

More on the History/Social Studies Passage

There’s a range of subjects that these passages can draw on, but there tends to be a heavier focus on sociology, psychology, economics, and political science than other topics. As a sampling, the official college board practice tests from the College Board guide have passages on the psychology of gift-giving, public transportation, ethical economics, theories of education in 18th century America, the growth of cities, speeches by Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Cady Stanton on the roles of women, and the French Revolution.

More on the Science Passage

Don't be too intimidated by the Science passages. Although they will often contain some jargon, they are written for everyday people. However, at the same time, don't be lulled into thinking that a strong background in science is useless here. It's a lot easier to make sense of theories on the DNA double helix if you've studied them in class. If you're uncomfortable reading about science, we suggest reading some science articles written for the general public. *Scientific American*, *Discover* magazines or *National Geographic*, or will give you a good feel for the type of passages you might encounter on the SAT.

The Science passages pull from a range of topics in the natural sciences: this means earth science, biology, chemistry, and physics. A sampling from the Official College Board Guide includes passages about DNA, the prospect of mining in space, the effect of the Internet on our brains, ocean waves, the evolution of birds, the disappearance of honeybees, genetic modification, and sources of volcanic eruptions.

The Takeaway

The SAT exam calls most of the nonfiction passages “informational passages” because this is exactly what they do: communicate information. Your job is to distill this information into its most important elements:

1. Any different theories or perspectives on the topic presented
2. The examples used to support the topic
3. The author's conclusion about this topic

If you can do this, you will be prepared for almost all of the questions.