

# Chapter 1: An Overview of the ACT Reading Test

## Passage Types

Passages fall into four main types: literary narrative, humanities, social science, and natural science. These passage types each have conventions for form and content. Each section is followed by 10 questions that generally follow the order of the passage. You have 8 minutes and 45 seconds for each of the four sections. The test comprises four sections, three of which contain one long prose passage. The fourth section presents two shorter passages with some questions that require you to compare and contrast them. These two texts will belong to one of the four passage types. For example, this section may contain two literary narrative excerpts on the topic of travel. Every test will have one paired passage, and it can occur anywhere in the test. The following table shows the percentage of each type of passage on the test. There are 40 questions to answer in 35 minutes.

Reading Content	Percentage of Test	Number of Questions
Literary Narrative	25	10
Humanities	25	10
Social Science	25	10
Natural Science	25	10

### ***Literary Narrative***

The literary narrative passages are excerpts from novels or short stories. Literary narrative does not include poems or scripts from plays. The excerpts typically include two to three characters. These passages focus primarily on characterization developed through the dialogue, actions, and thoughts relayed through the narrator. Though a conflict may be established at some point in the narrative, there is rarely a full story arc with a climax or resolution. Typically, a passage introduces only the characters. Most passages end with what might be considered a cliff hanger. Some insights are revealed about the dynamics between the characters but very little action takes place. Though many literary narrative passages begin at a point of change in a character's life, the characters tend to remain static without undergoing dramatic changes over the course of the passage.

### ***Humanities and Social Science Passages***

Humanities and social science passages tend to address human beings and their relationships with one another, the world around them, and their shared history. Humanities passages range from excerpts of memoirs to articles about the Indian film industry. Social science passages cover topics such as politics, architecture, and sustainability. Both humanities and social science passages tend to be structured in a traditional thesis-driven essay format with a clear thesis at the end of the introduction and topic sentences that begin each body paragraph by reviewing the content of those paragraphs and how that content supports the thesis.

### ***Natural Science***

Natural science passages tend to follow a certain structure. Typically, they begin by describing a topic of study. Usually the topic is a scientific problem that will be examined or a hypothesis that will be evaluated. The introduction and initial body paragraphs then describe the knowledge that existed prior to a certain experiment or invention. Key terms will be defined. Then the later body paragraphs summarize studies that have been completed and the views of various scientists or outcomes of experiments.

Some science passages go into great depth about experiments, and others just summarize the theories of different scientists. Other passages detail all the obstacles that made the topic difficult to study in the first place.

Once a scientist is introduced with his or her first and last name, then that person is referred to by his or her last name throughout the remainder of the passage. For example, if biologist Rachel Carson is introduced at the beginning of a passage, she will be referred to as Carson for the remainder of the passage.

The conclusion paragraph typically discusses the limitations of the current data about the topic being studied. It may also offer ideas for further studies that could be completed or it may focus on the applications of the most recent data discovered. Sometimes science passages end with a reflection on the meaning of the scientific discovery.

## Timing and Pacing

Your study plan should involve reviewing the content of this guide and taking timed practice tests to determine if you are retaining and applying what you have learned. You do not need to take your first practice test under timed conditions, but, eventually, you should practice using the correct pacing. For example, each English passage should take about 9 minutes. Each reading passage should take 8 minutes and 45 seconds. Many test centers only have an analog clock. If you are not able to easily read such a clock, bringing a digital watch may help you keep track of the time. Try to practice this way as well instead of using your phone's timers to time yourself during practice tests because you won't be able to use your phone during the actual test. You should also practice taking a full test in one sitting in the morning in order to mimic the testing conditions. Additionally, you should not read sentences out loud when you take practice tests because you will not be able to do this during the actual test.

The complete ACT test is always given in the same order. A break is given after the first two tests (English and math) are completed. Therefore, you should feel a bit energized as you head into test three: reading. If you do not have time to complete a full-length practice ACT, try to take a reading test after completing about an hour-and-a-half of homework because this will mimic the amount of time you will have spent taking the ACT by the time you get to the reading test.

## Checking Your Answers

If you wish to double-check your work, you can do so either at the end of each passage while the content is still fresh in your memory or after finishing the complete reading test. Mark questions that you are unsure about with a symbol such as a question mark. When checking your work, be sure to consider the context of the passage as a whole, not just the referenced lines or most relevant paragraph. If you decide to change an answer, try to consciously recognize the reason for the change by saying to yourself, "I am choosing answer B because I now realize that this question includes the word EXCEPT. Answer C is incorrect because I accidentally thought the question was asking about what Ted and Vida *have* in common instead of what they do *not* have in common." Using this process to slow down and articulate your thoughts process will help you be mindful as you double-check your answers.

## Scaled Scoring

Here is a recent example of top-scaled scores:

Number Correct	Scaled Score		Number Correct	Scaled Score
40	36		32	30
38–39	35		31	29
37	34		30	28
36	33		—	27
34–35	32		29	26
33	31		28	25

## Take a Diagnostic Practice Test

Before taking a diagnostic reading test, read chapter 2, which offers suggestions about how to approach the reading test, and decide which approach you will practice. If you divide your time evenly among the passages, each passage should take 8 minutes 45 seconds from start to finish. You need to determine how much of that time you should dedicate to reading each passage and how much time to devote to answering the questions. Most students should first begin by spending three to four minutes reading each passage and the remaining time answering the questions. If that approach does not work well, try to spend about five to six minutes reading and the remaining time answering the questions. If possible, try to use printed copies of tests, because this enables you to practice in the same manner in which you will take your actual test. Being able to cross out answer choices, underline, and star information can help you process the passages and questions. In the online version of the test, you will have a highlighting tool.

## How to Use This Guide

This guide begins with a review of a variety of approaches that can be used to tackle the ACT reading test passages. Next comes a description of a number of reading skills you will need for success on the ACT reading test and an overview of several question types that appear across different passages. These questions are accompanied by the relevant excerpts from the passages, and some excerpts are accompanied by explanatory notes that paraphrase the content of the passage. You may wish to hold off on reading the explanatory notes until you have attempted the question, using only the content from the passage itself.

**Note:** Entire passages are not always reproduced. Ellipses (. . .) indicate that a paragraph has been omitted. In order to provide information about which portion of the passage has been reproduced, paragraph numbers have been included in brackets as follows. Paragraph numbers will not appear on the actual exam. Line reference numbers will be included for every fifth line of text in this guide and on the actual exam.

**HUMANITIES:** This passage is adapted from the essay “My Life with a Field Guide” by Diana Kappel-Smith (©2002 by Phi Beta Kappa Society).

[5]

20 ...In the thin summer shadow of the tree, quivering, like a veil, the book was revealed, and I reached for it. A FIELD GUIDE TO WILD FLOWERS—PETERSON & McKENNY, its cover said. Its backside was ruled like a measuring tape, its inside was full of drawings of flowers. By the end of that week I had my own copy. I have it still.

...

[8]

I had already figured out the business of the book’s colored tabs. I turned in an authoritative way to

40 the Yellow part and began to flip through. By the time the last of my friends had disappeared up the trail, I’d arrived at a page where things looked right. Five petals? Yes. Pinnate leaves? Whatever. Buttercup? There are, amazingly, *eleven* buttercups. Who would have thought? However hard I tried to make it so, my item was not one of them. Next page. Aha! this looked more like it. Bushy cinquefoil? Nope, leaves not *quiiiite* right, are they? As the gnats descended, I noticed that there were six more pages ahead, each packed with 50 five-petaled yellow flowers—St. John’s wort loose-strifes, puccoons.

[9]

Why I persisted in carrying it around and consulting its crowded pages at every opportunity, I have no idea. The book was stubborn; well, I was stubborn, too; 55 that was part of it.

The remainder of this guide covers the content and form of the various passage types: literary narrative, humanities, social science, and natural science. Seeing questions and passages grouped by genre should help you gain a deeper understanding of how to navigate the process of reading the different passage types. As you complete practice questions, keep track of your mistakes and reflect on the processes you used to arrive at your answers. Try to develop an awareness of the types of reading passages and questions that you have trouble with so you can budget your time appropriately to maximize your score.

