



Chapter 1: An Overview of the ACT Reading Test

Passage Types

Passages on the ACT reading test are labeled as either literary narrative or informational. Informational texts are drawn from the following genres: humanities, social science, and natural science. These passage types each have conventions for form and content. Each passage is followed by 9 questions. If you think of the reading test as four sections, you have 10 minutes for each of the four sections. Two of the reading test sections contain one long passage, one section contains one shorter passage, and one section contains two short passages that explore a similar topic (paired passages) *or* one long passage that is complemented by a graphic (Visual and Quantitative Information passage). You will have 40 minutes to answer 36 questions (27 of these questions will be scored).

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Literary Narrative

The literary narrative passages are excerpts from novels, short stories, or memoirs. 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. You may see a paired literary narrative passage on the test, but you will never see a literary narrative passage complemented with a visual element like a table or chart.

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 can cover topics such as literary criticism, philosophy, music, dance, and film. Social science passages cover topics such as economics, sociology, anthropology, and history. Both humanities and social science passages have a main point or purpose and can be explanatory or persuasive.

Natural Science

Natural science passages can vary, sometimes introducing an obscure scientific topic, explaining significant scientific studies, or describing a science-related problem. Some science passages go into great depth about experiments, and others just summarize the theories of different scientists.

A note about informational passages: Although there may be some unfamiliar terms used in informational passages in particular, you are not expected to know what they mean. Much of the time, the terms will be defined for you in the passage, or context may make it possible for you to discern the meaning. On the reading test, no outside knowledge is needed to answer the questions. All of the information you need to answer the questions correctly can be found in the passage.

You may see a paired passage in any of the informational genres. Also, a humanities, social science, or natural science passage could be complemented with a visual element, like a table or chart.

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 (10 minutes for each set of reading questions). Many test centers will have an analog clock, and if you take the test on the computer, you will have access to a built-in timer. You can also bring a digital watch as long as it's not a smart watch (you will have to turn off any sounds or alerts for testing). Try to practice with an analog clock or digital watch 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. You may feel a bit energized as you head into test three, which is reading. But you may also have to take a moment before the test starts to refocus on the task at hand. 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. If you're taking the test online, you can use the bookmark tool to mark questions you'd like to come back to. 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 articulating it to yourself. For example, "I am changing my answer to B because I realize now that I misinterpreted the line of text to be referring to sand dollars when it is really referring to certain types of seashell." Using this process to slow down and articulate your thought process will help you be mindful as you double-check your answers.

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 set should take 10 minutes 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. 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 paper-based exam.

INFORMATIONAL: This passage is adapted from “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 *quiiite* 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.

