

# Crystal Ball Grazing

Look deeply into this crystal ball. Can you see your future? Yes, the one where your house is featured on MTV's "Cribs" and you've just been signed to a multimillion-dollar contract to promote a new soft drink.

Predicting the future isn't just for soothsayers and television prophets. Readers, too, proceed by making predictions about the passage. We are rarely aware that we are making predictions for the simple reason that our predictions are usually so good. Our predictions rarely let us down, even when we read a book for the first time.

What exactly do we predict when we read? The fundamental answer is meaning. Prediction is the reason that the brain is not overwhelmed by all the possible alternatives in a passage; for example, if you reach the bottom of a page and see this sentence: "The captain told the crew to drop an-", you don't really need to turn the page to know that an "anchor" is just about to plop into the sea. We expect what the writer is likely to say because consciously or not, we are continually making predictions about the text.

Let's look at how this might work in the ACT Reading exam. Suppose you find a passage that begins like this:

*One evening in late January, Peter Dut, twenty-one, leads his two teenage brothers through the brightly lit corridors of the Minneapolis airport, trying to mask his confusion.*

We immediately grasp the basic situation: we have a narrative involving several characters (Peter and his two brothers), a setting (January in Minneapolis, brrrr!), and a conflict (Peter is confused).

What we're not told—why Peter is in Minneapolis in the first place and why he's so confused—helps stimulate our desire to predict. We expect to find answers to those questions as the passage continues, and by predicting what those answers will be we become more active readers. Here's the next sentence:

*Two days earlier, the brothers, refugees from Africa, encountered their first light switch and their first set of stairs.*

Part of the mystery is solved. We know the boys are from Africa, and from a very undeveloped part, apparently. But part of the mystery remains open: how is it that they have come to Minneapolis? This process will be repeated over and over again as we read. We will find a few answers that in turn lead to more questions.

Let's see what happens next:

*An aid worker in Nairobi demonstrated the flush toilet to them—also the seat belt, the shoelace, the fork. And now they find themselves alone in Minneapolis, three bone-thin African boys confronted by a swirling river of white faces and rolling suitcases.*

Images from Africa (the "river of white faces") blend in the boys' imaginations with new sensations ("rolling suitcases") to create a cultural jumble. Now we can predict what the narrative is heading toward: a series of cultural encounters between these African boys and American technology. And indeed, as we read in the article "The Lost Boys" by Sara Corbett, we learn the story of some 3,600 Sudanese refugees who have come to the United States to find new lives.

Pay special attention to first and last words of a paragraph—do they remind you of something you read in the previous paragraph or help prepare you for the succeeding one? Look for parallels in content and style. Often writers will emphasize a point by repeat-

10 • INCREASE YOUR SCORE IN 3 MINUTES A DAY: ACT READING

ing the structure of a particular sentence or repeating a particularly significant word.

As you read the ACT passages, keep asking yourself: Where is this headed? What can I expect to find? Making guesses and predictions will keep you alert and engaged as a reader. It puts you in control.

Finally, polish up that mental crystal ball you've been saving for just this occasion.