

Ah, the Humanity (etc.)

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*I had always planned on going to Columbia . . .
but they had tests to get in.*
—Jon Stewart, “The Daily Show”

This just in for all of you fake news show hosts of the future: you still have to take tests. The ACT Reading test will ask you to read four passages, each about 750 words long, and answer ten questions on each passage. You’ve got to do all that in thirty-five minutes, which is just under ten minutes per passage. You’re going to have to keep one eye on your watch as you work to pace yourself.

The passages will be taken from each of four areas: humanities, natural sciences, social sciences, and fiction. Passages in the humanities might include topics about the arts, movies, TV, literature, or philosophy. The natural science passages will cover just about every hard science you can think of, including astronomy, botany, geology, physics, and zoology. The social science section might include history, politics, or anything relating to people’s behavior. Finally, the fiction section will include a short story or portion of a short story, novel, or memoir.

Pay special attention to the following discussion of these passages. Each type of passage offers a unique challenge.

Ah, the Humanity

The humanities passages are usually about art, literature, or philosophy. The focus is less on facts, more on inference. Consider what columnist Dave Barry has to say about the history of painting:

After the Mother and Child Phase came the Enormous Naked Women Eating Fruit Phase, which was followed by the Just Plain Fruit with No Women of Any Kind Phase and the Famous Kings and Dukes Wearing Silly Outfits Phase. All of the phases were part of the Sharp and Clear School of painting, which means that even though the subjects were boring, they were at least recognizable. The Sharp and Clear School ended with Vincent Van Gogh, who invented the Fuzzy but Still Recognizable School and cut off his ear. This led to the No Longer Recognizable at All School, and finally to the Sharp and Clear Again but Mostly Just Rectangles School, which is the school that is popular today, except at shopping malls.

Now no one would accuse Barry of worrying about facts, but you can infer a thing or two from his insights. You won't find much in the way of great art at shopping malls, for example.

The most important thing to remember when reading these questions: *slow down*. Because some of the questions are based on inferences, you have to think about the implications of what you are reading. The good news is that these passages are almost always politically correct and positive. You are not likely to read a passage from an author asserting that Denzel Washington was overrated as an actor. Respond accordingly.

The ACT has been criticized in the past for insensitivity to minorities. If you come across a passage that discusses a minority issue, you can expect kid-glove treatment. In the ACT world, everything is beautiful in its own way.

To focus your thinking, you may want to jot down a few notes in the margin. (See Strategy 5 for suggestions.) If you can't separate the inferences, your hopes of answering the questions correctly could go up in flames.

And you don't want to be the next Hindenburg-er.

Houston, We Have a Passage

In a graduation talk for the UNC School of Information and Library Science, Martin Dillon's calculations demonstrated how trends and statistics can be dangerous. Evidently, the number of Elvis impersonators grew from 51 in 1981 to almost 15,000 in 1995. Dillon says, "If that trend continues, there will be some 50,000,000 Elvis impersonators in the U.S. alone by the year 2015. In the graduating class of that year, every 5th or 6th student would be an Elvis impersonator."

Elvis is not the only one who wants to leave the building. A natural science passage can be intimidating to anyone. Calculations discussed may be mind-boggling. The scientific jargon is often confusing. Fortunately, choosing the correct answer rarely depends on understanding a particular scientific term, and the calculations only matter on the Math section.

Any confusing scientific term will usually be explained in the sentences before and after it. For example, a question about "quarks" might seem difficult until you study that part of the passage that explains what a quark is. Since you have scanned the questions first (see Strategy 4), circle the word as you read the passage so you can find it later.

Of the several hundred subatomic particles out of which physicists tell us all matter is made, the quark is the most evasive, the most piquing, and the most basic—so small as to have no size and so simple as to have no internal structure. Of

course nobody's managed to shake a quark loose for closer inspection (the most they've been able to do is to hit a few over the head with beams of electrons), but that hasn't stopped scientists from insisting that quarks, like black girl groups of the Sixties, usually travel in threes and carry electrical charges....

—Judy Jones and William Wilson, *An Incomplete Education*

Remember: the answers to most of these questions are based on the facts in the passage. Rarely do you have to address the inferences in the passage. And, Science marches on.

History Retreats Itself

"To be is to do." Socrates

"To do is to be." Jean-Paul Sartre

"Do be do be do." Frank Sinatra

—Kurt Vonnegut Jr.

Here's to revisionist thinking! You've finally stumbled onto those questions of mass destruction that you knew were there all the time.

In the following social science passage, Robert Benchley describes what has become a tense, and sometimes confusing, part of most public meetings: "The Treasurer's Report."

Now, in connection with reading this report, there are one or two points which Dr. Murnie wanted brought up in connection with it, and he asked me to bring them up in connec—to bring them up.

In the first place, there is the question of the work which we are trying to do up there at our little place at Silver Lake, a

work which we feel not only fills a very definite need in the community but also fills a very definite need—er—in the community. I don't think that many members of the society realize just how big the work is that we are trying to do up there. For instance, I don't think that it is generally known that most of our boys are between the age of fourteen. We feel that, by taking the boy at this age, we can get closer to his real nature—for a boy has a very real nature, you may be sure—and bring him into closer touch not only with the school, the parents, and with each other, but also the town in which they live, the country to whose flag they pay allegiance—and to the—ah—(trailing off) town in which they live.

Although what happens in public meetings is an important part of our history, these passages will generally be about a historical trend or period. The historian's interpretation and supporting examples are the source of the questions. Mark on the passage when you come across this interpretation and the beginning of each example (see also Strategy 5). A simple "I" and "E" would serve this purpose. You can expect the historian to reference conflicting opinions. You probably will be asked a question about this other "disagreeable" historian as well. You might place a "C" next to this argument.

Tell Me a Story

These fiction passages are the most enjoyable to read. You may find yourself saying, to borrow the unbridled enthusiasm of "The Daily Show's" Jon Stewart, "It's smile-tastic. It's tickle-riffic." Then again, maybe not.

But all was not play at the University of Minnesota. Now I began classes, and that was work—the good, satisfying work of learning.

I shall always remember the first class I attended. It was a class in sociology. I took a seat in the front row and spread my paper and pencils neatly on my desk. Turning to my brother students, I smiled friendly. They threw lighted matches at me in a demonstration of good fellowship. Then the venerable white-haired professor entered the room. He advanced to the lectern at the head of the class. Putting on his pince-nez, he surveyed us for a moment. "Jeez," he said, "they get crumbier every year."

We laughed appreciatively.

In *Barefoot Boy with Cheek*, the author Max Shulman has his hero Asa Hearthrug laugh in the face of possible disaster. You, too, want to remain upbeat. So here is some advice about a fiction passage: don't rush through it. The questions will certainly address style and tone. You must be more aware of nuances in a fiction passage.

Warning: Do not read too much into your interpretation. You will not be rewarded for originality. Figure out the figurative language, but avoid overthinking your answers.