

Context Messaging

To read between the lines was easier than to follow the text.

—Henry James

You don't have to read between the lines to know that students' reading skills have barely improved over the last decade. Clearly, few students are illiterate; too many, however, are "aliterate." These aliterate students can read, but they don't. And when they do, they are not fully engaged in the process. Such recalcitrance can affect how you approach those questions that refer you to specific words or lines in a passage. Read the following passage and answer the question that follows.

In 1951, Oliver Brown, an African-American railroad worker from Topeka, Kansas, sued the city of Topeka for preventing his daughter from attending a local all-white school. Eight-year-old Linda Brown was forced to ride a bus for five miles when there was a school only four blocks from her home. The case, which went all the way to the Supreme Court (*Brown v. Board of Education*), challenged the constitutionality of an 1896 ruling, *Plessy v. Ferguson*. In *Plessy*, the court had decided that segregation was permissible as long as blacks and whites had access to "separate but equal" facilities.

Thurgood Marshall and his team of lawyers, though, presented evidence demonstrating that "separate but equal" was a logical impossibility. There could be no such thing as "separate but equal" facilities when society was arranged unequally.

In a 9–0 landmark decision, the Supreme Court ruled that segregated facilities degraded minorities and prevented them from having equal educational opportunities. As Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote, “Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.” *Plessy* was overturned. Although the 20 *Brown* decision applied only to education, it inspired minorities to seek rights in other fields, and it became a turning point in the civil rights movement.

Question: In lines 7–9, the importance of *Plessy* is addressed. The Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* affected this 1896 ruling by

- A. challenging the constitutionality of *Plessy v. Ferguson*
- B. becoming a turning point in the civil rights movement
- C. changing “separate but equal” facilities
- D. overturning *Plessy v. Ferguson*

Test makers can be tricky. If you skim the passage quickly or look only at lines 7 and 8, you might be tempted to choose A. The answer is true, but is it the best choice of the four? Later in the passage, you learn that the Supreme Court overturned *Plessy*. Ask yourself: does challenging the constitutionality of a ruling have a greater effect than overturning that ruling? No. Therefore, the correct answer is D. You could have quickly eliminated choice B because it doesn’t deal specifically with *Plessy*. And choice C is simply not true.

Whenever the question refers you to specific lines in a passage, read the lines before and after to avoid such trickery. In the passage about *Brown v. Board of Education*, for example, you can heighten your interest by pretending that you really are Thurgood Marshall. And you have the opportunity to change this country for the better, but first you have to understand all of the facts of the case.

In other words, no matter what a passage is about, you should invest yourself in what is at stake. Make the outcome matter to you, and the outcome will be better for you.

Two Suggestions to Make That Investment Pay Off

1. Be Noteworthy. Taking notes on the passage can help some students. The simple act of noting a significant idea makes the next idea clearer for them. Circle important words. Underline key concepts. Comprehension, after all, depends upon understanding each preceding thought. But you have to be efficient. Develop an abbreviation code that works for you. You are not trying to write a book in the margins of the paper. You are merely highlighting what you hope will help you choose correct answers later.

In *Parade*, Marilyn vos Savant discusses the potential disadvantage of relying on such markings. Vos Savant says, “Some top students highlight elementary information; others note arcane material; still others mark abstruse sections; plenty make markings as idiosyncratic as their personalities.”

As always, time yourself on the Practice Passages. How much does it slow you down to make markings? Do those markings improve your ability to answer the questions correctly?

2. Be Handy. Once you’ve selected an answer, return to the place in the passage where you found the necessary information. Actually put your finger on that spot. Using your finger in this way decreases the chances that your fertile imagination is coming into play. Too often, the pressure of the moment takes over. The knowledge you brought to the testing site predis-

poses you to make certain choices. Your biases cut loose. You can't quite remember the words to the song that is stuck in your head.

Find the correct answer in the passage, not in the "Well, I've always thought" corner of your cerebrum, cerebellum, or medulla oblongata. When the ACT test is finally over, you don't want to say, "And that's all folks," like some Elmer be-Fudd-led.