

Recognizing Question Stems

After you have **actively** read the passage, you're ready to begin the questions. It's imperative that you recognize the type of question so that you know how to approach it.

SUPPORTING DETAILS: When the question asks for a supporting detail, the answer will be **directly stated** in the passage. It will not be word-for-word; it will be a paraphrase, and some words may be changed or left out, but the idea will be the same.

- "The passage (or author) states"
- "The passage (or author) says"
- "According to the passage (or author)"
- A statement that asks you to find information from the passage, like "Research on the effect of family environment has been conducted in _____."

Steps to Answering a Supporting Detail Question

1. Scan the passage for the word or idea that is presented in the question stem. Once you've found it in the text, read the surrounding sentences.
 2. Choose the response that is the closest match to the text.
 3. Distracters to watch out for: those that contradict the text and distracters that require you to make an inference
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MAIN IDEA: When the question asks for a main idea, you're looking a **big statement**--it must cover over the entire passage, not just a detail or two. The main idea may be stated directly or it may be implied.

- "The main idea of the passage...."
- "The central point of the passage...."
- "A possible title for the passage...."
- "The author's primary point..."
- "The author is primarily concerned with...."
- "The passage primarily...."

Steps to Answering a Main Idea Question

1. First of all, don't look at any of the answer choices until you've come up with your own idea of the main idea.
2. Ask, "What is the topic of this passage?" Answer in a word or two. The topic will be repeated throughout the passage--either the same word or synonyms or pronouns for it.

3. Ask, "What is the author's point of view (or opinion) about the topic?" State the author's point of view in your own words by beginning with the topic and ending your sentence with the author's opinion. (For example, if the topic of the passage is "the brain," you could state the author's opinion this way: "The brain gets better as it gets older, contrary to common belief." You could not say, "The brain and how it works" because that phrase does not state an opinion or point of view.
 4. Once you've stated the main idea in your own words, now look at the choices and do the Goldilock's Test: Exclude any that are too broad (for example, the topic is not mentioned in the distracter) and exclude any that are too narrow (for example, the distracter is just a detail from the passage). Choose the answer that is JUST RIGHT.
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INFERENCE: When the question asks you to make an inference, you won't find the answer stated in the text. You're going to have to make a **little leap of logic.**

- "The passage (or the author) implies...."
- "The passage (or the author) suggests...."
- "The author might agree...."
- "The reader can infer that"
- "The reader can conclude that...."
- "The reader can assume that...."

Steps to Answering an Inference Question

1. Consider each of the answer choices and look for evidence to either support it or reject it in these areas

- the text itself (most important)
- your own experience
- your own logic

2. Exclude any distracters that are not logical

3. Choose the response that requires the shortest leap of logic.

TONE/ATTITUDE: When the question asks you to determine the tone of the passage or the attitude of the author, you're looking for the **feeling** the author is conveying about the topic.

- "The tone of the passage is...."
- "The attitude of the author is...."
- "The writer's overall feeling toward ____ is...."

Steps to Answering a Tone/Attitude Question

1. First of all, determine if the author is negative, positive, or neutral about the topic. (For example, if the author is positive, then you can reject all distracters that are negative.)
 2. Look at the level of intensity of feeling in the passage. Is it strong (like passionate, bitterly critical, or revengeful)? Or is it mild (like ambiguous or uncertain or undecided?)
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STYLE: When the question asks you to determine the style of writing, you're looking for the **form** of writing the author has used to communicate his or her point.

- "The overall style of writing is"
- The author's style is"

Steps to Answering a Style Question

1. Ask yourself where this passage might have been published. For example, if you say "textbook," then the style might be academic or informative.
 2. Learn common style words: informal, formal, casual, academic, scholarly, scientific, personal, informational
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PATTERN OF ORGANIZATION: When the question asks you to determine the pattern of organization, you're looking for the **type** of passage the author has written to communicate his or her point.

- "The author makes her point through...."

Steps to Answering a Pattern Question

1. Underline signal/relationship words as you read.
2. Learn these patterns and what words signal them:

Description: a picture is painted for the reader; look for adjectives, figures of speech, sensory details

Narration: a story is being told; look for dialogue and time words like *then, afterwards, before, until*

Persuasion: an opinion is being given; look for strong language words (*should, must*) and just one opinion

Comparison: at least two subjects being compared (their similarities); look for words like *alike, similar, both, likewise, in addition, in the same way, analogous*

Contrast: at least two subjects being contrasted (their differences); look for words like *although, but, however, in contrast, conversely, differ, different, however, more than, on the contrary, on the other hand, opposite, though, unlike*

Definition: a term is being defined, and an example may be included; look for words like *comprise, include, contain, consist of, encompass, have, is, are, was, were*

Illustration: examples are give; look for words like *for example, for instance, depict, represent, such as, like*

Cause and Effect: why something happened and its consequences; look for words like *as a result, because, consequently, for this reason, hence, resulting, since, so, therefore, if ... then*

PURPOSE: When the question asks you to determine the purpose of the passage or the attitude of the author, you're looking for the **reason** the article was written.

- "The purpose of the passage is...."
- "The author's primary purpose is...."

Steps to Answering a Purpose Question

1. Determine the type of passage: factual passages **inform**, explain, describe, and enlighten; opinion passages **persuade**, argue, condemn, and ridicule; and fiction passages **entertain**, narrate, describe, and shock. Where do you think the article was originally published?
 2. Determine if the author is negative, positive, or neutral about the topic. (For example, if the author is positive, then you can reject all distracters that are negative.)
 3. Also look at the level of intensity of feeling. Is it simply a story that *narrates* or a story that *shocks*?
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FACT/OPINION: When the question asks you to determine if a statement is fact or opinion, you know that you're going to have to distinguish between **statements of fact and statements of opinion**.

- "Which of the following could be a fact rather than an opinion?"
- "The statement, " . . ." in paragraph one is meant to be"

Answering a Fact/Opinion Question

You don't need to read the passage at all to distinguish between a factual

statement and an opinion. A statement of fact is a statement that can be proved true or false: The statement "Richard Nixon was president of the United States" could be proved by checking historical records. A statement of opinion cannot be proved by objective means: The statement "Richard Nixon leaves so many questions unanswered--about himself and his country" can't be objectively proved—you may believe it to be true, but someone else may disagree.

VOCABULARY: When the question asks for the meaning of a word, you can figure it out with context clues even if you've never seen the word before.

- "Xxxxx, as used in the passage, can best be defined as...."

Steps to Answering a Vocabulary Question

1. See if you can determine if the word has a positive or negative meaning from its context in the passage. Identifying the feeling of a word can help you eliminate some of the distracters.
2. Look for a context clue:

Example Clue: You're given an example that illustrates the meaning of the word.

My husband is so *parsimonious* that he reuses paper plates.

Synonym Clue: You're given a word that restates the meaning of the unknown word.

My husband is *parsimonious* or stingy to a fault.

Antonym Clue: You're given a word that means the opposite of the unknown word.

My husband is *parsimonious* but my brother is the most generous person I know.

3. Draw a conclusion based on the sense of the sentence if you can't find any clues.

The parsimonious preacher was pleased with his penny-pinching parishioners.