

CHAPTER 4**STRATEGIES AND
TECHNIQUES**

As you write more in high school and college, the ability to recognize your mistakes will become very important. Good writers can express ideas clearly by correctly applying the rules of grammar and selecting the most appropriate words and phrases.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, “Format and Scoring,” the ACT English Test includes seventy-five multiple-choice questions that test your basic English and grammar skills. These questions also assess your ability to make choices about the effectiveness and clarity of a word, phrase, sentence, or paragraph. In this chapter, we’ll give you useful strategies and techniques for effectively answering ACT English questions.

Follow these general strategies to select the best answers on the ACT English Test.

Study Tip

You will generally not be required to infer anything about the people or places mentioned in these passages. Inference questions are reserved for the ACT Reading Test, which we will discuss in Chapters 8–14.

SKIM THE PASSAGE

Most of the ACT English Test questions are presented as underlined portions of the passages. It is helpful to read the passage through once quickly before you answer the questions. If you have a general sense of the structure and overall meaning of the passage, you will be more likely to choose the correct answers on questions that ask about a specific part of the passage. The ACT English Test passages are relatively short essays that you should be able to skim fairly quickly.

Take a look at this example. Skim the excerpt and answer the question that follows:

Like most college students, I usually needed extra cash. However, I was a bit too discriminating in how I earned that money. Since my parents were paying my tuition, I couldn’t very well get a job that interfered with my classes, nor did I want to give up any of my extracurricular activities. Babysitting often fit within these parameters, but it usually didn’t pay very well. I scoured the campus papers, but the good jobs were always taken by the time I called to get more information. And then, one day, I found it—the perfect part-time job.

As I left my sociology class one day, I saw a flyer posted near the door: “Help wanted for Psychology Dissertation Research—Acting Experience Requested.” Normally, I avoided psychology research because it generally involved some form of pain or deprivation for a very small stipend—in the range of \$20 to \$50. Nevertheless, I was intrigued by the request for “acting experience,” and since most of my extracurricular time was spent on stage, I decided this job posting warranted a phone call.

Question: Suppose that the editor of a magazine had assigned the writer to depict a firsthand account of an undergraduate majoring in Sociology. Does the essay successfully fulfill this assignment?

- A. Yes, because the essay describes what happens when the writer is leaving a sociology class.
- B. Yes, because sociology and psychology are closely linked.
- C. No, because the essay describes a part-time job working on a psychology dissertation research project.
- D. No, because the essay’s tone is too formal and too personal for such an assignment.

The best answer is C. This question relies on identifying the main idea of the essay. The main idea is stated at the end of the first paragraph: “a description of the perfect part-time job.” The author’s perfect job is in psychology, not sociology. In fact, there is no indication that the author is even a sociology major, only that the author is taking a sociology class. Therefore, the essay would not be appropriate for the magazine article because its content is off-topic.

This type of question usually appears at the end of the set of questions following an English passage.

Study Tip

Wordiness and redundancy are never rewarded. Throughout the test, you will be asked to make choices that best express an idea. Usually, the fewer words that you use, the better. So, when in doubt, select the shortest answer choice.

REVIEW THE UNDERLINED PORTION

The portion of the sentence that is underlined might need to be revised, replaced, or omitted. When reading the sentence, pay attention to the underlined portion. If the underlined portion makes the sentence awkward, or contains errors in standard written English, it will need to be revised or omitted. Many errors are obvious, and if you can spot them right away, you will be able to move quickly through this section.

Look for common problems, such as redundancy, misplaced modifiers, faulty parallelism, ambiguous pronouns, and disagreement between the subject and the verb. Be sure that the answer choice you select does not contain any of these errors, which were discussed in Chapter 3, “Grammar Review.”

If the underlined portion seems correct within the sentence as it is, mark either A or F on your answer sheet. The test is designed to assess your ability to improve sentences, which also includes recognizing when a sentence is best as it is written. Consider the following examples:

Chinese calligraphy dates back¹ nearly 5,000 years. Around 200 B.C., a 3,000-character index was established for use of² Chinese scholars.

- Underlined Portion 1:** A. NO CHANGE
 B. date back from
 C. date back
 D. were dated back

- Underlined Portion 2:** F. NO CHANGE
 G. for to be used by
 H. for the use with
 J. for use by

- The best answer is A.** To maintain parallelism in this sentence, the subject must match the verb. Since the subject, “Chinese calligraphy,” is singular, the correct verb form is “dates back,” answer choice A.
- The best answer is J.** The Chinese scholars used the index; therefore, the index was established “for use by” the Chinese scholars. This is an example of both verb choice and idiom.

PREDICT AN ANSWER

If the underlined portion does not seem correct, try to predict the correct answer. If an answer choice matches your predicted answer, it is most likely correct. If you can recognize a paraphrase of your predicted answer, choose it. Mark the question in your test booklet if you are unsure. Use a mark that will be easy to spot when you are looking back through the test, as discussed in introduction. Whatever symbol you decide to use, be consistent so that the mark means the same thing every time you use it. Remember that you can always come back to the question later if there is time.

If your predicted answer does not match any of the answer choices, determine which of the selections is the most clear and simple. Read the sentence

again, replacing the underlined portion with the answer choices in order. Remember that answer choice A or F (“NO CHANGE”) will always be a repeat of the original underlined portion. Consider the following example:

According to health experts, over the past 30 years the childhood obesity rate in the United States has more than tripled for some of them aged 6–11, and has doubled for younger children and adolescents.

- Underlined Portion 1:** A. NO CHANGE
 B. them
 C. children
 D. those of them

1. **The best answer is C.** The pronoun “them” is rather ambiguous. Be sure that all pronouns have a clear antecedent. In this case, based on the context of the sentence you might have predicted “children,” the correct answer, because it eliminates the ambiguity.

TRUST WHAT YOU KNOW

Subvocalize (read “aloud silently” to yourself) to allow your brain to “hear” the sentence with each of the answer choices inserted. Your brain might automatically make the necessary improvement, or recognize the best version of the sentence.

You can usually trust your impulses when answering many of the questions on the English Test. In other words, if it sounds right to you, it probably is. You will recognize when and how to apply basic rules of grammar, even if you don’t recall what the specific rule is. You can tap into the part of your brain that controls speech and hearing as you read. That part of your brain “knows” how English is supposed to sound. Let that part of your brain work for you. Remember, the ACT English Test does NOT require you to state a specific rule, only to apply it correctly. Consider the following example:

No sooner had Michael arrived on campus so his mother began calling him repeatedly.

- Underlined Portion 1:** A. NO CHANGE
 B. than his mother began
 C. but his mother had began
 D. then he was called by his mother

1. **The best answer is B.** The context of the sentence indicates that first one thing happened, and then another thing happened. To best express this chronology of events, the comparative word “than” should be used. The other answer choices are awkward and grammatically incorrect.

Study Tip

Since there can only be one correct answer for each question, you can eliminate any two choices that mean the same. If you find that two of the choices are synonyms, eliminate them both.

USE THE PROCESS OF ELIMINATION

Elimination is the process that most test takers use for all the questions that they answer. It is reliable, but slow. Use it as a backup strategy on questions for which either you cannot predict an answer, or your prediction is not listed as a choice. Consider the following example:

Despite it’s popularity, the play closed after only two weeks.

- Underlined Portion 1:** A. NO CHANGE
 B. their popularity
 C. it’s being popular
 D. its popularity

1. **The best answer is D.** Your first step should be to decide whether “it’s” is correct in this sentence. Because “it’s” is the contraction of “it is,” you would not use “it’s” in this sentence. Therefore, you can eliminate answer choices A and C. Next, because there is only one play, you can eliminate answer choice B, which includes the plural possessive pronoun “their.” You are now left with the correct answer.

■ TAKE OMIT SERIOUSLY

You will sometimes see the answer choice “OMIT the underlined portion.” Selecting this option will remove the underlined portion from the sentence or paragraph. “OMIT” is a viable answer choice when it eliminates redundant or irrelevant statements. When OMIT is given as an answer choice on the ACT, it is correct about half of the time. Consider the following example:

The first sign that our remodeling project might have its ups and downs was when the contractor announced his bottom-line price to cover all our wondrous plans; it became immediately clear right away that a scale-back was necessary.

- Underlined Portion 1:** A. NO CHANGE
 B. at the onset
 C. instantly
 D. OMIT the underlined portion.

1. **The best answer is D.** Because the sentence already includes the word “immediately,” it is not necessary to include language such as “right away,” “at the onset,” or “instantly,” which all have essentially the same meaning. This is a good example of eliminating redundancy.

■ FEAR CHANGE (SOMETIMES!)

On the ACT English Test, the first answer choice for almost every question is “NO CHANGE.” This answer choice should come up about as often as the others do on your answer sheet. Just because a portion of the passage is underlined doesn’t mean that there is something wrong with it. Consider the following example:

Amanda took voice lessons last year, and she has been singing in the choir ever since.

- Underlined Portion 1:** A. NO CHANGE
 B. and in the choir she has been singing ever since.
 C. so singing in the choir she has been ever since
 D. ever since then she has been singing in the choir

1. **The best answer is A.** The sentence is clear and concise as written. Answer choices B and C are awkward, so they would not be the best choice. Answer choice D is incorrect because it creates a comma splice.

■ GO WITH THE FLOW

The ACT English Test includes *rhetorical skills* questions, which address writing strategy, organization, and style. These questions test your ability to express an idea clearly and concisely. They also assess whether you can identify a well-constructed essay. Make sure that you understand what’s going on in the passage/essay, and pay attention to introductory and transitional words and phrases that might suggest a continuation, contrast, or comparison.

Following are tables of commonly used introductory and transitional words and phrases:

WORDS OR PHRASES THAT SUGGEST CONTINUATION
Furthermore Moreover In addition

WORDS OR PHRASES THAT SUGGEST CONCLUSION
Therefore Thus In other words

WORDS OR PHRASES THAT SUGGEST COMPARISON
Likewise Similarly Just as Like

WORDS OR PHRASES THAT SUGGEST CONTRAST
But Whereas Although Despite However

WORDS OR PHRASES THAT SUGGEST EVIDENCE
Because Since As a result of Due to

■ PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

Remember from the Introduction that the best way to internalize a skill is to practice it. Use the practice material in this book to hone your skills so that you can attack the ACT English Test with confidence.

You might also want to purchase some additional practice tests; we recommend the following:

McGraw-Hill's 10 ACT Practice Tests. This book includes, not surprisingly, 10 full-length simulated practice ACT tests, written by the faculty of Advantage Education. Each test is followed by explanations for every question.

The Real ACT Prep Guide. Written by the makers of the ACT, this book includes three full-length practice ACT tests along with explanations.

Both of the above titles can be purchased online at www.AdvantageEd.com/ACTBooks.htm. They are also available in major bookstores around the country.

■ WHAT'S NEXT?

Chapter 5 includes exercises designed to help you master the ACT English Test questions. Focus on those areas that give you the most trouble, and be sure to review the explanations. The exercises in Chapter 5 will also help you to become a better writer, so be sure to apply what you learn to the essay-writing tasks in Chapters 15–20.

CHAPTER 11

STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES

If you choose to answer all of the questions on the ACT Reading Test, you will have about 8 minutes to work on each of the four passages and still have enough time to mark the answers on your answer sheet. For many students, it makes sense to slow down a bit, focus on two or three of the passages, and simply guess on the remaining questions. Whether you choose to work on all four of the passages or not will depend on where you are on the scoring scale. The truth of the scoring patterns on the ACT exam is that if you get 30 out of the 40 questions correct, you end up with a scaled Reading Score of about 28. (There is minor variation in scaled scores from one exam to the next.) A 28 on the Reading Test means that your reading score would be well within the top 10 percent of reading scores nationwide.

The current national average ACT Reading Test score is around a 21 on the scale. This means that the average ACT-taker correctly answers about one half of the questions on the Reading Test. Of course, we recommend that you strive to do your best and we hope that all readers of this book will be well into the above-average range on the ACT.

If you are closer to the average ACT Reading test taker, and find that you are only able to really understand two passages and their accompanying questions in the time allowed, you are still likely to get credit for a few more correct responses by guessing on the remaining 20 questions. In fact, since there are four answer choices for each question, you should predict that you would get about 25 percent correct when guessing at random. This means that guessing on 20 questions should yield about five correct answers. If you manage to get only 15 correct of the 20 questions that go with the two passages that you work on carefully, you would still have a scaled score of approximately 20 or 21.

Study Tip

Remember to fill in every answer “bubble” on your answer sheet since there is no extra penalty for guessing incorrectly as there is on some other tests, like the SAT.

“SACRIFICING” A READING PASSAGE

As we just discussed, many students will not have time to attempt all four of the passages on the Reading Test. In this case, you should choose a passage or two that will be “sacrificed” in the interest of time management. There are a few factors to consider when deciding which passage(s) you will sacrifice. For example, you should certainly look at the subject matter. Most students have distinct preferences for one or two of the passage types mentioned previously. Conversely, there is probably at least one type of passage that always gives you trouble and accounts for the bulk of the questions that you regularly miss on practice Reading Tests. Let your practice testing help you to decide whether to attack all four passages. If you decide to focus on two or

three passages on test day, let your practice guide you when deciding which passages to sacrifice.

ACT READING TEST GENERAL STRATEGIES

Study Tip

Students who apply two key strategies—paraphrasing and skimming—usually get the best scores on this section.

Don't read these passages as though you were studying for a high school exam. The open-book aspect of the ACT Reading Test means that you should read in a way that helps your brain to work through the information efficiently. You will not have to remember the information for a long period of time, so don't spend time studying or memorizing. You should read loosely and only dwell on information that you are sure is important because you need it to answer a question. This type of reading should be very goal oriented. If the information you are looking at does not help to answer a question, you should not linger over it.

Following are some strategies to apply to the ACT Reading Test.

Read the Question Stems First

Study Tip

Always mark at least one line before and one line after the lines referenced. Reference questions are usually based on the context of the whole passage.

The single most powerful strategy for reading is to read the question stems first. The question stems are the prompts, or *stimuli* that appear before the four answer choices. The questions might contain useful information. They might refer to specific names or terms repeatedly or contain references to the line numbers that are printed down the left side of the passage. This can be very useful in focusing your attention and energy on the parts of the passage that are likely to lead to correct answers to questions.

While reading the question stems can be helpful, reading the answers choices usually is not. Don't read them before you read the passage. Most of the answer choices are wrong and, in fact, are referred to by testing professionals as "distractors." If you read them before you read the passage, you will be much more likely to get confused.

Each of the passages has numbered lines. Some of the questions will refer to a particular line or lines. When you read a question that contains a line reference, locate those lines in the passage and make a note in the margin so that you know where to begin to find the answer to the question. For example, put parentheses around the line referenced text, and write the question number next to the parentheses.

As you read the questions, attempt to put them into your own words to increase your understanding of what's being asked. Then, once you've read the question stems, move to the passage itself.

Determine the Main Idea of the Passage

As you begin to read the passage, your first step should be to determine the main idea. This technique can help you to answer the "big-picture" questions and assist you in locating information necessary to answer the other question types (discussed later in this chapter). The main idea has the following three components:

Topic (what is the passage about?)

Scope (what aspect of the topic does the passage focus on?)

Purpose (why did the author write the passage?)

If you can answer these three questions, you understand the main idea. Consider the following scenarios:

1. The world's tropical rain forests are being decimated at an alarming rate. Each day, thousands of acres of trees are destroyed in both developing and industrial countries. Nearly half of the world's species of plants and animals will be eliminated or severely threatened over the next 25 years due to this rapid deforestation. Clearly, it is imperative that something be done to curtail this rampant destruction of the rainforests.
2. Tropical rain forests are crucial to the health and welfare of the planet. Experts indicate that over 20 percent of the world's oxygen is produced by the Amazon rain forest alone. In addition, more than half of the world's estimated 10 million species of plants, animals, and insects live in the tropical rain forests. These plants and animals of the rain forest provide us with food, fuel wood, shelter, jobs, and medicines. Indigenous humans also inhabit the tropical rain forests.

The **topic** of both passages is tropical rain forests. However, the **scope** of each passage is very different. The first passage discusses destruction of the tropical rain forests, whereas the second passage introduces the diversity of the rain forests and indicates why the rain forests are important. The **purpose** of the first passage is a call to action, while the second passage is primarily informative.

The introductory paragraph of the reading passage often indicates the topic or topics being discussed, the author's point of view, and exactly what the author is trying to prove (if anything). Read a little more slowly at the beginning of the passage until you get a grip on the three components of the main idea, then shift into higher gear and skim the rest of the passage.

Study Tip

The goal with skimming is to get a general understanding of the structure of the passage. This is key so that you can find pertinent facts when you refer to the passage as you answer questions.

Skim the Passage

Don't use context clues the first time that you skim through a passage. When you come to a word or phrase that is unfamiliar, just read past it. You will most likely have time to come back if you need to. But there is a strong chance that you won't need to bother figuring out exactly what that one word or phrase means in order to answer the bulk of the questions that follow the passage. If you waste some of your precious time, you'll never get it back. With perseverance and practice, you will start to get comfortable with a less-than-perfect understanding of the passage.

You should also pay close attention to paragraph breaks. While reading through paragraphs, follow these tips to help you gather information more effectively:

- Try to determine the subtopic for each paragraph quickly.
- Focus on the general content of each paragraph.
- Determine the purpose of each paragraph.

Study Tip

You can write in your test booklet. So, when you see a topic word, circle it. If you can sum up a paragraph in a word or two, jot it down in the margin.

Note that the first sentence is not always the topic sentence. Don't believe those people who say that you can read the first and last sentence of each paragraph and skip the rest of the sentences completely. You are better off skimming over all of the words even if you end up forgetting most of what you read almost immediately. Remember that the idea at this stage is not to waste time. Keep moving through the material.

In addition, you should read actively throughout the Passage-Based Reading sections. That is, think about things such as the tone and the purpose of the passage. This technique will help you to stay focused on the material, and, ultimately, will allow you to select the best answer to the questions.

Likewise, while vocabulary is not tested directly on the ACT, there is certainly an advantage to knowing what the words mean as you try to decipher a passage. We have included a vocabulary list (Appendix A), which includes words that have appeared on past ACT tests and may appear again. Even if none of the words on the list shows up on your exam, you should at least get an idea of the type of word that is likely to be seen and the level of difficulty that you can expect to find on your test.

Paraphrase the Question Stems

Once you have found the information in the passage that will provide the answer you are looking for, try to answer the question in your mind. Put the question in your own words so that it makes more sense to you. Do this before you look at the answer choices. Remember that three out of every four answer choices are incorrect. Not only are they incorrect, but also they were written by experts to confuse you. They are less likely to confuse you if you have a clear idea of an answer before you read the answer choices. It often helps to consciously simplify as you read. Try using the phrase, "So what they are really saying is" This technique works for question stems and answer choices, as well as for the passages.

Study Tip

You can paraphrase on your first pass through the question stems. You can also sometimes predict an answer before you read the passage. Be sure to check the context before you mark your final answer.

Predict Answers to the Questions

Try to predict an answer for the question, and then skim the choices presented and look for your answer. You might have to be a little flexible to recognize it. Your answer might be there dressed up in different words. If you can recognize a paraphrase of your predicted answer, choose it. Mark the question in your test booklet if you are unsure.

Note that it is possible for an answer choice to be both true *and* wrong. The answer that you choose must respond correctly to the question being asked. Simply being true is not enough to make an answer correct. The best answer will always be supported by details, inference, or tone.

Read and Answer the Questions

Start at the beginning of each group of questions. Read the first question and make sure that you understand it. Go back to the part of the passage that will probably contain the answer to your question. Some of the questions on the ACT ask you to draw conclusions based on the information that you read. However, even these questions should be answered based on the information in the passage. There will always be some strong hints, or evidence, that will lead you to an answer.

Some of the questions contain references to specific lines of the passage. The trick in those cases is to read a little before and a little after the specific line that is mentioned. At least read the entire sentence that contains the line that is referenced.

On the other hand, some of the questions don't really tell you where to look for the answer, or, they are about the passage as a whole. In those cases, think about what you learned about the passage while you were skimming it. Note the subtopics for the paragraphs, and let them guide you to the part of the passage that contains the information you are looking for.

One of the important skills rewarded by the ACT is the ability to sift through text and find the word or concept for which you are looking. This skill improves with practice.

Study Tip

The best choice is the one that responds to the question based on information and ideas that appear in the passage. If the answer choice could be applied to other situations, it is most likely too broad and not the best choice.

Study Tip

The process of elimination is a good tool. It just shouldn't be the only tool in your box.

Remember that the most complicated-sounding answer choice is not always correct. Too many ACT takers have cost themselves points over the years by applying the following flawed logic: "If I can't understand it, it must be correct because this is a hard test!"

Finally, be careful always to consider all of the choices before you select your answer, even if your predicted answer is among the choices. The difference between the best answer and the second best answer is sometimes very subtle.

Don't be afraid to refer back to the passage repeatedly, and don't be reluctant to skip around within the question group that accompanies each of the passages. In fact, many students report success with a strategy of actually skipping back and forth *between* passages. This plan won't work for everyone. It probably would just create confusion for most test takers. But, if you feel comfortable with it after trying it on practice tests, we can't think of any reason not to do it on test day.

Use the Process of Elimination

Elimination is the process that most test takers use for all the questions that they answer. It is reliable, but slow. It is useful to you as a backup strategy for the questions for which either you cannot predict an answer, or your prediction is not listed as a choice. Once you have eliminated an answer choice that is not supported by the passage, cross it off in your test booklet.

It can be hard to break the habit of always applying the process of elimination. You have developed this habit because you have been given too much time on most exams that you have taken. There are a couple of different reasons that teachers tend to allow long periods of time for exams. The first is that teachers must allow enough time for even the slower students to have a fair chance to answer questions. The second is that testing time for students is often break time for the instructor. He or she might be able to catch up on paper work or read a newspaper during the time that students are testing. These factors tend to lead to students who get used to a leisurely pace on exams.

Apply Logic

It is important to know the difference between information that is stated directly in the passage, and inferences and assumptions. You might be asked questions based on factual information found in the reading passages. Or, you might be asked to make an inference based on information provided in the reading passage.

An *inference* is a conclusion based on what is stated in the passage. You can infer something about a person, place, or thing by reasoning through the descriptive language contained in the reading passage. In other words, the author's language *implies* that something is probably true.

An *assumption*, on the other hand, is unstated evidence. It is the missing link in an author's argument. Following is a classic example of a conclusion based on stated evidence and unstated evidence (assumption):

Socrates is a man.
Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

Because you are given that Socrates is a man, the conclusion that Socrates is mortal *must* be based on the assumption that men are mortal.

Socrates is a man. (Stated evidence)
Men are mortal. (Unstated evidence)
Therefore, Socrates is mortal. (Conclusion)

Some of the evidence is not stated, but the final conclusion leads you to the existence of that missing evidence, or assumption.

■ ACT READING TEST QUESTION TYPES

Following is a list of the types of questions you are likely to encounter on the ACT Reading Test.

- Main Idea/Point of View
- Specific Detail
- Conclusion/Inference
- Extrapolation
- Vocabulary in Context

We have included a description of each question type, along with specific approaches to tackling the questions. You will begin to recognize the different question types as you work through the sample questions and practice exams.

Main Idea/Point of View

These questions might ask about the main idea of the passage as a whole, or about a specific paragraph. They also ask about the author's point of view or perspective and the intended audience.

Strategy: Answer these questions according to your understanding of the three components of the main idea mentioned previously (**topic, scope, and purpose**). It is also worth noting that the incorrect choices are usually either too broad or too narrow. You should eliminate the answer choices that focus on a specific part of the passage and also eliminate the answer choices that are too general and could describe other passages besides the one on which you are working.

Specific Detail

These questions can be as basic as asking you about some fact that is easily found by referring to a part of the passage. Often, they are a bit more difficult because they ask you to interpret the information that is referred to.

Strategy: Refer to the passage to find the answer to these questions. Use line or paragraph references in the questions if they are given. Sometimes the answer choices are paraphrased, so don't just choose the answers that contain words that appeared in the passage. Make sure that the choice you select is responsive to the question being asked.

Conclusion/Inference

These questions require the test taker to put together information in the passage and use it as evidence for a conclusion. You will have to find language in the passage that will cause you to arrive at the inference that the question demands. (To "*infer*" is to draw a conclusion based on information in the passage.)

Strategy: Although you have to do a bit of thinking for these questions, you should be able to find very strong evidence for your answers. If you find yourself creating a long chain of reasoning and including information from outside the passage when "selling" the answer to yourself, stop and reconsider. The ACT rewards short, strong connections between the evidence in the passage and the answer that is credited.

Extrapolation

These questions ask you to go beyond the passage itself and find answers that are probably true based on what you know from the passage. They can be based on the author's tone or on detailed information in the passage.

Strategy: You need to be sensitive to any clues about the author's tone or attitude and any clues about how the characters in the passage feel. Eliminate any choices that are outside the scope of the passage. As with inference questions, the ACT rewards short, strong connections between the passage and the correct answers.

Vocabulary in Context

These questions will ask what a specific word or phrase from the passage means. The context of the passage should lead you to an educated guess even if you don't know the specific word or phrase being asked about.

Strategy: The best way to answer these questions is the simplest way; just read the answer choices back into the sentence mentioned in the question stem and choose the one that changes the meaning of the sentence the least. These questions are almost always accompanied by a line reference. Often, the answer to the question is found in the line before or the line after the referenced line or lines.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Chapter 12 includes exercises designed to help you master the ACT Reading Test questions. Focus on those areas that give you the most trouble, and be sure to review the explanations. Chapters 13 and 14 contain simulated ACT Reading Tests in format, as well as explanations for each question.

CHAPTER 17

STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES

This chapter includes the necessary steps for writing the best ACT Writing Test essay that you can within the thirty-minute time period. Perform each step in order, and do one thing at a time—this is not the time for improvisation or multitasking! If you were to simply read the stimulus and then write your essay from the beginning to the end, you would certainly be doing several tasks at once. You would be creating the logical structure of your essay; searching your memory banks for vocabulary words; anticipating counterarguments; trying to correctly apply the rules of grammar, punctuation, and spelling; and remembering some good, relevant examples to plug into your essay structure. In short, students who write without planning are setting themselves up for a disappointing score. This chapter begins with a discussion of the ACT Writing Test essay prompt, and continues with an introduction to the structure of a well-written essay and some specific strategies to help you to write your best under test conditions.

THE ACT ESSAY PROMPT

Study Tip

Be sure to explain the connection between the examples that you are using and your conclusion. Don't assume that the reader will agree with your viewpoint regarding the significance of a given fact.

The ACT Writing Test does not require any specialized knowledge on your part. You are not tested on what you might know about a particular subject. Instead, you are given an opportunity to demonstrate your ability to reason clearly and write coherently and concisely. College admissions people are looking for logical reasoning, clarity, organization, writing mechanics, and proper language usage. You are expected to think clearly and critically about the issue and create a thoughtful, well-reasoned essay supporting your position.

Remember, there is never a “correct” answer on the ACT Writing Test. Your task is simply to write a good essay from whatever perspective you choose. In addition, how *well* you write is much more important than how *much* you write. You should write enough to clearly support your position within the allotted time.

There are many possible responses to any issue prompt. You might agree or disagree in part or in whole. You might attack the underlying assumptions in the statement that is given. You might indicate that the statement you are writing about has only limited applicability in certain situations. You should use at least one example to support your position. You can use more than one example as long as the examples you select are relevant and you stay focused on your main idea.

The issues in the prompts are carefully chosen so that they aren't biased toward any college major or profession. However, luck is a bit of a factor on the ACT Writing Test. If you are presented with an issue that you know something about, you will probably feel more comfortable writing about it.

But be careful to respond to the issue presented and the assignment given. Don't answer a question that wasn't asked just because you happen to know something about the subject matter.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD ESSAY

Effective writing is well organized and focused. A good writer displays skill in structuring sentences and uses precise and relevant vocabulary. Following is an introduction to the elements of a good essay.

The Paragraph

Sentences are grouped into paragraphs, each of which represents a unique thought or line of reasoning. Each paragraph should have a topic sentence that clearly defines the purpose of the paragraph. Consider the following paragraph:

Blue is certainly my favorite color. All day, I find myself staring at the sky or the lake. The color seems to match anything—just consider denim jeans, the most popular pants in the world! Blue is the color of true indigo, a rare and alluring natural pigment. The blue backdrop in the American flag represents vigilance, perseverance, and justice.

The first sentence is the topic sentence, a notion that all the other sentences in the paragraph work together to support. Your topic sentence should clearly state the objective of the paragraph.

There is no absolute rule about how many sentences should make up a paragraph. The best test is to consider whether a topic is introduced and fully supported, and whether the paragraph keeps from straying to secondary or minor points. Paragraph length is also an important consideration. Readers struggle with a lot of little paragraphs or just a few very large ones, so be sure to vary the lengths of your paragraphs as you write. The next sections outline the components of a well-constructed paragraph.

Logical Order

Sentences within a paragraph should be arranged in an order that corresponds to time or mental reasoning. Consider this example of poor logical order:

During the mating season, male robins are characterized by brilliant black feathers on their heads. Robins can lay two sets of eggs in a season. The bird is commonly seen snatching worms from the earth to feed hatchlings. Soon, the females arrive to choose their mates and breed. They return to northern breeding grounds earlier than the females in order to compete with each other for the best nesting sites.

Following is the same series of sentences placed in a more logical order:

During the mating season, male robins are characterized by brilliant black feathers on their heads. They return to northern breeding grounds earlier than the females in order to compete with each other for the best nesting sites. Soon, the females arrive to choose their mates and breed. Robins can lay two sets of eggs in a season. The bird is commonly seen snatching worms from the earth to feed hatchlings.

This paragraph could benefit from a topic sentence that unifies it, as shown below:

Early spring is a wonderful time to watch amazing bird activity. During the mating season, male robins are characterized by brilliant black feathers on their heads. They return to northern breeding grounds earlier than the females in order to compete with each other for the best nesting sites. Soon, the females arrive to choose their mates and breed. Robins can lay two sets of eggs in a season. The bird is commonly seen snatching worms from the earth to feed hatchlings.

Correct Pronoun Use

When composing paragraphs, pay close attention to pronouns. Use your best judgment to determine if the reader may forget an antecedent. Consider the following example:

Larry is my brother. As kids, he and I would terrorize the neighborhood. During the summer, we would keep street hockey games going long into the evening. On the empty lot, he liked to build dirt ramps.

By the time the reader comes to the last sentence, the antecedent of *he* is too distant a memory. *Larry* should be substituted.

Similarly, repetition of words can make writing dull, as shown next:

The *tree* in my backyard was tall and gnarled. I marveled at that centuries-old *tree* every day as a kid. I wished the *tree* could tell stories about this land.

Other words could be substituted for *tree* to increase variety in the sentences, as follows:

The *oak* in my backyard was tall and gnarled. I marveled at that centuries-old tree every day as a kid. I wished *that wise man* could tell stories about this land.

Figurative language, such as the personification of the tree in the last sentence of the previous example, makes reading more interesting. Avoid clichés, however, which are figures of speech that have lost their novelty due to overuse.

Effective Word Choice

Be sure to explain the connection between the facts you are using and your conclusion. Don't assume that the reader will agree with your viewpoint regarding the significance of a given fact. For instance, imagine an essay about schools. A prejudicial statement in the essay, such as "... *which is merely a public school*," reveals the writer's bias, and may not actually contribute to a convincing essay.

Consider "100 percent" words carefully. Words such as *every*, *everyone*, *all*, *entire*, *whole*, *none*, *no one*, *zero*, *always*, and *never* are absolute terms, which should generally be avoided. If you think critically about a topic, you usually find that there are likely exceptions, as shown next:

(1) *It is always hot in Arizona.*

This cannot be true if Arizona has ever had cool weather.

Rephrase: *It is usually hot in Arizona.*

(2) *No doctor likes to reveal bad news.*

This cannot be true if there ever was a doctor who liked revealing bad news.

Rephrase: *Compassionate doctors do not like to reveal bad news.*

Use *most* and *majority* carefully. These words mean "more than 50 percent" specifically, so be sure not to make overly broad statements. Consider the following examples:

(3) *Most Americans like football.*

Certainly many Americans like football, but without specific data, it is impossible to know if football fans exceed half of the total population.

Rephrase: *Many Americans like football.*

(4) *A majority of the guests enjoyed the meal.*

Unless you know the total number of guests and the specific number of guests who enjoyed the meal, you cannot assume they number over half, regardless of general impression.

Rephrase: *I believe a majority of the guests enjoyed the meal.*

No Redundant or Irrelevant Language

Good writing does not include information irrelevant to the topic of a sentence or paragraph. An effective paragraph conveys its information precisely and concisely. Many writers who strive to lengthen their work make the mistake of including redundant information. Consider the following paragraph:

My first baseball game was *awesome* and *amazing*. My father bought us *third-row seats, not right in front*, along the first-base line right by the wall. I enjoyed all the action as I munched on nachos and a hotdog. *I like a lot of relish on my hotdogs*. Our team won the game, and I got to spend quality time with my dad. I would love to do it again.

Awesome and *amazing* are synonyms; they have nearly the same meaning. One should be eliminated. *Third-row* implies that the *seats* are *not right in front*, making the latter phrase unnecessary. The sentence "*I like a lot of relish on my hot dogs.*" is irrelevant because the paragraph is about the writer's enjoyment of watching a baseball game, not the writer's choice of condiments.

Study Tip

Transition words help to lead the reader through your essay, and can improve the overall flow of your essay.

The Relationship Between Paragraphs

Paragraphs must have a certain amount of independence from each other, yet they should have similar tone and style, and provide the reader with a meaningful transition from one topic to the next.

For example, do not use a pronoun in one paragraph whose antecedent is in a previous paragraph, as shown next:

... John was an interesting fellow. I only knew him from one class in high school, but he instantly made an impression on me.

The first time I met *him* was on the steps outside the building.

Replace *him* in the new paragraph with its antecedent, *John*.

Use "transition" words and phrases within and between paragraphs to introduce new topics or evidence. There are four basic categories of transition words. Following is a list of those categories along with some sample transition words:

- **Contrast:** *but, however, on the other hand, conversely, alternatively, although, even though*
- **Similarity:** *likewise, similarly*
- **Evidence:** *since, because, in light of, first, second, third*
- **Conclusion:** *therefore, thus, as a result, so, it follows that, in conclusion*

Observe how transition words are used to tie the following sentences and paragraphs together:

Youth baseball pitchers are discouraged from practicing complicated pitches, *since* developing shoulders and elbows may not tolerate the powerful twisting and snapping action required to produce effective curveballs, screwballs, and the like. Little League Baseball, *however*, does not officially recognize any evidence that particular pitches lead to increased instances of injury, *since* the only studies on the subject have been conducted with college-age or older pitchers.

On the other hand, evidence does exist that injury is minimized when the total number of pitches thrown by a young player is minimized. *As a result*, USA Baseball has issued recommendations for safe total pitch counts according to player age.

COMMON MISTAKES TO AVOID

Review these common errors that test takers make in their essays. If you know what to avoid, you'll not only be a better writer, but you'll have a much easier time on the ACT English multiple-choice test.

Too General

Effective writing uses specific examples. Think of the best teachers you have had. They tend to tell you the general concept that they are teaching and then give one or more specific, memorable examples. This strategy works because of the memorable examples.

For example, if you are told that there is no progress without determination and hard work, you might accept the statement as true and you may even remember it. However, you will have a much better chance of fully grasping the idea and remembering it later if you are given a specific example such as Thomas Edison, who tried thousands and thousands of different filament materials in his light bulbs before finally settling on one that gave acceptable light and lasted a reasonable period of time.

Too often, students make broad, general statements in their essays without giving any specific support. Make sure that you provide clear, simple examples of the general statements that you make.

Too Emotional and Opinionated

While it is true that the stimulus will ask you for an opinion, you should not make the entire essay about your feelings. You should state what your opinion is and then back up your opinion with well-reasoned logical support. Tell the reader *why* you feel the way you do rather than just saying *how* you feel.

Overly Complicated

Many coaches and teachers have suggested that students apply the K.I.S.S. principle. While there is a slightly less polite formulation, we'll explain the K.I.S.S. Principle as an acronym for "Keep It Short and Sweet." Do not use three words when one will do.

For example, write, "*There are better proposals.*" Do not write, "*I believe that I am correct when I state that the previously proposed solution to this complicated problem will be less than completely effective as compared to other potential solutions that have been brought forth recently.*"

The essay readers are not going to be blown away by your ability to use a dozen words to state a simple idea. They are going to be blown away if you are able to make your point cleanly and clearly.

Risky Vocabulary

As we mentioned previously, if you are not sure what a word means, or whether it would be appropriate to your essay, don't use it. Many an otherwise good essay has been sunk by a word or two used incorrectly, which made the essay grader question the author's writing abilities.

Poor Penmanship

As discussed in Chapter 15, "Writing Test Format and Scoring," the reader has to assign a score to your essay that depends on his or her interpretation of the terms in the rubric (scoring guide). In order to help the reader interpret those terms in your favor, you should write, or print, as neatly as you can. Make it easy for the readers to find the good things about your essay that will allow them to give you all of the points that your hard work deserves.

Shaky Logic

Your ACT Writing Test essay should describe your position on a given topic. The essay should have a conclusion about the topic and support for that conclusion.

Choose relevant examples that are connected to your topic in a direct way. One way to do this is to use examples that show a cause-effect relationship. For example, *"I really think I would enjoy teaching high school Spanish. Students are generally in a brighter mood in language classes. Happy students learn more, and through classroom learning they come to respect the teacher."*

While you may disagree with the conclusion of the above argument, you have to admit that there is a cause-effect connection between the evidence presented and the position that the author takes.

Unsafe Assumptions

There are two components to an assertion: evidence and conclusion. Evidence leads to conclusion. You need at least two pieces of evidence to support one conclusion. If you only give one piece of evidence, you are making an assumption. Logic professors refer to assumptions as "suppressed premises," which is just a fancy way to say "unstated evidence." If you leave too much of your evidence unstated, your argument starts to get weak.

For example, if an essay says, *"Curfews are dangerous because what if I have to be somewhere after midnight?"* The reader immediately starts to wonder, "Where could you have to be so late? What would you be doing?" There are simply too many unanswered questions. If the reader agrees with the position that the writer is taking, he or she might "help" with the assumptions and provide examples and answers to the unanswered questions. The reader might read the statement above and fill in an example from his or her own life or one that he or she would consider plausible. Minimize the number of unanswered questions by providing evidence to support your conclusion.

Too Conversational

The ACT Writing Test essay is supposed to be an example of your command of standard written English. Read Chapter 3, “English Grammar Review,” if you are still uncertain about how to effectively apply the rules of grammar.

Avoid the generic *you*: “*You could feel the tension in the room when Jeff had a pizza delivered to American History class.*” The pronoun does not actually mean “you, the reader.” The person making that statement should have said, “*I could feel the tension ...*” or “*We could all feel the tension*”

In conversation we often try to be inclusive and gender-neutral, although English has no third-person singular gender-neutral pronouns. *They, their, them,* and *theirs* must only be used as plurals in writing. Be careful not to use them when you’re referring to singular subjects (a student, the teacher, and so on).

Always remember that your essay needs to be a formal document. It is not appropriate to write in the same idiom that you use with friends in informal conversation.

STEPS TO WRITING WELL

Now that you have a grasp of what a good essay contains, you should follow these steps in the order they are presented to maximize your ACT Writing Test score.

Study Tip

Don’t be afraid to use your test booklet to underline, circle, or make other notations to help you understand the prompt. It may prevent you from making a mistake in responding to the prompt.

Carefully Read the Prompt

Know what the task is before you begin. Read the essay prompt a couple of times to be certain that you understand what you are reading. The stimulus is short, so reading carefully will not take up much of your time. One or two minutes will probably be sufficient.

Do not rush through this step, however, as rushing can cost valuable points and make some of your hard work worthless.

For instance, many students write essays that argue vehemently against school *uniforms* when responding to a prompt that mentions school *dress codes*, but never actually mentions uniforms. While it is possible to write an essay that takes the idea of dress codes one step further and actually advocates for school uniforms, an essay that argues against something that is never even mentioned reveals a clear misunderstanding of the stimulus. An essay that does not directly and accurately address the stimulus will probably only be assigned a score of 3, which is particularly tragic when it is otherwise extremely well written.

Study Tip

There is no correct or incorrect position. Either side can be supported, so choose the side for which you have more relevant examples.

Think About the Prompt

If the topic is something that you have thought about, or discussed in the past, then you may already have an opinion. If not, then take a short time to formulate one. The test writers are careful to choose topics that have at least two sides that can be successfully argued.

Remember that one of the criteria in the rubric is taking a position on the issue. This is not the time to be overly diplomatic. Take a side and defend your choice. This decision process should not take very long, a few minutes at most.

Plan Your Essay

Start your essay with a clear statement of your position on the issue. The reader should have no doubt about which side you are on.

Use the scratch paper that is provided to outline the structure of your essay. Your outline does not have to include complete sentences. It does have to include the ideas that you will put into your final draft. You need to be sure that you have a clear picture of where you are going and how you will get there before you start to write on the answer pages.

Many test takers use a cluster diagram, which is a visual representation of how details are used to support a main idea. In a cluster diagram, supporting details are linked to the central idea. If you plan your specific evidence, each evidence item should appear as a bubble attached to the statements that surround the main idea. This task is sometimes called *webbing* because the result is something that resembles a web with lines radiating from the center. (Figure 17.1 shows an example of a cluster diagram used to plan an essay about technology.)

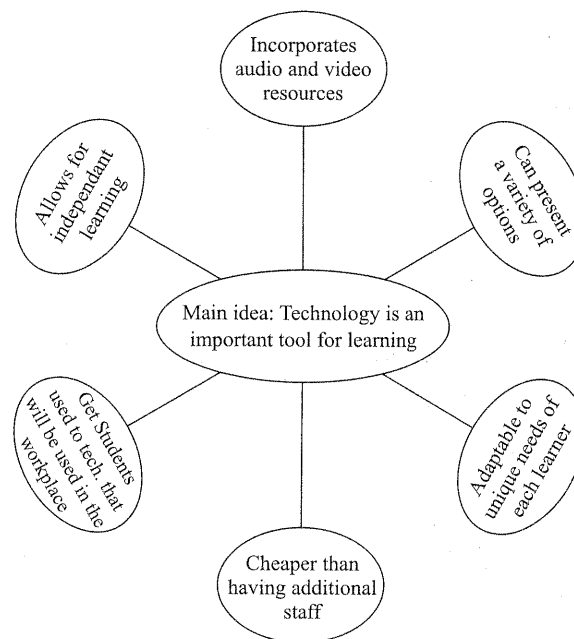


Figure 17.1

Study Tip

Spend at least 10 minutes on the planning stage, which will allow you enough time (20 minutes) to write a complete, fully developed essay.

Be sure that you have a clear introduction, a body, and a conclusion that echoes the introduction. You may choose to write a traditional five-paragraph essay, but it is possible to write a very effective essay with more or fewer paragraphs. Organization and flow is more important than length.

You will hear some of the other test takers around you scratching furiously with their pencils from the beginning of the thirty-minute period. Sometimes that sound can make you feel like you are getting behind. You are not. Remember that the planning stage is the most important stage.*

Write Your Essay on the Lined Pages

The final step in the essay writing process is to, well, write your essay! You've read and understood the prompt, have decided upon your position, and have

outlined your response. Be sure to include the following four categories of information in your essay:

- **Positive for your position**—*I believe that dress codes in school should be supported because such codes would allow students to focus on school work, rather than on the latest fashions.*
- **Negative for your position**—*However, because some students express themselves through their choice of clothing, dress codes might reduce a student's freedom of expression.*
- **Positive for the other side**—*There are those who believe that dress codes are an example of just one more restriction placed on young people today.*
- **Negative for the other side**—*Nevertheless, dress codes can be an important means of imposing necessary order on a teenager's sometimes chaotic life.*

An effective essay uses facts from all four categories. You can think of your side as “correct” and the other side as “incorrect.” When you write a paragraph that is focused on the “correct” side of the issue, you should mention at least one aspect of your choice that might be seen as a negative by some people. Your essay will be much more persuasive if you do not ignore potential problems with your side of the debate. Of course, you should be sure to mention plenty of positive information to overcome the potential downside that you are admitting to.

Apply the same technique when you discuss the opposition's position. You should admit that the other side of the debate has at least one strong point. Then, refute the other side of the argument with ample evidence so that your side ends up looking like the clear winner. This is known as *dealing with potential counterarguments*, and it is the most effective way of presenting a persuasive written argument.

Refer back to Chapter 16, “ACT Writing Test Diagnostic,” for examples of both good and bad essays. Take another look at the essay evaluations to see how the strategies and techniques in this chapter were applied to the essays that received the highest scores.

■ REVISING AND EDITING

You will probably have little time to read over your essay, so do not expect to be able to catch all of your mistakes. Errors in mechanics should be fixed, but not at the expense of correcting faulty reasoning or gaps in support of your opinions. Remember that grading on the ACT essay is holistic, meaning the readers take your essay as a whole and do not deduct from your score for each relatively minor mistake. If your essay fails on a conceptual level, though, your score will suffer. Take care of your logic and evidence errors first, and then correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Do this neatly, with a minimum of scratch-outs. To eliminate something that you have written, draw a single line through it. Do not make a big patch over each word.

■ WHAT'S NEXT?

Chapter 18 includes exercises designed to help you master the ACT Writing Test. Focus on those areas that give you the most trouble, and be sure to review the exercise explanations and sample essay evaluations.