Reading Section Overview

What the Passages Are Like

The five passages on the Reading Test include four standalone passages and one pair of passages that you read together. The standalone passages and the paired set are each 500–750 words. The passages are drawn from the following types of documents:

1 literary passage from a work of fiction.

1 or 2 passages from a U.S. founding document or a text in the Great Global Conversation they inspired. An example of a founding document would be the U.S. Constitution. The Great Global Conversation refers to works from around the world that focus on topics such as freedom, justice, or human dignity. A speech by Nelson Mandela would be an example.

1 passage from a work of economics, psychology, sociology, or some other social science.

2 passages from scientific works that examine foundational concepts and developments in Earth science, biology, chemistry, or physics.

What the Questions Are Like

The questions on the reading test fall into three broad categories:

1. How the Author Uses Evidence

Some questions ask you to show that you understand how an author is using evidence to support a claim. Questions like this might ask you to:

Identify the part of a passage that supports a point the author is making.

Find evidence in a passage that best supports the answer to a previous question.

Find a relationship between an informational graphic and the passage it's paired with.

2. Understanding Words in Context

Many of the questions on the Reading Test ask you to identify the meaning of a word in context. The "in context" part is important: the questions ask you to use context clues in a passage to figure out which meaning of a word or phrase is being used. Other questions will ask you to decide how an author's choice of words shapes meaning, style, and tone.

3. Analysis in History/Social Studies and in Science

The Reading Test includes passages in the fields of history, social studies, and science. You'll be asked questions that require you to draw on the reading skills needed most to succeed in those subjects. For instance, you might read about an experiment and then see questions that ask you to:

Examine hypotheses.

Interpret data.

Consider implications.

The answers are based only on the content stated in or implied by the passage, not your prior knowledge of the subject.

PSAT/NMSQT Vocabulary

The PSAT/NMSQT doesn't require you to learn unusual or difficult vocabulary words. The words you'll be asked about come up often in college-level reading and in professional life.

In addition, the PSAT/NMSQT also doesn't ask you to define a word without any context to guide you. All of the words you'll be asked about appear in the context of reading passages, so you can use context clues to guide you to the best answer.

If you build your vocabulary by learning the meaning and usage of words that appear most often in college-level assignments, you'll have a much easier time with the test. In particular, you won't have to spend time guessing from context what a word might mean. If you recognize vocabulary words on sight, you'll read passages faster and with greater confidence.