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How To Read A Reading Comp Passage

Recently, I was asked to write an article on the reading part of reading comprehension “specifically, what are we supposed to do and look for during the initial few minutes before we start to answer the first question? I thought it was a great idea; a lot of people struggle with this.

Note: this article doesn’t address how to answer reading comprehension questions; it focuses on the initial read-through and note-taking. If you do that well, though, then that should help you answer any kind of question.

Goals

Whenever we start a specific type of problem, we should have certain goals in mind (depending, of course, on what that problem type is). Reading Comprehension (RC) is no exception.

First, we have some timing goals. I aim to complete an initial read-through of an RC passage in 2 (shorter) to 3 (longer) minutes. I try to answer general questions (e.g., main idea) in about 1 minute and specific questions in about 1.5 to 2 minutes.

I also take some short notes while I read through the passage; these notes will be based upon the goals discussed in the next several paragraphs. My notes will be heavily abbreviated; see the Taking Notes section below for more on this topic.

Next, we have some goals for the initial read-through of the passage. Every passage has a topic and what I call The Point. The topic is what you would probably expect: the basic topic under discussion in the passage. The Point is the main reason *the author* is writing this specific passage (you can also think of The Point as the thesis statement). For instance, a passage topic might be the curious decline of bees in recent years (entire hives have been dying, losing the ability to find their way back to the hive, and so on). The Point might be that, out of three possible causes (all mentioned in the passage), a certain pesticide is the most likely cause (according to the author). Back to our Goal: when I read the passage, I need to make sure I understand The Point, not just the topic.

Further, I also need to make sure I understand the purpose of each paragraph. These passages follow the same rules we’re supposed to use when we write an essay: each paragraph should have one distinct purpose or message (and, often, that message is delivered via a topic sentence, usually the first or second sentence of the paragraph).

Finally, I also need to make sure that I do NOT fully understand or remember all of the detail in each paragraph. That NOT was not a typo. I’m trying to read this passage in 2 to 3 minutes maximum; I don’t have time to try to fully understand, let alone remember, all of the detail. My goal is to know *in which paragraph* the different kinds of detail reside “ that’s all.

Wait “ How Can I Get Away With NOT Understanding the Detail?

This is where we can take advantage of the fact that the GMAT is a standardized test. An individual test-taker is given only about half of the questions that were written for that passage. That little piece of knowledge has major implications for how we conduct the initial read-through.

I know that I’m going to have to understand The Point, because that permeates the entire passage and even, to some extent, every question that I answer. I also know that I will not get asked about every

detail on the screen, because I'm never going to see half of the questions. So why learn all of that annoying detail unless I *know* that I'm going to get a question about it? (And I won't know that until the question pops up on the screen.)

Instead, as we discussed above, my goal for the detail is to know in which paragraph it resides. That way, if I do get a question about the chemical mechanism by which the pesticide affects a bee's nervous system, I'll immediately know that I can find that detail in paragraph 2. I won't have any idea how to answer the question yet; I'll have to read that detail now to see whether I can figure it out.

Note: did you hit a word you don't know? Skip it. Is some sentence really convoluted? If it's the first sentence of a paragraph, use your SC knowledge to find the subject and verb, just to get a basic understanding of what it says. If it's a detail sentence, skip it.

The Initial Read-through

Most of the time, The Point can be found in one discrete sentence somewhere in the passage (though sometimes we have to combine two sentences to get the full Point). Most often, The Point can be found in the first few or last few sentences of the entire passage, but it is possible for The Point to show up anywhere.

So, a new passage pops up on the screen and we, naturally, start reading. Read the first sentence, then stop. Rephrase it in your mind (put it into words that you can understand very easily), and jot down a note or two. Then do the same with the second sentence. Once you think you understand the purpose of that one paragraph, you can start skimming the rest of the paragraph. While you skim, you're trying to make this distinction: is this information just detail that goes along with whatever I decided was the purpose of this paragraph? Or is this information something new: does it represent a new idea or a change of direction? If it's just detail, jot down the basic kind of detail it is (bees dying?) and move on. If it represents a new idea or change of direction, then pay a little more attention and take some short notes.

Do the same with the other paragraphs, though you can be a bit more aggressive about skimming. If, for example, you think you understand the purpose of the second paragraph after reading only the first sentence, that's fine. Start skimming (but take note of anything that represents a new direction).

When you're done, take a moment to articulate The Point to yourself. Is that already in your notes? Put a star next to it. If it isn't in your notes, jot it down.

Taking Notes

Your notes should be *heavily* abbreviated "much more aggressively abbreviated than notes you would typically take at work or school. In fact, if I look at my notes for a passage a few days later, I should have a lot of trouble figuring out what they say (without using the passage as a reference).

How can we get away with abbreviating this heavily? Again, we're taking advantage of the nature of this test. You're going to spend perhaps 6 to 8 minutes with this passage and then you can forget about it forever. You don't need to commit anything to long-term memory, nor do you need to take notes from which you can study in a week. (Of course, if you're just practicing, you are going to review your work later, but you should still practice as though it's the real thing.)

Analyzing Your Work

Everyone already knows that it's important to review your work on the problems you do, but did you know that it's also important to review how you read and take your notes? When you're done with a passage and the associated questions, start your review with the passage itself. When you were done reading (but before you answered questions), what did you think The Point was? What did you think the purpose of each paragraph was? Did that knowledge or understanding change as you worked your way through the questions? If you misunderstood something after the first read-through, why do you think you misunderstood it? Did you read too quickly and overlook something? Did you not take the time to rephrase what you read? How could you do this better next time?

Next, match your initial notes to your current knowledge of what information is contained in the passage. Were you able to find the right paragraph easily when answering a specific question? If not, why not? What should you have jotted down on the initial read-through to make that easier? Conversely, did you have too much information jotted down? Maybe you were able to answer a specific question just from your notes, or maybe you had a lot of detail written down that you never had to use. If so, you wrote down too much information and you spent too much time on the initial read-through.

Could you have abbreviated even more? Write down what that might have looked like, from the beginning. (In general, if you feel your notes were fairly far from your ideal for any reason, then re-write the notes the way you should have written them the first time.)

Take-aways

- (1) You do NOT want to learn or comprehend every single thing that the passage says
- (2) Know your goals:
 - (a) Find The Point
 - (b) Find the purpose of each paragraph
 - (c) Know *where* (in which paragraph) to find different kinds of detail
- (3) Practice sticking to your timing and practice abbreviating heavily
- (4) When you review your work, also review how you read and took notes on the passage

How To Improve Your Reading Skills for Reading Comprehension

Students often ask for non-GMAT reading sources that they can use to improve their reading skills in general, for comprehension and for speed. Recently, some students have asked for more: how should they read such material? Is it the same as reading for work or for pleasure? (Not entirely, no.)

Reading Passages on the GMAT

Several circumstances separate GMAT reading from real-world reading (whether for business or pleasure). First, we're severely time-constrained on the GMAT. It's rare that your boss will toss some reading material at you, instruct you to read it and report back to her, and then add, By the way, I want your report in 3 minutes. (If this happens to you maybe you need to find a new boss!)

Second, the material is often more dense than the kinds of things that we read in the real world. Third, the material is often excerpted or edited down from a longer work, so some of the transitions may be disjointed and the material may provide only bare-bones context.

Non-GMAT Reading Sources

For those who are learning English and aren't planning to take the GMAT for at least six months to a year, you may want to begin with business and science articles in newspapers such as *The Wall Street Journal* or magazines such as *The Economist*. These sources are a bit too casual and easy to read compared to most GMAT material, but they can provide you with a good starting point if you feel you need it.

Sources that are closer to GMAT-speak include:

- [Scientific American](#) for the harder science passages
- [The University of Chicago Magazine](#) (particularly articles found in the Investigations tab)
- [Harvard Magazine](#)

But it's not enough just to read these the way that you read your regular news material.

How to Read from Non-GMAT Sources

So what do we need to do to learn GMAT lessons from these non-GMAT reading sources? (Note: the things I'm going to recommend below are geared toward helping you prepare for the GMAT; I would recommend different strategies if you were looking for pure comprehension without artificial time limits.)

First, GMAT reading material rarely provides a long introductory section or much of a conclusion, but those features are quite common in news and magazine articles. Skip the first paragraph or two (possibly several) and dive in somewhere in the middle. Read approximately three to five paragraphs (depending upon the length: you want about 200 to 400 words), and give yourself a time limit. Give yourself 2 minutes for a shorter length and 3 minutes for a longer one.

Don't expect to get 100% comprehension from the three to five paragraphs you read initially; after all, you aren't actually reading the full text. Don't give yourself extra time; stop when that buzzer buzzes.

Part of your task is to become comfortable with reading quickly and actually not fully comprehending what you just read.

Then, try to articulate:

- the main point of each individual paragraph
- the main idea of the entire article (or at least of this section of the article) without having to go back to the introductory paragraph; don't expect to get it exactly right, since you aren't actually reading the entire article
- content language (facts, historical information, processes, categories) and judgment language (opinions, hypotheses, comparisons)
- any changes in direction in the text that you read: however language, two differing points of view, etc.

Then, go read more and gauge your accuracy. Read a couple of additional paragraphs. Does that change your answers to the above? How? Why? Read a bit more and do the same. Finally, read the entire article.

When you start to feel more comfortable with this type of reading, add another layer of complexity: what might they ask you about the details of the article? What can you infer for GMAT purposes? (That is, what is not stated but must be true based upon information given in the article?) Do you understand the detail well enough that you could summarize it for someone else, possibly using easier language?

Content

To start, you might read articles that cover all kinds of content. GMAT Reading Comp passages come in one of four main categories: Physical Sciences, Biological Sciences, Social Sciences, and Business. As you study, ask yourself: is your RC ability the same regardless of the type of content? Or do you tend to struggle more with certain kinds of content? If the latter is true, then start doing some more non-GMAT reading in those areas.

What do you do when you hit a particular sentence that makes you think, *What in the world does that mean?* You unpack the sentence into multiple simpler sentences. Use your grammar knowledge and find a noun that you understand. Look for actions that describe that noun (don't worry about what parts of speech are used—just articulate the action). Make a short sentence: that noun plus that action (in the form of a verb).

Then, create a second sentence that uses some new piece of info from the original and that relates to your first new sentence. Keep the sentence simple: one subject, one verb. Often, you can start these sentences with this or these: for example, *this caused* or *these theories were tested*. If there are technical terms that you don't understand, abbreviate them to a single letter and don't worry about the meaning; use the rest of the sentence to understand what's going on. Keep going until you have unpacked the original sentence.

When studying, you may want to write out your unpacking of a sentence, but your goal is to get good enough that you don't need to write it all out (because you certainly won't have time to do that during the test!).

Take-Aways

- 1) If you are struggling with reading speed or comprehension, practice reading from non-GMAT sources. If necessary, build up from lighter sources, such as *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Economist*, to more GMAT-like material, such as scientific and university magazines.
- 2) Answer certain questions about the material that you read: what's the overall point? What's the purpose of each paragraph? What are the main pieces of content and the judgments made? What changes of direction exist?
- 3) If any specific content gives you trouble, practice that type more. Learn to unpack difficult sentences efficiently and effectively.

Good luck! ?

How To Find The Point in an RC Passage

Last week, a student asked me to write an article on finding The Point[®] in a reading comprehension passage “specifically, what is The Point and how do we find it? I thought it was a great idea; a lot of people struggle with this.

Note: this article doesn’t address how to answer reading comprehension questions; it focuses on the initial read-through in order to understand the main point of the passage. If you do that well, though, then that should help you answer any kind of question.

This article will expand upon the paragraph that discusses The Point in this article on [How To Read an RC Passage](#). We’re going to discuss a particular passage from [The Official Guide for GMAT Review, 12th Edition](#), but I cannot reprint the full text of the passage here, so you may want to get your book first in order to follow along.

What is The Point[®]?

Here’s an excerpt from the article I linked to above:

Every passage has a topic and what I call The Point. The topic is what you would probably expect: the basic topic under discussion in the passage. The Point is the main reason *the author* is writing this specific passage (you can also think of The Point as the thesis statement). For instance, a passage topic might be the curious decline of bees in recent years (entire hives have been dying, losing the ability to find their way back to the hive, and so on). The Point might be that, out of three possible causes (all mentioned in the passage), a certain pesticide is the most likely cause (according to the author).

So, when I read a passage, I need to make sure I understand the author’s main Point, or purpose for writing the passage. You can also think of the Point as the one thing that the author wants to make sure you get out of the passage: not just that bees are mysteriously dying off, but *why* “some pesticide. If you ran into the author in the elevator, and he or she asked you to provide a 1-sentence summary, in your own words, of *why* the author wrote the passage, could you do so?

Most of the time, The Point can be found in one discrete sentence somewhere in the passage, though sometimes we have to combine two sentences to get the full Point. Most often, The Point can be found in the first few or last few sentences of the entire passage, but it is possible for The Point to show up anywhere.

There are a few common ways in which The Point often shows up. You do not need to attempt to classify The Point when taking the test or doing practice questions; the below descriptions are just to help you to recognize The Point when you see it.

(1) **Resolution:** there’s some kind of problem or issue; the author describes the problem and offers some kind of resolution or solution. The author might also provide several possible resolutions (and, if so, the author may or may not indicate which one the author prefers)

(2) **Answer:** there’s some kind of question “something which people don’t know or about which they’re unsure “ and the author describes the question at hand and provides some kind of answer; the author might also provide several possible answers (and, if so, the author may or may not indicate which one answer the author prefers)

(1) and (2) are very similar. Examples of these in OG12 (*The Official Guide for GMAT Review 12th Edition*) are the Predator-prey dynamics passage and the Economic development strategy passage.

(3) **New Idea:** there's an old way of looking at things " an old theory, an old idea, and old principle " and a new theory or idea; the author presents the old idea as context, describes the new idea, and contrasts the old with the new.

Examples of this type in OG12 are the Archaeology as a profession passage and the Beta vs. VHS passage.

(4) **Reason:** there's some particular observation made or data gathered or phenomenon observed; the author explains this information and offers a reason why this thing is the way that it is or happened the way that it happened. Often, the author mentions an existing, widely-accepted reason and says either that the existing reason is not quite comprehensive enough or that some new reason would better explain the observation or phenomenon.

Examples of this type in OG12 are the Florentine textile industry passage and the Temporary employment passage.

How Do I Find The Point?

The Point can occur at any position in the passage. Approximately 80% of the time in short passages, The Point is found in the first two sentences or the last two sentences of the entire passage. On long passages, The Point is found in the first two paragraphs approximately 70% of the time. Further, when The Point is found in the middle or towards the end of the passage, the first paragraph often contains foreshadowing of The Point: information that gave clues to or more strongly represents The Point before it is stated later in the passage.

In the Predator-prey dynamics passage, for example, the first two sentences introduce the overall topic for the passage. The final sentence of the first paragraph provides an issue or question: there is a surprising result in the data. After reading that paragraph, we now know the general topic but we don't yet know *why* the author is writing this passage.

The first sentence of the second paragraph offers significant foreshadowing:

In considering possible explanations for this finding

Stop right there! Okay, now I know that at least part of this next paragraph is going to talk about possible explanations for this surprising data mentioned in the first paragraph. At this point, I have a pretty good idea (because I've examined the structure of lots of passages) that one of two things is going to happen:

(1) The author mentions multiple possible explanations but does not indicate which explanation the people in the passage or the author finds most plausible. In this case, the point is usually: there are multiple possible explanations for phenomenon X but we don't know which one is best.

(2) The author mentions multiple possible explanations and indicates which one the people in the passage or the author prefers. In this case, the point is usually: there are multiple possible explanations for phenomenon X and we think this one is the best one.

So, now, I'm going to look for that as I continue to read. The second sentence in the second paragraph tells me one explanation that the researchers rejected. The third sentence tells me another explanation that they ruled out. The fourth sentence begins:

The explanation they consider most plausible

Bingo! Now I know why author wrote this passage: to tell me that there were three possible explanations for some phenomenon and here's the one explanation that researchers consider most plausible.

Take-aways

- (1) Understand what The Point is: the single primary reason *why* the author bothered to spend a bunch of time writing this passage
- (2) Read actively; think critically about the purpose behind different pieces of information in the passage and look for language that foreshadows what might be coming next.
- (3) Know the kinds of structures that you might see when you read a passage so that you can recognize similar patterns and anticipate what The Point might be.
- (4) When you review your work, also review The Point. Now that you're done, do you still think you were right about The Point? If not, why not? In future, how might you get The Point right the first time?

What to Read—and What Not to Read—on RC Passages

A student recently asked me to show an example of how I read and take notes on a reading comprehension passage. [In this older article](#), I discussed how to read through a RC passages in general, but I didn't show an example. If you haven't already read the older article, read that first; then come back here to see an example.

The passage below is from the Manhattan Prep CAT database (copyright Manhattan Prep). If you are still using our exams and haven't yet seen this passage, then you may want to wait until after you've seen the passage before you read this article.

As a general rule, we want to spend about 2 to 2.5 minutes on a shorter RC passage and about 2.5 to 3 minutes on a longer RC passage. The below passage is a longer one, so give yourself up to 3 minutes to read and take light notes.

Sarah Meyers McGinty, in her new book *Power Talk: Using Language to Build Authority and Influence*, argues that while the simple lingual act of declaring power does not help a powerless person gain influence, well-considered linguistic techniques and maneuvers do. McGinty does not dispute the importance of factors such as expertise and ability in determining stature, but argues persuasively that these power determinants amount to little for a person unable to communicate effectively. Surveys have shown that managers consider effective communication skills the most critical characteristic in determining promotability in the workplace.

McGinty divides speech into two categories: "language from the center" and "language from the edge." In McGinty's words, "Language from the center makes a speaker sound like a leader." McGinty suggests that such language is not only for those already in powerful positions, but also for those of lower ranks who wish to gain more power and credibility. A speaker using language from the center directs rather than responds, makes statements rather than asks questions, uses experience persuasively, and maintains an air of impersonality in the workplace. McGinty's assertions that the use of such language can alter or create a new balance of power are supported by studies that show that people accept leadership from those they consider experts.

Language from the edge stands in stark contrast to language from the center. Language from the edge is exploratory, inclusive, deferential, and collaborative. A speaker using language from the edge responds rather than directs, asks questions, strives to make others feel heard, and avoids argument. Language from the center strives to claim authority for a speaker, while language from the edge strives to build consensus and trust. McGinty argues that true power comes from a deep understanding of when to use which style and the ability to use both as necessary.

What distinguishes McGinty's discussion of effective communication is her focus on communication skills as a way of gaining power; by contrast, most workplace communication theory focuses on communication skills as a way of preventing misunderstandings, avoiding conflict, and fostering interpersonal relationships. McGinty, however, holds that language not only helps maintain relationships but also lends authority.

Many of you are probably thinking: that was nowhere near enough time. How am I supposed to get through something like that in 3 minutes (or faster!)? If you've read the other article I linked above, then

you know my answer already: because we're not going to read and try to understand every last detail in there. I'm going to take you through what I would think and what I would write while I'm reading this passage for the first time.

Paragraph 1

The first column contains the actual text, but I've underlined the words that I really read carefully and inserted *blah blah blah* when I started seriously skimming. The wording without underlines indicates things that I did read but to which I didn't pay that much attention.

What I read	What I think	What I write
<u>Sarah Meyers McGinty, in her new book <i>Power Talk</i>:</u> <i>blah blah blah</i> , <u>argues</u> <u>that</u> while the simple lingual act of <u>declaring power does not help a powerless</u> <u>person</u> gain influence, well-considered linguistic techniques and maneuvers do.	<i>SMM has a book and I really don't know what it's talking about yet!</i>	P1 SMM book
<u>McGinty does not dispute the importance of factors such as expertise and ability</u> in determining stature, <u>but</u> <u>argues</u> <u>persuasively</u> <u>that</u> these power determinants <u>amount to little for a person unable to communicate effectively.</u>	<i>SMM: Expertise and ability are important but don't mean much if you can't communicate well. Okay, I'm getting an idea of her topic now: communication.</i>	P1 SMM book: comm well = imp (communicating well = important)
<u>Surveys have shown that managers consider effective communication skills the most critical</u> <u>characteristic</u> in determining promotability in the workplace.	<i>Survey: managers like communication skills. This isn't SMM talking any more.</i>	P1 SMM book: comm well = imp Study: M: comm skills crit

Paragraph 2

The first column contains the actual text, but I've underlined the words that I really read carefully and inserted *blah blah blah* when I started seriously skimming. The wording without underlines indicates things that I did read but to which I didn't pay that much attention.

What I read	What I think	What I write
<u>McGinty</u> divides speech into <u>two categories</u> : " <u>language from the center</u> " and " <u>language from the edge</u> ."	<i>SMM has two types of language (1) center and (2) edge. Okay, now we're getting into her actual hypothesis. I don't know what those terms mean yet.</i>	P2 (1) Center L (2) Edge L
In McGinty's words, "Language from the <u>center</u> <u>makes a speaker sound like a leader</u> ."	<i>Center language has something to do with being a leader.</i>	P2 (1) Center L: leaders (2) Edge L
McGinty suggests that <u>such language</u> is <u>not only for those already in powerful positions, but also for those of lower ranks who wish to gain more power</u> and credibility.	<i>"Such language" means language from the center. SMM says that powerful people use this but also people who want to become powerful. So this language has something to do with power and being a leader.</i>	P2 (1) Center L: leaders, power (2) Edge L
A <u>speaker using language from the center</u> <u>directs rather than responds</u> , makes statements rather than asks questions, uses experience persuasively, and maintains an air of impersonality in the workplace.	<i>This is just a list of characteristics when someone's using language from the center. I stopped reading carefully after the first one. If I get a question later about how to use center language, I'll come back here.</i>	P2 (1) Center L: leaders, power (2) Edge L > dtl on (1) (more detail on category 1)
<u>McGinty's assertion</u> that the use of such language can alter or create a new balance of power <u>are supported by studies</u> that show that people accept	<i>Other studies also seem to support what SMM says about center language being used to create power.</i>	P2 (1) Center L: leaders, power (2) Edge L > dtl on (1)

leadership from those they consider experts.		Studies: SMM's center theory = good
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Paragraph 3

The first column contains the actual text, but I've underlined the words that I really read carefully and inserted *blah blah blah* when I started seriously skimming. The wording without underlines indicates things that I did read but to which I didn't pay that much attention.

What I read	What I think	What I write
<u>Language from the edge</u> stands in stark contrast to <u>language from the center</u> .	<i>Edge language is different than center language. I don't know how yet.</i>	P3 edge = diff from center
<u>Language from the edge is exploratory</u> , inclusive, <i>blah blah</i> .	<i>This is a description of edge characteristics. I'm not going to write them down—I'll just know they're here if I need to read them again.</i>	P3 edge = diff from center characs
<u>A speaker using language from the edge responds rather than directs</u> , asks questions, <i>blah blah</i> .	<i>Examples of how to use this edge language—this is just like that other sentence in the last paragraph about how people use center language.</i>	P3 edge = diff from center characs and ex. (characteristics and examples)
<u>Language from the center strives to claim authority for a speaker</u> , while <u>language from the edge strives to build consensus and trust</u> .	<i>This is a big idea sentence. I know this because it's not giving me examples or details; rather, it's giving a broad "this is true" statement about the two types of language. So I read the whole thing.</i>	P3 edge = diff from center characs and ex. Center: claim auth Edge: build cons + trust
<u>McGinty argues that true power comes from a deep understanding of when to</u>	<i>Another big idea sentence. I want to pay careful attention especially because they're mentioning</i>	P3 edge = diff from center

<u>use which style and the ability to use both as necessary.</u>	<i>McGinty again and because it says that this is what she argues—this is a big hypothesis. SMM thinks that true power comes from using BOTH types of language at the right time. That’s a bit of a surprise; I had been thinking that center language was for power and edge language wasn’t.</i>	characs and ex. Center: claim auth Edge: build cons + trust SMM: use BOTH to gain power
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Paragraph 4

The first column contains the actual text, but I’ve underlined the words that I really read carefully and inserted *blah blah blah* when I started seriously skimming. The wording without underlines indicates things that I did read but to which I didn’t pay that much attention.

What I read	What I think	What I write
<u>What distinguishes McGinty’s discussion of effective communication is her focus on communication skills as a way of gaining power;</u>	<i>SMM is different from others. She focuses on using communication skills to gain power. I guess that means others don’t.</i>	P4 SMM diff: comm skills = way to gain power
<u>by contrast, most workplace communication theory focuses on communication skills as a way of preventing misunderstandings, blah blah blah.</u>	<i>Yep, ok, most others focus on using comm for other stuff. I don’t care what that other stuff is now; if I need to know for a question, I’ll come back here later. I’m not even going to write that down.</i>	P4 SMM diff: comm skills = way to gain power
<u>McGinty, however, holds that language not only helps maintain relationships but also lends authority.</u>	<i>They all agree on the relationship stuff, but SMM also thinks language lends authority—back to the power thing. This is just summarizing what I already know, so I’m still not going to write any more down.</i>	P4 SMM diff: comm skills = way to gain power

So that last thing—that SMM thinks that we can use communication skills to gain power and lend authority—seems to be the big idea here. That, and the fact that others don’t think the same thing as SMM; this is her theory. The correct answer to a main idea question should address those concepts.

Also, she talks about two different kinds of language: center and edge. People who want power or want to be leaders have to use both and have to know when to use each kind.

Takeaways for Reading an RC Passage

(1) On the first read-through, we're trying to understand the big picture ideas as well as any major contrasts or changes of direction. That's all. We want to take light notes, delineated by paragraph, while we're reading.

(2) We don't have a lot of time to read these passages, so we specifically want to try to avoid getting sucked into the detail on these passages. We should know what kind of detail we have and in which paragraph it's located—but we'll come back to that detail later on, and only if we actually get a question about it.

(3) You will likely feel uncomfortable with this approach at first because you will be skimming or outright skipping some of the detail. You *should* feel as though you don't understand every last thing in the passage—if you do understand every last thing, you are reading too carefully and taking too much time. As long as you understand the big ideas and any major contrasts, you'll be fine! ?

What NOT to read on Reading Comprehension passages

It's kind of ironic that, in order to do a great job on RC, we actually have to learn what NOT to read. You may already have read [an earlier article of mine on this same topic](#); I want to revisit the issue not only because so many people struggle with it but also because we used an MGMAT example last time. This time, we're going to use an example from OG13 "that is, the real thing.

Required Preparation

You need to do a little prep before you can get the most out of this article. 😊 First, read the introduction entitled [How To Read A Reading Comp Passage](#). (Hint: take some notes! You're going to be trying this out on a real passage in a few minutes!)

Next, you are going to need OG13 in order to do this exercise "I can't reproduce the entire passage here for copyright reasons. We're looking for the second-to-last passage; it's on page 414 and begins All the cells in a particular plant

Here's what to do: set a timer for 3 minutes, read, and take whatever notes you like. If the timer buzzes before you're done, take note. You can then go ahead and finish the passage "I just want you to notice how much extra time you need. Then come back here.

Okay, are you ready? Let's do this!

Paragraph 1: 90% focus, 10% skim

Of course, when I first start, I'm going to start by reading "I won't get very far otherwise! I need to figure out:

1. what words or parts of the sentence are so complex that I'm going to ignore them for now?
2. when can I stop reading and start skimming?
3. when do I have to start paying close attention again?

So let's dive into the first paragraph (partial reproduction; see the Official Guide for the full text):

All the cells in a particular plant **start out with the same** complement of **genes**. How then can these cells differentiate and form structures as different as roots, stems, leaves, and fruits? **The answer is** that **only a small subset** of the genes in a particular kind of cell are expressed, or **turned on**, at a given time. This is accomplished by a complex system of [things] that in plants include [some stuff].

Let's start with the formatting I inserted. Normal text means: I did read this but didn't pay extra attention to it.

Boldface: These words really stood out for me: my brain perked up and paid attention. Notice that I didn't bold any of the crazy words "not even the mildly hard ones.

Strikeout: I did technically read these words "my eyes looked at them "but I glossed over them. I didn't think about what they mean or how they fit into the overall message. I made sure my brain did not engage when I read them.

[Words between brackets]: Hard words or concepts that I do not need to understand right now. At this point, I'm starting to skim more aggressively.

Next big question: how did I know when to pay attention and when to skim?

I really am looking for the easiest path to the main messages. I glossed over the big or harder words and paid more attention to the easy ones. How did I get away with that? Because the easy words give me enough info to understand the general message “ and that’s all I want at this stage!

Do I need to know how they use the term differentiate or the term expressed? No. Each term is actually explained right afterwards. Lesson: when they use hard words or technical terms, I can probably turn my brain off because I’ll get the info elsewhere.

Do I need to know that the messengers are chemical? No, not right now “ that’s a detail. Regulatory molecules? Not sure what those are “ but that’s okay, because I don’t need to know any detail now. Lesson: detail is not important at this stage. Skip it.

Let’s examine the last two sentences of the paragraph (not reproduced here). The second-to-last sentence lists the 5 relevant hormones. I have read this passage many times, but I have still *never* read the full list. As soon as I see Auxin and realize a list is coming, I immediately skip ahead.

The final sentence has some language that indicates I need to take it seriously: Studies have *now* identified something new. Ignore all the hard words and just think of the 5 hormones (mentioned earlier) and the new O.

Let’s take stock here: I probably paid attention to about 90% of what I read in this first paragraph; this is pretty typical for a paragraph 1. As I move further, I can expect to be able to pick up the speed.

Paragraph 2: 60% focus

Unlike the oligosaccharins, the **five** well-known plant hormones are pleiotropic rather than specific; **that is, each has more than one effect** on the growth and development of plants. The five have **so many simultaneous effects that they are not very useful** in artificially controlling the growth of **crops**. Auxin, **for instance**

I have a lot bolded so far “ a lot more than 70%. Everything that I *didn’t* include in the quote, though, is pure skim. How do we know? First, the word for instance telegraphs that we’re about to get some detail. Second, when we scan that detail looking for any high level language, we don’t see any. Pure detail = skim.

Those first 2 sentences, on the other hand, contain some important info. The O’s aren’t like The 5 in some way. What way? Well, there’s the crazy p-word oh, and check it out “ once again, they then tell me what the crazy word means. The 5 = more than one effect. O = unlike, so the Os must have just one effect.

Paragraph 3: 40% focus

All right, I’m starting to understand a bit “ which is good news, because that means I can start to speed up! How much can I skim this paragraph?

The pleiotropy of the **five** well-studied plant hormones is somewhat **analogous** to that of certain hormones in **animals**. **For example**, hormones from the hypothalamus [blah blah detail blah]

One sentence in, and we already have a for example “ excellent! We do have to know the harder word analogous, a form of the wordy analogy. Essentially, the first sentence tells us that something similar might happen in animals. Then it goes into crazy detail. Scan until you either (a) find language that indicates a high level message again, or (b) finish the paragraph.

I read	I think:
These hormones have	this is detail, keep skimming
<i>One</i> hormone stimulates	probably a detail
<i>for example</i>	bingo, detail!
In other words	Hold up! Might indicate a high level message; pay attention.

In other words, there is a hierarchy of hormones.

Another harder word. Hierarchy well, a company often has a hierarchy. The CEO runs things and then some Vice Presidents report to the CEO, and then each VP probably has managers, and so on. So this hormone stuff has a hierarchy as well, with some things reporting to others.

Before we move to paragraph 4, go look at #3 one more time. Notice how much we really did just skim / skip there!

Paragraph 4: 20% focus

Such a hierarchy may also exist in plants. Oligosaccharins are fragments

The first sentence says it all; the rest is detail.

One important thing to note: I put some percentages next to each paragraph. These won't always be the same on every 4-paragraph passage; we adjust as we see what the language is actually telling us. As a general rule, though, the further in we get, the more we'll be able to speed up (though sometimes the last paragraph really does contain some kind of broader message that needs a more careful read).

Taking Notes

Here's one example of a possible set of notes (but these will vary!)

P1	cells diff: genes, 5HAlso, O
----	------------------------------

P2	O NOT like 5H5h >1 effecteg Auxin
P3	Animals similar hormones have hierarchy
P4	Maybe Hier in plants too?

*5H = 5 major hormones; O = oligosaccharins

Our notes are so skimpy! Notice how much we *don't* know. That's perfectly fine " in fact, it's better than fine. This is exactly where we want to be at this point in the passage. We have the big picture and we have a pretty good idea of where to go if we get asked about certain topics. Animals? Paragraph 3. Auxin? Paragraph 2. And so on.

Really? That's all I need?

Really. Here's the deal: you're not actually *done* reading. When you get a question about a particular detail, you are going to go back and read that information to try to figure out the answer. You're just deferring " you're going to read it later, not right now during the initial read-through.

Why? There's just not enough time. Luckily, we know that we aren't going to get asked about all of these details " only some of them. So we don't bother to learn those pesky details until we *know* that we need them. (And we know that when we get a particular question about that detail!)

If you have access to our GMAT Navigator study tool, I've also posted a video discussion of the passage. It's very similar to what we do here, but you may want to watch anyway to help reinforce the lesson (and to see and hear an example rather than just read about it). The questions associated with the passage each have two videos: one discussing the overall passage (same video for all questions), and one discussing that particular question.

Key Takeaways for What NOT to Read

(1) The bigger the words get, the more likely we'll want to skim. They're going to use technical terms, such as expressed in paragraph 1, and they'll even toss crazy words like pleiotropy at us. Such technical language, though, will almost certainly be described in easier language at some point " go look for that easier description rather than spending precious time trying to decipher the hard stuff.

(2) Despite #1, we are still expected to have a decent vocabulary. In this passage, we were expected to know analogous and hierarchy. If you run across an unknown-to-you word that *isn't* otherwise defined, then you are forewarned: learn this vocab word before you take the GMAT.

(3) Look for language clues that help distinguish between high level and detail. The detail clues tend to be more obvious: for *example*, for *instance*, *one* type of something, and so on. On the other hand, you may need to need to train yourself to notice the high level clues. Start with the ones discussed above and keep searching for more when you practice!

How to Read Tough Science Passages

In the past, we've done some one-off review of parts of RC passages, but this time I've got a full one for you. In this article, we'll look at how to get through this thing (and what to avoid). Next week, we'll do a question or two.

I chose this passage from the free set of questions that comes with GMATPrep (that is, it doesn't actually show up in the practice CAT itself). It's a longer passage, so give yourself approximately three minutes total to get through.

The Passage

A meteor stream is composed of dust particles that have been ejected from a parent comet at a variety of velocities. These particles follow the same orbit as the parent comet, but due to their differing velocities they slowly gain or fall behind the disintegrating comet until a shroud of dust surrounds the entire cometary orbit. Astronomers have hypothesized that a meteor stream should broaden with time as the dust particles' individual orbits are perturbed by planetary gravitational fields. A recent computer-modeling experiment tested this hypothesis by tracking the influence of planetary gravitation over a projected 5,000-year period on the positions of a group of hypothetical dust particles. In the model, the particles were randomly distributed throughout a computer simulation of the orbit of an actual meteor stream, the Geminid. The reNavigator found, as expected, that the computer-model stream broadened with time. Conventional theories, however, predicted that the distribution of particles would be increasingly dense toward the center of a meteor stream. Surprisingly, the computer-model meteor stream gradually came to resemble a thick-walled, hollow pipe.

Whenever the Earth passes through a meteor stream, a meteor shower occurs. Moving at a little over 1,500,000 miles per day around its orbit, the Earth would take, on average, just over a day to cross the hollow, computer-model Geminid stream if the stream were 5,000 years old. Two brief periods of peak meteor activity during the shower would be observed, one as the Earth entered the thick-walled pipe and one as it exited. There is no reason why the Earth should always pass through the stream's exact center, so the time interval between the two bursts of activity would vary from one year to the next.

Has the predicted twin-peaked activity been observed for the actual yearly Geminid meteor shower? The Geminid data between 1970 and 1979 show just such a bifurcation, a secondary burst of meteor activity being clearly visible at an average of 19 hours (1,200,000 miles) after the first burst. The time intervals between the bursts suggest the actual Geminid stream is about 3,000 years old.

Here's how to read

When you're reading an RC passage, think about:

- (1) What words or parts of the sentence are so complex that I'm going to ignore them for now?
- (2) When can I stop reading and start skimming?
- (3) When do I have to start paying close attention again?

Below, I go through each paragraph, noting various things. Normal text means: I did read this but didn't pay extra attention to it. **Boldface** text really stood out for me: my brain perked up and paid attention.

I did technically read the strikeout text”my eyes looked at the words”but I actively avoided thinking about what they mean or how they fit into the overall message.

Let’s try paragraph 1:

Original Text	What I thought
A meteor stream is composed of dust particles that have been ejected from a parent comet at a variety of velocities. These particles follow the same orbit as the parent comet, but due to their differing velocities they slowly gain or fall behind the disintegrating comet until a shroud of dust surrounds the entire cometary orbit.	I’ve heard the word meteor before. I know what a comet is. Halley’s Comet is the really famous one. When you see a picture of a comet, it has a tail of little dots of light”I guess that’s part of the meteor stream thing.
Astronomers have hypothesized that a meteor stream should broaden with time as the dust particles’ individual orbits are perturbed by planetary gravitational fields. A recent computer-modeling experiment tested this hypothesis by tracking the influence of planetary gravitation over a projected 5,000-year period on the positions of a group of hypothetical dust particles .	The hypothesis is that the stream should get bigger or more spread out”not really sure”for some reason and a recent experiment tests this on a hypothetical case.
In the model , the particles were randomly distributed throughout a computer simulation of the orbit of an actual meteor stream , the Geminid. The reseNavigator found, as expected, that the computer-model stream broadened with time. Conventional theories, however, predicted that the distribution of particles would be increasingly dense toward the center of a meteor stream. Surprisingly , the computer-model meteor stream gradually came to resemble a thick-walled, hollow pipe.	I don’t understand the significance of the first sentence, but it sounds like they tried to map a real meteor stream, the Geminid.They hypothesized that the stream would broaden and it did. BUT. They also predicted something else that I don’t really understand and then something surprising happened. The meteor stream looked like a certain kind of pipe. I know what a pipe is, so I can visualize that, but I don’t really understand what they’re trying to say here.

Notice a few things. First, most of the bold words are normal words”not the crazy technical ones. Second, I’m not entirely sure what’s going on at the end of that first paragraph; the information is getting pretty detailed. And I don’t care! It’s okay not to understand that level of detail at this point. I know that the conventional theories and the computer-model test agree on one thing but something else was surprising. That’s good enough for now.

Paragraph 2

Original Text	What I thought
Whenever the Earth passes through a meteor stream, a meteor shower occurs.	Is this like the Northern Lights? Or maybe shooting stars? Bright lights in the night sky"okay, this makes sense. This stuff comes into the Earth's atmosphere and then we see it.
Moving at a little over 1,500,000 miles per day around its orbit, the Earth would take , on average, just over a day to cross the hollow, computer-model Geminid stream if the stream were 5,000 years old .	Hypothetical language. IF the model is right, and if this Geminid thing is 5,000 years old, then something would take about a day to happen"maybe there would be meteor showers for a day? (Note: how did I know to ignore the starting words? It's a modifier, not the subject. Use your SC skills!)
Two brief periods of peak meteoractivity during the shower would be observed, one as the Earth entered the thick-walled pipe and one as it exited . There is no reason why the Earth should always pass through the stream's exact center, so the time interval between the two bursts of activity would vary from one year to the next.	Still hypothetical. Enter and exit I don't get it. Read the next sentence. Oh, there are two bursts of activity with some time in between. Okay.

Most of the sentences were pretty detailed and confusing. I still don't get the whole enter and exit thing, but that's okay for now.

Paragraph 3

Original Text	What I thought
Has the predicted twin-peaked activitybeen observed for the actual yearly Geminid meteor shower?	The model predicted something. Does it match reality?
The Geminid data between 1970 and 1979 show just such a bifurcation, a secondary burst of meteor activity being clearly visible at an average of 19 hours (1,200,000 miles) after the first burst. The time intervals between the bursts suggest the actual Geminid stream is about 3,000 years old .	Not sure what they mean by bifurcation, but the data show just such something means that the data did show something that was expected. I'll figure out later what that was (if I get a question about it).Hmm, and the G is 3,000 years old, so this must be talking

	about something similar to that 5,000 year comment earlier.
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So the predicted activity did seem to match reality in some way, but the Geminid is only about 3,000 years old.

Taking Notes

Here's one example of a possible set of notes (but these will vary widely!)

P1	MS around comet same orbit, diff velocity model of G vs. theory
P2	Earth + MS = shower activity varies (?)
P3	model = reality? Y. (?) G 3,000 yo

The two question marks in parentheses are used to indicate "There's more detail here that I don't quite understand" "I'll come back to it if / when I get a question about it."

Our notes are so skimpy! Notice how much we *don't* know. This is exactly where we want to be at this point in the passage. We have the big picture and we have a pretty good idea of where to go if we get asked about certain topics. The computer model vs. the conventional theories? Mid-to-late paragraph 1. A surprising result? End of paragraph 1. Something about the amount of activity or how old the MS is? Prediction or hypothetical is paragraph 2 and reality is paragraph 3.

Really? That's all I need?

Yes—for now. You're not actually *done* reading, though. When you get a question about a particular detail, you will go back and read that information to try to figure out the answer. You're just deferring—you're going to get into the detail later, not right now during the initial read-through.

Why? There's just not enough time. Luckily, we know that we aren't going to get asked about all of these details "only some of them. So why bother to learn those annoying details unless and until we *know* that we need them?"

Dig this post? [Check out its follow-up](#), where we tackle a question from the passage. In the meantime, happy studying!

Key Takeaways for Reading the Passage

(1) Half of the battle on RC is knowing what to read and what *not* to read. Concentrate on the core: the main subjects and verbs. Skim over the modifiers and details on the first read-through; you'll come back to these later (IF you get a question about them).

(2) The bigger the words and the more complicated the sentences, the more likely we'll want to skim. They're going to use technical terms, such as cometary in paragraph 1, and they'll toss in long modifiers to slow us down. A recent computer-modeling experiment? How about just an experiment?

(3) Anticipate whenever you can. Astronomers have hypothesized A recent experiment tested this hypothesis. Okay, they're probably going to tell me whether the results helped or hurt the hypothesis. I'm going to keep an eye out for that.

Inferring from the Meteor Stream Passage

Last time, we took a look at the [Meteor Stream passage](#) from the free set of questions that comes with GMATPrep (not from the practice CATs). Click the link in the previous sentence and open up that passage in a separate window (I'm not going to show it here because it's so long!).

Ready for the question? Give yourself about 1.5 to 2 minutes to answer.

The Question

The passage suggests that which of the following is a prediction concerning meteor streams that can be derived from both the conventional theories mentioned in the highlighted text and the new computer derived theory?

[Note: when this question is given during the test, the phrase *Conventional theories* is also suddenly highlighted in yellow in the passage. This text appears at the start of the second-to-last sentence of the first paragraph.]

- (A) Dust particles in a meteor stream will usually be distributed evenly throughout any cross section of the stream.
- (B) The orbits of most meteor streams should cross the orbit of the Earth at some point and give rise to a meteor shower.
- (C) Over time the distribution of dust in a meteor stream will usually become denser at the outside edges of the stream than at the center.
- (D) Meteor showers caused by older meteor streams should be, on average, longer in duration than those caused by very young meteor streams.
- (E) The individual dust particles in older meteor streams should be, on average, smaller than those that compose younger meteor streams.

Solution

This is a detail question, so we're going to use our notes and any clues in the question stem to know where to look. The question stem gives us one huge clue: it actually highlights a portion of a sentence in the first paragraph.

Next, the question says the passage *suggests*, so this is an inference question. Finally, the question is asking for a prediction that can be drawn from both the conventional theories and the new computer theory—in other words, where do these two theories agree?

Take a look at your notes. Mine are below, but everyone will have somewhat different notes.

P1	MS around comet same orbit, diff veloc model of G vs. theory
P2	Earth + MS = shower activity varies (?)

P3

model = reality? Y. (?)G 3,000 yo

Hmm. Well, the yellow highlighter already gives us a clue that we'll need to use paragraph 1 and my notes reinforce that message: the model (or computer model) of the Geminid vs. the (conventional) theory. All right, back to paragraph 1 we go!

Paragraph 1

As a general rule, start a sentence or so before the cited text.

The reNavigator found, as expected, that the computer-model stream broadened with time. Conventional theories, however, predicted that the distribution of particles would be increasingly dense toward the center of a meteor stream. Surprisingly, the computer-model meteor stream gradually came to resemble a thick-walled, hollow pipe.

Hmm. The first sentence says that as expected, the computer-model stream broadened with time. If this was *expected*, then both the computer model and the conventional theories must be in agreement on this issue. The next two sentences indicate a contrast: however and surprisingly. This information, then, can't be where the two agree.

Glance through the answers. Argh! None of them specifically talk about how broad the stream is.

Oh, right, wait a second! This is an inference question. We can't just spit back what the passage already says; we have to infer something. Okay, what else does the passage say about the stream broadening? Check a bit earlier and a bit later than the areas we've already read.

Earlier, the passage does confirm that astronomers hypothesized that the stream would broaden and the computer model tested that hypothesis. That info doesn't tell us anything more to do with the size or breadth of the stream, though.

Later, in the first sentence of the second paragraph, the passage indicates that a meteor shower occurs whenever the Earth is passing through a meteor stream. Can we infer anything here? When the meteor streams are young, they're more narrow; as they get older, they get broader. What effect would this have on the meteor showers that occur when the Earth passes through a meteor stream?

In general, the bigger and broader the stream, the longer it would take for the Earth to pass through it"so we would expect a much more interesting meteor shower (or, at the least, a longer one).

(A) Dust particles in a meteor stream will usually be distributed evenly throughout any cross section of the stream.

This isn't what we were just talking about, but I do feel like I read this somewhere check the passage. Yep! It's in there, just before the bit about the conventional theories. The passage says that *In the model, the particles were randomly distributed throughout a computer simulation of the orbit of an actual meteor stream, the Geminid*. Hmm. That's how they made the model, yes, but there's no

indication that the conventional theories also held to this, and we're looking for something on which both things agreed.

(B) The orbits of most meteor streams should cross the orbit of the Earth at some point and give rise to a meteor shower.❌

Most meteor streams? The universe is a pretty big place. It seems impossible that there would only be meteors right around our own little planet. The passage says only that when they do cross our path, we'll see a meteor shower.

(C) Over time the distribution of dust in a meteor stream will usually become denser at the outside edges of the stream than at the center.❌

The passage did say something about this yep, at the end of paragraph 1. This was the surprising result of the computer model; the conventional theories disagreed. This one's definitely wrong.

(D) Meteor showers caused by older meteor streams should be, on average, longer in duration than those caused by very young meteor streams.❌

Yes, this is pretty much what we said above: a bigger meteor stream would take longer to pass through, so the older ones would take longer.

(E) The individual dust particles in older meteor streams should be, on average, smaller than those that compose younger meteor streams.❌

The only thing I remember seeing about the individual particles was something about velocities at the beginning. The passage never mentions anything about their size.

The correct answer is (D).

We did have to get into the detail here, and that took some time. We didn't read all that detail carefully on the first read-through, so here's where we concentrate on several specific sentences and try to figure things out. On a question like this one, if at all possible, try to formulate at least an idea of what the answer must or might include before looking through the answer choices.

If you're not sure, then first try to eliminate answers that are never mentioned in the passage at all. In this case, answer (E) mentions the size of dust particles, but that's never mentioned in the passage.

Next, look for answers that don't make common sense. Answer (B) doesn't make sense because the Universe is enormous; it's very unlikely that most meteors out there will cross our path at some point.

Finally, if you do pick up that the question is asking for agreement between the conventional theories and the computer model, then cross off answer (C), because the information in that choice is presented in the *however* and *surprisingly* sentences of paragraph 1.

Now you're down to two choices; guess and move on.

If you can't get enough of the Meteor Stream passage, check out our ensuing post [here](#).

Key Takeaways for Inference Questions

- (1) First, figure out where to look; the clues will be in the wording of the question itself. In this case, they highlighted a couple of words for us, but they also gave important direction when they asked what could be derived from both the theory and the model.
- (2) Whenever possible, know what you're *not* looking for as well. In this case, the question asks where the theory and the model agree, *not* where they disagree. Because the passage does also give info about where the two contradict, chances are a trap answer will include that info.
- (3) If the text is just too hard to understand, use a couple of tactics to try to eliminate some wrong answers. Anything that isn't actually mentioned in the passage can be crossed off. You can also use common sense; if something really doesn't make sense in the real world, don't guess that one.

Why Does It Say This? The Meteor Stream Passage

Originally, I was only planning to do one question from the Meteor Stream passage. But this one is so much fun, I figured why not?

Yes, I'm being sarcastic. I don't think anybody finds this passage fun. :)

In fact, that's why I want to look at another problem with you "this thing is kind of a nightmare!

Okay, if you haven't already, read the [Meteor Stream passage](#). Note that this comes from the free set of questions in GMATPrep (not from the practice CATs). Here's the [link to the first question](#) we did (though you don't need to try that one before continuing with this article).

Click the first link in the previous paragraph and open up that passage in a separate window (I'm not going to show it here because it's so long!).

Ready for the question? Give yourself about 1.5 minutes to answer.

The Question

The author states that the research described in the first paragraph was undertaken in order to

- (A) determine the age of an actual meteor stream
- (B) identify the various structural features of meteor streams
- (C) explore the nature of a particularly interesting meteor stream
- (D) test the hypothesis that meteor streams become broader as they age
- (E) show that a computer model could help in explaining actual astronomical data

Solution

This is a detail question, so we're going to use our notes and any clues in the question stem to know where to look. The question stem gives us one huge clue: it refers specifically to the first paragraph.

Next, the question says in order to. This language typically points to a "Why question" that is, why did the author talk about or include something? In this case, the question asks why someone conducted the research described in the first paragraph.

Take a look at your notes. Mine are below, but everyone will have somewhat different notes.

P1	MS around comet same orbit, diff veloc model of G vs. theory
P2	Earth + MS = shower activity varies (?)
P3	model = reality? Y. (?) G 3,000 yo

Hmm. The first paragraph described meteor streams that's not research, though, just information. Next, the passage talked about building a computer model to show some stuff. That must be the research. Okay, time to dive back into the text and figure out why the research was done!

Re-read the text

Scan until the text starts describing the research:

A recent computer-modeling experiment tested this hypothesis by tracking the blah blah blah.

Tested *this* hypothesis? What hypothesis? Go back one more sentence:

Astronomers have hypothesized that a meteor stream should broaden with time as the blah orbits are perturbed by blah. A recent computer-modeling experiment tested this hypothesis by tracking the blah blah blah.

All right, got it! They built the model in order to test the hypothesis. That might be enough to answer the question or the answer might reference the actual hypothesis: they built the model in order to test whether the meteor stream broadened with time.

Now, are you sure that this is it? Maybe there's more about why later in the paragraph. Should you keep reading?

You've got one *why* idea, so check the answers. If that one doesn't do it, then you can keep going in the paragraph, but don't try to find every possible answer first.

Test the Answers

Look for language that goes along with this idea: to test the hypothesis that the meteor stream broadened over time.

(A) determine the age of an actual meteor stream

This doesn't match, but it's still tempting. Why? Oh, right, because the later two paragraphs do actually talk about the age of a meteor stream, and the very last thing the passage does is to calculate the age of the Geminid. But that's in paragraph 3; this question asks about paragraph 1. Eliminate answer (A).

(B) identify the various structural features of meteor streams

The early part of the passage does seem to describe some structural features, but the goal of the computer model research wasn't to identify all of the various features. Rather, the researchers wanted to test a certain hypothesis. Eliminate (B).

(C) explore the nature of a particularly interesting meteor stream

It's true that the researchers used a particular meteor stream, the Geminid, in their computer model, but this isn't *why* they undertook the research in the first place. Rather, they undertook the research to test a specific hypothesis; they just happened to choose the Geminid for their research. Eliminate (C).

(D) test the hypothesis that meteor streams become broader as they age

Yes, this is what the passage says: the astronomers hypothesized that a meteor stream should broaden with time and the researchers built a computer model in order to test that hypothesis.

(E) show that a computer model could help in explaining actual astronomical data

It's true that the computer model did ultimately seem to help explain some things, but the passage doesn't say that this is *why* the researchers chose to build the model.

The correct answer is (D).

Note that a couple of the answers might have been appropriate for a *what* question: what did the model show? It predicted a certain structural feature (the pipe shape), so answer (B) might have worked for a different question. What was the final result of all of the described research? They were able to predict the actual age of the Geminid” answer (A).

Key Takeaways for Why Questions

- (1) First, figure out where to look; the clues will be in the wording of the question itself. In this case, they mentioned a specific paragraph, but they also gave important direction when they asked not what happened but *why* something happened.
- (2) Whenever possible, know what you’re *not* looking for as well. On *why* questions, don’t fall into the trap of picking a *what* answer. In addition, when they mention a particular paragraph, don’t pick an answer that discusses something mentioned only in a different paragraph.

The Master Resource List for Reading Comprehension

They manage to pick such interesting topics for Reading Comprehension, don't they? It's always the kind of thing you'd choose to read at home in your free time!

Wait. No, that's not quite right. But the topics are relevant to business school...well, occasionally. Hmm.

So, let me get this straight. They're going to give me somewhat obscure, very dense topics with very complicated ideas and sentence structures. I'm going to have about 3 minutes to read such a passage, and then I have to start answering questions about the material. That's completely artificial; it would never happen in the real world!

Actually, yes it will. You're going to do case studies in business school. You often *won't* be given enough time to read through every last detail carefully; instead, you'll have to figure out what's important and concentrate on those pieces, while putting together a framework for the main ideas and the big changes in direction or opinion.

At work, you're often going to have to make decisions based upon incomplete information. At times, you'll have a ton of information—and not enough time to review it all before you have to take action. These situations are far from rare in the real world.

So when you find yourself a bit unmotivated because you know you've got to study boring Reading Comprehension today, remind yourself that RC will actually help you develop much-needed skills for business school and beyond!

The Master Resource List for Reading Comprehension

I've put together what I'm calling the Master Resource List for Reading Comprehension. A couple of disclaimers. First, this list includes only free resources, no paid ones. There are a lot of good resources out there that cost some money—they're just not on this list!

Second, this list is limited to my own articles. I'm not trying to claim that only my articles are good enough to make such a list—far from it. I'm most familiar with my own articles, so that's what I'm using. And, okay, I will admit that I think the Manhattan Prep Reading Comprehension process is the best one out there. But I'm biased. ?

How To Read

Before you dive into individual question types, it's critical to know some overall processes for Reading Comprehension, starting with how to read! You already know how to read in general, of course. I'm talking about [How To Read RC](#).

You'll notice that the first article, linked above, discusses not only what *to* read but also what *not* to read. When you have only a few minutes, it's just as important to know what you can skip or skim (and how to make that decision). For more, check out this lesson on [What to Read and What Not to Read](#).

If, after trying the above, you still find yourself really struggling with either reading speed or comprehension, here are some resources to help you [Improve Your Reading Skills](#). That article is especially important for people who don't read regularly in English, either for work or on your own; this

is particularly true if your native language is also not English and you did your undergraduate studies in another language.

Finally, one of our two main goals when first reading a passage is to [Find the Main Point](#). (The other main goal is to take some light notes on each paragraph in order to understand the organization of the information.)

When you've mastered those skills, you're ready to learn how to tackle the questions.

The Reading Comprehension Question Types

I literally just said this, but I'm going to repeat it: when you've mastered the reading skills, you are then ready to tackle the questions. Don't make the mistake of thinking that you can ignore the previous section and just go straight for the questions. You will be slower and you will make more mistakes if you do that.

Reading Comprehension has three main question types: Main Idea, Specific Detail, and Inference. Each of those question types can have nuances or sub-types.

Main Idea

Most passages will include one Main Idea category question. Most commonly, you'll be asked for the "primary purpose" (i.e., the main idea) of the entire passage, though a question could also ask for the primary purpose or role of just one paragraph.

If you're asked for [the purpose of the entire passage](#), then the correct answer has to cover the overall "real estate" of the passage as a whole. Wrong answers will often be too narrow (e.g., something that applies primarily to just one paragraph) or too broad (something that includes the main idea but goes beyond it to encompass ideas that were not presented in the passage). Follow the link above to get some practice.

Specific Detail

This category refers to questions that ask about a particular detail in the passage. Most commonly, these questions will begin: "According to the passage..." Your task on these is to find an answer choice that matches something stated specifically in the passage.

That sounds easy—if the information is stated right there in the passage, how hard can it be?

As you already know very well, they can make it quite hard. First, the language in the passage is seriously complex; it's not always easy to understand what they're talking about. Second, right answers will often contain *synonyms* for words that appeared in the passage while some wrong answers will often contain the exact language used in the passage. If you're not careful, you'll be tempted to cross off that right answer because the language doesn't match exactly!

Specific Detail Rule: Use the question wording to figure out where to go in the passage. Then re-read that detail carefully. Do NOT rely on your memory!

Why not? I was once taking a standardized test (not the GMAT, but similar) and I was about to pick a Reading Comprehension answer. Then I remembered that I should check the proof in the passage first, so—even though I was *sure* I was right!—I made myself find the proof.

The passage was about some mammals, one of which was the [kangaroo rat](#). I looked at the passage, glanced back at my answer...and suddenly realized that the answer said *kangaroo*, not kangaroo rat! I would have been really mad to get a question wrong for that reason!

The moral of the story: find the proof in the passage. Every single time.

Here's a [specific detail question](#) to get started. Want another? [Here you go](#).

Inference

We're going to talk about two big things here: how to handle Inference questions and how to analyze Reading Comprehension problems in general (which you can then use on any question type).

Inference questions do ask about specific details in the passage, but they add a twist: we have to *deduce* something that must be true given certain facts from the passage.

For example, if I tell you that my favorite type of book to read is biographies, what could you deduce?

Here's the trap: don't use your "real-world" conclusion-drawing skills. In the real world, you might conclude that I like reading books in general, or perhaps I'm interested in history, or maybe that I'm a nerd (really? *biographies* are your favorite??). These things don't have to be true, though.

What *has* to be true? I don't like fiction as much as I like biographies. I have read at least one book in a non-biography category (otherwise, I wouldn't be able to tell that biographies are my *favorite*, which implies a comparison).

What's the difference? GMAT deductions are usually things that would cause us to say, "Duh!" in the real world.

"My favorite category of book is the biography."

"Oh, so you must not like fiction as much as you like biographies."

"Uh... well, yeah, that's what "favorite" means... I don't like anything else better."

A GMAT deduction should feel like a "duh" deduction—something totally boring that must be true given the information in the passage. Here, [try out an Inference question](#).

That article also explains how to analyze your work and the problem itself. Did you miss something in the passage? Why? How can you pick it up next time? Did you fall for a trap answer? Which one? How did they set the trap and how can you avoid it next time? And so on.

Why Questions

Specific questions can come in one other (not as common) flavor: the *Why* question. These are sort of a cross between Specific Detail and Inference questions: you need to review some specific information in the passage, but the answer to the question is not literally right in the passage. You have to figure out the most reasonable explanation for *why* the author chose to include a particular piece of information.

Test out [this Why question](#) to see what I mean.

Put It All Together

All right, have you got all of the pieces? What to read and what not to read? How to find the main point? How to answer Main Idea, Specific Detail, Inference, and Why questions?

Let's test it out! This first article talks about [how to read a tough science passage](#). This passage was taken from the free set of questions that comes with GMATPrep.

Wait, there's more! Test out your understanding of the passage on [this Inference question](#) and then try out [this Why question](#).

Timing

As I mentioned earlier, we really don't have much time to read Reading Comprehension passages. Aim for about 2 to 2.5 minutes on shorter passages and closer to 3 minutes for longer ones. Of course, that's not nearly enough time to read everything closely and carefully—but that's not your goal! As discussed in the How To Read articles above, our goal is to get the big picture on that first read-through, not every last detail.

Aim to answer main idea questions in about 1 minute. You can spend about 1.5 to 2 minutes on the more specific questions. In particular, if you run across an Except question, expect to spend pretty close to 2 minutes; Except questions nearly always take a while.

As always, be aware of your overall time. If you're running behind, skip one question entirely; don't try to save 30 seconds each on a bunch of questions. Also, if RC is your weakest Verbal area and you also struggle with speed, consider guessing immediately on one question per passage and spreading your time over the remaining questions.

Great, I've Mastered Reading Comprehension!

Let's test that theory, shall we? Your next step is to implement all of these techniques on your next practice test—and don't forget about your timing. Good luck! ?

Meteor Streams: Find the Assumption on GMAT Reading Comprehension (Part 1)

A couple of years ago, I wrote a small [series on the Meteor Stream passage](#) from the free set of practice questions that comes with the GMATPrep® software. A student recently mentioned how useful he found the discussion regarding how to handle all the technical language in a science passage, and I realized that there's more we can do with this passage!

Specifically, we only did two of the questions together, but there are more. And one of them is unusual: it's basically a Find the Assumption question, which is very common on Critical Reasoning but not so much on Reading Comp.

Okay, if you haven't already, go read the first article (linked in the first paragraph); I'm not going to reproduce the full passage here because it's so long. When you're done, keep that passage up and come back here. (Note: you can try the other questions first if you like, or you can come straight back here. Your choice.)

Ready for the question? Give yourself about 1.5 minutes to answer.

The Question

"Which of the following is an assumption underlying the last sentence of the passage?

"(A) In each of the years between 1970 and 1979, the Earth took exactly 19 hours to cross the Geminid meteor stream.

"(B) The comet associated with the Geminid meteor stream has totally disintegrated.

"(C) The Geminid meteor stream should continue to exist for at least 5,000 years.

"(D) The Geminid meteor stream has not broadened as rapidly as the conventional theories would have predicted.

"(E) The computer-model Geminid meteor stream provides an accurate representation of the development of the actual Geminid stream."

The Solution

First, identify the question type. An assumption question on RC! Weird. Hopefully, it works pretty much like CR assumption questions?

In general, you can assume that if you see a question category that you'd normally see for a different question type, then you can use the same kind of thinking that you'd typically use for that other question type. An assumption is still an assumption, even though this is an RC question.

Next, find the proof in the passage. Re-read the relevant text and try to formulate your own answer to the question.

The question stem is nice: it points us straight to the last sentence of the passage. First, remind yourself what that last paragraph is about. Here are my notes from the passage:

P1	MS around comet same orbit, diff veloc model of G vs. theory
P2	Earth + MS = shower activity varies (?)
P3	model = reality? Y. (?) G 3,000 yo

My notes aren't going to look exactly like yours, of course, and my notes might not even make total sense to someone else. Note that the two question marks in parentheses are my way of indicating "There's more detail here that I don't quite understand—I'll come back to it if / when I get a question about it." So now I'm going to need to dig into paragraph 3 a little more carefully.

According to my notes, the last paragraph asks a question (Does the model match reality?) and appears to answer it (Yes!).

I say "appears to answer" because I can see my (?) there, so maybe there's a nuance I don't fully understand yet. Time to re-read!

When the question references a specific word, line, or sentence, you'll generally need to read a little bit more than the actual reference. Use your best judgment as to where to start, but you'll typically start a sentence or two before the actual reference.

In this case, my notes already summarized the question, so I didn't re-read the first sentence. I started here:

"The Geminid data between 1970 and 1979 show just such a bifurcation, a secondary burst of meteor activity being clearly visible at an average of 19 hours (1,200,000 miles) after the first burst. The time intervals between the bursts suggest the actual Geminid stream is about 3,000 years old."

As I started to re-read the second sentence, I realized that it's saying, yes, the real data went along with what the model predicted: "the data shows just such a bifurcation." Note that the numbers don't matter, nor do you really need to know what bifurcation means. The language "just such" shows that the model predicted what really happened.

And then I noticed something neat about the third sentence: it's a conclusion! The question really is like a CR argument, then: what is the author assuming when drawing her conclusion?

"... the *actual* stream is about 3,000 years old." (emphasis added)

The conclusion doesn't just give the age of the stream. What's the significance of that word *actual*? The previous paragraph mentioned a time period of 5,000 years. What was that about again?

Go re-read that bit in paragraph 2. *If* the stream were 5,000 years old, *then* the Earth would take a little over a day to pass through the stream. Oh, but the third paragraph said that the average time was *actually* 19 hours. If the model is accurate, then that should mean the stream isn't quite as old as 5,000 years, so the author concludes that it's about 3,000 years old.

The author is using the model to draw her conclusion, so she has accepted (or is assuming!) that the model itself is accurate.

Okay, time to eliminate wrong answers and look for the right one!

“(A) In each of the years between 1970 and 1979, the Earth took exactly 19 hours to cross the Geminid meteor stream.”

The passage says that the average was 19 hours. Each data point doesn’t have to be exactly 19 in order to get to an average of 19. Eliminate answer (A).

“(B) The comet associated with the Geminid meteor stream has totally disintegrated.”

The third paragraph talks about the period 1970 to 1979 and indicates that the meteor stream was still going strong in that timeframe. No information is given about the disintegration of the meteor stream. (Note: if you’re worried that they might have said this elsewhere, remember that the question specifically asked you for an assumption in the last sentence—nothing in that area of the passage even hints at the break-up of the meteor stream.) Eliminate (B).

“(C) The Geminid meteor stream should continue to exist for at least 5,000 years.”

Ah! They’re messing with us! The 5,000 year figure mentioned in paragraph 2 had to do with how old the meteor stream already was, not how long it would continue to exist in the future. Eliminate (C).

“(D) The Geminid meteor stream has not broadened as rapidly as the conventional theories would have predicted.”

This one is a bit tricky. They’re trying to get us to fall into a trap surrounding the 5,000 year and 3,000 year figures. This is where that careful read was so necessary. Paragraph 2 doesn’t say that the Geminids *are* 5,000 years old. Rather, that figure is used to explain how the model works: *if* they are 5,000 years old, *then* it should take the Earth about 24 hours to pass through the stream. It turns out that it only takes about 19 hours, so the Geminids are younger, somewhere around 3,000 years old. Eliminate (D) and remember this reasoning for the next choice...

“(E) The computer-model Geminid meteor stream provides an accurate representation of the development of the actual Geminid stream.”

Exactly. The author is using the model, coupled with actual data, to predict the approximate age of the Geminids, so she must assume that the model is accurate.

The correct answer is (E).

Note that a couple of the answers played around with the 5,000 and 3,000 figures. They’re hoping that you didn’t understand what was going on, or just didn’t take the time to go back and get the facts straight.

This is why steps 2 and 3 are so crucial! Make sure you go back and re-read the relevant part(s) of the passage in order to find the proof (step 2). And try, as much as you can, to predict where the answer is going to go (step 3). You aren’t going to predict the actual language of the answer, of course, but if you understand the passage, you can get pretty close to the idea that the correct answer should convey.

(And if you don't understand the passage well enough to do this, then that's a pretty good sign that you should make your best guess and move on.)

By the way, the Geminids are real and the Earth still passes through the meteor stream! In 2015, the meteor shower is expected to peak on December 13 and 14; mark your calendars and read more about [the 2014 showers \(and see pictures!\) here](#).

Key Takeaways for RC Assumption Questions

- (1) Most Assumption questions show up on Critical Reasoning, but you might see one on RC, too. Don't panic. Follow the same principles that you use for CR. (You may also see a Strengthen or Weaken question on RC.)
- (2) For Assumption questions in general, you're looking for something that the author must believe to be true when drawing a certain conclusion.

Meteor Streams: Find the Detail on GMAT Reading Comp (Part 2)

I've got another installment for you in the [series on the meteor streams passage](#) from the free set of practice questions that comes with the GMATPrep® software.

This post contains the 4th of 5 questions that come with the passage. If you haven't already, go read the first article (linked in the first paragraph); I'm not going to reproduce the full passage here because it's so long. When you're done, keep that passage open in another window and come back here. (Note: you can try the other questions first if you like, or you can come straight back here. Your choice.)

Ready for the question? Give yourself about 1.5 minutes to answer.

The Question

"According to the passage, why do the dust particles in a meteor stream eventually surround a comet's original orbit?

"(A) They are ejected by the comet at differing velocities.

"(B) Their orbits are uncontrolled by planetary gravitational fields.

"(C) They become part of the meteor stream at different times.

"(D) Their velocity slows over time.

"(E) Their ejection velocity is slower than that of the comet."

The Solution

First, identify the question type. *According to the passage* signals that this is a specific detail question. You're going to have to find some specific detail in the passage and spit it back to answer the question.

Next, find the proof in the passage. Re-read the relevant text and try to formulate your own answer to the question.

Which paragraph talked about dust particles in the meteor stream?

P1	MS around comet same orbit, diff veloc model of G vs. theory
P2	Earth + MS = shower activity varies (?)
P3	model = reality? Y. (?) G 3,000 yo

Paragraph three was the whole model vs. reality thing. Paragraph two talks about how the model works. Paragraph one was the one that actually got into the details of the meteor stream.

Head over to the passage and think about how to answer this question while scanning the text for keywords *dust particles* or *original orbit*. It's right at the beginning:

"A meteor stream is composed of dust particles that have been ejected from a parent comet at a variety of velocities. These particles follow the same orbit as the parent comet, but due to their differing velocities they slowly gain or fall behind the disintegrating comet until a shroud of dust surrounds the entire cometary orbit."

Put the message in your own words: the dust particles get ejected, but they still follow along with the comet. They have different velocities, though, so they end up spreading out around the orbit.

So *why do the dust particles in a meteor stream eventually surround a comet's original orbit*? Because the different velocities make them spread out in a cloud.

Okay, time to eliminate wrong answers and look for the right one!

"(A) They are ejected by the comet at differing velocities."

Bingo. This matches the predicted answer: the different velocities cause the particles to spread out. This is the correct answer.

"(B) Their orbits are uncontrolled by planetary gravitational fields."

The third sentence of the first paragraph does mention *planetary gravitational fields*. But it talks about how the dust particles' orbit might be *perturbed*, or disrupted, by these fields, not why the particles surround the comet's orbit in the first place.

"(C) They become part of the meteor stream at different times."

I think this one can be really tricky because you might imagine that this is the reason. It makes sense logically that this would happen at different times. However, the passage doesn't actually say anything about this.

"(D) Their velocity slows over time."

This one is tempting because the passage does mention velocity, but it talks about *differing velocities*, not necessarily whether the particles are speeding up or slowing down (or maintaining a steady speed).

"(E) Their ejection velocity is slower than that of the comet."

Ejection velocity sounds good, too! The first sentence does say that these particles are *ejected* at different *velocities*. The next sentence, though, says that the particles *slowly gain or fall behind the comet*. This implies that some might be slower than the comet but others are faster, so this statement isn't true of all of the particles. It also isn't *why* the particles *eventually surround the orbit*. The passage states that this is due to the different velocities.

The correct answer is (A).

Were you tempted by one of the other answers? Here's how to learn from the trap that the test writers were setting for you.

First, articulate why you thought that wrong answer was (or might be) right. For instance, answer (E) matches some detail language closely (*ejection velocity*), so that would likely catch your eye.

Next, articulate why that answer was actually wrong. In this case, the passage specifically cites a *variety of velocities* as the cause, not just slower velocities.

Finally, articulate why the right answer seemed like it could be wrong, and then don't forget to articulate why it's actually right. Answer (A) may not look as good as (E) because it doesn't feature that language match from the passage. Answer (A) says *differing velocities* instead of a *variety of velocities*. These two phrases are synonyms, though—they mean the same thing!

Key Takeaways for RC Specific Detail Questions

(1) Make sure you go back to the passage to find the proof. As much as you can, try to predict (in your own words!) what the correct answer should say before you read through the five answers. This will help you to understand the *meaning* that you need, and you'll be less likely to fall for a "false language match" trap, as described above.

(2) For all verbal questions (not just RC!), analyze the problem when you're done. If you were tempted by a wrong answer, ask yourself 4 things: (1) Why did this answer look good (even though it's wrong)? (2) Why is it actually wrong? (3) Why did the right answer not look good in some way (ie, why would I consider crossing it off)? (4) Why is the right answer right?

Meteor Streams: Inference on GMAT Reading Comprehension (Part 3)

We're up to the very last question in the [series on the Meteor Stream passage](#) from the free set of practice questions that comes with the GMATPrep® software.

If you haven't already, go read the first article (linked in the first paragraph); I'm not going to reproduce the full passage here because it's so long. When you're done, keep that passage open in another window and come back here. (Note: you can try the other questions first if you like, or you can come straight back here. Your choice.)

Ready for the question? Give yourself about 1.5 minutes to answer.

The Question

"It can be inferred from the passage that which of the following would most probably be observed during the Earth's passage through a meteor stream if the conventional theories mentioned in the highlighted* text were correct?

"(A) Meteor activity would gradually increase to a single, intense peak, and then gradually decline.

"(B) Meteor activity would be steady throughout the period of the meteor shower.

"(C) Meteor activity would rise to a peak at the beginning and at the end of the meteor shower.

"(D) Random bursts of very high meteor activity would be interspersed with periods of very little activity.

"(E) In years in which the Earth passed through only the outer areas of a meteor stream, meteor activity would be absent."

*In the GMATPrep software, the words *Conventional theories* in the second-to-last sentence of the first paragraph are highlighted in yellow.

The Solution

First, identify the question type. *Inferred* signals that this is an inference question. The question is asking you to deduce something that must be true from the information given in the passage.

Next, find the proof in the passage. Re-read the relevant text and try to formulate your own answer to the question.

Nicely, the question stem sends us straight to the relevant text.

"Conventional theories, however, predicted that the distribution of particles would be increasingly dense toward the center of a meteor stream. Surprisingly, the computer-model meteor stream gradually came to resemble a thick-walled, hollow pipe."

The *however* and *surprisingly* language indicate that the conventional theories disagreed with the computer model in some way. How?

Picture a “stream” of particles flowing through the air. The conventional theories predicted that these particles would be most dense in the center of the stream. The computer model, surprisingly, was most dense around the outside edges, like *a thick-walled hollow pipe*.

The question asks what would be expected to happen as the Earth passes through a stream that is most dense in the center. Where does the passage talk about the Earth passing through a meteor stream in general?

That was paragraph 2:

“Whenever the Earth passes through a meteor stream, a meteor shower occurs. Moving at a little over 1,500,000 miles per day around its orbit, the Earth would take, on average, just over a day to cross the hollow, computer-model Geminid stream if the stream were 5,000 years old. Two brief periods of peak meteor activity during the shower would be observed, one as the Earth entered the thick-walled “pipe” and one as it exited.”

I’ve underlined the most relevant text. Which scenario is that last sentence describing? According to the sentence before, it’s describing the computer-model theory, the one that is not like the conventional theory. Ah, now I’m beginning to have an idea: they described what happens under the computer model, so I need to use that information to predict, or infer, what would happen under the conventional theory.

In the computer-model theory, the stream was most dense on the edges; it resembled *a thick-walled, hollow pipe*. According to the passage, this kind of shape, shows two peaks of meteor activity, at the beginning and at the end, as the Earth passes through the “pipe.” In other words, the peak activity matches when the Earth passes through the densest part of the pipe.

The conventional theory said that the stream would be most dense in the center of the pipe, not at the edges. So what would happen in that case? Peak meteor activity would occur right in the middle of the Earth’s passage through the stream.

Look for a match in the answers.

“(A) Meteor activity would gradually increase to a single, intense peak, and then gradually decline.”

Bingo! That’s what we predicted: activity would peak in the middle of the passage through Earth. (And this one is the correct answer.)

“(B) Meteor activity would be steady throughout the period of the meteor shower.”

Nope. Peak activity occurs at the densest point, in the middle of the shower.

“(C) Meteor activity would rise to a peak at the beginning and at the end of the meteor shower.”

Trap! This is what happens under the computer-model theory, not the conventional theory.

“(D) Random bursts of very high meteor activity would be interspersed with periods of very little activity.”

The activity isn’t random. It peaks when the densest part of the pipe passes through the Earth’s atmosphere.

“(E) In years in which the Earth passed through only the outer areas of a meteor stream, meteor activity would be absent.”

Tricky! The passage doesn't say that the less dense areas result in zero meteor activity, though. It says only that the activity peaks during the most dense times.

The correct answer is (A).

Key Takeaways for RC Inference Questions

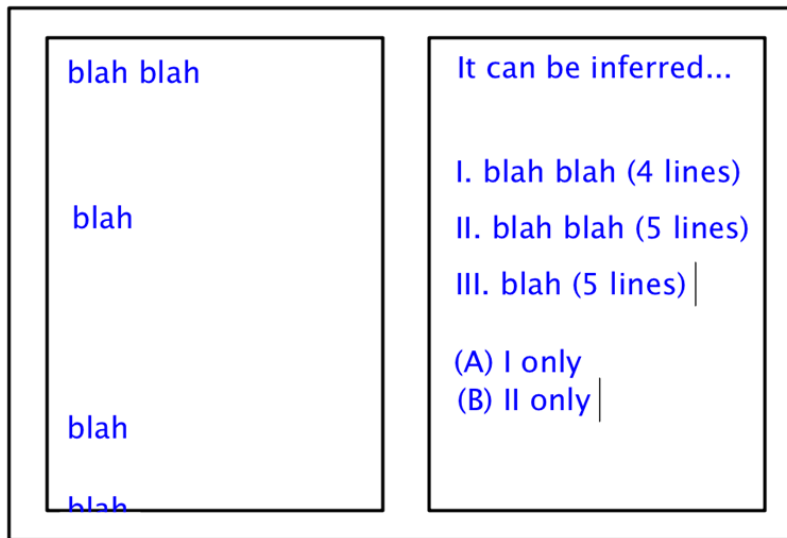
(1) The correct answer will not repeat something that the passage says straight out, so the trap in answer (C) is also the reason not to pick it. On an inference question, cross off any choices that are stated directly in the passage.

(2) Inference questions require you to deduce something that must be true. If peak meteor activity is associated with the densest part of the meteor stream, as the passage says, and the conventional theory says that the stream will be densest in the middle, then the conventional theory would predict that meteor activity would gradually increase until Earth is in the center of the stream and then decrease as the Earth moves out of the stream.

GMATPrep® Reading Comprehension: Tackling a Tough GMAT Passage (part 1)

Halfway through a GMATPrep® free practice test, I hit the passage I’m going to discuss in this series—and I groaned aloud the second it appeared on the screen.

Why? Here’s what I saw (without really reading much of anything!):



Can you spot what I spotted?

The roman numeral set-up hit me first. A roman numeral on Reading Comp (RC)! These aren’t that common and they definitely take longer to answer than regular problems. Plus, I could see that the passage, on the left-hand side of the screen, was really long; it ran off the screen.

Sigh. So what’s my approach when something like this pops up?

First, they’re asking me to do more work than normal to answer one question. I might be okay with that on certain quant problems, but I’m pretty annoyed on RC. So the first thing to figure out is whether I even want to bother trying this problem at all.

I normally do not read the question before reading the passage, but in this case, I’m going to do so. I want to see how hard the question seems and, if I do decide that I want to do it, then during my read-through, I may want to keep an eye out for the info I’ll need to answer it.

In this case, one aspect is lucky: the question references specific text that they’ve highlighted in yellow for me, so I know exactly where I need to concentrate. That’s just about the only redeeming feature of this problem.

Okay, here’s the start of the problem. Don’t try to answer it, of course—you haven’t even looked at the passage yet! Just decide whether this looks like something you think you can handle or whether this looks like a nightmare, in which case you’re going to guess and move on.

* “It can be inferred from the passage that application of “other mandates” (see highlighted text) would be unlikely to result in an outcome satisfactory to the female employees in which of the following situations?

“I. Males employed as long-distance truck drivers for a furniture company make \$3.50 more per hour...[2 more lines of text]

“II. [five lines: even longer than the first one!]

“III. [long, like the other two]

Wow. That’s a lot of work: three long scenarios and I have to figure out whether a particular thing can be inferred about each scenario.

If you know that RC is a weaker area for you, this would be a great time to guess and move on. If you are behind on time and need to catch up, ditto. If I decided to skip this one, I would guess on this question immediately, before I even bother to read the passage; I don’t want to get sucked into wasting any time at all on a problem that is so ridiculously long.

Unless you’re really behind on time, you’ll likely still want to try the other questions associated with this passage. But feel free to bail on something like this.

Okay, time to read the passage and create a passage Map. (Note: we will go through the roman numeral problem, but not until the second installment of this series. First, we need to process the passage.)

Ready? Here you go.

“Comparable worth, as a standard applied to eliminate inequities in pay, insists that the values of certain tasks performed in dissimilar jobs can be compared. In the last decade, this approach has become a critical social policy issue, as large numbers of private-sector firms and industries as well as federal, state, and local governmental entities have adopted comparable worth policies or begun to consider doing so.

“This widespread institutional awareness of comparable worth indicates increased public awareness that pay inequities—that is, situations in which pay is not “fair” because it does not reflect the true value of a job—exist in the labor market. However, the question still remains: have the gains already made in pay equity under comparable worth principles been of a precedent-setting nature or are they mostly transitory, a function of concessions made by employers to mislead female employees into believing that they have made long-term pay equity gains?

“Comparable worth pay adjustments are indeed precedent-setting. Because of the principles driving them, other mandates that can be applied to reduce or eliminate unjustified pay gaps between male and female workers have not remedied perceived pay inequities satisfactorily for the litigants in cases in which men and women hold different jobs. But whenever comparable worth principles are applied to pay schedules, perceived unjustified pay differences are eliminated. In this sense, then, comparable worth is more comprehensive than other mandates, such as the Equal Pay Act of 1963 and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Neither compares tasks in dissimilar jobs (that is, jobs across occupational categories) in an effort to determine whether or not what is necessary to perform these tasks—know-how, problem-solving, and accountability—can be quantified in terms of its dollar value to the

employer. Comparable worth, on the other hand, takes as its premise that certain tasks in dissimilar jobs may require a certain amount of training, effort, and skill; may carry similar responsibility; may be carried on in an environment having a similar impact upon the worker; and may have a similar dollar value to the employer.”

What does your passage Map look like? What do you think the main idea is?

Here’s the story I articulated to myself as I read, followed by my Map in blue (which I wrote paragraph by paragraph, as I read).

First, the author defines a term: comparable worth, or CW, says that you *can* compare the values of tasks performed in dissimilar jobs. This approach has become pretty widespread recently.

The CW concept has made the public more aware of pay gaps. But has CW actually helped to fundamentally fix the problem or is it just making people feel better but not fixing anything?

The author answers her own question: CW has made a real difference. The rest of the paragraph is long and somewhat confusing, but at heart, she’s saying that some other things haven’t had the same impact as CW on the pay gap and attributes that to CW’s focus on comparing tasks in dissimilar jobs.

P1

CW: \$\$ of tasks in diff jobs can be compared

critical issue, used by private, gov’t

P2

public >> aware of pay gaps

CW: is it real fix or false / temporary?

P3

Author: Real! More comprehensive than others.

DtIs why

What's the main idea here? Even if you don't get a main idea question, articulating this to yourself will help you to orient yourself to the passage and answer even specific questions. Here's my stab at the main idea:

Explain an important method for tackling a widespread problem and demonstrate that this method has a distinct advantage in one particular situation (when dealing with different jobs).

All right, got it. Time to do the problem (unless you decided to skip it!).

* "It can be inferred from the passage that application of "other mandates" (see highlighted text) would be unlikely to result in an outcome satisfactory to the female employees in which of the following situations?

"I. Males employed as long-distance truck drivers for a furniture company make \$3.50 more per hour than do females with comparable job experience employed in the same capacity.

"II. Women working in the office of a cement company content that their jobs are as demanding and valuable as those of the men working outside in the cement factory, but the women are paid much less per hour.

"III. A law firm employs both male and female paralegals with the same educational and career backgrounds, but the starting salary for male paralegals is \$5,000 more than for female paralegals.

"(A) I only

"(B) II only

"(C) III only

"(D) I and II only

"(E) I and III only"

Join me in [the next installment of this series](#), when we'll talk about how to work your way through the above problem and we'll try another. ?

Key Takeaways for Mapping Long Passages

(1) You're trying to accomplish three things: understand the overall "story" of the passage, note the purpose of each paragraph, and articulate the overall main point to yourself.

(2) Don't go too deep! Compare my Map to the actual passage. I didn't write down or even bother to try to remember the Equal Pay Act or Title VII of the Civil Rights Act. If I need to know their names, I can go back to the passage at any time. All I really need to know is that they are "other": the point is that they work differently than the big CW theory.

(3) Once you're done with your read-through, take about 20-30 seconds to articulate the main point to yourself. Don't skip this step! You'll use it to answer any main idea questions and to inform your answers to other questions.

GMATPrep Reading Comp: Tackling a Tough Passage (part 2)

In [the first installment of this series](#), we deconstructed a challenging Reading Comprehension passage from the GMATPrep® free exams. Pull up that page, as I'm not going to repeat the full text of the passage here.

I also gave you the first problem to try. Let's talk about it now!

Here's the problem again:

* "It can be inferred from the passage that application of "other mandates" (see highlighted text) would be unlikely to result in an outcome satisfactory to the female employees in which of the following situations?

"I. Males employed as long-distance truck drivers for a furniture company make \$3.50 more per hour than do females with comparable job experience employed in the same capacity.

"II. Women working in the office of a cement company content that their jobs are as demanding and valuable as those of the men working outside in the cement factory, but the women are paid much less per hour.

"III. A law firm employs both male and female paralegals with the same educational and career backgrounds, but the starting salary for male paralegals is \$5,000 more than for female paralegals.

"(A) I only

"(B) II only

"(C) III only

"(D) I and II only

"(E) I and III only"

If you recall, I was pretty annoyed by this problem. Roman numeral questions are always long and the three statements here are pretty complex. Don't just dive into a question like this; decide whether it's even worth your time in the first place.

If you're going to do this problem, then it's going to be crucial to make sure that you understand the question before going to the statements.

First, this is an inference question. Inference questions require you to figure out what must be true based upon some evidence presented in the passage.

Step two is to find the proof in the passage. Luckily, they highlighted the relevant text in the passage, so you know exactly where to go. Wait a second, though. Make sure you understand the question before you jump to this text.

Glance at the statements. Don't read completely or try to understand them. Just articulate to yourself *whatkind* of info they contain.

They seem to be describing very specific scenarios that weren't at all talked about in the passage. I guess these are hypothetical scenarios that I'm going to have to think about somehow.

Go back to the question stem to see how you have to think about the scenarios.

application of "other mandates"

hmm..."application" of this thing I'm going to read about in the passage...

would be unlikely to result in an outcome satisfactory to the female employees in which of the following situations?

Okay, they're going to describe something in this text I'm about to read, and applying that something to the scenarios (in the roman numerals) would *not* be satisfactory to the female employees. So in this text I'm about to read, I need to be able to infer something about female employees in particular.

Step three: time to read that text and try to articulate my own answer. I need to read enough to understand how female employees would be affected.

Here's the relevant text from the passage:

"Comparable worth pay adjustments are indeed precedent-setting. Because of the principles driving them, other mandates that can be applied to reduce or eliminate unjustified pay gaps between male and female workers have not remedied perceived pay inequities satisfactorily for the litigants in cases in which men and women hold different jobs. But whenever comparable worth principles are applied to pay schedules, perceived unjustified pay differences are eliminated."

Put this all in the context of the overall point of the passage: CW did / does make a difference in alleviating the pay gap.

"Other mandates" means other things besides CW. But those things "have not remedied perceived pay inequities satisfactorily" when "men and women hold different jobs." BUT CW did actually help in that situation.

Okay. So the "other" stuff, whatever it is, doesn't really work when you're talking about different jobs for the male and female employees involved. That would definitely be considered an unsatisfactory outcome for the female employees, so I need to look for scenarios in which the employees have different jobs.

Finally! I can go back to the statements.

"I. Males employed as long-distance truck drivers for a furniture company make \$3.50 more per hour than do females with comparable job experience employed in the same capacity."

"Employed in the same capacity" = the same job, so this doesn't fit what I'm looking for. I'm looking for situations in which the employees do *not* have the same kind of job.

Wow. I can eliminate answers (A), (D), and (E) based on this statement alone. (Note: this made me second-guess myself. Did I understand the question properly? So I re-read the question and confirmed that, yes, I really did understand and now I'm confident that this one is not right.)

“II. Women working in the office of a cement company content that their jobs are as demanding and valuable as those of the men working outside in the cement factory, but the women are paid much less per hour.”

Different jobs—office vs. factory. If the “other” methods (not CW) are used here, then the women aren’t likely to be happy with the outcome. This one works. Eliminate answer (C).

Only answer (B) is left. Let’s check the third statement just in case.

“III. A law firm employs both male and female paralegals with the same educational and career backgrounds, but the starting salary for male paralegals is \$5,000 more than for female paralegals.”

Same job. Nope, this one’s wrong, too. Statement II is the only one that fits the “different job” criterion.

The correct answer is (B).

This problem required a lot of careful upfront work. If that is done well, then the statements aren’t that bad. The trick is that you actually have really understand both the convoluted question and the relevant text in the passage so that you can pick out the one key detail: these other methods don’t work well when the male and female employees have different jobs.

It would be really easy to get lost in either the question or the passage on this one, in which case, *don’t push on*. You already know this is a crazy one, by virtue of the roman numeral set-up. So if the question, or passage, or both are just too much, roll your eyes that they actually expected someone to do that much work, pick your favorite letter, and don’t look back. Dive right into the next problem.

Speaking of, here is the second question!

“According to the passage, which of the following is true of comparable worth as a policy?”

“(A) Comparable worth policy decisions in pay-inequity cases have often failed to satisfy the complainants.

“(B) Comparable worth policies have been applied to both public-sector and private-sector employee pay schedules.

“(C) Comparable worth as a policy has come to be widely criticized in the past decade.

“(D) Many employers have considered comparable worth as a policy but very few have actually adopted it.

“(E) Early implementations of comparable worth policies resulted in only transitory gains in pay equity.”

[In the next installment of this series](#), we’ll talk about how to work your way through the above problem. I’ll also give you the third problem in the set. ?

Key Takeaways for Roman Numeral questions

(1) Don’t dive straight to the statements. First, make sure you understand the question, especially if it’s as involved as this one. Your understanding of the question should tell you what you need to figure out from the passage text. If you don’t get that, guess and move on.

(2) Next, still don't dive into the statements! Go back to the passage, read the relevant text, and try to formulate your own overall "answer" to the question. This won't be the actual answer of course, but it will be the key to evaluating the statements. Again, if you don't get this step, guess and move on.

(3) Finally, you can go to the statements! But you're only going to get this far if you successfully pass the earlier steps. Don't be stubborn and keep going just because you think you have to get it right or you "should" be able to figure it out.

GMATPrep Reading Comp: Tackling a Tough Passage (part 3)

In the [first installment](#) of this series, we deconstructed a challenging Reading Comprehension passage from the GMATPrep free exams. Pull up that page, as I'm not going to repeat the full text of the passage here. (And if you're just starting here, go through parts 1 and 2 first before you read this one!)

At the end of [the second installment](#), I posted the second problem for the passage. Let's figure it out!

Here it is again:

"According to the passage, which of the following is true of comparable worth as a policy?

"(A) Comparable worth policy decisions in pay-inequity cases have often failed to satisfy the complainants.

"(B) Comparable worth policies have been applied to both public-sector and private-sector employee pay schedules.

"(C) Comparable worth as a policy has come to be widely criticized in the past decade.

"(D) Many employers have considered comparable worth as a policy but very few have actually adopted it.

"(E) Early implementations of comparable worth policies resulted in only transitory gains in pay equity."

What's the **first step**?

Right, **figure out what kind of RC problem this is**. The language *according to the passage* signals that this is a Specific Detail question. On SD questions, your task is to find something that is specifically stated in the passage and "spit it back" to them as an answer.

So move to **step 2: find the proof**. What information do you need from the passage and where is that info located? The question stem asks what is *true of comparable worth as a policy*. Where do they talk about that?

The whole passage, of course, is about this CW idea, so it might be good to start by reminding yourself of what this idea is. It's a way to help close pay gaps and it works well even when you're dealing with different jobs, unlike some other methods.

Where, in general, does the passage detail the whole CW idea as a policy? Glance at your notes if needed; that was in paragraph 1. Review the text:

"Comparable worth, as a standard applied to eliminate inequities in pay, insists that the values of certain tasks performed in dissimilar jobs can be compared. In the last decade, this approach has become a critical social policy issue, as large numbers of private-sector firms and industries as well as federal, state, and local governmental entities have adopted comparable worth policies or begun to consider doing so."

Now, I just want to caution you about something. The rest of the passage gets more at how CW has actually worked in practice (versus what the underlying policy is) and how it compares to some other policies. It's *possible* that you'll need info from one of those paragraphs to answer the question, but

don't go searching everything now. That's a mistake—they're trying to suck you into spending too much time.

Most likely, what you need is in paragraph 1, because paragraph 1 is where they discuss the overall policy, and that's what the question specifically asks.

In short: start with the most likely paragraph. If that doesn't work, you can decide at that point whether to look in another paragraph or whether to guess and move on. But don't try to review the entire passage now; just go for the most likely paragraph.

Okay, **step 3**: try to **predict what you need** in the answer. There are a few big details in this paragraph. CW applies when you're talking about *dissimilar* jobs. This approach has *become a critical social policy issue*. (In this sense, *critical* means important, not negative. It's critical that you study hard!) Finally, lots of organizations have started using CW or are considering doing so.

Now, you can take your **final step**: look at those answers and **find a match**.

“(A) Comparable worth policy decisions in pay-inequity cases have often failed to satisfy the complainants.”

This choice doesn't match anything in paragraph 1, but could it be somewhere else in the passage? Wait! Don't go searching yet. First, ask yourself: how does this choice fit in with the overall main point?

The main point of the passage was that this CW thing worked well in cases where *other* methods failed. CW didn't fail (at least, not according to this passage). So this choice doesn't fit with the main idea. Eliminate it.

“(B) Comparable worth policies have been applied to both public-sector and private-sector employee pay schedules.”

What does *public-sector* mean? That's a synonym for government, as private-sector is typically a synonym for for-profit companies (whether the companies are privately-held or publicly-held). They do expect you to be familiar with this type of language, but note that they also gave you a clue in paragraph 1:

“...as large numbers of private-sector firms and industries as well as federal, state, and local governmental entities...”

They use the word private-sector in the passage, and they contrast that with *governmental entities*, so you can infer that the private ones are non-governmental. And then when you see *public-sector*, you can infer that this is the opposite of private, so this is a synonym for those governmental entities.

In short, this choice says that CW has been used by companies and by government groups. Hey! That's exactly what paragraph 1 did say. This is the correct answer.

Do run your eye over the other answers, just to be thorough.

“(C) Comparable worth as a policy has come to be widely criticized in the past decade.”

Again, this doesn't match with the main idea, which generally praises CW. No good.

“(D) Many employers have considered comparable worth as a policy but very few have actually adopted it.”

We call this one a Direct Contradiction trap. The passage says the opposite: *large numbers* of employees have adopted it or are considering doing so.

These Direct Contradiction traps can be really tempting when you don’t take the time to re-read the passage. You remember reading *something* about that...what was it again? And then you might fall into the trap of thinking that the passage said the opposite of what it really said.

“(E) Early implementations of comparable worth policies resulted in only transitory gains in pay equity.”

Transitory means temporary or not-long-lasting. If you don’t know the word, then pay attention to the word *only*: it signals some kind of a negative. *Only (blank) gains in pay equity* isn’t a good thing.

Paragraph 1 said nothing about *early implementations* of CW. It is possible that CW didn’t work as well early on. And if you hadn’t already found a good answer, maybe you’d go look elsewhere in the passage for a discussion of the early implementation. But since you already know that (B) works and since the point of the passage was really that this CW thing has generally worked well at least in the longer-term, cross this one off.

The correct answer is (B).

I want to summarize the process here, because a consistent process is really what’s going to help you most on these questions.

First, identify the question. *According to the passage* signals a Specific Detail question.

Second, find the proof. Figure out what you need to re-read in the passage in order to answer the question. (Do NOT skip this step. Do NOT rely on your memory. This is an open-book test! Re-read the needed material.)

Third, read that text and use it to formulate your own answer to the question. Your wording, of course, won’t match the wording of the correct answer. That’s okay. You’re just trying to articulate to yourself the kinds of things you want the answer to say or address. Get that clear in your head (or even jot down a note or two) before you go to the final step.

Fourth, eliminate wrong answers and find a match! This is what I want to emphasize here: look at how much work comes before you get to look at the answers. Don’t jump straight to the answers. Figure out what’s going on with the question first!

All right, are you ready for the third problem in the set? Here you go!

“Which of the following best describes an application of the principles of comparable worth as they are described in the passage?

“(A) The current pay, rates of increase, and rates of promotion for female mechanics are compared with those of male mechanics.

“(B) The training, skills, and experience of computer programmers in one division of a corporation are compared to those of programmers making more money in another division.

“(C) The number of women holding top executive positions in a corporation is compared to the number of women available for promotion to those positions, and both tallies are matched to the tallies for men in the same corporation.

“(D) The skills, training, and job responsibilities of the clerks in the township tax assessor’s office are compared to those of the much better-paid township engineers.

“(E) The working conditions of female workers in a hazardous-materials environment are reviewed and their pay schedules compared to those of all workers in similar environments across the nation.”

In [the next installment of this series](#), we’ll talk about how to work your way through the above problem. I’ll also give you another new problem from the set. ?

Key Takeaways for Specific Detail questions

(1) Follow the process. Don’t skip steps!

(2) Even though these are detail questions, you can still use the main idea / main point to help you eliminate answer choices. If something contradicts the main point, it’s probably incorrect (unless that question was worded in such a way as to contradict the main point: e.g., what would the author *disagree* with?).

(3) Reading Comp is an open-book test. The passage is always there while you’re answering questions. Don’t feel like you need to learn everything the first time you read it and don’t hesitate to go back to it whenever you need to do so.

GMATPrep Reading Comp: Tackling a Tough Passage (Part 4)

[In the first installment of this series](#), we deconstructed a challenging Reading Comprehension passage from the GMATPrep® free exams. Pull up that page and keep it handy; it contains the full passage text. (And if you're just starting here, go through the first three parts before you continue with this one!)

At the end of the third installment, I posted the third problem for the passage. Here it is again:

"Which of the following best describes an application of the principles of comparable worth as they are described in the passage?

"(A) The current pay, rates of increase, and rates of promotion for female mechanics are compared with those of male mechanics.

"(B) The training, skills, and experience of computer programmers in one division of a corporation are compared to those of programmers making more money in another division.

"(C) The number of women holding top executive positions in a corporation is compared to the number of women available for promotion to those positions, and both tallies are matched to the tallies for men in the same corporation.

"(D) The skills, training, and job responsibilities of the clerks in the township tax assessor's office are compared to those of the much better-paid township engineers.

"(E) The working conditions of female workers in a hazardous-materials environment are reviewed and their pay schedules compared to those of all workers in similar environments across the nation."

Step 1: Identify the question

This is a weird one. They're asking you to apply some concept from the passage to the new scenarios described in the answer choices. This one is sort of a cross between specific detail (find something in the passage) and inference (deduce something that must follow from information in the passage). You need to find a scenario that fits with the *principles of comparable worth*.

Step 2: Find the proof.

What are the principles of comparable worth? Find and review them.

"Comparable worth, as a standard applied to eliminate inequities in pay, insists that the values of certain tasks performed in dissimilar jobs can be compared. In the last decade, this approach has become a critical social policy issue, as large numbers of private-sector firms and industries as well as federal, state, and local governmental entities have adopted comparable worth policies or begun to consider doing so."

In short, CW is a way to help close pay gaps and it works well even when you're dealing with different jobs, unlike some other methods.

Step 3: Predict an answer.

Obviously, you aren't going to be able to predict whatever scenarios the answers detail, but you can try to articulate what characteristic(s) the correct answer should have.

The correct answer should go along with CW principles. The scenario described should help to close pay gaps among people with different jobs.

Step 4: Find a match in the answers.

Dive in!

“(A) The current pay, rates of increase, and rates of promotion for female mechanics are compared with those of male mechanics.”

Female mechanics and male mechanics are doing the same job, not different jobs. This one doesn't fit CW.

“(B) The training, skills, and experience of computer programmers in one division of a corporation are compared to those of programmers making more money in another division.”

The divisions might be different, but we're still talking about the same job: computer programmer. This one also does not fit.

“(C) The number of women holding top executive positions in a corporation is compared to the number of women available for promotion to those positions, and both tallies are matched to the tallies for men in the same corporation.”

This one is sort of comparing people in different jobs: the people who hold executive positions vs. the people who don't but might be promoted. The focus of the comparison, though, is not about addressing any pay gap. It's just talking about the number of people in each group. This one isn't the right answer.

“(D) The skills, training, and job responsibilities of the clerks in the township tax assessor's office are compared to those of the much better-paid township engineers.”

Okay, we've got two different jobs: clerks and engineers. Oh, and they have a difference in pay: the engineers make a lot more. This one hits the two main criteria. Leave it in.

“(E) The working conditions of female workers in a hazardous-materials environment are reviewed and their pay schedules compared to those of all workers in similar environments across the nation.”

This choice doesn't specify an actual job—what are the workers doing? And are they doing similar things or different things? We do know that they're working in the same dangerous environment, so if we assume anything, we'd probably assume that they're performing similar jobs. But answer (D) already works, and we're not supposed to assume anyway. This one isn't the right answer.

The correct answer is (D).

Sometimes, you're going to get a question that doesn't fall neatly into one of the common categories. When this happens, you can usually use your knowledge of other question types to get to the answer. You may have something like this one, which is sort of a cross between specific detail and inference.

Sometimes, you may get one that looks more like a Critical Reasoning problem—these can ask you to strengthen or weaken something that was claimed in the passage.

It's rare, though, to see a question that's completely unlike anything you've ever seen before anywhere on the test. If that does happen, assume that it's likely an experimental question. If you think you can tackle it in a reasonable amount of time, feel free to try, but don't spend any extra time. And if, when you dive in, the problem turns out to be more taxing than you thought, pick your favorite letter and move on.

Here's the fourth and final problem in the set. Good luck!

"According to the passage, comparable worth principles are different in which of the following ways from other mandates intended to reduce or eliminate pay inequities?

"(A) Comparable worth principles address changes in the pay schedules of male as well as female workers.

"(B) Comparable worth principles can be applied to employees in both the public and the private sector.

"(C) Comparable worth principles emphasize the training and skill of workers.

"(D) Comparable worth principles require changes in the employer's resource allocation.

"(E) Comparable worth principles can be used to quantify the value of elements of dissimilar jobs."

In the last installment of this series, we'll talk about how to work your way through the problem above. ?

Key Takeaways for Application questions

(1) This question type is not as common as other types; you may or may not see one on the test. They're asking you to take some specific detail in the passage and apply it to new scenarios described in the answer choices.

(2) You can't truly predict an answer (step 3) because the scenarios could be anything, but you *can* articulate the kinds of characteristics that the correct answer should have. In this case, the correct answer had to go along with the two main CW details: it addresses pay gaps for people with dissimilar jobs.

(3) If you keep those two principles in mind while analyzing each answer (jot them down!), your job will be made easier. Now, instead of trying to analyze each choice from scratch, you're checking each choice against your little list of criteria—and eliminating any that don't match.

GMATPrep Reading Comp: Tackling a Tough Passage (part 5)

Welcome to the final installment of our series on tackling a tough reading comp passage from the GMATPrep® free exams! If you're just joining us now, [go all the way back to the first installment](#) and work your way through to this one.

Make sure you keep part 1 of the series open; it contains the full text of the passage.

Here is the final problem for the passage:

"According to the passage, comparable worth principles are different in which of the following ways from other mandates intended to reduce or eliminate pay inequities?

"(A) Comparable worth principles address changes in the pay schedules of male as well as female workers.

"(B) Comparable worth principles can be applied to employees in both the public and the private sector.

"(C) Comparable worth principles emphasize the training and skill of workers.

"(D) Comparable worth principles require changes in the employer's resource allocation.

"(E) Comparable worth principles can be used to quantify the value of elements of dissimilar jobs."

Step 1: Identify the question

The language *according to the passage* signals that this is a Specific Detail question. These questions essentially ask you to find the answer that matches a certain detail in the passage.

Step 2: Find the proof.

Where does the passage talk about the differences between CW and other mandates that are also intended to address pay gaps?

The passage introduces other mandates in the third paragraph. Starting with the second sentence of paragraph three:

"Because of the principles driving them, other mandates that can be applied to reduce or eliminate unjustified pay gaps between male and female workers have not remedied perceived pay inequities satisfactorily for the litigants in cases in which men and women hold different jobs. But whenever comparable worth principles are applied to pay schedules, perceived unjustified pay differences are eliminated. In this sense, then, comparable worth is more comprehensive than other mandates."

Step 3: Predict an answer.

So, what are the differences? The other ones don't work as well for pay gaps between male and female workers holding different jobs, whereas CW does work.

Do you need to go further in the passage or is this enough? You can't know until you check the answers for a match. If none match, then you can continue further in paragraph three to see whether there are other differences.

(Why aren't I suggesting that you find all of the differences first? Time! Once you can predict a potential answer, see whether it's there. If not, then you can decide whether to predict another potential answer or whether you're sick of this question and want to guess and move on. 😊)

Step 4: Find a match in the answers.

Dive in!

“(A) Comparable worth principles address changes in the pay schedules of male as well as female workers.”

This choice does mention male and female workers...but “changes” in the pay schedules aren't the issue. *Gaps* are the issue. This one isn't a match.

“(B) Comparable worth principles can be applied to employees in both the public and the private sector.”

This part of the passage didn't mention public vs. private. I do remember reading about public and private in the first paragraph...but for now, this one isn't a match. If I don't find a better answer, I might come back to this one and look at paragraph one.

“(C) Comparable worth principles emphasize the training and skill of workers.”

Hmm. This isn't a match to what I just read, but I do remember reading that skills are what you actually measure when the jobs are dissimilar. So this at least seems to go along with the general way that CW works. I'll leave it in for now.

“(D) Comparable worth principles require changes in the employer's resource allocation.”

This is not a match for the part I just re-read. And I don't remember reading about this in general. The previous answer was more promising.

“(E) Comparable worth principles can be used to quantify the value of elements of dissimilar jobs.”

This one reminds me of (C). Both seem to be about how comparable worth is able to fix pay gaps even for people in different kinds of jobs.

So I do need to read a little bit later in this paragraph to see how this part is described.

“Neither compares tasks in dissimilar jobs (that is, jobs across occupational categories) in an effort to determine whether or not what is necessary to perform these tasks—know-how, problem-solving, and accountability—can be quantified in terms of its dollar value to the employer. Comparable worth, on the other hand, takes as its premise that certain tasks in dissimilar jobs may require a certain amount of training, effort, and skill; may carry similar responsibility; may be carried on in an environment having a similar impact upon the worker; and may have a similar dollar value to the employer.”

CW does examine training and skill levels. It uses that examination to try to *quantify* the value of different jobs to the employer. That matches answer choice (E). Answer choice (C) is very tempting, but it says that CW *emphasizes* training and skill levels. CW is not trying to say that people should be better trained to have higher skills. It just examines these things in an effort to try to figure out how much the job is worth to the employer.

The correct answer is (E).

That was a tough one. We had to review a good portion of the third paragraph, and even then, at least one wrong answer was still pretty tempting.

You made it! Congratulations. Now, glance back through these five installments and write down your two or three major takeaways for tackling challenge RC. What do you want to make sure you do (or don't do) in future? ?

Key Takeaways for Challenging RC

(1) You don't need to understand every last detail of this passage. RC is an "open book" test: the passage is always sitting right there. Figure out the big picture, and worry about the details later, once you actually get a question about something specific. (By the way: how often did knowing the main idea help you on all of the specific questions for this passage? Go take a look.)

(2) Follow the process. Don't skip steps! If a particular question is just too hard, that's okay; guess and move on. But if you *are* going to answer a question, follow the process.

(3) Think about where you are in the verbal section and how your time and mental energy are doing. On a long and challenging passage, you might decide to bail on one question so that you can spread that time over other questions. (Remember that roman numeral question—the first one we did? Ugh.)

(4) An answer to my question in the first takeaway: the main idea alone could help you to eliminate wrong answers on every single one of these questions. See how useful that is? 😊

How to Improve GMAT Reading Comprehension Skills

I've had multiple conversations recently with different students about how to improve GMAT Reading Comprehension skills, and each person had a somewhat different angle or issue going on. I realized, though, that these students all had something in common—and, therefore, there was one particular thing that they all needed to do to get better at RC.

What is That One Thing?

I've got to give you some background first.

Some of the students I spoke with were non-native speakers who didn't do their undergraduate studies in English. Others did attend English-based schools (and some were even native speakers) but their specific programs of study did not involve very much reading. And still others did read a lot of academic material in school...but that was a long time ago now.

Separately (but actually related, it turns out!), we always make fun of how pedantic and boring the Reading Comprehension passages can be. (Though, secretly, I find a lot of them interesting! ? Shh, don't give me away.)

You can take the exact same topic and write about it at any "level" of writing: grade-school level, high-school level, university-level, magazine-story level, casual-email-to-a-friend level, and so on. These different levels or styles are designed to be appropriate for a particular audience, and that determines such features as vocabulary, sentence complexity, and even what I would call "general human interest" level. For example, a general-market magazine demands pieces that are written with a very engaging style of writing—the reader never has time to get bored or be distracted by something else.

Academic writing, by contrast, is a much more formal style, especially as you get up to university-level writing (or even higher). You'll have more advanced vocabulary, of course, but the differences go well beyond that. It is much more common to employ sentence structures that are used only in writing; nobody would ever speak aloud that way, even in formal speech. And it's more common to write *dense* sentences—sentences that pack a whole lot of complexity into a relatively small number of words.

And here's one more key to the puzzle: Did you know that the test writers don't write these RC passages specifically for the GMAT? Rather, they cut down and adapt actual academic articles for their test. So this academic material that you may have missed out on in college (or have just not read for a really long time) is literally the exact type of writing that you're going to see on the GMAT.

As a result, GMAT testers require lots of exposure to and practice with reading at a university level. Some people have a natural advantage in that they regularly read and analyze this type of writing (whether in school or for work). Others, though, don't or didn't—or they did but conducted those studies in a language other than English. If this describes you, then you have some work to do to remedy the problem.

So...I Need to Recreate My College/University Studies?

No, definitely not. It's true that this is not going to be a quick fix, but it's not going to take you 4 years, either.

Depending on your level of (dis)comfort with this kind of academic writing, you may need a solid 3 to 6 months of regular reading in order to build these GMAT Reading Comprehension skills. (This is yet another reason why it's a good idea to get a head start on your GMAT studies. Don't leave it till the last minute!)

The good news, though, is that any steps you take to get better at reading on the GMAT will directly (and immeasurably) help you with graduate school as well. That's not always the case for some things we have to study for the GMAT.

How Do I Practice This?

Let's start by identifying sources (ideally free!) that give you access to this kind of material.

I started with [MIT's OCW \(OpenCourseWare\) website](#), where the school lists hundreds of courses available for free. Under Find Courses, I browsed by Topic. I went for Health and Medicine first—that sounded interesting to me. 😊

I then picked Health and Exercise Science as my Sub-Topic and looked down below at the Results. (Note: it can take a while for Sub-Topics, Specialties, and Results to populate. Just wait a little.)

Course Finder

Topic	MIT Course Number	Department
TOPIC Business Energy Engineering Fine Arts Health and Medicine Humanities Mathematics	SUB-TOPIC Cellular and Molecular Medicine Epidemiology Functional Genomics Health and Exercise Science Immunology Medical Imaging	SPECIALTY <i>No specialties are available within this sub-topic</i>

Need help? Read our [frequently asked questions](#).

Limit your results to courses containing any of the following features:

- | | | |
|---|--|--|
| ☐ Video/Audio Lectures | ☐ Lecture Notes | ☐ Online Textbook |
| ☐ Student Work | ☐ Assessments | ☐ Interactive Simulations |

RESULTS

Course #	Course Title	Level
ES.010	Chemistry of Sports	Undergraduate
ES.S71	Increasing Your Physical Intelligence, Enhancing Your Social Smarts	Undergraduate
PE.720	Weight Training	Undergraduate
21H.S01	Food in American History	Undergraduate
WGS.645	Gender, Health and Marginalization Through a Critical Feminist Lens	Graduate

I'm looking for something at the Undergraduate level and I decided that Food in American History was the kind of topic that might show up on the GMAT.

On the page for that course, click on the Readings tab.

Food in American History

COURSE HOME <

SYLLABUS

READINGS

ASSIGNMENTS

RELATED RESOURCES

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This popular snack cake, which is rumored to never expire, has been a fixture in pop culture and grocery stores since 1930. This course will examine the globalization of food as well as consumption patterns and the history of sugar, among other topics. (Image courtesy of [Christian Cable](#) on flickr. License CC BY.)

Instructor(s)

Anya Zilberstein

MIT Course Number

21H.S01

As Taught In

Fall 2014

Level

Undergraduate

CITE THIS COURSE

Twinkies! This is definitely the course for me. ?

Then, I started scanning for free readings linked on that Readings page. The first one is an article by Marcy Norton entitled “Tasting Empire: Chocolate and the European Internalization of Mesoamerican Aesthetics.” Perfect! (I’m really not sure what that title means. But it sounds GMAT-like!)

Follow that link and it will take you to Dr. Norton’s article. (I’m not giving you the direct link here. Follow my steps above to find it yourself—so that you know how MIT’s website works!)

Finally, go ahead and read the first 3 to 4 paragraphs of her article. Look up any words you don’t know. (Note: The GMAT will be nice to you. It won’t expect you to know any really technical or obscure words. But when you’re reading for a university-level class, you’re just expected to look up and learn any words you don’t know—and that’s exactly what you’re trying to recreate here.)

Finally, you may notice that this article is seriously long—far longer than anything that will show up on the GMAT. Expect that to be the case for all of the academic articles you find. You don’t need to read the article in its entirety (unless you want to). Typically, the introductory material in an article will be most likely to match GMAT-level passages.

I Read It. Now What?

As you read, jot down a few notes to help you articulate the main ideas and main contrasts. Then try to say (aloud!) or write a summary, in your own words, about what the author is trying to say. Don’t focus

in on all of the details—your goal is not just to repeat the content. Pretend you’re talking to a friend and trying to summarize the main points of this really interesting article that you read (but your friend didn’t).

Ideally, in fact, find a friend with whom to have these conversations! If you know someone else studying for the GMAT, you two can help each other. If you have a friend or family member who is naturally good at this kind of stuff, that person can also help you to stretch your GMAT Reading Comprehension skills further.

Here are some other exercises to try:

— You and your study friend both read the same article, then both summarize in writing. Send your summaries to each other (at the same time!). Where do you agree or say the same things? Where do you disagree—or where do you write about something that your friend doesn’t and vice versa? Then get together to discuss those similarities and differences.

— You and your already-a-good-reader friend both read the same article, then you summarize the article either in writing or aloud for your friend. S/he tells you where you did a good job of summarizing and where you might have misinterpreted or missed important points.

—Variation on the above: your friend does NOT read the article ahead of time. You summarize for your friend (and your friend is allowed to ask questions if confused about anything). Then, your friend reads the article to see whether there are any major discrepancies and tells you what you may have missed or misinterpreted.

If you want to get really serious, you might even try taking a course yourself! Many universities and community colleges run continuing education programs with night and weekend classes. Pick a topic that sounds interesting to you and check the syllabus to ensure that there will be both reading and assignments that will require you to analyze that reading to demonstrate your comprehension.

Any Other Tips?

Here are some of the other paths that I followed through MIT’s database. This is just a small subset, but these are the kinds of topics that the GMAT tends to use and all have a decent number of appropriate undergraduate-level courses.

TOPIC: Business. Sub-Topics: Business Ethics; Globalization; Leadership; Management.

TOPIC: Health and Medicine. Sub-Topics: Cancer; Health and Exercise Science; Immunology.

TOPIC: Humanities. Sub-Topic: History. Specialty: Any.

TOPIC: Humanities. Sub-Topic: Literature. Specialty: Nonfiction Prose*.

TOPIC: Social Science. Sub-Topics: Anthropology; Economics; Sociology.

TOPIC: Science. Sub-Topic: Biology. Specialty: Developmental Biology; Genetics.

TOPIC: Science. Sub-Topic: Earth Science. Specialty: Atmospheric; Climate; Geology; Planetary.

*This one focuses mostly on writing vs. reading...but you’re going to need that for your applications!

For the science-y/more technical ones, I would stick to courses whose titles sound pretty introductory. And, in general, go for reading assignments assigned earlier in the course vs. later—unless you actually want to try that whole course.

Get Ready...Get Set...

Get on out there and start reading! Let us know how it goes—and share any classes you've loved or ideas on other sources in the comments! ?

GMATPrep Reading Comprehension: Tackling a History Passage (Part 1)

Some people really like history-based Reading Comprehension passages—and others find them pretty boring. Either way, you'll probably have at least one historical passage, so let's talk about how to tackle these.

Let's start with this: If you get a topic that you think is boring, pretend you're reading for a friend who actually likes this topic. In fact, I go into the test already having certain friends in mind who I know like topics that I really don't like. So I think of them when I get one of those passages—and that helps me pay more attention so that I can "tell" my friend about this passage I know they'll like.

Next, the passage I've selected for you comes from the free questions that come with the GMATPrep® software. It's got 5 questions, not just 3 or 4 as the real test will, so I'm not going to give them all to you at once. We'll do the passage and one question today and then talk about the other questions in subsequent installments.

And let's talk about timing. In general, give yourself approximately 2 to 3 minutes to read (on the shorter end if you're a faster reader and/or like the topic; on the longer end if you're a slower reader and/or hate this topic).

Give yourself about 1 to 2 minutes depending on how detailed the question is. In this case, the first question I'm giving you is a pretty general question, so I'd say to aim for just 1 minute. Total, then, give yourself about 3 to 4 minutes to read the passage and answer the first question.

Ready? Go!

"Two recent publications offer different assessments of the career of the famous British nurse Florence Nightingale. A book by Anne Summers seeks to debunk the idealizations and present a reality at odds with Nightingale's heroic reputation. According to Summers, Nightingale's importance during the Crimean War has been exaggerated: not until near the war's end did she become supervisor of the female nurses. Additionally, Summers writes that the contribution of the nurses to the relief of the wounded was at best marginal. The prevailing problems of military medicine were caused by army organizational practices, and the addition of a few nurses to the medical staff could be no more than symbolic. Nightingale's place in the national pantheon, Summers asserts, is largely due to the propagandistic efforts of contemporary newspaper reporters.

"By contrast, the editors of the new volume of Nightingale's letters view Nightingale as a person who significantly influenced not only her own age but also subsequent generations. They highlight her ongoing efforts to reform sanitary conditions after the war. For example, when she learned that peacetime living conditions in British barracks were so horrible that the death rate of enlisted men far exceeded that of neighboring civilian populations, she succeeded in persuading the government to establish a Royal Commission on the Health of the Army. She used sums raised through public contributions to found a nurse's training hospital in London. Even in administrative matters, the editors assert, her practical intelligence was formidable: as recently as 1947 the British Army's medical services were still using the cost-accounting system she devised in the 1860s.

"I believe that the evidence of her letters supports continued respect for Nightingale's brilliance and creativity. When counseling a village schoolmaster to encourage children to use their faculties of observation, she sounds like a modern educator. Her insistence on classifying the problems of the needy in order to devise appropriate treatments is similar to the approach of modern social workers. In sum, although Nightingale may not have achieved all of her goals during the Crimean War, her breadth of vision and ability to realize ambitious projects have earned her an eminent place among the ranks of social pioneers."

"In the last paragraph, the author is primarily concerned with

"(A) summarizing the arguments about Nightingale presented in the first two paragraphs

"(B) refuting the view of Nightingale's career presented in the preceding paragraph

"(C) analyzing the weaknesses of the evidence presented elsewhere in the passage

"(D) citing evidence to support a view of Nightingale's career

"(E) correcting a factual error occurring in one of the works under review"

What did you think? What does your Passage Map look like? What's the basic story (or Simple Story) here?

This is my Map:

- ① 2 pub DIFF
#1 Summers: FN not so great, mostly propag.
(ex)
- ② #2 editors: FN really great, her time + future
(ex)
- ③ Author: agree w/#2, FN = +
(ex)
Maybe exagg some, but mostly ++

What's the story? Summers thinks FN wasn't so great and provides reasons why. The "editors" (whoever they are) disagree—they think FN had a great impact both in her time and in future times. And the author agrees with the second opinion: FN had a big impact both in her own time and later (though, the author acknowledges, Summers may have a small point and maybe some of FN's achievements were exaggerated).

The passage told me up front that these two publications have different points of view, so I numbered them as I went. That helps me to keep them clear/separate from each other. (By the way, the (ex) stuff I have up there is my little shorthand for "the passage gives some examples here to support this point.")

Interestingly, the author gives her own opinion very clearly—even using “I” in the passage. That doesn’t often happen on the GMAT. She agrees with #2 overall, though she acknowledges that #1 may have some valid points.

At this point, I hadn’t seen any of the questions yet, but I was still guessing that at least one of the questions was going to get at the difference of opinion between Summers and the “editors.” I also suspected that some trap answers were going to try to get me to mix up what each one thinks or mix up which one the author agrees with. So I made sure that I had very clear notes on that information.

Okay, let’s tackle that question. What kind of question is it?

This is a somewhat less common question type but it falls under the category of main idea or primary purpose. Instead of asking for the primary purpose of the entire passage, though, it asks for just the primary purpose of the final paragraph.

So what is the primary purpose of that paragraph? Why did the author include it?

That’s where she gave her opinion. She generally agreed with #2 (even giving some additional examples to support this view), though she acknowledged that #1 may have a point. So the correct answer should go along with this idea—she agreed with the side presented in the second paragraph.

Let’s check the answers.

“(A) summarizing the arguments about Nightingale presented in the first two paragraphs”

This choice is very neutral, but paragraph 3 is not neutral. She doesn’t just summarize some stuff—she definitely agrees with the second view and even provides new examples to support that view. (I would guess that this one is a trap answer for someone who thinks that this is a regular Primary Purpose question—the passage overall is about these two different arguments, but the third paragraph does not just summarize them.)

“(B) refuting the view of Nightingale’s career presented in the preceding paragraph”

Whoops, wrong paragraph. The “preceding” paragraph is the second one, but she agrees with the second paragraph. You could say she refutes the view presented in the *first* paragraph—but not the *second* one.

“(C) analyzing the weaknesses of the evidence presented elsewhere in the passage”

She doesn’t dive into the other evidence presented earlier. Rather, she provides new evidence to support one of the points of view.

“(D) citing evidence to support a view of Nightingale’s career”

Yes! This is it. She does cite new evidence and she does support one particular view (the one presented in the second paragraph).

“(E) correcting a factual error occurring in one of the works under review”

She doesn't say that any of the earlier info is wrong. Rather, she provides additional evidence to further support the view that Nightingale did actually have a significant, positive impact on the world. This one isn't it either.

The correct answer is (D).

Key Takeaways for Reading Comprehension

(1) Map the passage. Make sure to delineate each paragraph and represent the main message (but not all of the details) in your map. Pay particular attention to any contrasts or changes of direction (sometimes called *twists*) in the passage.

(2) As you make your Map, articulate the Simple Story to yourself—and keep it very big picture. What will you tell your friend afterwards? You wouldn't get into all of the specific details; you'd mostly just tell her the main ideas/simple story.

(3) Main Idea questions might sometimes ask you about just one paragraph instead of the entire passage. When this happens, make sure you focus in on just that one paragraph.

GMATPrep Reading Comprehension: Tackling a History Passage (Part 2)

In the [first installment of this series](#), we deconstructed a Reading Comprehension history passage from the GMATPrep® free question set. I gave you the full history passage plus one problem. Today, I have the second problem for you.

Here is the history passage again, plus the problem. (Note: if you haven't read part 1 yet, I recommend going back there first. If you'd like to do both problems in a row, feel free.)

"Two recent publications offer different assessments of the career of the famous British nurse Florence Nightingale. A book by Anne Summers seeks to debunk the idealizations and present a reality at odds with Nightingale's heroic reputation. According to Summers, Nightingale's importance during the Crimean War has been exaggerated: not until near the war's end did she become supervisor of the female nurses. Additionally, Summers writes that the contribution of the nurses to the relief of the wounded was at best marginal. The prevailing problems of military medicine were caused by army organizational practices, and the addition of a few nurses to the medical staff could be no more than symbolic. Nightingale's place in the national pantheon, Summers asserts, is largely due to the propagandistic efforts of contemporary newspaper reporters.

"By contrast, the editors of the new volume of Nightingale's letters view Nightingale as a person who significantly influenced not only her own age but also subsequent generations. They highlight her ongoing efforts to reform sanitary conditions after the war. For example, when she learned that peacetime living conditions in British barracks were so horrible that the death rate of enlisted men far exceeded that of neighboring civilian populations, she succeeded in persuading the government to establish a Royal Commission on the Health of the Army. She used sums raised through public contributions to found a nurse's training hospital in London. Even in administrative matters, the editors assert, her practical intelligence was formidable: as recently as 1947 the British Army's medical services were still using the cost-accounting system she devised in the 1860s.

"I believe that the evidence of her letters supports continued respect for Nightingale's brilliance and creativity. When counseling a village schoolmaster to encourage children to use their faculties of observation, she sounds like a modern educator. Her insistence on classifying the problems of the needy in order to devise appropriate treatments is similar to the approach of modern social workers. In sum, although Nightingale may not have achieved all of her goals during the Crimean War, her breadth of vision and ability to realize ambitious projects have earned her an eminent place among the ranks of social pioneers."

"The passage suggests which of the following about Nightingale's relationship with the British public of her day?

- "(A) She was highly respected, her projects receiving popular and governmental support.
- "(B) She encountered resistance both from the army establishment and the general public.
- "(C) She was supported by the working classes and opposed by the wealthier classes.
- "(D) She was supported by the military establishment but had to fight the governmental bureaucracy.

“(E) After initially being received with enthusiasm, she was quickly forgotten.”

Here’s my Map again:

- ① 2 pub DIFF
#1 Summers: FN not so great, mostly propag.
(ex)
- ② #2 editors: FN really great, her time + future
(ex)
- ③ Author: agree w/#2, FN = +
(ex)
Maybe exagg some, but mostly ++

And here’s my little mental summary of the story:

Summers thinks FN wasn’t so great and provides reasons why. The “editors” (whoever they are) disagree—they think FN had a great impact both in her time and in future times. And the author agrees with the second opinion: FN had a big impact both in her own time and later (though, the author acknowledges, Summers may have a small point and maybe some of FN’s achievements were exaggerated).

Okay, let’s answer this thing!

Step 1: Identify the Question

The word *suggests* in the question stem indicates that this is an Inference question. Remind yourself briefly what that means.

On Inference questions, we have to find something that we can definitely deduce from some information in the passage. This inference must be true (according to info from the passage).

Step 2: Find the Proof

Step 3: Predict the Answer

Nightingale is all over the passage, so we need to focus in on the other keywords: *the British public of her day*. Where does the passage talk about how Nightingale’s contemporaries felt about her?

It does this in multiple places. The first paragraph says that Nightingale has a *heroic reputation*. (Note: even though Summers argues that she doesn’t deserve that reputation, it’s still what people think—and thought in the past.) Summers also thinks *Nightingale’s importance ... has been exaggerated*—so people thought she was really important.

The second paragraph says Nightingale *significantly influenced ... her own age*. The other examples here talk about her *persuading the government* to do something and raising sums, so the government listened to her and people donated money for her to do things.

Despite the fact that Summers doesn't think Nightingale deserves all this acclaim, it's still the case that most people think—and thought, back then—that she did great things. So the correct answer should basically say that people thought Nightingale was great.

Step 4: Eliminate and Find a Match

“(A) She was highly respected, her projects receiving popular and governmental support.”

These are all good things; they match what we said above. Leave this one in.

“(B) She encountered resistance both from the army establishment and the general public.”

No, she didn't. Summers doesn't think Nightingale fully deserves her reputation, but the examples in the passage don't indicate that anyone back then resisted what she wanted to do. Eliminate.

“(C) She was supported by the working classes and opposed by the wealthier classes.”

The passage doesn't say that she was opposed by anyone, nor does it make any distinction between working classes and wealthier classes. Eliminate.

“(D) She was supported by the military establishment but had to fight the governmental bureaucracy.”

It does sound like the military supported her—but the government did, too (*she succeeded in persuading the government...*). Eliminate.

“(E) After initially being received with enthusiasm, she was quickly forgotten.”

She wasn't forgotten at all! In fact, that's Summers' point: Summers thinks that Nightingale is too highly praised or remembered. Summers probably thinks that Nightingale should have been more forgotten. Eliminate.

The correct answer is (A).

Key Takeaways for Tackling a History Passage on GMAT Reading Comprehension

(1) Map the passage and articulate the Simple Story to yourself.

(2) Use the Map and Story to figure out where to look in the passage for specific detail questions. Most of the time, the question will point you to one specific area of the passage. Sometimes, as on this problem, you'll need to gather information from multiple parts of the passage.

(3) Inference questions ask you to deduce something that must be true from information given in the passage. Watch out for traps that try to get you to infer something that might plausibly be true but don't have to be true according to the given information. Also look for traps that try to mix up the information in the passage. In this case, Summers doesn't think Nightingale deserves her reputation—but the question asks about the opinion of the British public of Nightingale's day, not Summers' opinion.

GMATPrep Reading Comprehension: Tackling a History Passage (Part 3)

In the [first installment of this series](#), we examined a Reading Comprehension history passage from the GMATPrep® free exams. If you're just starting, go through parts 1 and [2](#) first, then come back to this one. Feel free to do all three questions (one per installment) in a block for the passage.

Here are the history passage and the third problem. Good luck!

"Two recent publications offer different assessments of the career of the famous British nurse Florence Nightingale. A book by Anne Summers seeks to debunk the idealizations and present a reality at odds with Nightingale's heroic reputation. According to Summers, Nightingale's importance during the Crimean War has been exaggerated: not until near the war's end did she become supervisor of the female nurses. Additionally, Summers writes that the contribution of the nurses to the relief of the wounded was at best marginal. The prevailing problems of military medicine were caused by army organizational practices, and the addition of a few nurses to the medical staff could be no more than symbolic. Nightingale's place in the national pantheon, Summers asserts, is largely due to the propagandistic efforts of contemporary newspaper reporters.

"By contrast, the editors of the new volume of Nightingale's letters view Nightingale as a person who significantly influenced not only her own age but also subsequent generations. They highlight her ongoing efforts to reform sanitary conditions after the war. For example, when she learned that peacetime living conditions in British barracks were so horrible that the death rate of enlisted men far exceeded that of neighboring civilian populations, she succeeded in persuading the government to establish a Royal Commission on the Health of the Army. She used sums raised through public contributions to found a nurse's training hospital in London. Even in administrative matters, the editors assert, her practical intelligence was formidable: as recently as 1947 the British Army's medical services were still using the cost-accounting system she devised in the 1860s.

"I believe that the evidence of her letters supports continued respect for Nightingale's brilliance and creativity. When counseling a village schoolmaster to encourage children to use their faculties of observation, she sounds like a modern educator. Her insistence on classifying the problems of the needy in order to devise appropriate treatments is similar to the approach of modern social workers. In sum, although Nightingale may not have achieved all of her goals during the Crimean War, her breadth of vision and ability to realize ambitious projects have earned her an eminent place among the ranks of social pioneers."

"The passage is primarily concerned with evaluating

"(A) the importance of Florence Nightingale's innovations in the field of nursing

"(B) contrasting approaches to the writing of historical biography

"(C) contradictory accounts of Florence Nightingale's historical significance

"(D) the quality of health care in nineteenth century England

"(E) the effect of the Crimean War on developments in the field of health care"

First, what kind of question is this one?

The *primarily concerned with* language signals a Primary Purpose question. They want to know what the main idea is.

Glance at your Map. Here's mine:

- ① 2 pub DIFF
#1 Summers: FN not so great, mostly propag.
(ex)
- ② #2 editors: FN really great, her time + future
(ex)
- ③ Author: agree w/#2, FN = +
(ex)
Maybe exagg some, but mostly ++

Use that to jog your memory. Briefly re-articulate the main story to yourself.

People differ on FN's importance. Summers thinks FN wasn't as important as she was/is made out to be. The editors think FN was really important. The author agrees that FN was important.

Okay, which answer choice matches your idea?

"(A) the importance of Florence Nightingale's innovations in the field of nursing"

Some of the people in the history passage thought her innovations were really important—but Summers didn't think so. And that contrast or disagreement was really the main message, so this can't be the main idea. Eliminate (A).

"(B) contrasting approaches to the writing of historical biography"

The word *contrasting* is good. What about the rest? Summers does seem to have written a biography on FN. But the editors in the second paragraph just edited a volume of FN's letters. That's not the same as writing a biography of someone.

Also, the contrast isn't about how these different people wrote about FN. The contrast is that they had fundamentally different conclusions about FN's ultimate contributions and importance. This one is a tempting trap—but it's still a trap. Eliminate (B).

"(C) contradictory accounts of Florence Nightingale's historical significance"

Contradictory is a good word for this history passage. There are definitely contradictory opinions at play. And the contradiction was around how important or *significant* FN was. This one is looking pretty good—leave it in.

"(D) the quality of health care in nineteenth century England"

While the history passage does talk about health care in that time frame, this choice doesn't mention FN or the contrasting opinions about her importance. This choice is too broad to be the main point of the passage. Eliminate (D).

“(E) the effect of the Crimean War on developments in the field of health care”

The passage does mention the Crimean War, but it's mostly only in the first paragraph. Summers uses the war to talk about FN's importance. The 2nd and 3rd paragraphs talk about lots of other examples that took place at different times, with a focus on FN, so the war alone is not the main idea. Eliminate (E).

The correct answer is (C).

Key Takeaways for Tackling a History Passage on GMAT Reading Comprehension

(1) Follow the process. Don't skip steps! That's how mistakes creep in.

(2) On your read-through, go for the big ideas and the main contrasts or twists. Don't get sucked into annoying detail. Jot down an abbreviated Map to help you navigate the passage later, when you're answering questions. By the time you're done, you will (hopefully!) be able to articulate the Simple Story of the history passage.

(3) Know what kind of question type you have, as each type is asking you to perform a different kind of analysis. On main idea (Primary Purpose) questions, your simple story and passage map should be enough to get you to your answer. Watch out for traps that involve going too broad (like answer D above) or too narrow (like answer E above). Also watch out for a “mix-up” type answer, where they use words that sound good (like *contrasting* in answer B) but they mix it up with other stuff that wasn't actually what the passage said.

GMATPrep Reading Comprehension: Tackling a History Passage (Part 4)

Are you ready for your fourth question? We've been examining a Reading Comprehension history passage from the GMATPrep® free exams. If you're just starting, go through the [earlier installments](#) first, then come back to this one—and feel free to do all four questions (one per installment) in a block for the passage. (Take some screen shots or set up separate browser tabs so that you can cycle through them all efficiently.)

Here are the history passage and the fourth problem. Good luck!

"Two recent publications offer different assessments of the career of the famous British nurse Florence Nightingale. A book by Anne Summers seeks to debunk the idealizations and present a reality at odds with Nightingale's heroic reputation. According to Summers, Nightingale's importance during the Crimean War has been exaggerated: not until near the war's end did she become supervisor of the female nurses. Additionally, Summers writes that the contribution of the nurses to the relief of the wounded was at best marginal. The prevailing problems of military medicine were caused by army organizational practices, and the addition of a few nurses to the medical staff could be no more than symbolic. Nightingale's place in the national pantheon, Summers asserts, is largely due to the propagandistic efforts of contemporary newspaper reporters.

"By contrast, the editors of the new volume of Nightingale's letters view Nightingale as a person who significantly influenced not only her own age but also subsequent generations. They highlight her ongoing efforts to reform sanitary conditions after the war. For example, when she learned that peacetime living conditions in British barracks were so horrible that the death rate of enlisted men far exceeded that of neighboring civilian populations, she succeeded in persuading the government to establish a Royal Commission on the Health of the Army. She used sums raised through public contributions to found a nurse's training hospital in London. Even in administrative matters, the editors assert, her practical intelligence was formidable: as recently as 1947 the British Army's medical services were still using the cost-accounting system she devised in the 1860s.

"I believe that the evidence of her letters supports continued respect for Nightingale's brilliance and creativity. When counseling a village schoolmaster to encourage children to use their faculties of observation, she sounds like a modern educator. Her insistence on classifying the problems of the needy in order to devise appropriate treatments is similar to the approach of modern social workers. In sum, although Nightingale may not have achieved all of her goals during the Crimean War, her breadth of vision and ability to realize ambitious projects have earned her an eminent place among the ranks of social pioneers."

"With which of the following statements regarding the differing interpretations of Nightingale's importance would the author most likely agree?

"(A) Summers misunderstood both the importance of Nightingale's achievements during the Crimean War and her subsequent influence on British policy.

"(B) The editors of Nightingale's letters made some valid points about her practical achievements, but they still exaggerated her influence on subsequent generations.

“(C) Although Summers’ account of Nightingale’s role in the Crimean War may be accurate, she ignored evidence of Nightingale’s subsequent achievement that suggests that her reputation as an eminent social reformer is well deserved.

“(D) The editors of Nightingale’s letters mistakenly propagated the outdated idealization of Nightingale that only impedes attempts to arrive at a balanced assessment of her true role.

“(E) The evidence of Nightingale’s letters supports Summers’ conclusion both about Nightingale’s activities and about her influence.”

First, what kind of question is this one?

It asks us to find an answer with which the *author* [would] *most likely agree*. You can think of this as a sort of mix of Primary Purpose (main idea) and Specific Detail. The answer should go along with the main idea (since the main idea is the author’s idea) but you’ll likely have to get more into the detail than that. The specific wording of the question stem will tell you what kind of detail you need to examine.

In this case, the question talks about the *differing interpretations of Nightingale’s importance*. Glance at your Map, with an eye toward reminding yourself about each of those interpretations and what the author thought about them. Here’s my Map:

①

2 pub DIFF

#1 Summers: FN not so great, mostly propag.
(ex)

②

#2 editors: FN really great, her time + future
(ex)

③

Author: agree w/#2, FN = +
(ex)

Maybe exagg some, but mostly ++

Use that to jog your memory.

Summers is *not* a fan of FN.

But the editors are.

The author mostly goes along with the editors, though she does acknowledge that Summers may have had a point.

This would be a good time to go back into the text of the third paragraph to clarify exactly what the author thought.

“I believe that the evidence of her letters supports continued respect for Nightingale’s brilliance and creativity. [skimming...examples...skimming] In sum, although Nightingale may not have achieved all of

her goals during the Crimean War, her breadth of vision and ability to realize ambitious projects have earned her an eminent place among the ranks of social pioneers.”

So the author acknowledges that Summers might be right that FN’s accomplishments during the Crimean War might have been somewhat exaggerated, but overall the author thinks that FN did some amazing things and her reputation is justified.

Okay, which answer choice matches that idea?

“(A) Summers misunderstood both the importance of Nightingale’s achievements during the Crimean War and her subsequent influence on British policy.”

The author does seem to think that Summers’ position about FN’s overall influence on British policy is not correct. However, the author also acknowledges that Summers might have a point about the importance of FN’s achievements during the Crimean War—not that Summers misunderstood that part. Eliminate (A).

“(B) The editors of Nightingale’s letters made some valid points about her practical achievements, but they still exaggerated her influence on subsequent generations.”

The author mostly agrees with the editors. She doesn’t say that they exaggerated anything. Rather, she acknowledges that Summers’ viewpoint (that *Nightingale’s importance during the Crimean War has been exaggerated*) may be valid. Eliminate (B).

“(C) Although Summers’ account of Nightingale’s role in the Crimean War may be accurate, she ignored evidence of Nightingale’s subsequent achievement that suggests that her reputation as an eminent social reformer is well deserved.”

The first part of this matches what we said: the author acknowledges that Summers’ view of FN’s role in the Crimean War may be valid. The second part might be good, too, as it does criticize Summers for not giving FN more credit for other things.

The words *she ignored evidence* are pretty strong, though—so double-check paragraph 3. The author begins by praising the evidence of the letters (discussed in paragraph 2—i.e., not Summers’ evidence). The passage doesn’t indicate that Summers addresses this evidence, so perhaps *ignored* could be acceptable.

Leave this in—but if something else exists that doesn’t have this kind of possible objection, that other choice might be better.

“(D) The editors of Nightingale’s letters mistakenly propagated the outdated idealization of Nightingale that only impedes attempts to arrive at a balanced assessment of her true role.”

This choice says that the editors have a faulty view of FN, but that’s not what the author thinks. The author generally agrees with what the editors said. Eliminate (D).

“(E) The evidence of Nightingale’s letters supports Summers’ conclusion both about Nightingale’s activities and about her influence.”

The editors argue that the letters do *not* support Summers' conclusion—and the author generally agrees with the editors. In other words, the author does *not* think that the letters support Summers' point of view. Eliminate (E).

Everything else has been eliminated, so the correct answer is (C).

Key Takeaways for Tackling a History Passage on GMAT Reading Comprehension

(1) Follow the process. Don't skip steps! That's how mistakes creep in.

(2) On your read-through, go for the big ideas and the main contrasts or twists. Don't get sucked into annoying detail. Jot down an abbreviated Map to help you navigate the passage later, when you're answering questions. By the time you're done, you will (hopefully!) be able to articulate the Simple Story of the history passage.

(3) Know what kind of question type you have, as each type is asking you to perform a different kind of analysis. Occasionally, you'll see a question like this one—something that asks what the author would *most likely agree* with. Keep an eye out for two things. First, the correct answer has to go along with the author's overall point or position, so remind yourself what that is. Second, the history passage will have some kind of twists with respect to that overall position—otherwise, the question would be too easy. Dive into the detail enough to make sure that you know what the author thinks as well as what the author does *not* think, so you can avoid the trap answers.

GMATPrep Reading Comprehension: Tackling a History Passage (Part 5)

Are you ready for your fifth and final question? We've been examining a Reading Comprehension history passage from the GMATPrep® free exams. If you're just starting, go through the [earlier installments](#) first, then come back to this one—and feel free to do all five questions (one per installment) in a block for the passage. (Take some screen shots or set up separate browser tabs so that you can cycle through them all efficiently.)

Here are the history passage and the fifth problem. Good luck!

"Two recent publications offer different assessments of the career of the famous British nurse Florence Nightingale. A book by Anne Summers seeks to debunk the idealizations and present a reality at odds with Nightingale's heroic reputation. According to Summers, Nightingale's importance during the Crimean War has been exaggerated: not until near the war's end did she become supervisor of the female nurses. Additionally, Summers writes that the contribution of the nurses to the relief of the wounded was at best marginal. The prevailing problems of military medicine were caused by army organizational practices, and the addition of a few nurses to the medical staff could be no more than symbolic. Nightingale's place in the national pantheon, Summers asserts, is largely due to the propagandistic efforts of contemporary newspaper reporters.

"By contrast, the editors of the new volume of Nightingale's letters view Nightingale as a person who significantly influenced not only her own age but also subsequent generations. They highlight her ongoing efforts to reform sanitary conditions after the war. For example, when she learned that peacetime living conditions in British barracks were so horrible that the death rate of enlisted men far exceeded that of neighboring civilian populations, she succeeded in persuading the government to establish a Royal Commission on the Health of the Army. She used sums raised through public contributions to found a nurse's training hospital in London. Even in administrative matters, the editors assert, her practical intelligence was formidable: as recently as 1947 the British Army's medical services were still using the cost-accounting system she devised in the 1860s.

"I believe that the evidence of her letters supports continued respect for Nightingale's brilliance and creativity. When counseling a village schoolmaster to encourage children to use their faculties of observation, she sounds like a modern educator. Her insistence on classifying the problems of the needy in order to devise appropriate treatments is similar to the approach of modern social workers. In sum, although Nightingale may not have achieved all of her goals during the Crimean War, her breadth of vision and ability to realize ambitious projects have earned her an eminent place among the ranks of social pioneers."

"According to the passage, the editors of Nightingale's letters credit her with contributing to which of the following?

"(A) Improvement of the survival rate for soldiers in British Army hospitals during the Crimean War

"(B) The development of a nurses' training curriculum that was far in advance of its day

"(C) The increase in the number of women doctors practicing in British Army hospitals

"(D) Establishment of the first facility for training nurses at a major British university

“(E) The creation of an organization for monitoring the peacetime living conditions of British soldiers”

First, determine the kind of question you were asked.

The language *according to the history passage* signals a Detail question. Which details, in particular, will you need?

In this case, the question stem wants to know about what the editors said. Glance at your Map (here’s mine). Which paragraph do we need?

Right, second paragraph. And what does the question specifically want to know here? The editors *credit (Nightingale) with contributing* to something.

It’s super important at this stage not to go just by memory. Each paragraph mentions various things that Nightingale did. You don’t want to mix up something that someone else said; you care about what the editors said.

Here’s the second paragraph again. Start skimming with an eye toward giving credit to FN for contributing to some good thing. (Emphasis added below.)

“By contrast, the editors of the new volume of Nightingale’s letters view Nightingale as a person who significantly influenced not only her own age but also subsequent generations. They highlight her ongoing efforts to *reform sanitary conditions after the war*. For example, when she learned that peacetime living conditions in British barracks were so horrible that the death rate of enlisted men far exceeded that of neighboring civilian populations, she *succeeded in persuading the government to establish a Royal Commission on the Health of the Army*. She used sums raised through public contributions to *found a nurse’s training hospital in London*. Even in administrative matters, the editors assert, her practical intelligence was formidable: as recently as 1947 the British Army’s *medical services were still using the cost-accounting system she devised in the 1860s*.”

I italicized four different details that might help to answer this question. The first two go together—at a broad level, she helped to reform sanitary conditions for soldiers. The specific example given here was establishing a Royal Commission on the Health of the Army. The other two examples are distinct: found a nurse’s training hospital and establish a cost-accounting system that was still in use nearly a century later.

Time to look for an answer choice that matches one of those details!

“(A) Improvement of the survival rate for soldiers in British Army hospitals during the Crimean War”

Survival rate is a very specific term. The second paragraph doesn’t mention survival rate, nor does it mention things she did *during* the war, only after. Eliminate (A).

“(B) The development of a nurses’ training curriculum that was far in advance of its day”

Training nurses—that sounds good. What was the specific language from the second paragraph? She *found(ed) a nurse’s training hospital*. Hmm. Founding a hospital and developing the curriculum for that hospital are not exactly the same thing. Nor do we know whether the curriculum was far in advance of its day. We might be able to infer that her cost-accounting system was far in advance of its day (since

it was still used nearly 100 years later). But we have no information about the nurse's training curriculum. Eliminate (B).

“(C) The increase in the number of women doctors practicing in British Army hospitals”

This paragraph mentions nothing specifically about female doctors (or even female nurses, for that matter). Eliminate (C).

“(D) Establishment of the first facility for training nurses at a major British university”

She did establish a nurse's training hospital! Is this it? Hmm. The history passage doesn't say that it was the *first one at a major British university*. It just says it was a training hospital in London. This one is closer than any of the previous answers, so you might leave it in—but an *according to the passage* question really should repeat what the passage says, so this one probably isn't correct either. Let's check (E).

“(E) The creation of an organization for monitoring the peacetime living conditions of British soldiers”

Check the passage again. She *succeeded in persuading the government to establish a Royal Commission on the Health of the Army*. What did that Royal Commission do? Go to the prior sentence: this is an example of her efforts to *reform sanitary conditions after the war*, in response to the fact that *peacetime living conditions in British barracks were ... horrible*. So, yes, she did help create an organization that monitored the peacetime living conditions of these soldiers.

This answer fully matches, unlike (D) which only partially matches, so the correct answer is (E).

Key Takeaways for Tackling a History Passage on GMAT Reading Comprehension

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(2) On your read-through, go for the big ideas and the main contrasts or twists. Don't get sucked into annoying detail. Jot down an abbreviated Map to help you navigate the passage later, when you're answering questions. By the time you're done, you will (hopefully!) be able to articulate the Simple Story of the history passage.

(3) Know what kind of question type you have, as each type is asking you to perform a different kind of analysis. *According to the passage* questions are asking you to find and repeat back some specific detail from the passage (that's why we call them Detail questions!). Don't rely on your memory—use the clues from the question stem to re-read the part of the history passage specifically referenced by the question. Get that information straight in your head (maybe even jot down a few words), then look for a match in the answers. ?

GMATPrep Reading Comprehension: Tackling a History Passage (Part 6)

We're done! Phew! [That was a complicated history passage](#) and those questions got pretty tricky at times. (If you're just joining us for the first time now, follow that link back to part 1 of the series and work your way back here.)

How did you do? More importantly, how can you get *better*? The whole point of studying is not to see what percentage of things you get right the first time. The main point is to figure out how you can perform better when you see something new (but similar) on the real test.

So in the final installment of the series, we're going to talk about how to **Review Your Work** on a history passage in order to improve your GMAT prowess. (And, yes, Review Your Work gets capital letters because it's such a crucial part of the study process. 😊 If you leave this part out, then you are not maximizing your learning potential.)

Rewrite Your Map

Think about what you know about the main messages of the history passage—now that you've actually had to dig in and answer all of those questions. How does it compare to what you understood about the passage before you started?

Do expect to know or understand more now. You did, after all, answer five questions. But did you have any disconnects or misunderstandings on the main picture? Did you think a paragraph was doing one thing when it was actually doing another? Or did you miss any of the main twists and turns entirely?

And let's get even more particular. Did you not know certain words or expressions in the passage? If you ran across anything that didn't look familiar, now is the time to look it up and learn it.

Now, look back over your Map. Here's mine.

- ① 2 pub DIFF
#1 Summers: FN not so great, mostly propag.
(ex)
- ② #2 editors: FN really great, her time + future
(ex)
- ③ Author: agree w/#2, FN = +
(ex)
Maybe exagg some, but mostly ++

If you could do this all over again for the first time, how would you change your Map to make it better?

For instance, I've noticed that a lot of students initially miss the fact that, in the third paragraph, the author does acknowledge that Summers may have some valid grounds for her criticism. Their Map,

then, might say only that the author agrees with #2 (the editors), with the implication that FN's achievements were great and her reputation completely deserved.

But the author does, in fact, acknowledge that Summers may have a point (*although Nightingale may not have achieved all of her goals during the Crimean War*), even as the author asserts that FN generally does deserve her reputation. So if you didn't already have something in your Map that looks like the last line for paragraph 3 in mine, then you'd want to rewrite your notes to include that line.

Yes, I actually want you to rewrite your Map! Don't just tell yourself that you should have noticed XYZ. On a Quant problem, you wouldn't just say, "Oh, I messed up the math on that—don't do that next time." You'd try the math again! Ditto here: Practice making your Map what you want it to be next time.

Alternatively, maybe you wrote down too much. What if you'd tried to enumerate every one of those examples in your Map? During your review, you might realize that that was overkill. The passage is always in front of you. In this case, it's also pretty well-defined: P1 = Summers, P2 = editors, P3 = author. So you can go back to re-read the examples used by each person/group whenever you want. Rewrite your Map to show yourself what you would want the Map to look like the next time you see a similar passage structure.

Review Your Simple Story

Along with the above, review your Simple Story. You generally won't write this down—it's just your mental narrative of the flow of the history passage. Was the flow accurate? Did your narrative miss anything important? Did it get too bogged down in the weeds at any point?

Think about your general performance on this and prior RCs, too. Do you tend to be too high-level with the Simple Story and miss important twists? Do you include so much technical detail that it takes a long time to tell yourself the story?

Make it better! Re-state the Simple Story to yourself in whatever way you would want to articulate it next time you see something similar.

Review the General Question(s)

Not all passages will include general questions, but when they do, that's where you want to start. If you've done a good job on the Map and Simple Story, then you have a much better shot at answering any main idea questions correctly.

The most common general type is the Primary Purpose (aka main idea)—it literally asks what the primary purpose of the passage is. If you missed this problem, or struggled with it, then the issue may be in your fundamental understanding of the history passage itself.

In this case, be extra-thorough in your review of your Map and Simple Story. If you can figure out what went wrong there, then you may also fix whatever problem you were having with the main idea question, too.

Finally, analyze the question in the same way that we did in this series. Did you properly identify the question type? Did you know what you were supposed to do with that type of question? Were you able to spot and avoid trap answers or did you fall into a trap? Why? How can you avoid that same type of trap next time?

The “why” and “how” questions are the most important ones. Any time you miss something or make any kind of mistake, don’t be mad. Think, “I’m about to get better!” Then ask yourself, “Why did I make this mistake?” and “How will I avoid making this same kind of mistake next time? What do I need to change about my process or my thinking to avoid that type of mistake?”

In the Nightingale history passage, the third question was the Primary Purpose question (*The passage is primarily concerned with evaluating*).

The passage also includes another general type: the Paragraph question. These types ask you to describe the role that a certain paragraph plays in the overall passage. In this passage, the first question was a Paragraph question (*In the last paragraph, the author is primarily concerned with*).

Review the Specific Question(s)

You’ll typically have at least two specific questions per passage—sometimes three or all four. In this history passage, we had three specific questions: a Detail question, an Inference question, and a hybrid general/specific question.

Analyze the specific questions in the same way as the general ones, with one addition: Were you able to find the right part of the detail in the passage to review? Did you understand that material when you reviewed it?

And, in the end, get yourself back to the “Why?” and the “How?” If you didn’t understand the material when you reviewed it, you might realize that it was because the passage used an expression that you misinterpreted—and you can learn how to interpret that expression properly for next time. Or perhaps you didn’t look at the right part of the passage—but you realize now that certain phrasing in the question stem could have pointed you to the right part.

Or perhaps you still don’t understand the material when you review it again—even when you read the explanation. In that case, the solution may be to guess and move on before you use up too much precious time and mental energy. How do you know to make that decision? You may need to do so on the real test, too, so show yourself what that feels like.

Articulate Two (Yes, Only Two!) Big Takeaways

Sadly, you can’t remember every last thing that you study. There’s just too much. So you’re going to have to prioritize. Look back over your review of the passage and think about which takeaways are the most universal—that is, the ones that are most likely to apply to the greatest number of unknown future passages and questions you might see on the real test.

Encode these two Big Takeaways in some kind of Big Takeaway log that you are keeping in a notebook, on flash cards, or in a file on your computer.

If there’s only one Big Takeaway, don’t force yourself to come up with two. You can leave it at one. And if there are really three Big Takeaways this time, and you just can’t decide how to cut one, then you can leave it at three—as long as you aren’t always leaving it at three. Deal? 😊

Skip Off into the Sunset...

...knowing that you just got a little bit better at the GMAT. Yay! ?

