



THEORY OF READING COMPREHENSION

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SOLVING READING COMPREHENSION (RC) IS AN EXACT SCIENCE

Perhaps the first thing that you should realize, as you set out to go about improving your Reading Comprehension skills, is that RC is an exact science. What we mean to say is that there is exactness and a precision to RC and the way its questions are answered. We would go as far as saying that the degree of precision in RC is close to that found in Mathematics.

The reason for the exactness is not hard to find. Consider what an examiner trying to create RC questions based on a passage will be trying to achieve through his questions. His objective is to test your understanding of the ideas contained in the passage. At the same time, he has to create questions that should stand the test of logic and reason. Especially, if the passage happens to be for a paper of CAT or XLRI or similar level exams. The examiner definitely realizes that his questions are going to become a subject of intense analysis by lakhs of students and dozens of training institutes and their trainers across the country. Hence, any scope for doubt or ambiguity about the correct answer in a question is something that a question setter cannot afford to leave. Hence, even though his primary objective will be to confuse an imperfectly trained mind, the examiner will definitely focus on keeping the correct answer unambiguous. The logic supporting the correct answer hence, is always so strong, that it can be defended against the scrutiny of the entire community of students and analysts.

From the CAT /MBA/aptitude test aspirants' point of view, this translates into the fact that solving reading comprehension is an exact skill—as exact as mathematics is. All you need to do is to be able to think straight and remove self-created confusion in your mind.

The Cream of the Piece

Confused thought being the reason for selecting the incorrect options, your ability to think straight will invariably help you develop your ability for spotting the correct answer.

In this context, working on the seven dimension approach to develop reading skills (explained in detail in the previous section of this book) becomes extremely crucial for you as a student. The more you practice and develop those skills inside your mind, the higher will be your ability to get a correct picture of the author's idea. The more qualitatively superior your picture of the author's idea, the better your ability to prephrase the answer to the question asked. [As will be explained subsequently, prephrasing your answer is an extremely crucial skill for solving RC well].

TACKLING READING COMPREHENSION ON THE BASIS OF EVALUATION OF SUPPORTS

There is another useful process of solving RC questions—Consider each option of the RC question as a building supported by the foundation—the option being the building and the logic that supports the option being its foundation. As a student trying to solve the question, your objective is to spot the foundation which is the strongest. An analysis of typical questions set in RC, yields that normally two out of the 4 options fall by the wayside pretty easily since they have weak or 'false' logical supports.

Getting to the correct answer then depends upon your ability to evaluate the strength of the logic that supports each of the options.

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ALL PASSAGES HAVE A TOPIC, A PURPOSE AND A PLAN

As already seen in the previous section on reading skills,

Every written piece that you will come across is written with a purpose. The author decides what his message about the topic is, at the very outset—before he writes his first words. Closely related to the topic of the passage is the scope of the passage—which can be looked at as the boundary of the passage. Concentrate on not just what the topic of the passage is but also on the scope of the passage.

By scope, we mean the specific components of the topic that the author wants to talk about.

This is also crucial since a lot of times incorrect options are created by going outside the scope of the passage.

Next, again before putting down his first words, the author creates a plan of how he /she is going to achieve his/her purpose. On the basis of this plan, the author creates a series of paragraph divisions.

In the context of an exam like CAT and other aptitude tests, passages contain about, 800–1200 words and have about five-six paragraphs in them. As a reader, you need to recognize that contained within each paragraph, will be an idea with its relevant supporting details.

Your first task is to discover the topic of the passage—something, which is usually revealed by the time you finish the first paragraph. As a reader your objective should be to decode each paragraph, as it comes in front of you. The decoding of each additional idea will help you in decoding out the author's structure, bit by bit. While reading, remember to consciously review at the end of each paragraph, how the same added to your understanding of the idea structure.

By the time you finish reading your mind should be clear about

- The purpose of the passage
- And the plan of organisation of the passage.

You need to remember that as a reader, you need to manage each passage strategically. Most often, the purpose of the paragraph will be clear by the time you are through reading one-third of the passage.

Getting to this point should be the primary purpose of your reading. If by the end of your reading, you have not identified the purpose, the plan and the idea contained in each paragraph of the passage, it is unlikely that you will be able to answer questions based on the passage accurately.

You are likely to get confused by options that are meant to confuse students who do not have a clear picture of the idea.

The Cream of the Piece

There are typically three ways in which confusing but incorrect options are created:

1. Creating Options that are inconsistent with the passage's point of view.
2. Creating Options that go outside the scope of the passage.
3. Creating eyewash options—options that contain words/phrases/sentences used in the passage, but in a way that is not related to the specific question being asked.
4. Creating an option by using a superfluous or irrelevant detail.

OTHER THINGS YOU NEED TO PICK UP WHILE READING THE PASSAGE

The Tonality and other 'Software' Related to the Author's Viewpoint in the Passage

Apart from the idea structure (plan) and the purpose of the writing, there are several other things that should be picked up during you reading of the passage.

These include—keeping an outlook of the author's choice of words, his/her use of adverbs and adjectives, the strength and quality of his/her argumentation, the tonality of the author, the degree of the force with which he is communicating the idea, the writing style of the author, the use of analogies and comparisons/contrasts by the author, etc.

These aspects can be described as the software in the passage since most of it is intangible—something not very easily describable.

Grasping the intangibles is crucial since there are a lot of questions that are asked on these—and there is no way you can go back to a part of the passage and find an answer to such questions without reading the whole passage again.

Specific Details and their Use in the Passage

Specific details are always used to support the author's view point about the topic. They are never used frivolously, since they have an inherent connection with the plan of the passage. As a reader, during your reading, you should skim

over the details of the passage. The idea is to only catch what specific detail is mentioned and where it is mentioned.

You really do not need to go into the details of the specific details by themselves. What you need to do on the other hand, is to look for the logic of why a particular detail has been used in the passage and with which specific idea is the detail connected and how the detail is connected with this idea. The answer to the 'How' might be: to support/strengthen the idea's credibility or to attack/weaken it.

Getting this perspective will help you, since the questions asking about the specific details in the passage, are invariably phrased so as to see whether you have connected 'correctly' with the 'correct' idea.

Getting a view of the author's purpose in mentioning a specific detail will help you prephrase answers to questions the passage puts forth. Another point is that while reading the passage you should be able to distinguish between facts and interpretations that the author makes on the basis of the facts. Interpretations of facts signal idea transitions and the unfolding of fresh ideas from the author's viewpoint. Hence, you need to slow down while reading the same.

In terms of where the idea of a paragraph is placed within the paragraph, most authors stick to one way of writing throughout the passage. When you start reading a passage, try to identify the authors' specific choice of where he is placing his ideas in the paragraph. The most convenient readings are ones in which the author states the idea within a paragraph in either the first or the last sentence of the paragraph. These are also the most commonly used. However, many a time, the author will write his idea in the middle of the paragraph. The point is, whichever style the author uses, he is most likely to be consistent through all the paragraphs of the passage. If you happen to identify a consistent pattern in the first two paragraphs, you can zip through the passage because you will know exactly where to slow down while reading the remainder of the passage.

The following flowchart could be used as a reference point for improving RC skills:

Identify topic, scope, purpose and plan of the passage as you read



Watch for the idea structure evolution through the different paragraphs of the passage. Watch for significant shifts from one paragraph to the next. Read mainly to get the gist of each paragraph. Remember every paragraph contains an idea which is different from the other ideas contained in the passage.



Get a rough sense of the purpose of the details and facts used in the passage and how they relate to the idea of the paragraph they are in



Do not worry about specific content. Read through the details at a speed approximately five times the speed at which you read the ideas. If required, come back to a detail if there is a specific question about it.

Fig. 3.1

TYPES OF QUESTIONS ASKED FROM READING COMPREHENSION PASSAGE

Global Questions (Main Idea, Overall Organization/Structure of the Passage)

The answers to global questions are to be found throughout the length of the passage. These include questions about:

- The Main Idea about the Passage;
- Logical Structure of the Passage; and
- Questions that ask about the style and Tonality of the Passage.

(a) The Main Idea of the Passage Here, you might be asked to recognize a correct restatement or a paraphrase of the main idea of a passage. Besides, main idea questions also include questions about the author's purpose and objectives in writing the passage, as also to guess a title for the passage—one which summarizes briefly, the main idea developed in the passage.

The following is an example of this question:



The central theme of the passage can be best summarized as:

- a. Our grassroots development at the panchayat level is now driven by the "foreign aid" syndrome.
- b. Panchayati raj is firmly entrenched at the lower level of our federal system of governance.
- c. A truly federal polity has not developed since PRIs have not been allowed the necessary political space.
- d. The Union government and State-level parties are engaged in a struggle for the protection of their respective rights.

(b) Logical Structure of the Passage These questions ask you to analyze and evaluate the construction, organization and the logical structure of the passage.

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For instance, they may ask about the construction of the passage—whether it defines, whether it compares and contrasts, whether it presents and supports a new idea or whether it refutes and opposes an idea. Questions might be framed on the assumptions that the author makes in presenting his ideas, or to evaluate how the author's ideas can be strengthened or weakened from amongst a given set of options.

These questions measure your ability not only to comprehend a passage, but also to evaluate it critically. Your answering of such questions depends only on your ability to clearly understand the plan of the passage and your common sense.

You might be given options like:

- A historical point of view is stated, its contours are examined and a later supporting study is described in detail.
- Two opposing points of views about one topic are placed against each other and each is critically examined.
- An assumption is stated, relevant facts are examined, leading to the rejection/acceptance of the assumption.
- A traditional view point is outlined, its supporting structure is analysed and refuted in the light of new evidence.
- A less understood theory is reexplained using fresh contemporary examples.

(c) Questions that Ask About the Style and Tonality of a Passage These questions are based on the language used in the passage. The most common question under this type is the one where you might be asked to describe the author's tone in the passage with options like—'critical', 'supportive' 'enthusiastic', 'pragmatic', 'analytical', 'narrative', etc.

In order to answer such questions, you need to look for the language that is common to the entire passage. Remember the famous English saying—"One swallow does not a summer make." Similarly, one or even a few words of criticism do not make the tone of the passage critical.

Only a tone that is consistently present in each and every paragraph of the passage can be defined as the tone of the passage. You might also be asked to infer the author's attitude towards an idea, a fact, or a situation from the words that he or she uses to describe it.

At times, these questions may also ask about the kind of source that the passage was probably drawn from, for what kind of audience was the passage written and so forth. Tonal questions are answered by discerning the use of words as well as the reason for the use of words in a passage. In order to deduce the answer to such questions you need to go beyond the literal meanings of the words used in the passage.

The Cream of the Piece

- Do not guess while solving global questions. Guesses do not work since you cannot answer these questions unless you have created a photocopy of the author's idea structure into your own mind.
- Answering global questions correctly gives us confidence since it allows us to verify our overall view of the author's purpose and plan.
- If you have read the passage using the reading skills mentioned above and throughout the last section, global questions are easy and sure marks.
- Confirmation of your opinions through solving global questions, makes the solving of specific questions easier.

Inferential Questions

There are broadly two types of inferential questions:

(a) Questions that Ask for Inferences Based on Information Presented in a Passage Often, ideas are implied in a passage without actually stating the idea explicitly. These types of questions ask about ideas or meanings that can be deduced from the information that is explicitly stated. Hence, they measure your ability to 'read between the lines.'

Answers for such questions are strongly suggested, but they are not specifically stated in the passage. The challenge is to figure out from which part of the passage does the inference arise and then read the nearby sentences in order to find the implied idea/s.

For a clear understanding of inferences, go through the section on Reading Skills given in the previous part of this book. An example of this question type is given below.



It can be inferred from the passage that nitro-glycerine is of value in treating heart-attacks because it

1. lowers the blood pressure.
2. stimulates healing of an infarct.
3. causes cardiac acceleration.
4. dilates blood vessels.

Some common question structures of inferential types:

- The author implies which of the following?
- Which of the following can be inferred about the passage?
- The following *'Quote from passage'* suggests that?
- With which of the following statements would the author most likely agree/disagree?
- Which of the following is most consistent with 'something' in the passage?

(b) Questions that Ask How Information Given in a Passage can be Applied to a Context Outside the Passage These are one of the most difficult question types in RC. Solving such questions require the advanced skill of discerning relationships between situations or ideas presented in the passage and other parallel situations outside the boundaries of the passage. You need a crystal clear understanding of the passage to understand and solve these kinds of questions. In order to answer such questions, you need to more than just recall what you have read. You need to recognize the essential attributes of the ideas and situations presented in the passage when they appear in an entirely new context.

The following is an example of such a question from the CAT 2005 paper. Perhaps a testimony of the fact about the difficulty of such questions is the fact that there was a tremendous dispute about the answer to this question amongst most national level coaching institutes of repute. Obviously, some of them got this answer very wrong.

Which, according to the author, would qualify as interesting psychology?

1. A statistician's dilemma over choosing the best method to solve an optimisation problem.
2. A chess player's predicament over adopting a defensive strategy against an aggressive opponent.
3. A mountaineer's choice of the best path to Mt. Everest from the base camp.
4. A finance manager's quandary over the best way of raising money from the market.

Logical or Cause and Effect Questions

These questions are relatively easier to solve since they are very direct and most of the time, are explicitly stated in the passage. The only skill required in such questions is your ability to distinguish between the cause and the effect. Remember the cause always comes before the effect.

A clear idea of the idea structure and the plan used in the passage is normally enough to answer such questions.

According to the passage, internal conflicts are psychologically more interesting than external conflicts because

1. internal conflicts, rather than external conflicts, form an important component of serious literature as distinguished from less serious genres.
2. only juveniles or very few "adults" actually experience external conflict, while internal conflict is more widely prevalent in society.
3. in situations of internal conflict, individuals experience a dilemma in resolving their own preferences for different outcomes.
4. there are no threats to the reader (or viewer) in case of external conflicts.

In the above question, (CAT 2005 again), the effect is that internal conflicts are more interesting than external conflicts. The reason for the same is sought as the answer. Besides cause and effect, logical questions might also ask about what additional details might strengthen or weaken an argument in the passage, questions about supporting and opposing idea, the purpose of a particular paragraph, etc.

Specific Details Questions

These are one of the most common types of questions. In such questions, a specific part/phrase/sentence from the paragraph is taken and a question is created with respect to the reason for citing the detail and/or what the detail represents. Since these details are specifically stated in the passage, answering such questions is easy if you have understood the passage well. The options created for these questions are either picked up directly from the sentences surrounding the specific detail being asked about or are rephrases of these sentences.

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The Cream of the Piece

- According to the author, one result of the attacks was:
- The author states which of these about the impact of global warming?
- The passage gives information for answering which of the following questions?
- What is the author trying to say by 'Specific phrase from the passage'?

AN IMPORTANT STRATEGY: PREPHRASING THE ANSWER

Prephrasing, i.e., trying to answer the question on the basis of your understanding of the passage without looking at the options given, is one of the most effective ways of solving RC. In order to prephrase an answer to a question, read the question carefully and explore your understanding of the passage to answer the same. Then phrase the answer to the question.

Once you have what you think is an accurate answer to the question, all you need to do is compare the answer you have phrased with the options and find the option that matches your answer most closely.

Needless to say, the better your understanding of the passage, the more accurate you will be while prephrasing the answer.

Why Prephrasing Helps

- (a) It saves time since you are only confirming your predictions from amongst the answer choices. Hence, you do not need to look at the options too closely.
- (b) It decreases risk since if you find an answer close to what you are looking for, you are extremely unlikely to go wrong.

- (c) Getting an answer close to your prephrased answer helps you build confidence about your understanding of the passage.

The Cream of the Piece

It would be wise to keep the following additional points at the back of your mind in order to help you solve RC better:

Careful reading of the question is extremely important. You should make certain that you are clear about what is being asked. One of the common errors occurs by choosing an incorrect option that is stated in the passage, but does not answer the question asked. Avoiding this error is crucial since such an error is essentially a silly error. [Author's note: CAT punishes silly errors extremely stringently. An indication of the same can be got by calculating that if you made a silly error in just 4 two mark questions in the CAT 2005 paper, you would end up with -2.66 marks instead of +8 marks. A net effect of 10.66 marks. An analysis of the past results reveals that 10.66 marks can count for as much as 30 percentile in the CAT. Four silly errors will effectively see you trading a ticket to IIM, Ahmedabad with a ticket to a C grade B-school. A difference of life and death in the context of the CAT and other aptitude exams!]

Read each of the options carefully. Refrain from assuming that you have selected the best answer without first reading and eliminating the other options.

While answering questions, do not rely on information or general knowledge that comes from outside the passage. Focus exclusively on the information contained within the passage in order to select the correct option.

In terms of the contrasting merits of Speed vs. Understanding, remember that one hundred times out of a hundred, understanding and not speed is the critical factor in reading comprehension.