

Sample ACT Reading Test Passage with Questions and Answer Explanations

This sample ACT Reading Test passage is followed by several questions. Read the passage and then choose the best answer to each question that follows the passage. Refer to the passage as often as necessary to answer the questions.

Humanities: This passage (published in 1893) is adapted from Modern Painters by John Ruskin, a nineteenth-century art critic.

Is it useful to compare the works of the greatest artists? Should an art student be encouraged to paint like Leonardo and Goya, though one is Italian and the other Spanish, and they lived in different centuries? It is, indeed, true that there is a relative merit, that a peach is nobler than a hawthorn berry. But in each rank of fruits, as in each rank of masters, one is endowed with one virtue, and another with another; their glory is their dissimilarity, and they who propose in the training of an artist that he should unite the coloring of Tintoretto, the finish of Durer, and the tenderness of Correggio are no wiser than a horticulturist would be who made it the object of his labor to produce a fruit which should unite in itself the lusciousness of the grape, the crispness of the nut, and the fragrance of the pine.

And from these considerations one most important practical corollary is to be deduced, namely, that the greatness or smallness of a man is, in the most conclusive sense, determined for him at his birth, as strictly as it is determined for a fruit whether it is to be a currant or an apricot. Education, favorable circumstances, resolution, and industry can do much; in a certain sense they do *everything*; that is to say, they determine whether the apricot shall fall blighted by

the wind, or whether it shall reach maturity. But apricot out of currant—great man out of small—did never yet art or effort make; and, in a general way, men have their excellence nearly fixed for them when they are born; a little cramped and frostbitten on one side, a little sun-burned and fortune-spotted on the other, they reach between good and evil chances, such size and taste as generally belong to the men of their caliber.

Therefore it is, that every system of teaching is false which holds forth “great art” as in any wise to be taught to students or even to be aimed at by them. Great art is precisely that which never was, nor will be, taught. It is preeminently and finally the expression of the spirits of great men; so that the only wholesome teaching is that which simply endeavors to fix those characters of nobleness in the pupil’s mind, without holding out to him, as a possible or even probable result, that he should ever paint like Titian or carve like Michelangelo. Such teaching enforces upon him the assured duty of endeavoring to draw in a manner at least honest and intelligible and cultivates in him those general charities of heart, sincerities of thought, and graces of habit which are likely to lead him, throughout life, to prefer openness to affectation, realities to shadows, and beauty to corruption.

1. Which of the following is the best title for this passage?
 - A. The Comparison of Great Artists
 - B. The Uniqueness of Artistic Genius
 - C. How to Train an Artist
 - D. Artists Are Made, Not Born
2. According to the first paragraph (lines 1–21), the great artists are:
 - F. alike
 - G. dissimilar
 - H. poor models for student artists
 - J. no wiser than horticulturists
3. The development of the first paragraph (lines 1–21) depends chiefly upon:
 - A. the posing of a question and the offering of a series of answers
 - B. an extended analogy
 - C. a series of rhetorical questions
 - D. a contrast of the specific and the general
4. In the second paragraph (lines 22–44), the author compares men to fruits to stress:
 - F. the importance of inborn ability
 - G. the importance of good luck
 - H. the importance of determination and hard work
 - J. humans’ ability to control their destiny
5. The comparison of artists to fruits is employed in:
 - A. the second paragraph (lines 22–44) only
 - B. the first and second paragraphs (lines 1–21 and 22–44) only
 - C. the first and third paragraphs (lines 1–21 and 45–67) only
 - D. all three paragraphs
6. The author of the passage would probably believe that a great dancer achieved success chiefly because of:
 - F. hard work
 - G. an intense will to succeed
 - H. inborn ability
 - J. excellent coaching
7. As it is used in line 14, the word “finish” most nearly means:
 - A. completeness
 - B. polish
 - C. reticence
 - D. perspective
8. The author would probably disagree with all of the following EXCEPT:
 - F. all artists are equally valuable
 - G. contemporary artists should be taught to imitate the works of the great artists of the past
 - H. greatness in art is unteachable
 - J. birth alone will determine artistic success

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9. The author would be likely to condemn a work of art for all of the following reasons EXCEPT:

- A. dishonesty
- B. simplicity
- C. unreality
- D. affectation

10. What the last paragraph (lines 45–67) suggests should be taught to prospective artists implies that the author believes:

- F. there is no significant connection between the character of the artists and the work of art
- G. an evil artist might produce noble art
- H. there is a relation between the character of the artist and the work of art
- J. a virtuous artist may produce corrupt art

Answer Explanations

- 1. B.** Choice **A.** is only a minor concern; the main thrust of the passage isn't to compare great artists. Choice **D.**, according to the passage, is untrue, as made clear in, for example, "greatness or smallness . . . determined for him at his birth" (lines 24–27). The passage asserts that choice **C.**, training an artist, can't be done (lines 45–48).
- 2. G.** The passage calls their "dissimilarity" the glory of artists (lines 11–12). Choice **F.** is therefore obviously incorrect. Choice **H.** is also not a good choice. The passage indicates that artists shouldn't imitate the masters or be told they can learn to be as good, but it doesn't call great artists "poor models." Choice **J.** is irrelevant to the question; it's a reference to a poor method of training.
- 3. B.** The extended comparison in the first paragraph of the passage likens the unique qualities of certain paintings to qualities of fruit. The passage opens with two questions, but the questions aren't the chief method used to develop the paragraph (choices **A.** and **C.**); the extended analogy is much more significant. Choice **D.** is simply incorrect; there is no contrast of specific and general.
- 4. F.** Although the passage grants education some importance, its chief point is that the artist's talent is inborn. See lines 22–52. Choices **H.** and **J.** are conventional ideas, but they have nothing to do with the fruit analogy or with the author's central point. See lines 35–39. Similarly, choice **G.** is irrelevant.
- 5. B.** The comparison is introduced in the first paragraph and further developed in the second (lines 27–44). This eliminates choice **A.** It doesn't appear in the third paragraph, eliminating choices **C.** and **D.**
- 6. H.** Although the other elements are important, inborn ability, according to this writer, is the most important factor. See lines 35–44. A commonly held idea is that hard work (choice **F.**) and an intense will to succeed (choice **G.**) are the keys to artistic success, but remember to answer the question according to the points made in the passage itself. Choice **J.** also isn't relevant to the central idea of the passage.
- 7. B.** The artist refers to the virtue possessed by each master. In this context, "finish" means polish. Choice **A.** may seem reasonable, but "polish" is more appropriate. Choices **C.** and **D.** are definitions that have nothing to do with the word "finish," nor does **C.** fit the context. "Reticence" means a disinclination to speak.
- 8. H.** Notice the word "EXCEPT" in the question. The idea that greatness in art can't be taught is central to the passage, and therefore choice **H.** is the only statement that the author would be likely to agree with. Choice **F.** is incorrect; although the author recognizes the merits of different artists, he states in lines 6–7 that "there is a relative merit." He would also disagree with choice **G.** (lines 52–58) and with choice **J.**; lines 29–35 indicate that factors other than birth play a role.

9. **B.** In the last paragraph, the author specifically objects to dishonesty (choice **A.**), unreality (choice **C.**), and affectation (choice **D.**). The approval of honesty and intelligibility suggests that the author wouldn't object to simplicity. See lines 59–67.
10. **H.** The last paragraph suggests teaching artists about the nobility of other artists and virtues including charity, sincerity, and honesty. The implication is that the better a person the artist is, the more likely (though “not” certain) it is that the artist's work will be good. Lines 49–58 make a connection between character and artistic achievement, and therefore **F.** is a poor choice, as are **G.** and **H.**. The author sees great art as the “expression of the spirits of great men.”