

Sample Short Paragraph-Length Reading Passages

The SAT includes paragraph-length critical reading passages. These short passages, about 100 words in length, are usually followed by two questions. As you attempt to answer the questions to the first passage, apply the strategies:

- Read the passage looking for its main point and its structure.
- Make sure that your answer is supported by the passage.
- As you read, note the tone of the passage.
- Take advantage of the line numbers.
- Use the context to figure out the meaning of the words, even if you're unfamiliar with them.
- Read all the choices, since you're looking for the *best* answer given.

Samples

Questions 1–2 are based on the following passage.

- Potatoes changed history, or rather, the lack of potatoes changed history. The Great Famine in Ireland (1846–1849) was partly the result of a potato fungus that destroyed the major food source of the Irish and was particularly devastating to the poor. Food relief from the British was inadequate and came too late. Some estimates place the number of deaths at 750,000, with an equal number of the Irish poor emigrating to Britain, Canada, Australia, and the United States. British economic policy—including the policy of *laissez faire*, which argued against state intervention—was partly responsible for the disaster. Among the other culprits were the nature of Irish landholdings, destructive farming methods, and a lack of agricultural diversity.

1. The first sentence of the paragraph can best be described as intended to
- A. create interest.
 - B. mislead the reader.
 - C. provide facts.
 - D. promote a myth.
 - E. provide a humorous perspective.

Note that this question is asking for the intent of the first sentence. You should have underlined the key words. *What is the first sentence trying to do?* Instead of beginning immediately with facts as in choice C, the author chooses to create interest by making a surprising statement (“Potatoes changed history. . .”). The intent is not to mislead as in choice B or to “promote” a myth as in choice D. The most likely wrong answer is E, but nothing in this paragraph is seen from a “humorous perspective” as in choice E. The best choice is A.

2. From the passage, one can infer that during the famine, aid from the British came too late because of
- A. animosity between the English and the Irish.
 - B. poor methods of food distribution.
 - C. inadequate communication about the extent of the disaster.
 - D. the British policy of *laissez faire*.
 - E. the lack of agricultural diversity.

First, you should have underlined the words “infer” and “aid came too late because.” Remember, inference questions are asking you to *read between the lines*. Focusing on lines 5–6 will give you the answer. The British government didn’t intervene in the famine earlier because British economic policy was “hands off,” that is, the less intervention by government, the better—the British policy of *laissez faire*, choice D. It is possible that A, B, and C are accurate, but none of these is covered in the passage. E doesn’t make sense as an answer here. The best choice is D.

Did you read the passage actively, marking major points? Did you preread the two questions? Did you mark the key words in the questions?

Let's try one more short reading passage.

Questions 3–4 are based on the following passage.

- Chipmunks recently challenged the scientific dogma that small mammals were forced south during the Ice Age 18,000 years ago. DNA samples from more than 200 chipmunks in Illinois and Wisconsin were used to construct a family tree showing that chipmunks migrated further south only after glaciers receded. Scientists determined the chipmunks' migration routes by analyzing mutations in their genes. The longer a group of animals remains in one place, the more mutations they accumulate, increasing their genetic diversity. Animals leaving the refuge for a new area take only a few of the changes, and, therefore, the new group has less variety in its genes. The chipmunk populations found in the south had fewer mutations than those in northern Illinois and Wisconsin.

- 3.** In the passage, the best definition of “dogma” (line 1) is
- A. truth.
 - B. accepted opinion.
 - C. faith.
 - D. strict rules.
 - E. myth.

What does the word “dogma” mean in the passage? From the context of the first sentence, you should understand that “dogma” refers to something held as an established or accepted opinion (choice B). The paragraph's content contradicts choice A. Since “dogma” is often used in a religious context, choice C might be tempting, but there is no connection between the definition of “dogma” and faith. Choice D doesn't make sense, and choice E is simply incorrect. The best choice is B.

- 4.** According to the passage, less genetic diversity in a chipmunk population supports which of the following statements?
- A. Some chipmunk populations migrated south more recently than previously believed.
 - B. Chipmunks are the most resilient of the small mammal groups.
 - C. Northern and southern chipmunks are in fact two different species.
 - D. Frigid temperatures change the genetic structure of mammals.
 - E. DNA samples are an unreliable technique in establishing a sequence of events.

This question asks you to find *which statement is supported by the passage*. Less genetic diversity in the southern chipmunk population points to the chipmunks migrating after the Ice Age, choice A, not before (lines 2–3). No evidence supports choice D. Although choice B could be true, it is irrelevant, and choice C is simply inaccurate and not suggested anywhere in the passage. The scientists' conclusions about the later migration of chipmunks are based on genetic information, and any doubts there might be about DNA evidence as in choice E are outside the scope of the passage. The best answer is A.