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Reading Comprehension
Strategy Guide

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Atlas LSAT
Reading Comprehension

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1: Reading Comprehension Overview.....5

PART I: Read Like a Law Student

CHAPTER 2: Recognizing the Argument.....13

CHAPTER 3: Using the Argument as a Framework.....27

CHAPTER 4: Passage Annotation and the Reading Process.....41

PART II: Master the Questions

CHAPTER 5: The Search for Correct Answers.....49

CHAPTER 6: Incorrect Answers.....83

PART III: Apply Your Knowledge

CHAPTER 7: Comparative Passages.....97

CHAPTER 8: Putting it All Together.....113

Chapter 1
Reading Comprehension Overview

Why Study Reading Comprehension?

I Already Know What Reading Comprehension Is. What Can This Book Do for Me?

Reading comprehension is a staple of almost all standardized testing. You saw it on state tests in elementary school, you saw it on the SAT, and of course you will see it on the LSAT.

There is a reason for this: reading comprehension exams are a great way to test an individual's ability to absorb, comprehend, process, and relate written information in a time-efficient manner. These are skills you'll need as a lawyer, by the way.

It seems to make sense, but is it really possible to accurately quantify a person's level of reading comprehension? Can't we all, by looking at our own lives and experiences, see that our own level of reading comprehension is something that *fluctuates* from situation to situation?

Let's look at a few scenarios:

1. Ted is an electrical engineer. He has been working in a niche industry for years, but it's very easy for him to understand and evaluate articles on engineering concepts that fall outside of his specialty, even when he isn't familiar with the specific terminology involved. He's recently become interested in the stock market, and has been trying to read up on it. However, he's having a lot of trouble understanding and organizing the investment advice that he's read in various financial publications.

2. Sally is a freshman in high school. She has mastered the art of instant messaging, and sends and receives hundreds of messages a day. She filters them and organizes them easily, and is able to weave together a cohesive understanding of the lives of her friends. However, when she tries to organize the personalities and events of 18th century Europe from her history textbook, she's hopelessly lost.

3. Jane is an English literature professor, and a luddite. She's finally getting around to using the internet to communicate with her students. She is surprised by the short, abrupt, and casual messages they send to her. She is unable to catch subtlety and has difficulty interpreting the tone of the messages she receives. She tries to write short responses back, but invariably ends up sending emails that are too long and take her too much time to put together.

It's easy to see how different types of reading comprehension exams would score Ted, Sally, and Jane very differently. The truth is, none of us has a definable (or quantifiable) level of reading comprehension. Put simply, our reading comprehension ability is highly variable. It depends on many factors, including our familiarity with the subject matter, the manner in which the material is written, the purpose of our read, and our overall interest and focus level.

For a few of you, the strengths you possess as readers already align with the LSAT reading comprehension test. In other words, your ability to read and comprehend LSAT passages is similar to Sally's ability to organize and synthesize her text messages. However, for most of us, the complex passages that appear on the LSAT do not naturally fall into our reading "sweet spot." So what do we do? We must work to become intimately familiar with the characteristics of LSAT passages, and then define our reading approach based on these characteristics. In other words, we must expand our sweet spot to *include* the LSAT.

This book is designed to lead you through this process, one step at a time. If you are not already an "LSAT reader," you will become one by the time we are through.

Your Path to Success

Mastering Reading Comprehension on the LSAT is not easy. It takes a lot of work to get to the point where you can read and understand an LSAT passage just as comfortably (or at least *almost* as comfortably) as you would the articles in your favorite magazine. Here are the steps we're going to take to get you there.

1. Building Familiarity. In general, when readers read material that they already know something about, they tend to comprehend at a much higher level than when reading something about an unfamiliar topic. Ted, from the previous page, is a perfect example. Material related to engineering, even if out of his direct area of expertise, is easier for him to read and comprehend because he has a framework of prior knowledge upon which he can "hang" any new, related material, and he understands the fundamental logic of engineering principles. When he reads about the stock market and investment theory, however, he lacks a pre-existing framework of knowledge and he struggles to comprehend.

In an ideal world, we would all be experts on the subject matter covered in LSAT reading comprehension passages, and we'd be able to leverage our prior knowledge to better understand what we read. Ted would ace the reading comprehension section of the LSAT if every passage were related to engineering!

The issue is that, for the purposes of the LSAT, we cannot rely on prior knowledge of the subject matter to help us. For most of us, the good majority of passages will cover subjects that we know little about. Should we spend our preparation time anticipating and studying everything that could appear in an LSAT passage? Not very practical, and because of the broad net of possibilities, not to our advantage.

We need to generate a different kind of framework off of which to “hang” new information. Instead of using a *subject matter* framework, we will use a ***structure*** framework.

Consider the following example:

> Knock, knock.
>
> Who's there?
>
> Shelby.
>
> Shelby who?
>
> Shelby coming round the mountain when she comes.

Imagine for a second that you'd never before in your life heard a knock-knock joke. This text would make absolutely no sense to you at all! Only because you are completely familiar with the form of knock-knock jokes are you able to immediately process and understand the joke. You know, for instance, that lines 1, 3, and 5 are spoken by the joker, and that lines 2 and 4 are spoken by the person to whom the joke is being delivered. You know to expect a play on the name "Shelby" in the punch-line. You know that the joke will likely not make a whole lot of logical sense, but you're able to read it, understand it, and appreciate it nonetheless because you related the *structure* of this particular text to previous experience with knock-knock jokes.

LSAT passages are built around a very consistent structure as well. If you learn to see this structure, it will be much easier for you to organize the various elements of the passage, and understand their significance.

2. Defining Your Reading Perspective. The perspective from which you read can have a huge impact on how you make sense of a given piece of text. Let's go back to high school for a minute. Imagine your English teacher has assigned Shakespeare's Hamlet, and that your reading of the play will be evaluated in one of the following three ways:

1. You will be given a quote exam, during which you will be asked to identify certain lines taken from the text of the play.
2. You will be asked to write an essay about the major themes in the play.
3. You will be assigned one of the roles in a high school production of the play.

If you were asked to complete a quote exam, you would read with a particular focus on learning the characters and understanding the basic plot. If you were asked to write an essay on the major themes, you would interpret and extrapolate, attempting to uncover the author's implicit messages. If you were asked to act out the play, you would read with an eye towards character development, and you would pay close attention to the emotions of the characters at different points in the story. Needless to say, your interaction with the text, and your interpretation of the play, would be greatly affected by the perspective that you adopt.

We'll spend a good deal of time in this book defining an advantageous perspective from which you'll want to read all LSAT passages: from the perspective of a law student. This perspective will help you quickly recognize and organize the most important information in a given passage.

3. Understanding the Core Competencies. Every reading comprehension question on the LSAT tests your ability to do one or more of the following: (1) IDENTIFY a piece of supporting text, (2) INFER from a piece of text, and (3) SYNTHESIZE multiple pieces of text in order to make a general interpretation.

We'll spend a chapter examining the characteristics of these core competencies. You'll develop a keen sense for what correct answers should accomplish.

4. Identifying Patterns in Incorrect Answer Choices. Success on reading comprehension questions depends, in large part, on your ability to eliminate incorrect answers. For the hardest problems, the right answer can be unpredictable and not ideal. In fact, it is often easier to spot wrong answers than it is to spot the right answer. With this in mind, it is important that you develop a sense for how the test-writer creates incorrect choices.

We'll examine the common characteristics of incorrect answers and learn to use our understanding of these characteristics to effectively eliminate bad choices.

With these four tools in hand, you'll be ready to master Reading Comprehension on the LSAT. Before we get started with the process of expanding your reading "sweet spot" to include LSAT passages, let's discuss some of the logistics of the Reading Comprehension section of the test.

Reading Comprehension on the LSAT

Section Breakdown

The entire LSAT exam is comprised of the following sections (not necessarily in this order):

SECTION	QUESTIONS	SCORED?	TIME
Logic Games	22-23	yes	35 minutes
Reading Comprehension	26-28	yes	35 minutes
Logical Reasoning (1)	24-26	yes	35 minutes
Logical Reasoning (2)	24-26	yes	35 minutes
EXPERIMENTAL	22-28	no	35 minutes
Essay	1 essay	no	30 minutes

Note that every LSAT exam will contain one Reading Comprehension section that will count towards your final score. Thus, just about one quarter of the total questions on the LSAT will be Reading Comprehension questions.

Keep in mind that the Experimental section could end up being a Reading Comprehension section as well. If you do receive two RC sections on your exam, only one of those two sections will actually count towards your final score (unfortunately, it's impossible to know which one).

Scoring

Each Reading Comprehension question, and every other question on the LSAT for that matter, is worth exactly 1 point. If you answer a question correctly, you will be credited with 1 point for that question. If you answer the question incorrectly, or if you fail to answer the question, you will be credited with 0 points for that question.

It is important to note that there is no guessing penalty on the LSAT. An incorrect answer is scored the same as a "no answer." Thus, it is to your advantage to answer every single question on the exam, even if some of those answers are guesses.

During the scoring of your exam, your points are totaled and then converted to a scaled score between 120 and 180. The conversion depends on the performance of all the other test-takers who took the same exam; a standardized curve is used to assign your scaled score.

Subject Matter: Do I Have to Know About the Law?

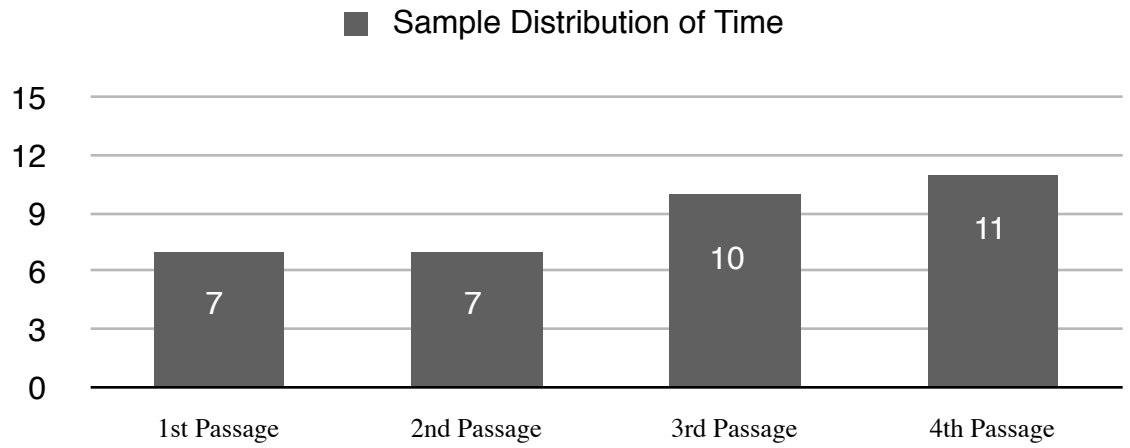
Every Reading Comprehension section contains four passages. You can expect to see one passage per section in each of the following four subject areas:

Subject Area	*Expect to see passages on...*
THE LAW	legal history, international law, legal theory, social ramifications of law
NATURAL SCIENCES	evolution, biology, chemistry, physics
SOCIAL SCIENCES	history, political science, sociology, economics
HUMANITIES	literature, art, film

The LSAT does NOT expect that you have any prior knowledge when it comes to the law, natural sciences, social sciences, or humanities. All the information you will need to answer the questions will be contained in the passage. That said, students with a certain level of familiarity in these subject areas will have a slight advantage. As we discussed earlier, the more familiar you are with the subject matter, the more likely you are to comprehend what you are reading.

Pacing

You will have a total of 35 minutes to complete the four passages. This works out to 8:45 per passage. However, you will need to be faster than 8:45 on easier passages in order to have the extra time necessary for the more difficult passages. Generally speaking, the four passages on the LSAT are arranged from easier to harder (easier passages at the start of the section and harder passages at the end; this is a tendency, NOT an absolute). With that in mind, consider the following pacing plan for a reading comprehension section:



For each specific passage, time must be allocated to reading the text and answering the questions. In general, it is recommended that you spend more time on answering the questions than on reading the text, but this ratio of time spent will depend on your own personal style and your particular strengths and weaknesses.

As you go forward in this book, and as you practice more on real exams, keep returning to the following list in order to hone your process.

SIGNS THAT YOU ARE SPENDING TOO LITTLE TIME IN THE READING PROCESS	SIGNS THAT YOU ARE SPENDING TOO MUCH TIME IN THE READING PROCESS
You have trouble recognizing the central argument	You try to memorize and notate every single detail in the text
You have trouble organizing the information in the passage relative to the argument	While you are reading, you try to go beyond understanding the text relative to the central argument and try to see what else you can infer
You don't understand the role each paragraph plays relative to the rest of the passage	You spend a lot of extra time trying to understand specific elements of the text, elements that ultimately don't show up in the questions
You have trouble paraphrasing the purpose of a paragraph	You feel rushed while going through the questions
You don't have a clear sense of the author's opinion	You often feel that you do not have time to go through the process of elimination
You don't have a clear sense of which opinions contrast one another	You often answer off of a "gut" feeling
You often miss problems pertaining to the passage as a whole	You often feel you do not have enough time to return to the text in order to verify the answer to a specific question
You often have to go back and reread the text in order to answer questions about the passage as a whole	
You do poorly on questions that ask you to compare the text to some sort of analogy	
You often feel lost when you have to go back into the text to find answers to questions that ask about a specific detail	

Again, remember that there are no absolutes when it comes to timing. Use this book and your own practice to get a sense for how you should allocate time between reading the text and answering the questions.

Let's get to work.