

Lesson Seven: An Introduction to Reading Comprehension

Reading Comprehension

- This section is studied the least, but you ignore it at your peril – there are always 27-28 questions in an RC section, the greatest number of questions in any of the three section types. While students often do not see the dramatic improvements that they can achieve in Logic Games, serious improvement is possible. If we learn about the kinds of passages there are, how best to read them, and how best to handle the questions, serious improvement is possible.

June 2007: First Passage – Humanities

- Humanities passages are very common on the LSAT, and for the last five years or so, nearly every humanities passage has featured an artist from a minority or oppressed group. While in the past it was common to see passages about Homer, Byron, or some other dead white writer, these days the passages that have to do with the arts tend to feature an artist that represents some historically disadvantaged group.

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- When discussing the value of a work of art, authors will often return to a familiar debate: form vs. content. The form of a work of art is simply the work itself. Is it a novel, or a painting, or a sculpture? Of course, form is more complicated than that: is it a realistic painting, or is it an abstract work? The content of a work of art is the art's subject matter: a novel about war, romance, domestic life, etc.

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- So, if we are going to praise or criticize a work of art, we have to consider both its form and content. The minority artists that are the subjects of LSAT passages are almost always praised, and they are praised both as innovators with regards to their art's form, and as representatives of groups that formerly did not receive a great deal of attention in the fine arts.

June 2007: First Passage – Humanities

- In this first passage, we learn about the poet Rita Dove. Unlike many RC passages about artists, her ethnicity and gender do not play a large role in the passage's analysis of her work. What is most interesting for the author is how the poet confronts a general American tendency to insist on strict divisions with regards to literary genres. Let's take a closer look at the passage.

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- Before we get started, I don't insist on one approach as far as taking notes, or highlighting, or just doing the analysis in your head. You don't want to take so many notes you have no time for the questions, but you also want to read actively and take from the passage its most interesting points. I'll be pointing out what you need to take from the passage to answer the questions most effectively

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- A good approach to get started is to note key parts of the passage with some abbreviations: “MP” for main point; “WR” for the wrong arguments that the author, or in this case, Rita Dove, will confront; “C/E” for any cause and effect relationships; and “DIS” for any major distinctions

June 2007: First Passage – Humanities First Paragraph

- As we have seen with many Logical Reasoning questions, an author will often introduce an idea or argument, and even if the author does not criticize it directly, it's pretty obvious the author is not a big fan. Unless the author specifically endorses an idea, the author will usually come out against it. The detached tone is a good indication that the author doesn't like this "rift" or "separation" between fiction and poetry. "Conventional wisdom" is another phrase that suggests the author doesn't like this "separation."

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Humanities

Second Paragraph

- More of the same, though the author does try to explain this situation: US culture, which casts a "suspicious eye" on the generalist. So we have our first cause/effect relationship - the effect is this "rift" and the cause is a American mistrust of accomplishment in multiple fields. In case you are wondering, a *dilettante* is someone who participates in many fields but is not particularly good at any one of them.

June 2007: First Passage – Humanities Third Paragraph

- Third paragraph: we meet our hero, Rita Dove. Note how the author's tone has gotten much more positive: this "bias" is "diminishing", Dove is "highly acclaimed." Even as she criticizes, she does it "gently" - so Dove is cool. The author likes her, and we must understand that fully in order to succeed on the questions. One important note is that Dove is not alone - she is part of a "recent trend." Also, we have the example of German literary culture, which isn't as specialized and restrictive as that in America.

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Fourth Paragraph

- We finally have some details about her work - we learn that her poetry features "lyrical narrative" - the narrative part is the fiction element - and her fiction is lyrical - and therefore poetic - because it has "poetic rhythms" and "elliptical expressions". In a paragraph like this, it's easy to get lost in the details, particularly if you are not familiar with literary terminology. If you notice that you are ever getting lost in the details, just note the basic contents of the paragraph - so in this case we would say, "Here is where the writing is actually described."

June 2007: First Passage – Humanities Question #1

- Main Point: we should have a pretty good idea of what the main point is before looking at the choice: it should say something like "Rita is good because she blends genres." We don't want too specific choices that have lots of detail. That gets rid of A, B, and C. So we are left with D and E. Both are true, but E is more complete because it includes the fact the Rita is part of a larger trend. E is correct.

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Questions #2, 3, 4

- 2. D is the only choice that contains blending of genres. It is therefore correct.
- 3. Here we are describing the wrong view, so we got to the first two paragraphs. C is tricky here, but it's not that poetry is excluded - it is always separate. A is the best choice, we can find evidence for it in the first paragraph.
- 4. Author's perspective: seldom are they "perplexed, astonished, or ambivalent." the author clearly doesn't like the rift, but has optimism that it is being overcome. E is correct.

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Questions #5, 6, 7, 8

- 5. This question involves the cause and effect relationship I called attention to earlier. If we made note of it, D would be an easy pick.
- 6. D is tricky here, but it's just too much. On RC, the questions are primarily passive. When in doubt keep it simple, and that should take you to B.
- 7. Here we find support in the last paragraph for A. The author is pretty clear that the fiction is fiction and the poetry is poetry; they each combine elements of the other, but the genres are clear.
- 8. Maybe E is true, but A is much less bold. As with 6, keep it simple, and opt for weakness over strength.