

# Essential SAT Reading Principles

**KEY POINT: the answer to an SAT reading question is always as clear and definitive and objective as the answer to an SAT math question.**

- this means that there is no “good, better, best”
- there is only one “right” answer choice and three “wrong” answer choices
- always approach SAT reading sections with this mindset

## 1 Design Philosophy

- The SAT is deliberately designed to be as objective as possible i.e. there is no room for subjective interpretation in any scenario.
- This is because the SAT needs to be a reliable and reproducible measuring stick for evaluating students’ abilities.
- If the SAT were to lose this reliability, the College Board would lose its funding and usage from Universities and would go out of business.
- The College Board has millions of test takers every year; it would be impossible to grade all the exams if the test were open to subjective answer choices because the time requirements would go up astronomically.
- This is why the now-defunct Essay section was thrown away; there was too much room for subjective expression.

## 2 Consequences of Design Philosophy and Best Approach

- Because of the aforementioned design philosophy, coming up with your own “literary” interpretations (as you would in English class) will more often than not actively hurt you.
- An example of a “literary” interpretation is the following:  
*The author said that the curtains were blue – perhaps this could symbolize the character’s sadness at the recent loss of her favorite brooch.*
  - ◊ Here, we are taking in the information presented to us in the passage “the curtains were blue” and extrapolating a possible reason or belief that the author is trying to portray from that information “the character is sad.”
  - ◊ You CANNOT do this in the SAT reading sections.
  - ◊ If the author said that the curtains were blue, then the **only** thing you know (in SAT land) is that the curtains are blue.
- Sometimes, the test will even try to trap you into making these leaps of logic and punish you with a juicy looking answer choice.
- Every thing must be read as LITERALLY as possible, avoiding any of the literary interpretation defined above.
- ALL correct answers will have some exact point in the text that is directly backing up everything that is written in the answer choice.

## 3 Restate and Demonstrate

- There are only TWO ways that you can ask people about some words on a page without letting them provide subjective interpretation:
  - ◊ RESTATE what is said on the page somehow
  - ◊ DEMONSTRATE an idea expressed on the page somehow
- Defining Restate:

- ◇ Two separate pieces of text that express the same idea using different words
- Defining Demonstrate:
  - ◇ The correct answer provides an example or scenario that is exactly described in the text, OR
  - ◇ the text provides an example or scenario that is exactly described in the correct answer
- Demonstrate questions tend to be a bit more tricky than Restate questions.
- A very important Corollary can be deduced:
  - ◇ Incorrect answers either fail to be Restated or Demonstrated by the text, or they add in additional ideas that are not present in the text.

## 4 Subjective Trickery

- As stated previously, the College Board will try and trick you into thinking subjectively and trap you with an incorrect answer.
- They do this in several ways, primarily by using words such as “suggest”, “probably”, “primarily”, “most likely”, and others.
- Questions are often formatted like the following:
  - ◇ Question: *the author most likely included the phrase “\_\_\_” to indicate which of the following?*  
Translation: what idea appears near phrase \_\_\_?
  - ◇ Question: *which choice most nearly means \_\_\_?*  
Translation: which choice exactly means \_\_\_?
  - ◇ Question: *the author would probably respond to the idea discussed in line 5 by \_\_\_?*  
Translation: The author states which of the following opinions?
- If you find your internal monologue going something like:  
*“well, that answer seems reasonable if x means y and then y goes to z and the author actually meant something else by saying this word than what we would traditionally think of it as and ...”*  
...then you’re probably in a dangerous spot.
- The College Board loves it when you waste your time! Just move on to another question if you can’t reset on that one and re-visit it later (time permitting).

## 5 Wrong Answer Archetypes

- Not all wrong answers will fall into these categories – some will be a mixture of several of them or none at all – but it can be good just to know some common pitfalls the College Board likes to use.
- So following is a list of some common wrong answers and a brief explanation of what they’re exactly doing.

### 5.1 Off by One or Two Words

- Everything in this answer choice will be correct save for a single word or very short phrase that is altered.
- Primarily designed to trick you if you just skimmed the passage or weren’t paying attention.

### 5.2 Barely Relevant

- States an idea adjacent to the text that is never actually discussed.
- Exploits your innate sense to give things the benefit of the doubt when they’re not outright contradictory.
- Yes you kind of need to go into Terminator mode for the SAT.

### 5.3 Valid Classroom Answers

- A plausible explanation for why the author did what he/she did, but has no concrete backing by the physical words appearing on the page.
- You could get an A in English class for this one, but you'll just get 0 for that question on the SAT.

### 5.4 Reasonable Statements Not Present in the Text

- A reasonable-enough sounding interpretation for an event or phenomenon discussed in the text, but it will again have no direct stating or demonstrating in the text itself.
- This one appears a lot in academically-oriented topics such as history, science, mathematics, etc.
- A common trap for people who try to bring in outside knowledge.

### 5.5 Direct Contradictions

- Blatantly inverting reality and saying the exact opposite of what you read.
- This one can be insidious, because you may be taken aback by the audacity of having such an obviously wrong answer choice.
- You may begin to think that you misread the passage, or that perhaps there was an error somewhere, and waste your time. A win for the College Board.

### 5.6 Confused Relationships

- This answer choice uses correct ideas from the passage, but weaves those ideas together in an incorrect way.
- Tricks you mainly if you aren't paying attention to the logical progression of the passage.

### 5.7 Restate/Demonstrate the Wrong Part of the Text

- A perfectly valid answer for a DIFFERENT part of the passage, but not for the part mentioned in the question specifically.
- A good one to look for if you're wrestling between two answers that you both think are correct.

## 6 Miscellany

- Always read the intro blurb. There can be some very important context, such as explanation of characters' relationships, that you'll need for the questions.
- Don't be afraid to ignore technical jargon. You will often not need to understand it, and it will often have no questions associated with it.
- What does "humor" (in an SAT context) mean? You will sometimes get answer choices referring to "a humorous insight to \_\_\_" or "a humorous anecdote pertaining to \_\_\_". It means:  
*the text cannot be interpreted literally*  
*the text has something unexpected or unusual occur*
- If there is no line citation mention in the question, there will still ALWAYS be words/phrases present that affirm the correct answer choice (yes, even for the "purpose of this passage" questions). You just have to go on a little scavenger hunt.