

## ACT TIPS & TRICKS

### 1. DO keep calm and carry on

On test day, relaxation is key. Easier said than done, right? There's actually strategy involved here, too. Take it easy and give yourself plenty of time to wake up, get ready, and get to the test center. Breathe.

### 2. DON'T be a zombie

Have a protein-rich breakfast before you leave. Get good sleep starting two nights before the test. Seriously. Functioning on eight hours of sleep is so much nicer than functioning on any less.

### 3. DO stay positive

Tests can be kind of boring. Still, if all you do is think about how horrible this test is going to be and how badly you're going to do on it, chances are your experience will be really horrible and you're going to do badly (self-fulfilling prophecy, anyone?). Belief affects behavior, simple as that. So, think positively. Give yourself a pep talk as you're driving to the exam, even try smiling while you're taking it. Have a few laughs with your friends. It'll work.

### 4. DO practice, practice, practice

How does that saying go? Anything worth doing is worth doing right? If you want to be good at something, you have to practice. Do the on-line practice tests, as well as any needed math tutorials.

### 5. What to Bring to the ACT? DO come prepared



**Your admission ticket** — it's that thing you were supposed to print after you registered for the test. If you lost it, don't worry; you can log in to your account and print another one before the test.

**A photo ID** — preferably a driver's license or student ID

**No. 2 pencils** — NOT mechanical. Bring several, and have them already sharpened.

**A calculator** — check the ACT website to make sure your model isn't prohibited.

**Remember cell phones are NOT allowed.** Back in the old days, people used "watches" to keep track of time. You might consider bringing one to help you pace yourself.

**A watch** — borrow one if you need to. It's easier to look at your wrist for the time than to look up at the wall. With 2 minutes left on a test, just fill in any blank circles.

**snacks and/or drinks** - to consume outside the test room only during the break.

**Listerine breath strips** - to help keep you alert.

**6. DO guess intelligently and with purpose** You're not penalized for guessing, but try to narrow down the possibilities. There are usually at least one or two answers that are definitely wrong. "Duds," if you will. If you can get rid of these dud choices, you'll have a much better chance of guessing correctly.

**7. DO mark up the test booklet** Take notes, write little hints to yourself, identify words you don't understand (it'll come in handy later on)...basically, just be an active reader. Plus, it's a good way to keep you focused.

**8. DON'T be a statue** You're limited to the one square foot that your test chair encompasses, so you won't be able to have a dance party or anything, but move around as much as you can. Shake out the limbs, stretch, whatever. Just get the blood flowing.

## Tips for Taking the ACT

- **Prepare your backpack the night before:** This assures you that you have everything you need for the test and keeps you calm in the morning by having everything nicely organized.
  - If you are driving to the test, make sure your car keys are in a location that is easy to find.
- **Memorize the directions** BEFORE TEST DAY! (See below). During the test, you won't get extra time to read the directions, so if you take 5 minutes to figure out what to do, that's 5 fewer minutes you'll have to get points.
- Read each question carefully. A math diagram may show an  $x$  on the side of a triangle, but ask for perimeter.
- Pace yourself—don't spend too much time on a single passage or question.
- Use a soft lead No. 2 pencil with a good eraser. Do not use a mechanical pencil or ink pen.
- Answer the easy questions first; then go back and answer the more difficult ones if you have time remaining.
- On difficult questions, eliminate as many incorrect answers as you can, then make an educated guess.
- **Answer every question. There is no penalty for guessing.**
- Pay attention to the announcement of five minutes remaining on each test. Go back to questions you narrowed down earlier, and guess from the remaining choices. Then just pick a letter (NOT C) to fill in for any remaining questions.
  - **Letter of the Day** As counter-intuitive as it may seem, you will pick up more points consistently if you always guess the same letter. Contrary to popular opinion, you won't get more questions right if you guess (C) rather than any other choice (in fact, **C seems to be the least likely answer** on the last (hardest) questions of the test). Go crazy, guess (A) or (F) on the next ACT you take. Just be consistent
    - **Exception:** "cannot be determined from the information given" is virtually never the answer for the math section.
- If you complete a test before time is called, recheck your work on that section of the test.
- Mark your answers properly. Erase any mark completely and cleanly without smudging.
- Do not mark or alter any ovals on a test or continue writing the essay after time has been called. If you do, you will be kicked out and your answer document will **not** be scored.

**Test Booklet Instructions** The following instructions are printed on the cover of the multiple-choice test booklet. The instructions for the ACT Writing Test are different.

- This booklet contains tests in English, Mathematics, Reading, and Science. These tests measure skills and abilities highly related to high school course work and success in college. ***CALCULATORS MAY BE USED ON THE MATHEMATICS TEST ONLY.***
- The questions in each test are numbered, and the suggested answers for each question are lettered. On the answer document, the rows of ovals are numbered to match the questions, and the ovals in each row are lettered to correspond to the suggested answers.
- For each question, first decide which answer is best. Next, locate on the answer document the row of ovals numbered the same as the question. Then, locate the oval in that row lettered the same as your answer. Finally, fill in the oval completely. Use a soft lead pencil and make your marks heavy and black. ***DO NOT USE INK OR A MECHANICAL PENCIL.***
- Mark only one answer to each question. If you change your mind about an answer, erase your first mark thoroughly before marking your new answer. For each question, make certain that you mark in the row of ovals with the same number as the question.
- Only responses marked on your answer document will be scored. Your score on each test will be based only on the number of questions you answer correctly during the time allowed for that test. You will NOT be penalized for guessing. ***IT IS TO YOUR ADVANTAGE TO ANSWER EVERY QUESTION EVEN IF YOU MUST GUESS.***
- You may work on each test ONLY when your test supervisor tells you to do so. If you finish a test before time is called for that test, you should use the time remaining to reconsider questions you are uncertain about in that test. You may NOT look back to a test on which time has already been called, and you may NOT go ahead to another test. To do so will disqualify you from the examination.
- Lay your pencil down immediately when time is called at the end of each test. You may NOT for any reason fill in or alter ovals for a test after time is called for that test. To do so will disqualify you from the examination.
- Do not fold or tear the pages of your test booklet.

**DO NOT OPEN THIS BOOKLET UNTIL TOLD TO DO SO.**

# ACT MATH STRATEGIES

## Take two passes on the ACT Math test

- **Pass 1:** Start with Question 1 and work your way forward, answering questions that look relatively quick and easy and jumping over those that look difficult or time-consuming.
- **Pass 2:** After you've answered all the quick and easy questions, circle back to the first question you skipped over and work your way forward to the end again.
  - Don't guess at any answers while you're still on the first pass (see the previous section, "Take two passes on the ACT Math test," where I discuss tackling the test in two separate passes). Instead, begin guessing on your second pass of the test. At this point, if you can confidently rule out a couple of answers but don't know how to proceed with a question, you can save time by guessing at the answer and moving on to the next question.
  - Keep track of the questions that you guess on. If you have time at the end of the math test, you can revisit these questions and make a more educated guess.
- **Solve the problem first**, then locate your answer, rather than plugging each option into the problem – UNLESS you have no idea how to solve it, and you have completed all the questions you know how to do – then plug in answers to find the correct one.
- **Use all of the time provided.**
- **Go back and check your work.** If nothing else, check any problems you weren't particularly sure of.
- **Use scratch paper to figure stuff out.** Label diagrams and Draw pictures, and simplify algebraic expressions.
- **DON'T spend more than one minute on any problem** on your first tour through the exam. The test is designed to give you plenty of time, but don't waste any minutes early on. You are better off missing one hard problem than not getting to four easy problems at the end of the test.
- **DON'T do any complicated computations that need a calculator.** A calculator isn't required, so if your solution absolutely depends on one, you are probably headed down a time-consuming and incorrect path.
- **DON'T leave any questions unanswered.** Even if you have no idea what the question means, you should give it your best shot, and then just bubble something in. **You have a small chance of guessing correctly, and incorrect guesses aren't penalized.**
- **If two answers look similar** (positive and negative of the same number, or reciprocals), the correct answer is probably one of them.
- The instructions say the drawings are not necessarily to scale, but they generally are. You can use this to make an educated guess if you are stuck, or see if your answer looks reasonable, but not as proof.

**Pre-Algebra** Pre-algebra questions are generally about being able to perform simple operations on whole numbers, integers, fractions, and decimals. This includes exponents, roots, taking the absolute value, and ordering lists of numbers from least to greatest.

### **You must be able to:**

- Compute greatest common multiples
- Find simple probability
- Find factors
- Find ratios, proportions, and percents
- Recognize small primes
- Recognize patterns that describe a sequence
- Solve simple linear equations

**Elementary Algebra** Elementary algebra introduces variables, and you'll mostly be tested on how to use them in a variety of equations and expressions.

### **You should be:**

- Comfortable using equations to relate two variables
- Able to solve linear and quadratic equations and linear inequalities
- Able to add and factor polynomials, as well as solve for their roots
- Able to substitute
- Familiar with order of operations to simplify expressions involving variables

**Intermediate Algebra** Intermediate algebra involves solving more complicated problems.

**You must be familiar with:**

- Binomials
- $2 \times 2$  matrices
- The quadratic formula
- Logarithms
- Radical and rational expressions
- Complex numbers

**You also must be able to:**

- Solve a quadratic equation by factoring
- Solve systems of equations
- Recognize patterns in sequences
- Solve equations involving absolute value and inequalities (both linear and quadratic)

**Plane Geometry:** Plane geometry involves recognizing shapes that lie on a plane.

**You will be tested on:**

- Triangles
- Trapezoids
- Rectangles
- Circles
- Parallelograms
- Polygons

**You should understand:**

- What angles are and what their measurements can be
- General proof technique should also be familiar to you
- How to compute the surface areas and volumes of simple 3D shapes
- Basic postulates and definitions about parallel and perpendicular lines
- Names of simple 3D shapes should be known
- The basic ways to translate, rotate, and reflect a shape to obtain a congruent shape
- General facts about congruent triangles used in proof
- How to compute perimeters and areas of 2D shapes

**Coordinate Geometry:** Coordinate geometry involves familiarity with and the use of the standard  $(x, y)$ -coordinate plane (a.k.a. the Cartesian plane). You must be familiar with labeling points in the plane. Familiarity with the real number line, inequalities, and number line graphs are also prerequisites.

**You must be able to:**

- Graph functions
- Determine slopes of lines
- Recognize and graph the equations for points, lines, polynomials, and circles
- Compute distances between points
- Recognize the equations of parallel and perpendicular lines
- Understand the transformations: translation, rotation, and reflection
- Calculate midpoints of line segments
- Understand the relationship between graphs and functions

**And you should be familiar with:**

- The graphs and equations of the three major types of conic sections: ellipses, hyperbolas, and parabolas
- Performing transformations of these equations

**Trigonometry** You must know:

- How to solve trig equations
- How to model simple situations with trig functions
- How to recognize trig graphs
- The values and properties of the trig functions
- The trig identities
- How to use the trig functions to solve for lengths of sides and angles within right triangles

# **ACT SCIENCE STRATEGIES**

**ACT Science Trick #1: Read the Data Representation Passages First:** On the ACT Science test, you'll see three different types of passages: Data Representation, Conflicting Viewpoints, and Research Summaries. Data Representation passages are the easiest because they incorporate the least amount of reading. They basically ask you to interpret coordinating tables, draw inferences from graphics, and analyze other diagrams and figures. In some cases, you can go straight to the first DR question and answer it correctly without reading any explanatory material whatsoever. You may just have to refer to one chart! So it makes sense to get as many points as is possible right out of the gate by answering those questions first.

**A Helpful Reminder:** You'll know it's a Data Representation passage if you see several large graphics like charts, tables, diagrams and graphs. If you see a lot of reading in paragraph format, you're not reading a DR passage!

**ACT Science Trick #2: Pay Attention To the Numbers:** Even though this isn't the ACT Mathematics test, you'll still be expected to work with numbers on the Science Reasoning exam, which is why this ACT Science trick is key. Often, experiments or research will be explained numerically in a table or graph, and those numbers could be explained in millimeters in one table and meters in another. If you accidentally count the millimeters as meters, you could be in big trouble. Pay attention to those abbreviations.

**ACT Science Trick #3: Use Shorthand Notes In the Conflicting Viewpoints Passage:** One of the seven passages you'll see on the ACT Science Reasoning test will involve two or three differing takes on one theory. You will interpret each theory to locate its key components, and find the similarities and differences between the two. Right when you start reading, make notes in plain language on the side of the paragraph. Summarize each scientist's basic idea. Make a list of the key components of each. You won't get bogged down in the language if you summarize as you go. Since you will actually need to read this passage, **save this passage for last.**

**A Helpful Reminder:** Look for big numerical changes or differences in tables or charts. If Weeks 1, 2, and 3 had similar numbers, but Week 4's numbers spiked, you'd better believe there will be a question asking for an explanation of the change

## **Mark up your test.**

The section is yours for 35 minutes, so don't be afraid to write all over it. Come up with your own method of circling important facts and information. This will make it much easier when you get to the questions because you won't have to read over the whole passage again to get the correct answer. Some specific tips:

- **Circle the words you don't know the meaning of**
- **Draw lines on graphs to mark important data points or trends**
- **Circle numbers in tables and plotted points that are out of whack with the rest of the data**
- **Underline statements that you don't totally understand**
- **Write the trends you spot right on the plots and tables**

**DO NOT waste time reading the entire passage** - you run into some data or results that you don't understand. Wait until you are asked about it, which you probably will be, rather than wracking your brain beforehand and becoming overwhelmed. If you think you need to read a specific passage in its entirety, skip that passage and come back to it after completing the others.

- **The one exception to this rule is the passage comparing the opinions of two scientists.** You will need to read the passage to find the answers – so **SKIP this passage.** Go back and read it only after completing all of the other passages. If you run out of time, just guess the answers and fill in the circles.

**1. Don't get caught up in fancy scientific jargon. Put the questions and answers in your own words.**

**2. Do what you know first, and skip or guess if necessary. Hint: Questions are often in order of increasing difficulty.** If you're stuck on the last two questions of a passage and still haven't gotten to the final passage, it's time to put those two questions aside and move on to the next section. It's up to you: you can either mark these questions if you think you will have time to come back to them, or you can guess and put them out of your mind. You definitely don't want to run out of time, leaving some easy questions unanswered in later passages. Pace yourself. You should be spending about five minutes on each passage.

**3. Perform rough calculations. If you have to bust out your math skills, just do a quick estimate calculation. You have four choices in front of you. No exact number needed!** There are no calculators allowed on ACT Science, so any math that you may need to do will be pretty simple. Don't be afraid to estimate if it will cut down on the time it takes you to solve the problem. You won't need to calculate the exact mathematical answer; a rough idea of the number should be enough for you to answer the question correctly.

**4. Stay calm and focused.**

# ACT ENGLISH STRATEGIES

## 1. Get used to doing some (educated) guessing.

In fact, the odds of guessing correctly on the **ACT English Test** are even better. Since you're only facing four choices, not five, each answer you can eliminate brings you that much closer to the possibility of landing on the right one. There's no penalty for a wrong answer. There's absolutely no difference between leaving an answer blank and choosing the wrong answer.

**2. Read carefully.** ACT English passages might be fairly straightforward, but answering questions can be tricky—even if they look easy. In fact, obvious answers should be a warning sign. Since most of the questions consist of underlined words or phrases, always refer to the passage and make sure that you can identify the sentence and what it is about, even if you have to read a couple of extra sentences. In the same way, always glance over the entire paragraph or essay when the question asks you to.

**3. Remember the rules of grammar and writing.** When dealing with grammar, it's especially tempting to go with whichever answer "sounds" right. Unfortunately, the wild and wonderful world of grammar doesn't always match up to what you hear spoken every day. Even if a sentence like "I could of danced all night" sounds like something you'd say, remember that "could of" should be "could have" or "could've" in formal English.

**4. Go with your gut.** It's important to know grammar rules inside and out. Apply your skills to the questions, but don't second-guess yourself once you have your answer.

# ACT WRITING STRATEGIES

The subjects of these prompts have to do with something we're all good at: the ability to argue! When writing a solid essay, you will always need to do the following:

## 1. Pick a side.

You have to show that you can form an opinion based on the prompt. Come down on one side of the issue, come down on the other, or whip out a third opinion. Any way you do it, you have to have an opinion. Essays that are off-topic or do not choose a side won't even be graded and you will get a big fat zero.

## 2. Use style and substance.

Your writing needs to be clear and effective, without spelling or grammatical mistakes that make it hard to understand what you're trying to convey. Compelling transitions, varied sentence structure, and clear paragraph breaks are all essential elements to a good essay. The nice folks grading your essay know you only have 30 minutes to write it, and they'll take that into account when they grade your test.

## 4. Be specific in your examples.

Test graders will be looking for evidence that you can develop a logical position and support it with good reasoning. Many students can form opinions and state their positions but fail to adequately support them with written explanations and examples.

## 5. Consider an optional third solution.

We mentioned earlier that in rare cases, it is acceptable to pick a third stance that is a blend of the two sides of the debate, and argue for that instead. With the uniform or no uniform debate, a viable third option would be to argue for a school dress code that is formal and has rules (such as no short skirts or sagging jeans), but still allows for some student choice in outfits. Warning: Only attempt this if you are confident in your writing skills and know how to thoroughly incorporate both sides into your argument. If your third option does not include elements from the original debate, it will not look good to graders.

## 6. Stay on task.

Keep focused on your topic from start to finish, with no random digressions, tangents, or rants. A slice of chocolate cake, no matter how good, is not going to look appetizing on a plate with deviled eggs. Your graders will not appreciate (and not even score) a detailed account of your harrowing trip to Mexico, so save it for lunchtime at the cafeteria.

## 5. Address your enemy.

Every strong argument has an equally strong opposite argument. Since you are being asked to write on one side of a debate topic, the prompt already provides the two sides for you. The side you pick is your argument, and the other side is the counter-argument. A six-point essay will always address possible objections by proponents of the counter-argument. If you argue that school uniforms are a good idea, an expected dissent from the other side would be freedom of expression. If you counter that opinion with the argument that, while freedom of expression is important, student safety is ultimately more important, then you have effectively addressed and shot down the counter-argument.

# ACT Writing Strategies and Tactics:

The **ACT essay prompt** is supposed to be "high school specific." That's test-speak for "the prompt will give you a debated topic that is typically geared toward, or concerned with, people your age." You will have to pick a side and argue your point thoroughly and with plenty of supporting examples.

**Outline before you write.** If you're taking the essay, be sure to take five out of the thirty minutes and plan before you write. It isn't a waste of time; the scorers are looking for **well-organized essays**. The best way to get one is to plan ahead with either an outline or graphic organizer.

## In the words of the ACT, here are the directions:

- "This is a test of your writing skills. You will have thirty (30) minutes to write an essay in English. Before you begin planning and writing your essay, read the writing prompt carefully to understand exactly what you are being asked to do. Your essay will be evaluated on the evidence it provides of your ability to express judgments by taking a position on the issue in the writing prompt; to maintain a focus on the topic throughout the essay; to develop a position by using logical reasoning and by supporting your ideas; to organize ideas in a logical way; and to use language clearly and effectively according to the conventions of standard written English.
- You may use the unlined pages in this test booklet to plan your essay. These pages will not be scored. You must write your essay in pencil on the lined pages in the answer folder. Your writing on those lined pages will be scored. You may not need all the lines pages, but to ensure you have enough room to finish, do NOT skip lines. You may write corrections or additions neatly between the lines of your essay, but do NOT write in the margins of the lined pages. Illegible essays cannot be scored, so you must write (or print) clearly.
- If you finish before time is called, you may review your work. Lay your pencil down immediately when time is called."

## Here's a sample prompt to taste:

- Some public schools feel that uniforms should be required for all students. They argue that uniforms will have many benefits, including reducing conflicts between students from high-income families and students from lower-income families. Some people even think that requiring public school students to wear uniforms will reduce clique or gang problems in schools. Opponents say that clothes are an important way for students to express their individuality, and that requiring uniforms in public schools will keep students from expressing their personality and creativity.
- In your essay, take a position on this question. You may write about either one of the two points of view given, or you may present a different point of view on this question. Use specific reasons and examples to support your position.

**ACT prompts** will always give a couple of starter examples along with the central debate (like eradicating cliques versus allowing for individuality), but keep in mind that these are just meant to get you thinking about the debate. The examples you will present in your essay can use these general topics but should be much more specific.

- The second paragraph of the prompt—the part that begins "In your essay, take a position on this question"—will be the same in every single **ACT essay**. Sweet! The first thing you should do is pick a side, any side. You can take one of the two positions mentioned in the prompt (school uniforms: yay!, or school uniforms: boo!). In rare instances, you can present a third option to the debate, but we will discuss this later.
- You'll need to use specific examples and reasons to support your position. Maybe you think uniforms in public schools are a swell idea that will keep you from agonizing over your wardrobe every morning, so you argue that uniforms will prevent students from wasting precious time that could be used to study. Or that school uniforms are a great way to eliminate the jealousy and other bad feelings that might crop up if half the class can afford Manolo Blahnik and the other half can't.
- On the other hand, if the idea of wearing the same clothes to school for four years makes you clutch in panic at your favorite sweatshirt/jeans/baseball hat, write about why, specifically, school uniforms would stifle your unique personality. It's not enough to say, "I think\_\_\_\_," although that's a good start. Citing the First Amendment (freedom of speech and expression) might work well here. Articulate the "why" of your argument and be super specific when you do.
- You support school uniforms because gang violence is a problem at your school and uniforms would prevent students from wearing their gang colors? Perfect.
- You think school uniforms are an awful idea because the way you dress is an expression of who you are, and high school is hard enough without taking that away? Nice.
- Write down examples. Write down as many as you can. Just make sure that they are relevant, intellectual, and strong.

# ACT Reading

## Tackling the Questions: Planning Your Performance

The questions ask you to go back over that passage with a fine-toothed comb and find all the important details and themes. We have strategies to help you approach the questions in the most efficient and effective way possible.

### 1. Answer the questions in order, but skip the hard ones and come back to them later.

This strategy is especially helpful when taking the ACT because the questions are in order of difficulty.

- The first four or so questions test **referring skills**: they will point you to specific parts of the passage and ask relatively straightforward questions.
- The next six questions will be a jumble of main point questions, tone questions, more difficult questions that test referring skills, questions that test **reasoning skills**, and so on. You should use the first few easy questions to warm up, and then as you move forward, you can slow down a little and take more time on the last few questions. If you don't understand the second-to-last question, answer the last one and then go back at the very end and tackle the ones you skipped.

### 2. Cross out the answer choices that you *know* are wrong.

Narrowing down your answer choices will greatly improve the odds of you picking the correct answer. Maybe two of the answer choices mention stuff that is totally irrelevant to the passage itself. You can go ahead and cross them out, giving yourself a 33% chance. Not too shabby. If you can eliminate even one answer, you should make an educated guess. Actually, you should always guess if you don't know the answer, regardless of how many answer choices you can eliminate. It's totally worth it.

### 3. Find clues in the context.

- Some questions will point you to specific sentences or phrases within the passage, and in these instances, it is important to read a little bit above and below the area in question to get the gist of the section. Also, some of the passages (especially the natural science passage) might include words you haven't heard before or can't really define. Don't let this worry you. We repeat, don't let this worry you!
- Sometimes the language will be specific to a certain field. For instance, a passage about biology might include some scientific terms you haven't heard before. Circle them. If knowing the meaning of a word or phrase is crucial to understanding the passage, the next sentence or paragraph will clue you in to what the unfamiliar word or phrase means. To be on the safe side, *always* read the sentence before and the sentence after to get an idea of what is being discussed.
- For instance, if you see the word "Phalaenopsis," the next sentence will probably be something like this: "This Orchid genus has approximately sixty species." We can tell from the sentence that "Phalaenopsis" is a kind of orchid. See how easy that was? Don't know what the heck an orchid is? The sentence right before the sentence in question says, "There are thousands of night-blooming species of orchid in the Amazon rainforest alone." At this point, you can probably guess that an orchid is a type of flower.

**4. Fill in the blank.** Some questions (usually about three total in the Reading section) will ask you the definition of a word found in the passage. If you can take a stab at what word or idea fits best in the blank before looking at the answer choices, you will help yourself immensely because all you will need to do is find an answer that matches your guess. Much like the previous strategy, you should use contextual clues to figure out a confounding word in an otherwise benign sentence. (Could you figure out what "benign" means by taking a guess? If you guessed "not harmful" or "non-threatening," you're on the right track.) Sometimes you will see a single word that you don't know:

If you covered up the unknown word and read the sentence again, what word would you use to fill in the blank? Boom. You just defined a tricky word by coming up with a close synonym.

**5. Forget what you know.** We know this sounds a little strange in a test prep course, but bear with us here. Keep in mind that ACT Reading is an open-book test and you can **ONLY** be tested on information that is in the passages. Knowing about or having interest in a particular subject, such as jazz music or great white sharks, can help keep you interested in the passage, and interested reading is active reading, which is good. However (and this is important), *you must not bring outside knowledge in when tackling the questions.*

## 6. Save EXCEPT/NOT questions for the end.

These questions are the most time-consuming questions on the ACT. Why? Because instead of looking for the correct answer, you will be given three right answers and one wrong answer—the wrong answer is the one you want. A typical question might ask you, "The author suggests each of the following about William Shakespeare EXCEPT..." so three of the answer choices will be things that the author does say about Shakespeare and the fourth will be the EXCEPT part—the one answer choice that cannot be found anywhere. You will need to examine each and every answer choice to see if it is referenced in the passage. If it is not in the passage, you have the right answer. Save these questions for the end, and answer them after you've gotten a feel for the passage and the rest of the questions. (In terms of question type, EXCEPT questions are usually **referring skills** questions because they are looking to see if you can find what is directly missing from the passage...more on that later.)

## 7. Play to your (sub) strengths.

If someone asked you, "Hey man, do you like Humanities?" you'd probably say, "Uh, no, what is that?" What if someone said, "Do you like dance? How about piano? [Mark Twain](#)?" You might have a different answer, and all of these subjects fall under the [humanities](#) umbrella. Are you into literature, drama, music, or whatever's being discussed in the humanities passage? If so, answer the questions in this section first, before you conquer the other sections. If not, leave this section for last, and knock off the other ones first.

## 8. Take careful notes.

Since a humanities passage, unlike prose fiction, can sometimes contain a lot of facts and details, it is important to keep track of these important tidbits. Circle, underline, or otherwise mark important concepts, arguments, and terms. And read between the lines, just as you would in the prose fiction section. That's how you'll catch the author's intentions or attitude toward the topic, as well as the main idea of the passage.

## 9. Get ready to interpret.

Though some humanities writers are clear and concise, others like to try to dazzle us with big, flashy words that can range from super-technical literary or art jargon to obscure words you have never seen before in your life. These types of writers also tend to bury symbols, images, and meanings in the text, so expect a lot of reasoning skills questions in the humanities passage.

## ACT Reading Strategies for the Social Science Section:

If you're really interested in history, psychology, political science, or something else that falls into this category, you might want to think about doing this section of the test first. Since the **ACT doesn't penalize you for skipping questions**, it makes sense to do the sections you're most confident in before all the others. That way, you don't risk not having time for them after you've slogged through the sections that are harder for you.

### 1. Watch for relationships.

Remember, this is social science we're talking here, meaning you are most likely going to be reading something about the interactions of individuals or groups of people. This section is all about relationships: between people, between concepts, between dates, between events. Relationships are typically full of problems, right? Look for conflict, disagreement, social issues, diseases, wars, and all of that not-so-fun stuff that can occur when people come together. You might not have to wrestle with the highly technical language you could see in the natural science section, but you will still need to underline, circle, or draw stars—whatever it takes to clearly mark important arguments and terms.

### 2. Make it easy for yourself.

If you need to refer back to the passage, you don't want to comb through it for three or four minutes, searching for that little detail you know is in there. If you mark the important stuff clearly on the first read-through, you'll make your life a whole lot easier.

### 3. Pay attention to the author's viewpoint.

Don't forget that, unlike biology or physics, social sciences such as history and political science are not always 100% objective. Even though you can be fairly certain that a passage written by a sociologist will be more scientific and therefore impersonal and analytical, an essay by a former slave about the [Civil War](#) might have a different opinion. Look for clues that suggest the author's beliefs, attitude, or agenda. Sometimes this won't be obvious or important, but sometimes it will be, so be aware.

### 4. Watch for main point questions.

Lots of questions in this section will ask you to choose the main purpose, point, or idea of the passage. If someone asked you, "Hey, what was that passage about?" you'd want to be able to say, "Oh, it was about \_\_\_\_." The answer to this question will probably be broad, and show up in every paragraph, rather than be narrow and specific.

## **ACT Reading Strategies for the Natural Science Section:**

Maybe you're a total biology nerd who's been reading *Science and Nature* since you were in middle school. In that case, you'll probably have no problem figuring out the type of language usually used in the natural science passage. The passage will be in English, of course, but it will be in what we at Shmoop like to call science-y language (that's a technical term). If you're bursting with confidence when you flip the page and see the natural science section, do this section first. No sense wasting your time sweating over the other sections and losing valuable time to shine.

Maybe you have an honest-to-goodness phobia of science class, or maybe you're simply not a fan. If that's the case, you should probably do this section last, after you've had a chance to flex your muscles on the sections that appeal to you more.

### **1. Underline key terms.**

Or circle them, draw a star in the margin, or write "IMPORTANT." A big part of the natural science passage is understanding tricky scientific language, and unless you're already an expert on the topic, you're going to have to refer back to the passage again and again. Make it easy for yourself by marking the heck out of the passage.

### **2. Look for points of disagreement and agreement.**

If two ideas or theories are being compared, make sure you know the difference between them. It sounds obvious, but this is a really common question in the natural science section. Understanding the differences between two ideas means being clear on what Theory A and Theory B both mean. Another opportunity for underlining, circling, and drawing stars!

### **3. Expect a serious tone.**

Science writers are sometimes purposely dispassionate. That is, they maintain an analytical, impersonal tone and do not get emotionally involved in the subject matter. Lab reports, research findings, or discussions about natural phenomena are not usually punctuated with gems like "along with being a keystone species of their habitat, salmon are just really awesome fish, in my opinion." One notable exception is when the scientist is trying to alert the reader to a problem, such as global warming or pollution—in this case he or she may be more opinionated or emphatic when discussing the harmful effects of these factors on a given ecosystem.

## **ACT READING STRATEGIES FOR THE PROSE FICTION PASSAGE**

The prose fiction passage is a full 180 degrees from the natural science passage. First of all, instead of cold, hard fact, you're reading fiction. This passage will be speckled with hints and suggestions about characters' emotions, motives, and personalities.

### **1. Be ready to reason.**

Unlike the natural science passage, which will be chock-full of questions that ask you to find facts and details, the most important parts of the prose fiction passage probably won't be clearly spelled out right there on the page. There will be some referring skills questions that ask you to remember details from the story, but the real meat of the prose fiction passage is interpretation. Questions will ask you why the author used a certain kind of language to communicate a certain thing, what the relationship is between the characters, what may have happened right before the passage in the original source, what may happen after the passage, or how the characters feel about the events taking place in the passage. See our section on Reasoning Questions for more information.

**2. Read for fun.** As you probably could have guessed, the prose fiction passage will be a narrative, or a passage that tells a story. Although the passage might contain some factual or factual-sounding information, you won't encounter a purely explanatory or argumentative passage in this section. If you love reading novels and short stories, you probably won't have much trouble with this passage. If you're more a fan of nonfiction, or if you're not into reading for pleasure, try smiling while you read—it actually helps!

### **3. Read between the lines.**

Think of yourself as a literary detective, asking questions like, "What's really going on here?" and "What does he actually mean?" Think about the characters' moods, their emotions, their desires, and their personalities. Are they nervous? Sad? Aggressive? Sometimes there will be clear hints in the passage, and sometimes you'll have to do some mental digging before you figure out how situation *x* makes character *y* feel. A good writer doesn't usually come right out and say, "Chris was angry because Erin forgot to buy groceries," or "Erin was sad because Chris was angry with her." Instead, Chris might snap, snarl, or grumble, and Erin might sniff, pout, or cry. Using those emotional clues, it's much easier to figure out how Chris and Erin are feeling.