

37

READING COMPREHENSION

review, timing strategies, and final thoughts

We have two Reading Comprehension lessons left. In this lesson, we will review the main points we have discussed in other Reading Comprehension lessons, walk through timing strategies, and talk about the work you'll be doing after this book. In the next lesson, we'll work on our final practice set of passages.

A Review of Lessons

Here is a snapshot review of the key points made in the various Reading Comprehension lessons. The lesson number has been listed after the point. You can use this list to reflect on what we've discussed and also to note areas in which it might help to do a bit of review.

The Reading Comprehension section tests your reading ability—primarily your ability to recognize reasoning structure (22).

The reasoning structure of a passage is the relationship between various parts of a passage; typically, the relationships in LSAT passages are structured around (often opposing) main points (22).

Reading Comprehension passages are not designed to test, in a significant way, your ability to retain a lot of information, your understanding of unusual subjects and words, or your critical reasoning ability (22).

It's helpful to think about all parts of a passage in terms of the following roles, all of which are defined by the main points made in the passage: main points, author's view of those points, reasons for and against those points, more information about those points as well as potential applications, and, finally, background on the subject matter related to those points (22).

Getting good at LSAT Reading Comprehension is less about developing new skills and more about correctly utilizing tools you already have (23).

As we read, we want to focus on reasoning structure more than subject matter, we want to embrace uncertainty when uncertainty is warranted, and we want to use main points to organize our thoughts (23).

The best time to most easily understand a passage is at the end of it, and for certain difficult passages, it will be nearly impossible to completely understand the passage before that point (23).

You are never required to be critical of reasoning as you read a passage, but one or two questions may ask for you to evaluate one of the opinions critically.

The question stem is the third piece of the jigsaw puzzle; it brings together the passage and the correct answer. In general, it will tell you whether the answer relates to the passage as a whole or to a specific component (24).

There is great commonality to the reasoning structures for different passages, and it can be helpful to think about the reasoning structure of passages in terms of tendencies and twists (25).

Comparative passage sets present two passages related to some central issue. Your primary tasks are to figure out what that central issue is, how the passages relate to it, and how the passages relate to one another (25).

General comparative passage set questions will ask about these primary tasks mentioned above. A strong majority of specific questions will be about commonalities and differences between the two passages (25).

You can encounter a large variety of questions in the Reading Comprehension section, but they are all just different combinations of a few specific characteristics (35).

The two fundamental considerations for any question are the genre (is it asking about reasoning structure, an opinion, or information?) and the scope (general or specific?) (35).

Use specific strategies for different types of structure, opinion, and detail questions (35).

Strengthen and Weaken questions are unique in that they require critical reasoning skills (35).

Read each question stem carefully. Use it to decide scope and genre and to decide how much you are expected to anticipate about the right answer (35).

Wrong answers are typically easier to spot than right ones, especially for more challenging questions, and in most instances you should aim to eliminate four wrong choices before selecting an answer (35).

Wrong answers are wrong because they misrepresent the text or because they don't match the task presented in the question stem (36).

The majority of questions for comparative passage sets will require you to compare the passages against one another (36).

Comparative passage sets tend to have more specific questions and less general questions than other types of passages (36).

Timing

We discussed some basic Reading Comprehension timing strategies back in Lesson 25. Let's revisit some of the key points we made and discuss timing in more depth.

In recent years, every Reading Comprehension section has contained twenty-seven questions. This might change any minute, but it won't change drastically. In general, you want to spend about 2:30 to 3 minutes reading each passage and about 0:45 to a minute per question. Different questions will require varying amounts of time; however, most passages are of similar length, and once you settle into your practice exams, you should be able to set a fairly consistent reading pace.

Different test takers take different amounts of time initially reading a passage; people have been successful with a variety of strategies. In general, if you average more time (say, 4:00 or so) per read, you should expect to retain a bit more of the passage than what I typically suggest in the solutions, and you should expect that questions will go faster for you than I suggest. If you read faster than 2:30 or 3:00 per passage, you'll certainly have a bit more time for questions, but if you are reading at that fast of a pace, you want to make sure it's not putting you at risk for misunderstanding the main points or the reasoning structure.

In Lesson 25, we also discussed the fact that pace typically matches process—if your skills and habits are strong, timing becomes less of an issue. Timing is a more significant issue when your path to the right answer is less direct. Finally, we also discussed the fact that, when we have to make difficult decisions in terms of time, it's best to cut out individual questions rather than entire passages. We'll expand on both of those points in this lesson.

Basic Timing Instincts

Answering any LSAT question correctly involves a series of correct steps. These steps can overlap, and sometimes you can get away with not being “perfect” at one of them, but for every Reading Comprehension question, you will be required to

- 1) Understand the relevant information about the passage
- 2) Understand what the question stem is asking of you
- 3) See why the wrong answers are wrong
- 4) See why the right answer is right

The best way to think about the efficient use of time is to think about what you are doing relative to these necessary steps. Here's what I mean, in a bit more detail:

It is an *efficient* use of time to stop during your read to think, when necessary, about the reasoning structure of the passage. If you are certain that the second paragraph plays one role, but then, in reading the third paragraph, you are not so sure you understand the point of the passage at all, quickly go back and think about the second paragraph again. If you feel pretty certain about the two sides of an issue, but then something you read makes you feel like your priorities are out of whack, take the time to stop, reassess, and reread as necessary. Of course, you can't spend an inordinate amount of time (to be discussed further in just a bit) doing this, but in general this will be time well spent. The reason? Reasoning structure is always relevant to several of the questions you will see,

and, as I'm sure many of you have experienced, it's next to impossible to get through the questions in an efficient manner if you don't have a good sense of reasoning structure.

It is commonly an *inefficient* use of time to stop during your read to think about the meaning of complex phrases or sentences. This is not true if that complex phrase or sentence is necessary for you to understand the central issue or a key opinion. However, in just about every other instance, you don't have to concern yourself with being perfectly in tune with every detail mentioned. Those random details are, mathematically speaking, unlikely to factor into any questions, and even if they do turn out to be relevant to a question, you can always come back to reread them as needed. If you find yourself rereading and rereading a sentence, ask yourself, do I understand why it is here? If you are not so clear on the what, but clear on the why, then move on and keep reading forward.

It is always an *efficient* use of time to stop and carefully think about the question stem. The question stem tells us a lot of things: it tells us what to expect from right answers and, less directly, what to expect from wrong answers. It also tells us what we should do—whether we should go back into the text to look at certain relevant information before looking at the answer choices, or whether we should move right into eliminating wrong choices.

It is an *inefficient* use of time (and an unnecessary distraction) to try to predict questions as you read, and it is an extremely inefficient use of your time to read the questions before you read the passage. Frankly, these strategies are so bad that I don't even want to bring them up, but I need to do so because they somehow exist in the general stratosphere of commonly used LSAT strategies. Do not read questions ahead of the passage, and do not try to anticipate questions as you read. These are both ineffective strategies for test takers at all score levels.

You use time *efficiently* when you eliminate incorrect answers quickly and for concrete reasons. You use your time *inefficiently* when you eliminate when you are less than certain and commonly have to go back to answers you've already eliminated. There are definite reasons that answers are wrong, and the elimination process is about using these definite reasons to get rid of answers with confidence. Do not linger during the elimination process. If an answer seems wrong but you just can't put your finger on why, it may just be the right answer in disguise—leave it for after the elimination round. Your eliminations should be certain and quick, and you should never (or very, very rarely) expect to go back to an answer you have crossed off. Make sure to use your practice to improve your ability to eliminate more and more of the wrong answers with accuracy and pace.

You use time *efficiently* when you confirm right answers and eliminate wrong answers by comparing them against the passage and against the task in the question stem. You use time *inefficiently* when you compare answers against one another and think about which one is “more right.” Hopefully, at the end of your first-round elimination process, there is an answer that stands out as being either certainly, or most likely, correct. However, when there isn't an answer that looks great, or when there are two or more answers that seem correct, focus on trying to find what is right or wrong with these answers relative to text and task. Do not get stuck comparing the answers to one another, for you will surely get biased by their relative “attractiveness,” and test writers are great

at making right answers seem less attractive and wrong ones more so. Always keep your eye on the ball—work to match the text of one answer at a time against the passage and the question, and look for concrete reasons to like an answer or be suspicious of it.

Finally, you use time *inefficiently* when you get stuck on a question and spin your wheels. In general, the time that is most commonly wasted by all students is the time spent in indecision on questions that the student finds most difficult. I'll discuss this more on the next page.

Essential Timing Habits

In just a few lessons, you will officially enter the final phase of your preparation (woo-hoo!). As we have discussed, the primary purpose of the final phase of your training is to develop the habits that will help you apply your skills at your best. When it comes to Reading Comprehension, there are three key habits I really want you to keep in mind.

One: Habitualize a Reading Pace

And make sure it's a brisk one. You want to read slowly enough that you can eventually understand why each part of the passage is there, but fast enough that you do not get bogged down in details.

For most of us, the pressure of the exam (even the pressure of a timed practice test) wreaks havoc on our sense of time. We suddenly become terrible at estimating how long we are taking at reading a passage or answering a question. We can't help it—when we get to a certain point of focus or stress, our sense of time begins to wobble.

That's why it's imperative that you habitualize a certain reading pace. Get used to reading all LSAT passages at a certain pace, and try to stay as consistent as possible throughout your practice while making your practice as realistic as possible. And get comfortable pushing that pace whenever you can.

Two: Go Fast on Questions That Go Fast

It's important to use perfect form, and it's important to get the questions we find easier right, but I also want to encourage you to push the pace during a question whenever you feel that your confidence is high and warranted. By this point, you know this test well, and there should be a lot of questions that go exactly as you expect—sometimes you can get through these questions in twenty seconds or less. Being able to go very fast on certain questions is a secret to the success of many top test takers—this leaves them plenty of time to carefully think through the situations that require more thought. Make sure you use your practice to work on getting through easier questions quickly while maintaining your accuracy.

Three: Don't Spin Your Wheels

If you were to take a sample section and time each question you solved, it is very likely that you'd discover at least four questions for which you spent two or more minutes. Of these four, it's very unlikely that you would get more than two correct—these questions take a long time because you don't understand them.

Those four problems likely took you about 8 - 9 minutes, which is 25% of the time you have for the section. Getting two correct answers in eight to nine minutes represents a terrible rate of return (if you were to extrapolate, it'd be equivalent to getting 32 questions correct for the entire exam). You can get an advantage over most test takers if you can lessen the impact of these time-sucking questions—if you can develop a strong habit of spending no more than 1:30 on all but the most challenging questions, and no more 2:00 on any one question, no matter how challenging that question is (that is, unless you have that time to spare, as we'll discuss in just a bit). Remember, harder questions aren't worth more points, and your goal is to answer as many questions right as possible. Invest your time in making sure you get right the ones you can, and make time for this by cutting your time on the toughest questions.

Timing Patterns for Top Scorers

When it comes to timing, top scorers in the Reading Comprehension section—those who are consistently able to miss two or fewer questions per section—typically share two common characteristics:

Top Scorers Have Time to Get through Every Step of the Process

In order to consistently answer questions correctly, we need to understand the reasoning structure of the passage, the task presented in the question stem, the reasons wrong answers are wrong, and the reason why the right answer is right—generally in that order. When you first started studying, you may have felt that it would be impossible to successfully satisfy these steps for each and every question; hopefully, you see more and more as you study that thinking about your process in terms of these steps not only makes you more accurate but faster, because it helps you use your time more efficiently.

When we are rushed for time, sometimes we need to move on from the passage to the questions without completely understanding the reasoning structure, and commonly we are forced to pick an answer without getting a chance to confirm with certainty that it is indeed correct or that the others are indeed incorrect. It is very hard to consistently score at a very high level if you are consistently facing these challenges.

Top scorers are fast enough that their scores are not limited by these types of constraints. They are fast enough to slow down when they need to as they read in order to understand reasoning structure, and they are fast enough to thoroughly vet the right answer, and every wrong answer, for almost all questions.

Top Scorers Can Finish the Section in Less Than Thirty-Five Minutes

Notice I said “can”—that doesn't mean a top scorer won't end up using all thirty-five minutes. The point I want to make is that top scorers are capable of going at a pace that would allow them to, if they choose not to spend a significant amount of extra time on any particular question, finish the section in well less than thirty-five minutes.

A typical Reading Comprehension section will have a few (anywhere from two to four, depending on the exam and how you tend to judge these things) questions that are extremely difficult to solve, even for top scorers. It's a huge advantage to have extra time for these questions. If, for example, you are able to consistently get through read-

ing passages and answering all but the hardest two or three questions in a section in twenty-five minutes or less, then you know you have ten minutes or so for those two or three killer questions—in other words, as much time as you need. If your goal is to keep improving your score, and if you struggle at all with finishing in thirty-five minutes, your goal should be to limit the time you spend on the toughest questions. However, if you have improved to the point where you are trying to go -0 or -1 in a section, these toughest questions are your most important. Extra time for just these questions can be a huge advantage, and generally it's very hard to get a top score without it.

How to Get There

Just tap your heels three times and...

It's obviously easier to describe a top scorer than it is to become a top scorer. However, keep in mind that for every administration of the exam there are plenty of people who do rise up to get those top scores, and there is no reason to think that you shouldn't be one of them. Here are some suggestions for how to get there.

One: Work to Be Able to Finish the Section in Thirty-Five Minutes

The first step in the process is to be able to finish a section in thirty-five minutes while feeling reasonably comfortable with your reading pace and your problem-solving process. There is a difference between getting faster at solving questions and just going faster through each of your steps. The first is generally a consequence of understanding and focus, and the second is akin to rushing. The key to getting to this thirty-five-minute pace is to get strong at using your time effectively. In particular, if you are finding yourself challenged, keep working on eliminating inefficient uses of time.

Two: Push the Pace with Each New Practice Test

Obviously, if it seems you need about thirty-seven or thirty-eight minutes to satisfactorily finish a practice section, you want to push the pace to get to the thirty-five-minute mark. However, even when you get to a point at which you can finish a practice test in thirty-five minutes, keep pushing the pace—try to finish the next one in thirty-three or thirty-four, the next one in thirty-one, and so on. Try to cut your time in two primary ways—by getting rid of the instances in which you “spin your wheels” and by working to get faster at the questions with which you are most comfortable. Of course, do not sacrifice accuracy for pace. However, as you get better and better at this exam, you should find yourself more capable of going faster and faster. It's okay to push yourself to see how fast you can go without sacrificing accuracy, and in fact, that should be something that is embedded into your mindset from this point forward as you get ready for your exam.

Three: Practice Using That Extra Time

Imagine that you get to a point at which you feel confident that you can consistently get through a Reading Comprehension section in about thirty minutes. That leaves you a full five extra minutes to spend as you like. That's a big deal, for if you play your cards right, that means you will have plenty of time to think through the most challenging aspects of the section.

One effective way to spend this extra time is to give yourself an extra minute or two when you recognize that you are dealing with a particularly challenging reading passage. An extra minute or two, as I'm sure you know by now, can be extremely useful on the most difficult of passages. Even just knowing that you have an extra minute or two, and being able to slow down and relax, can do a world of good. Or, if you catch on later in a passage that you've missed the point somewhat, two minutes is even enough to read the entire passage over again if need be. Keep in mind that if you are at this level, it's highly unlikely that more than one passage per section, or two passages in the rarest of circumstances, will make you feel like you really need to slow down and reassess.

Another effective use of extra time is to give yourself an extra minute, ideally from as early a point as possible, when you notice that you've run into a particularly difficult question. This should give you plenty of time to carefully try to understand the relevant text and confirm that answers are right or wrong.

Some students like to have time left over at the end of the section to serve as a buffer in case the last passage is unexpectedly difficult, or in order to return to the challenging questions. The first reason is perfectly legitimate, and it is very comforting to go into the final passage with ten or more minutes remaining. The second use of time, in my experience, has been of questionable value to students. In general, it's better to use that time when you are initially focused on the passage and the question, if possible. Of course, when you take the exam, you do want to mark a question or two to return to in case you happen to find yourself with extra time at the end of a section.

Mitigating Strategies

We've just laid out the ideal timing strategies for top scorers and some suggestions for how to get there. But of course, not everyone can or needs to be a top scorer in the Reading Comprehension section. Maybe your strong suit is Logic Games or Logical Reasoning, and getting -4, or -6, or -8 on the Reading Comprehension is going to ensure your overall goals. Let's discuss more specifically some timing strategies that can help you get the best score possible on test day. Keep in mind that all these strategies we will discuss are based on two basic tenets—we want to spend the time necessary to get the questions right that we have the best chance of getting right, and we want to avoid spending extra time on questions we are most likely to get wrong.

If you find near the end of your studies that you are not able to comfortably finish the section in thirty-five minutes, you will need to make some difficult time-allocation decisions, specifically decisions about when to cut your work short or spend less time than you would like to. There are two ways to cut your time: spend less time reading passages or spend less time answering questions.

Less Time Reading Passages

If you are spending an average of more than three minutes reading each passage, and if you are struggling to finish questions on time, you should try to improve the pace at which you read. One way to try to do this is by pushing the pace on passages that feel easy or comfortable. Of course, don't ever rush.

More importantly, save time by really limiting yourself on the most difficult passages. It's very easy to get lost in those more difficult passages and to spend four or five min-

utes reading those passages. This is never a good idea. Set a firm cut-off—say, 3:30 maximum on any one passage, with the goal of a 2:45 average for the set of four.

Stick to that 3:30 maximum by simplifying and streamlining your goals when you find that a passage is particularly difficult for you to understand and organize. If need be, strip down the goal of your read to just two simple tasks and nothing else: you will spend the 3:30 just trying to figure out the main points and the author’s opinion. If the main points are convoluted or subtle, do your best to come up with simplified and accurate versions and move on (later, you may be able to use the answers for general questions to verify and fine-tune your understanding). Practice sticking to these limits so that you don’t accidentally over invest time in any one passage on test day.

Less Time Answering Questions

The other way in which we can cut our time, of course, is by spending less time answering questions. Just as with the passages, part of this has to do with going faster on questions you feel comfortable with. However, for those who are having significant timing issues, typically the bigger problem is that the hardest questions are taking too much time.

Set a maximum time limit for any one question (1:45 or 2:00 are nice numbers) and allow yourself to “max out” your time just a few times (I’d suggest 3 or 4) per section. Now, keep in mind that during the pressure of the exam, it’s tough to keep track of and stick to those numbers, and it can certainly be an unnecessary distraction. The better way to track time is through processes—have set processes for how you handle difficult questions, and stick to them no matter what. For example, sometimes a problem is difficult because it’s very hard to find the relevant information—maybe you give yourself 30 seconds to go as slowly as you can through the text to find it, then select the best available answer no matter what. Sometimes a problem will go just as you expect until the very end (when you realize the answer you expected isn’t there)—sometimes the best thing to do is just try to solve it again from the beginning. For most test takers, 2:00 is about how long it takes to try solving a question twice—if you are going to go this route, give yourself that second shot, but force yourself to pick an answer at the end of it **no matter what**. If you can think of your question “maximums” in terms of steps rather than just time spent, it’s much easier to be consistent and in control.

Cutting time on the hardest questions will be much better for your overall score than trying to rush through every question more quickly, and it’s certainly much better than not getting to certain questions because you run out of time. Make sure you habitualize the processes that will stop you from spending too much time on any one question on test day.

Your Next Steps

If you are following one of the recommended study schedules, your final Reading Comprehension preparation will center on the sections you do as part of your final practice exams. You want to use this final work to polish and round out your skill set and, most importantly, to solidify effective habits. Here are some recommendations to help ensure that you get the most out of this final work.

It’s easier to keep track of processes than it is to keep track of time

One: Before Each Exam, Remind Yourself of Key Considerations

Don't spend an hour (or even five minutes) thinking through these key considerations, but do remind yourself of a few important things: your general timing strategies and goals, other strategies that you know are important to your success, and issues that may have come up for you in the past. A good idea is to jot this down on a three-by-five note card (you can make a note card for each of the sections) and review the note card before beginning your exam.

Two: During the Exam, Keep Track of Certain Markers

As per the instructions in your study schedule, it can be very helpful to keep track of certain issues as you are taking your practice exams. These things will help you review and assess your progress afterward and should be simple enough so as not to significantly impact your overall performance.

For Reading Comprehension, the key things to keep track of are

- (A) The amount of time each passage takes you to read
- (B) The amount of time each question set takes
- (C) The questions for which you were not certain of your answer
- (D) (Optional) the questions on which you felt you spent a lot of time

You can keep track of (A) and (B) by marking the time at which you finish reading each passage and the time at which you finish each set of questions. You can keep track of (C) by circling those questions. And you can choose to notate (D) in some other way (such as stars).

Some people feel comfortable keeping track of the amount of time each question takes. They often use electronic tools that allow them to just click something after each question. The information you get from this would be extremely useful, so if you can do it and if you don't think it'll be a distraction, give it a shot. It can show you things such as what happens when you go through a question very quickly (do I ever make silly mistakes when I answer questions in thirty seconds or less?) or when you spend a lot of time on questions (oh my goodness, did I really spend four minutes on that one problem!?). For a lot of people, keeping track of the time for each question is too much of a distraction, and if that's the case, don't worry about it. Just remember to review two main issues: whether you are accurate when you go through questions quickly, and whether you end up spinning your wheels and spending too much time on particular problems. It should be fairly easy for you to assess this even without using some sort of timing mechanism.

Three: Review Your Work Carefully

The time you spend reviewing your work is arguably just as important as the time you spend solving problems. You're going to want to review these final five practice exams carefully—they will be the final barometer of your skills and habits.

Make sure, as per our discussions, that you carefully review timing—the pace of your reads and the pace at which you answered questions. Look for questions that took more time than they should, and think carefully about why those questions took so long. Did you not see the right answer, or did you have problems eliminating a tempting wrong

one? Did you have trouble finding the relevant text in the passage? Also think about whether the question was general or specific and look for patterns in the types of questions that cause you to spend too much time.

Also make sure you review the content of every practice section, in particular the questions you missed. Break down each miss carefully, and try to completely understand exactly why the right answer is right on your own (then look up the solution online if need be). At the end of Lesson 38, I've listed some resources for finding solutions.

Lastly, make sure you think about your process. What actions did you take or not take that led to you selecting the wrong answer? What was it about your read that ended up causing you trouble, and what could you have noticed in your read that would have helped you get through questions faster?

If the questions for a passage cause you particular trouble, do that passage again, fresh, a few days later. If it still causes you trouble, do it a few days after that.

Finally, set specific goals for each practice exam—try to get a bit faster and a bit more accurate with each one. It's unlikely that your path of improvement will be smooth—you may make a huge leap from one test to the next only to regress on the following one. However, you should expect overall improvement, and you should set goals for yourself with each practice exam. We all want to go faster and do better, and writing down specific goals about timing and score can help turn those goals into real actions.

Final Thoughts

A lot of test takers are understandably nervous about the potential impact of the pressure they will feel while taking the real exam. Most people I've talked with express a hope/desire/plan to perform just as well under pressure as they do otherwise...

But is it possible that pressure can actually help one perform *better*? Absolutely.

Pressure helps us focus, and it helps us get the best out of ourselves. It goes back to our cavemen days—we are programmed to run a little faster, jump a little higher, and think a little faster and better when the pressure is on. In the modern world, we can see this manifested in world-class athletes, who often perform at their best when the pressure is at its highest.

Of course, pressure can also have the opposite effect—it can make us perform worse than we would otherwise. I've personally experienced this an unfortunate number of times in my own life.

What determines the impact of pressure? I don't pretend to be a psychologist, and I'm sure the real answer is far too complex for me to understand...

However, I have worked with thousands and thousands of students in my life, and I've gotten very good at predicting which ones will perform better because of pressure and which ones will perform worse. If I could place bets on this in Vegas, I'd be a millionaire.

In my experience, and with the LSAT students I've worked with, the key difference has been the test taker's trust in his or her own instincts. Whether these instincts are correct or not is one thing—and it determines the ceiling for the score. Trust in these instincts is another, and the student who trusts in his or her instincts is far more likely

to match or surpass practice performance. The student who does not trust in his or her own instincts, no matter the ability level, is very often likely to underperform on the real exam. This is a big reason why I have designed *The LSAT Trainer* exactly the way I have—to help you develop sound instincts that you can and should have confidence in on test day.

Do you feel that you can trust your gut when it comes to how to read a passage or answer questions? Don't go into the exam thinking that you're going to do something different from what you've done in your practice, and don't go into the exam with a list of one hundred things you want to make sure you stay on top of—it's not going to happen. Any sort of overly conscious approach—any approach that makes the rider do the work of the elephant—is likely to be less effective under pressure.

Make sure you use these final practice sections to firm up your habits. The goal is to have to think less and less about how to read passages and solve questions. The more right actions and right habits, the better chance you have to utilize your abilities at their best when you need them most.