

Chapter 5

Paragraph Comprehension

In This Chapter

- ▶ Knowing what to expect on the Paragraph Comprehension subtest
 - ▶ Pumping up your comprehension
 - ▶ Reading like a stock-car driver: Improving your speed
 - ▶ Making the most of a little bit of time
 - ▶ Practicing what we preach
-

Any other organization would call this section of the ASVAB the Reading Comprehension subtest, but the Department of Defense is a stickler for precision. You'll be reading paragraphs, darn it, so you're being tested on paragraph comprehension! Not words, not sentences, not essays, but paragraphs! Glad we got that cleared up.

One thing you'll learn for sure in military boot camp: Comprehending the drill sergeant's orders and the information in your instruction manuals is important. Trust us on this one. The Paragraph Comprehension subtest tests your ability to understand what you read and to draw conclusions from that material. It contains a number of reading passages and questions about those passages.

How Does It Work?

When you get to the Paragraph Comprehension subtest, you have several passages to read. Some passages are only one paragraph long, and others can consist of several paragraphs. Each passage contains between 50 and 200 words. The ASVAB test-makers may ask you to answer only one question about a given reading passage, or they may ask you to answer as many as five questions about one passage. So you want to make sure you understand what you're reading!

This subtest counts toward your AFQT score, which is the composite score that determines whether you're even qualified to enlist. In determining your AFQT score, the Paragraph Comprehension subtest counts for twice as much as the Mathematics Knowledge and Arithmetic Reasoning subtests — the military thinks that your performance on this portion of the ASVAB is very important. (See Chapter 1 for more information on AFQT scores.)



After you enlist, you'll discover that the military runs on paperwork. If you can't read and understand a regulation that's buried within a pile of papers, how are you going to obey it?

Military folks also use the Paragraph Comprehension subtest to determine if you qualify for specific jobs. Certain military jobs require a high score on this test. Turn to Appendix A to learn more about which jobs require a good score on this subtest.

What's the Big Idea? Determining the Main Idea in a Paragraph

Reading comprehension — which is what the Paragraph Comprehension subtest is all about — consists of several abilities:

- ✓ Finding the main idea or argument that the author is making
- ✓ Remembering specific details about the reading
- ✓ Drawing conclusions from what you've read
- ✓ Understanding relationships between ideas
- ✓ Paraphrasing (or summarizing) what you've read

Questions on the Paragraph Comprehension subtest frequently ask you to identify the main point of a reading passage. How do you get better at identifying main ideas? Practice.

So, what's your point?

The *main idea*, which is the most important point the author is making, is sometimes stated and sometimes implied in a piece of writing. Often, the author begins or ends a paragraph or passage with the main idea, which is located in what is called a *topic sentence*. A topic sentence, reasonably enough, describes the topic that the author is writing about.

So, if you're looking for the main idea, start off by checking the first and last sentence of the passage. (No, this doesn't mean that you should skip the rest of the passage.) For example, suppose you read the following paragraph:

The local school district is facing a serious budgetary crisis. The state, suffering a revenue shortfall of more than \$600 million, has cut funding to the district by \$18.7 million. Already, 65 teachers have been laid off, and more layoffs are expected.

The main point of this paragraph can be found in the opening sentence, "The local school district is facing a serious budgetary crisis." What follows are details regarding the budget crisis.

Sometimes, a passage builds up to its main idea, and sometimes the main idea is implied, rather than stated. Consider the following paragraph:

The farmers' market reopened on the second weekend of May. Amid the asparagus and flowers, shoppers chatted about the return of temperatures in the seventies. Across the street, children (and their dogs) were playing Frisbee in the park. Finally, spring has come to town.

In this paragraph, you might think that the farmers' market reopening is the main point, but the other information about the temperature and the kids playing Frisbee tells you that the main idea is something a bit broader than the market opening. The main idea is stated in the last sentence: "Finally, spring has come to town."

In boot camp, your drill instructor may say, "Some of you better check to see that your bunks are properly made." Or he may rip your bunk bed apart and say, "Now make this \$%*& bunk the right way, you moron!" Both comments mean the same thing. In the first statement, the drill instructor implies the meaning; the second statement is a bit more direct.



Extra, extra! Identifying subpoints

An author doesn't just make one point in a piece of writing, so you also need to understand the other points the author makes. These details, or *subpoints*, may include facts or statistics, or they may be descriptions that support the main point of the passage. Subpoints help you see what the author is saying.

For instance, look at the first passage again:

The local school district is facing a serious budgetary crisis. The state, suffering a revenue shortfall of more than \$600 million, has cut funding to the district by \$18.7 million. Already, 65 teachers have been laid off, and more layoffs are expected.

The subpoints help you understand the main point — the school district is facing a severe budgetary crisis. The subpoints help you understand why: "The state, suffering a revenue shortfall of more than \$600 million, has cut funding to the district by \$18.7 million." You can see that the budgetary crisis is part of a larger problem, which is the state suffering a severe revenue shortfall. The subpoints also help you understand what this crisis means: "Already, 65 teachers have been laid off, and more layoffs are expected." By using these facts and figures, the author helps you grasp not just the main point, but the implications of that main point as well.

Everyone's a Critic: Analyzing What You've Read

On the Paragraph Comprehension subtest, the ASVAB may ask you to identify the main point of a passage. It may ask you to remember details and subpoints. Or the ASVAB may ask questions that require you to analyze what you've read. Analysis is more than simply picking out the point of some text. Analyzing a passage requires you to draw conclusions from what you've read and understand relationships between the ideas presented in the text. To analyze a passage, you may need to put it into your own words by paraphrasing it.

I know what it says, but what does it mean?

By drawing conclusions about the meaning of a passage, you reach new ideas that the author implies but doesn't come right out and state. You must analyze the information the author presents in order to make inferences from what you've read.

For instance, look back at the first paragraph again:

The local school district is facing a serious budgetary crisis. The state, suffering a revenue shortfall of more than \$600 million, has cut funding to the district by \$18.7 million. Already, 65 teachers have been laid off, and more layoffs are expected.

Although the author doesn't say so, you can draw the conclusion that if the state revenue shortfall could somehow be corrected — by increasing state sales tax or income tax, for example — the local school district's budgetary crisis could be resolved. (The \$18.7 million cut from the school budget could be restored.)

The author never actually makes this point in the paragraph. But using reason and logic, you can draw this conclusion from the facts presented.



Making inferences and drawing conclusions requires you to use your judgment. You don't want to read too much into a passage. For example, nothing in the above paragraph suggests that electing a new governor is necessary or that increasing federal income taxes would help the problem.

Now look at the second paragraph again:

The farmers' market reopened on the second weekend of May. Amid the asparagus and flowers, shoppers chatted about the return of temperatures in the seventies. Across the street, children (and their dogs) were playing Frisbee in the park. Finally, spring has come to town.



Suppose you were asked the following question about this paragraph:

It can be inferred from the passage that

- (A) Frisbee playing in the park doesn't happen in winter.
- (B) the warm weather is unusual for this time of year.
- (C) the shoppers were disappointed in the farmers' market produce.
- (D) rain is imminent.

Of the answer choices, only Choice A can reasonably be inferred from the passage. If the point of the passage is that spring has come to town, and the author uses Frisbee playing as evidence of the arrival of spring, then it's likely that Frisbee playing doesn't occur in the winter but does begin again in spring.

In my humble opinion: Putting ideas into your own words

One of the best ways to identify the main point of a paragraph is to put the paragraph into your own words (paraphrase it) or to sum up the basic idea of the paragraph (summarize it). By quickly doing this when you take the Paragraph Comprehension portion of the ASVAB, you can be confident that you're answering the question correctly. In other words (to paraphrase), you'll know you know what the paragraph is talking about.

You won't have time to write down the main point or to jot down your paraphrase or summary. Instead, as you're reading, simply try to mentally keep track of what's being said by putting it into your own words.



As you study for the ASVAB, practice paraphrasing reading passages. Get out a pencil and jot down your paraphrases. (Remember, you won't have time to do this on the ASVAB test itself, but the practice will help you mentally paraphrase as you take the test.)

Look at the following paragraph. (This is the last time you'll see this paragraph in this chapter. We promise.)

The local school district is facing a serious budgetary crisis. The state, suffering a revenue shortfall of more than \$600 million, has cut funding to the district by \$18.7 million. Already, 65 teachers have been laid off, and more layoffs are expected.

Now, close the book and spend a few moments paraphrasing this paragraph. Come on. Pick up that pencil. When you're done, reopen the book and compare your ideas to the passage. If you got something like the following, you're right on track:

The school district has a budget crunch because the state has a budget crunch. The state cut funding to the school district. Some teachers have been laid off already. More may be laid off soon.

You can practice this technique as you study for the ASVAB. You can paraphrase or summarize any short passage you read — a few sentences or a paragraph or two.

Four Types of Comprehension Questions

The Paragraph Comprehension questions on the ASVAB usually take one of four forms, including

- ✓ Finding specific information
- ✓ Recognizing the main idea
- ✓ Determining word meaning in context
- ✓ Drawing an implication from a stated idea

Each type of question asks you to perform a different kind of analysis of the reading passage. If a passage has more than one question associated with it, chances are each question will fall under a different category. The following sections spell out the differences between these four types of questions.

Finding specific information

This type of question asks you to pick out (you guessed it) specific information from a passage. Sounds easy, right? Remember, in the military, the only easy day was yesterday. At times, the information that a question asks about isn't directly stated in the paragraph, but you can infer this information from the text. To see what we're talking about, first take a look at this passage that clearly states the answer to the question that directly follows it:



An industry trade association found that there were more than 13,000 martial-arts schools in the United States, with nearly 6 million active members. Of the 13,000 schools, nearly 7,000 offered Tae Kwon Do lessons.

According to this passage, how many people actively participated in martial arts lessons?

- (A) 13,000
- (B) 7,000
- (C) 6 million
- (D) It can't be determined.

Correct answer: C.

Now, consider this question, applied to the same passage:

According to this passage, how many schools didn't teach Tae Kwon Do?

- (A) 13,000
- (B) more than half
- (C) 6 million
- (D) 6,000

Correct answer: D. Although the passage doesn't specifically say, "6,000 schools didn't teach Tae Kwon Do," you can infer this information from the fact that 7,000 schools did teach Tae Kwon Do. The remaining schools (of the 13,000 that offered martial arts) must, logically, not have offered Tae Kwon Do.



When questions are phrased in the negative, like the one above, becoming confused about what the question is asking is very easy. (This is especially true when the information being sought is not directly stated in the passage.) Misreading a negative question is also easy. Research has shown that people often skip over a negative when they read. A reader could easily glance at the above question and see “How many schools did teach Tae Kwon Do?” and that mistake would lead to the wrong answer. Be aware that questions on this portion of the ASVAB are frequently stated in the negative. When you see one, an alarm should go off in your head that reminds you to read the question a bit more carefully.

Recognizing the main idea

Sometimes the Paragraph Comprehension questions ask you to identify the main point of a passage. The main point can be directly stated, or it can be implied. Sometimes you can find the main idea in the first sentence of the passage, and sometimes it pops up in the last sentence. So if you're not sure what the main point of a paragraph is, re-read the first sentence and the last sentence. Chances are, one of these two sentences contains the main point. (Flip back to the “What's the Big Idea?” section for more information on identifying main ideas.)

Determining word meaning in context

Sometimes the Paragraph Comprehension subtest asks you to determine the meaning of a word when it is used in a passage. The correct definition that the question is looking for can be the most common meaning of the word, or it can be a less well known meaning of the word.

In either case, you have to read the passage, make sure you understand how the word is being used, and select the answer option that is closest in meaning to the word as it's used in the passage. Consider this example:



In the 18th century, it was common for sailors to be pressed into service in Britain. Young men found near seaports could be kidnapped, drugged, or otherwise hauled aboard a ship and made to work doing menial chores. They were not paid for their service, and they were given just enough food to keep them alive.

In this passage, *pressed* means:

- (A) hired
- (B) ironed
- (C) enticed
- (D) forced

Correct answer: D. The descriptions of the conditions these sailors found themselves in should help you decide that they weren't hired or enticed; *ironed* is one meaning of the word “pressed,” but isn't correct in this context.

Here's another example:



Since the 1980s, computers have become an indispensable part of American business. There are thousands of applications for which computers can be used, from word processing and running spreadsheets to keeping one's checkbook updated.

In this passage, *applications* means:

- (A) functions
- (B) sizes
- (C) requests
- (D) types

Correct answer: A. Try putting the other answer choices in this phrase: "There are thousands of applications for which computers can be used." You can see that *functions* is closest in meaning to *applications*, although in a different context, some of the other answer choices may be correct.

Drawing an implication from a stated idea

The Paragraph Comprehension subtest sometimes asks you to draw an implication from a stated idea. This simply means that you may be asked to draw a conclusion about what you've read. This conclusion should always be based on the reading, not your own particular opinions about a subject.

The *conclusion* — which may be called an *inference* or *implication* — must be reasonably based on what the passage says. You have to use good judgment when deciding what conclusions can be logically drawn from what you've read. Give it a shot:



Twenty-five percent of all automobile thefts occur when the doors of a car are left unlocked. People often forget to lock their doors, find it inconvenient, or tell themselves, "I'll only be a minute." But it only takes a minute for an accomplished car thief to steal a car. And thieves are always alert to the opportunities that distracted or rushed people present them with.

To prevent auto theft, it is a person's responsibility to

- (A) leave the doors unlocked.
- (B) never be in a rush.
- (C) prevent the opportunity.
- (D) be willing to perform a citizen's arrest.

Correct answer: C. Although the paragraph doesn't say, "To prevent auto theft, it is a person's responsibility to prevent the opportunity," this idea is certainly implied. There is no implication that people should be willing to (or can) perform a citizen's arrest. Leaving the doors unlocked is the opposite of what one should do, and never being in a rush is probably impossible.

An example of an unreasonable conclusion drawn from the above paragraph would be something like, "If everyone locked their doors, there would be no crime," or "All car thieves should be sentenced to 30 years in prison." Nothing in this particular passage supports such a conclusion.

One way to help determine if you've drawn a reasonable conclusion is to ask yourself, "Based on what I've just read, would the author agree with the conclusion I've reached?" If the answer is yes, your conclusion is probably reasonable. If the answer is no, time to think up a new conclusion.



Try this one on for size:

Boiler technicians operate main and auxiliary boilers. They maintain and repair all parts, including pressure fittings, valves, pumps, and forced-air blowers. Technicians may have to lift or move heavy equipment. They may have to stoop and kneel and work in awkward positions.

According to this job description, a good candidate for this job would be

- (A) a person with joint problems.
- (B) an individual unaccustomed to heavy lifting.
- (C) a person who is not mechanically minded.
- (D) a person who is physically fit.

Correct answer: D. Although the passage doesn't say, "This job requires a physically fit person," the duties listed imply that this is so. A person with joint problems may not be able to stoop or kneel or work in awkward positions. A person who is unaccustomed to heavy lifting may not be able to lift or move the heavy equipment as needed. A person who is not mechanically minded may not have the knowledge necessary to maintain and repair boilers and all their parts. This leaves Answer D, and it's true that a person who is physically fit would be a good choice for the job.

Speed Counts: Tips for Slow Readers

You will have 13 minutes to answer 15 questions on this subtest. For many people, 13 minutes is enough time to read the passage, understand the question, and choose the correct answer. But slow readers may have more difficulty getting all the questions answered before time is up. Don't despair: We have some suggestions that can help you build your reading speed. Of course, they require work, but you expected that, right?

Read more, watch less

If you're a slow reader, chances are you don't do a lot of reading. If you have plenty of time before you're due to take the ASVAB, starting to read more — right now — is in your best interest.



You don't have to pick up *A Tale of Two Cities* or *War and Peace*. You can start with the newspaper, a biography of a person you admire, or magazines you find at the library. Sorry, but the instruction guide to your favorite video game doesn't count. If you devote at least one hour a day to improving your reading comprehension and speed, you'll see results fast — maybe within a month or so.

Pump up your vocabulary

People sometimes read slowly because they don't have a large vocabulary and don't understand everything they read. If you can identify with this situation, improving your vocabulary is your first step toward increasing your reading comprehension and your reading speed. (Chapter 4 gives you info on building your word knowledge. Check it out.)

Build your confidence

Another reason people read slowly is that they don't have confidence in themselves. They're not convinced that they understand what they're reading, so they read a passage several times, trying to make sure they haven't missed anything. But just like people who check that the front door is locked 15 times before leaving for vacation and still lie awake at night wondering if they locked the door, reading and re-reading a passage doesn't give you confidence that you understand the text. You get confidence from proving that you understand it.

How do you prove to yourself that you understand what you're reading? One way is to get out a textbook or even an encyclopedia (preferably a volume that contains some subject matter that interests you) and read one or two paragraphs straight through without going back and re-reading anything. Then close the book (keeping your place marked) and write, in your own words, a brief description of what you've read. Finally, turn back to the passage and compare your description to the information on the page.



A relatively fun way to build your self-confidence is to play the 20-questions game. Read an article from a magazine, encyclopedia, or textbook. Then ask someone to pick out facts from the article and ask you questions about them.

Is your written version of the article close in meaning to the original? Do you get most of the 20 questions correct? If so, you understand what you're reading, and that should build your confidence. If not, don't toss the book or magazine aside in frustration or go ballistic on your mom for asking you tough questions. Keep working on it — we guarantee your comprehension will improve. Do these confidence-building drills a few times a day until you feel like you can read any paragraph or two and understand it without having to re-read the information.

Help! The ASVAB Is Next Week!

Face it — some old sayings are on the money. Practice makes perfect, and unfortunately, practice takes time. All the study aids that we provide in the preceding sections of this chapter won't help as much as they normally do if the ASVAB is next week and you're a slow reader. But, if you find yourself in this situation, you don't have to just pack it in and forget about the ASVAB and a military career.



The Paragraph Comprehension section tests your ability to understand what you read, not how quickly you can read it. When you sit down to take this subtest, try to go as quickly as you can without sacrificing accuracy. Being methodical in your reading isn't a bad thing, as long as you're getting the answers right. Just try to read a little faster than normal without panicking or missing the point.

Be all that you can be

Today's military is much more complex than attending boot camp, learning how to shoot a gun, and shipping off to war. After boot camp, you'll attend intensive classroom training to learn your military job. If you can't read

well, you're going to have a very hard time. But the good news is that it's never too late to work on improving your reading skills.

For short-term preparation, you need to do a hardcore confidence-building workout a few days before the ASVAB. (See the section "Build your confidence," earlier in this chapter, to find out how to do these exercises.)

Take one or two of the practice tests at the back of this book to get a sense of how long it takes you to read and understand the passages and the answer options. The practice tests will give you confidence going into the actual test. You may find that you can do the work in the time allotted.



It's better to read the paragraphs carefully and answer the questions correctly on half the questions, and guess on the other half of the questions than it is to speed through all of the reading and get none of the answers right.

Finally, if ASVAB day is quickly approaching, see the "Practicing Comprehension Skills" and "Test-Taking Tips" sections later in this chapter for more information on how to do well on the Paragraph Comprehension subtest even if you skipped English class your entire senior year.

Test-Taking Tips

Although there are no shortcuts to improving your reading-comprehension skills (besides practice), you can do a few things on test day to make sure that you score as high as possible on the Paragraph Comprehension subtest.



Guessing is always better than not guessing. You have a chance of getting the correct answer if you guess. So, if you're running out of time on the test, or you're not sure if you can identify the main idea of a passage, take a guess. If you think that was a good piece of advice, check out these tried-and-true tactics for test day:

- ✓ **Read first, ask questions later:** Read the passage all the way through before glancing at the question and answer options.
- ✓ **Take it one question at a time:** Some passages have more than one question associated with them, but look at only one question at a time.
- ✓ **Understand each question:** What is the question asking you to do? Are you supposed to find the main point? Draw a conclusion? Find a word that is nearest in meaning? Make sure you know what the question is asking before you choose among the answer options. This tip may seem obvious, but when you're in a hurry, you can make mistakes by misunderstanding the questions.
- ✓ **Read each answer option carefully:** Don't just select the first answer that seems right. Remember, on the Paragraph Comprehension subtest, one answer is often "most right" while others are "almost right." You want to choose the "most right" answer, not the "almost right" answer. And to do that, you have to read *all* the answers.
- ✓ **Check your feelings at the door:** Answer each question based on the passage, not your own opinions or views on the topic.
- ✓ **Don't choose ambiguous-answer options:** They're incorrect 99.99 times out of 100. (Oh heck, call it 100 times out of 100.) If an answer strikes you as not quite true but not totally false, that answer is incorrect. Those nasty ASVAB test-makers have put it there to throw you off. Don't give them the satisfaction of falling for their trap!
- ✓ **Never select never:** For the most part, answer options that are absolute are incorrect. *Never*, *always*, and related words are often a sign that you should select a different answer. Words like *generally* and *usually* are more likely to be correct.

Sample Test Questions

Time for you to put all the great advice we provide in this chapter to good use. (You can see that we're not usually accused of being too modest.) Quiz yourself on the following sample test questions to see if your reading comprehension is up to speed.

Although the average consumer replaces the tires on his or her automobile every 50,000 miles, steel-belted radials can last for more than 60,000 miles. However, they must be properly maintained. The tires must be inflated to the correct air pressure at all times, and tires must be rotated and balanced according to a routine maintenance schedule. The tread should be checked for correct depth regularly.

1. How long can steel-belted radials last?

- (A) 50,000 miles
- (B) 60,000 miles
- (C) No one knows.
- (D) 25,000 miles

Correct answer: B. If you missed this one, you didn't read carefully enough.

2. According to the passage above, proper tire maintenance does not include

- (A) keeping tires properly inflated.
- (B) balancing and rotating tires.
- (C) checking the tread.
- (D) checking the lug nuts.

Correct answer: D. This is a negative question that requires extra care in answering.

Some people argue that baking is an art, but Chef Debra Dearborn says that baking is a science. She says that if you follow a recipe carefully, assembling the ingredients accurately, cooking at the specified temperature for the specified period of time, your cookies will always turn out right. Chef Dearborn says the best baking is like the best experiment — anyone can duplicate it.

3. In this passage, the word *assembling* most nearly means:

- (A) measuring
- (B) putting together
- (C) buying
- (D) storing

Correct answer: B. Although *measuring* is something you do when baking, it doesn't "most nearly" mean the same thing as *assembling*. *Putting together* does.

4. According to the above passage, a person who is all thumbs in the kitchen

- (A) should get out of the kitchen.
- (B) is an artist.
- (C) isn't following the recipe carefully.
- (D) is Chef Dearborn.

Correct answer: C. The passage states that if you follow a recipe carefully, your cookies will always turn out right.

The United States Postal Service will deliver a one-pound package overnight for \$20, although it does not guarantee on-time arrival. United Parcel Service will deliver the same package for \$25 and guarantee the delivery. FedEx will deliver the package for \$30 and guarantee the delivery, plus pick up your package for no additional charge.

5. Which service should you use if you must have a delivery guarantee but can't spend more than \$25?
- (A) United States Postal Service
 - (B) United Parcel Service
 - (C) FedEx
 - (D) None of the services meet the criteria.

Correct answer: B. The passage's second sentence tells you everything you need to know.

PARAGRAPH COMPREHENSION REVIEW

Reading comprehension, the ability to read and understand written or printed material, is an important verbal skill. The reading material may be in the form of several paragraphs, a single paragraph, or a single sentence. This section includes reading selections that are samples of the type of material that you would be required to read, whether at school, in training, or on the job.

Before you try the following samples, note the eight general suggestions for answering reading comprehension questions. Keep these in mind as you take the sample test batteries in this book as well as on your ASVAB test day.

1. Scan the passage to get the general intent of the reading selection.
2. Reread the passage carefully to understand the main idea and any related ideas.
3. Read each question carefully. Be careful to base your answer on what is stated, implied, or inferred in the reading passage. Do not be influenced by your opinions, personal feelings, or any other information not expressed or implied in the passage.
4. Options that are partly true and partly false are incorrect.
5. Look for such words as *least*, *greatest*, *first*, *not*, etc., appearing in the comprehension question.
6. Be suspicious of options containing words such as *all*, *always*, *every*, *forever*, *never*, *none*, *wholly*, etc.
7. Be sure to consider all options given for the question before selecting your answer.
8. Speed is an important consideration in answering reading comprehension questions. Try to proceed as rapidly as you can without sacrificing careful thinking or reasoning.

When answering Paragraph Comprehension questions, refer back to the paragraph *as often as necessary*. Questions may focus on a particular sentence or phrase within the paragraph. You should refer back to make sure you answer the question correctly instead of trying to answer from memory. Keep in mind that wrong answer choices could be *subtly* wrong. With careful review of the paragraph and the details in the answer choices, it becomes clear which answers are correct and which ones aren't.

Here are samples of the four main types of paragraph comprehension questions you may find on the ASVAB Paragraph Comprehension section of your test. Each type of question is explained, a sample is given, and an explanation of the correct answer is given in detail. After these samples are practice questions to try on your own.

The four main types of questions are:

Type 1. Finding specific information or directly stated details contained in the reading passage:

This is a common type of item found in paragraph comprehension tests. It requires the ability to pick out specific facts provided in a passage or, sometimes, the ability to pick out the fact that is not mentioned in a particular passage.

Sample:

There are many signs by which people predict the weather. Some of these have a true basis but many do not. There is, for example, no evidence that it is more likely to storm during one phase of the moon than during another. If it happens to rain on Easter, there is no reason to think that it will rain for the next seven Sundays. The groundhog may or may not see his shadow on Groundhog Day, but it probably won't affect the weather anyway.

1. Which of the following is *NOT* mentioned as a sign of weather phenomenon?
 - 1-A Rain on Easter
 - 1-B The phases of the moon
 - 1-C Pain in a person's joints
 - 1-D The groundhog's shadow

The correct answer is choice C. The other choices were mentioned in the passage.

Below are some typical "detail" questions:

- The first toll road in the United States was completed in _____.
- Helping to prevent accidents is the responsibility of _____.
- The principal reason for issuing traffic summonses is to _____.
- The side margins of a typewritten letter are most pleasing when _____.
- The reason for maintaining ongoing safety education is that _____.
- It would be desirable when planning a departmental reorganization to _____.

Type 2. Recognizing the main idea or concept expressed in the passage:

Although questions of this type may be phrased differently, they generally require the ability to summarize the principal purpose or idea expressed in the reading passage. These questions require the ability to analyze and interpret as well as to read and understand the material presented.

Sample:

Specific types of lighting are required at first-class airports by the Department of Commerce. To identify an airport, there must be a beacon of light of not less than 100,000 candlepower, with a beam that properly distributes light up in the air so that it can be seen all around the horizon from an altitude of from 500 to 2,000 feet. All flashing beacons must have a definite Morse code characteristic to aid in identification. Colored lights are required to indicate where the safe area for landing ends, red lights being used where landing is particularly dangerous.

2. The best title for this selection is
- 2-A “Landing Areas.”
 - 2-B “Colored Lights at Airports.”
 - 2-C “Identification of Airports.”
 - 2-D “Airport Lighting Requirements.”

The correct answer is choice D because every sentence in the paragraph describes a lighting requirement for airports. The other choices are each mentioned in only one of the four sentences.

Below are other typical “main idea” questions:

- This paragraph is mainly about _____.
- The passage best supports the statement that _____.
- The passage means most nearly that _____.
- One may conclude from the above statement that _____.

Type 3. Determining the meaning of certain words as used in context:

The particular meaning of a word as actually used in the passage requires an understanding of the central or main theme of the reading passage, as well as the thought being conveyed by the sentence containing the word in question.

Sample:

The maritime and fishing industries find perhaps 250 applications for rope and cordage. There are hundreds of different sizes, constructions, tensile strengths, and weights in rope and twine. Rope is sold by the pound but ordered by length and is measured by circumference rather than by diameter.

3. In this context, the word “application” means
- 3-A use.
 - 3-B description.
 - 3-C size.
 - 3-D types.

The correct answer is choice A, “use.” Try it in the sentence in place of the word “application”; “use” makes sense in that context and keeps the meaning of the sentence intact.

Type 4. Finding implications or drawing inferences from a stated idea:

This type of item requires the ability to understand the stated idea and then to reason by logical thinking to the implied or inferred idea. *Implied* means not exactly stated but merely suggested; *inferred* means derived by reasoning. Although these terms are somewhat similar in meaning, *inferred* implies being further removed from the stated idea. Much greater reasoning ability is required to arrive at the proper inference. Because the answer to an inference question will not be found in the passage, it is the most difficult type of comprehension question to answer.

Sample:

The facts, as we see them, on drug use and the dangerous behaviors caused by drugs are that some people do get into trouble while using drugs, and some of those drug users are dangerous to others. Sometimes a drug is a necessary element in order for a person to commit a crime, although it may not be the cause of his or her criminality. On the other hand, the use of a drug sometimes seems to be the only convenient excuse by means of which the observer can account for the undesirable behavior.

4. The author apparently feels that
- 4-A the use of drugs always results in crime.
 - 4-B drugs and crime are only sometimes related.
 - 4-C drug use does not always cause crime.
 - 4-D drugs are usually an element in accidents and suicides.

The author states that drugs are sometimes a necessary element in a crime but at other times are just an excuse for criminal behavior. Therefore, choice B is the correct answer.

Other typical “implication” or “inference” questions include any of the following:

- Which of the following is implied by the above passage? _____ .
- Of the following, the most valid implication of the above paragraph is _____ .
- The author probably believes that _____ .
- It can be inferred from the above passage that _____ .
- The best of the following inferences that can be made is that _____ .

Now try the sample Paragraph Comprehension questions that follow. Detailed explanations of the answers are given immediately after each question to help you understand the logic of the answers. Once you feel comfortable with these, continue on to try the next set of sample questions on your own.

1. Investigations show that activation analysis of wipings taken from a suspect’s hands will reveal not only whether he or she has fired a gun recently but also the type of ammunition used, the number of bullets fired, and the hand in which the gun was held.

Activation analysis of wipings taken from the hands of a person suspected of firing a gun CANNOT be used to reveal the

- 1-A exact time the gun was fired.
- 1-B hand in which the gun was fired.
- 1-C number of bullets fired.
- 1-D type of ammunition used.

The paragraph states that activation analysis can be used to reveal choices B, C, and D. Although activation analysis can reveal whether the suspect fired a gun recently, it *cannot* ascertain the exact time the gun was fired; therefore, choice A is correct.

The ability of activation analysis to detect and identify very tiny amounts of certain elements has come to the aid of law-enforcement officers in a variety of ways. Hair even hundreds of years old can be analyzed successfully for arsenic and other residues.

2. English scientists recently found an unusual amount of arsenic in a relic of hair from Napoleon's head. The suspicion now is that he was slowly poisoned to death.

The case of King Eric XIV of Sweden is similar. When the king's body was exhumed recently, activation analysis showed that his body contained traces of poisonous arsenic.

Both King Eric XIV of Sweden and Napoleon could have been

- 2-A killed by gunshot.
- 2-B killed in military combat.
- 2-C poisoned by arsenic.
- 2-D poisoned by lead.

For this question, the possibility of poisoning by arsenic is indicated in paragraphs 2 and 3 for both Napoleon and King Eric XIV. There is nothing in the reading passage suggesting that their deaths were due to gunshot or occurred in military combat; nor is there any reference to poisoning by lead. Choice C is the only correct answer.

3. In spite of the fact that the latitude of Scandinavia corresponds to that of Alaska and Siberia, the climate is surprisingly mild. Even in winter, the temperatures in Scandinavia are often higher than those of Central Europe and sometimes even Southern Europe. The average temperature is higher in Scandinavia than for other places on the same latitude, thanks to the Gulf Stream that washes the Scandinavian Atlantic coastline.

According to the quotation above, it may be concluded that the latitude of Scandinavia is

- 3-A higher than that of Alaska.
- 3-B lower than that of Siberia.
- 3-C higher than that of Southern Europe.
- 3-D lower than that of Central Europe.

Nothing in the passage suggests that the latitude is either higher or lower than that of Alaska or Siberia; nor is there any indication that it is lower than that of Central Europe. The implication is that it is higher than that of Southern Europe. Choice C is the correct answer.

Answer the next two questions on the basis of the following passage.

4. It is important for every office to have proper lighting. Inadequate lighting is a common cause of fatigue and tends to create a dreary atmosphere in the office. Appropriate light intensity is essential for proper lighting. It is generally recommended that for "casual seeing" tasks, such as in reception rooms or inactive file rooms, the amount of lighting be 30-foot candles. For "ordinary seeing" tasks, such as reading or for work in active file rooms and mail rooms, the recommended lighting is 100-foot candles. For "very difficult seeing" tasks, such as transcribing, accounting, and business machine use, the recommended lighting is 150-foot candles.

For copying figures onto a payroll, the recommended lighting is

- 4-A less than 30-foot candles.
- 4-B 30-foot candles.
- 4-C 100-foot candles.
- 4-D 150-foot candles.

For this question, it is necessary to determine the proper lighting task for copying figures onto a payroll. This activity requires much more light than either “casual seeing” or “ordinary seeing.” As it is a “very difficult seeing” task, choice D is the correct answer.

5. It can be inferred from the passage above that a well-coordinated lighting scheme is likely to result in
- 5-A greater employee productivity.
 - 5-B lower lighting costs.
 - 5-C more use of natural light.
 - 5-D windowless offices.

In this question, there is no mention of lighting costs or the need for windowless offices in the reading passage. Nor is there any suggestion for greater use of natural light. Choices B, C, and D are therefore eliminated. If inadequate lighting is a common cause of fatigue, one can *infer* that proper lighting would eliminate this fatigue element and should result in greater employee productivity. Choice A is the correct answer.

Sample Questions

1. In the relations of man to nature, the procuring of food and shelter is fundamental. With the migration of man to various climates, ever-new adjustments to the food supply and to the climate became necessary.

According to the passage, the means by which man supplies his material needs are

- 1-A accidental.
 - 1-B inadequate.
 - 1-C limited.
 - 1-D varied.
2. From a building designer’s standpoint, three things that make a home livable are the needs of the client, the building site, and the amount of money the client has to spend.

According to the passage, to make a home livable,

- 2-A it can be built on any piece of land.
 - 2-B the design must fit the designer’s income.
 - 2-C the design must fit the owner’s income and site.
 - 2-D the prospective piece of land makes little difference.
3. Twenty-five percent of all household burglaries can be attributed to unlocked windows or doors. Crime is the result of opportunity plus desire. To prevent crime, it is each individual’s responsibility to
- 3-A provide the desire.
 - 3-B provide the opportunity.
 - 3-C prevent the desire.
 - 3-D prevent the opportunity.