

Chapter 1

of

Reading Comprehension

Reading Comprehension Overview



Why Study Reading Comprehension?

I already know what Reading Comprehension is. What can this book do for me?

Reading comprehension is a staple of almost all standardized testing. You saw it on state tests in elementary school, you saw it on the SAT, and, of course, you will see it on the LSAT.

There is a reason for this: reading comprehension exams are a great way to test an individual's ability to absorb, comprehend, process, and relate written information in a time-efficient manner. These are skills you'll need as a lawyer, by the way.

It seems to make sense, but is it really possible to accurately quantify a person's level of reading comprehension? Can't we all, by looking at our own lives and experiences, see that our own level of reading comprehension is something that *fluctuates* from situation to situation?

Let's look at a few scenarios:

1. Ted is an electrical engineer. He has been working in a niche industry for years, but it's very easy for him to understand and evaluate articles on engineering concepts that fall outside of his specialty, even when he isn't familiar with the specific terminology involved. He's recently become interested in the stock market, and has been trying to read up on it. However, he's having a lot of trouble understanding and organizing the investment advice that he's read in various financial publications.
2. Sally is a freshman in high school. She has mastered the art of instant messaging, and sends and receives hundreds of messages a day. She filters them and organizes them easily, and is able to weave together a cohesive understanding of the lives of her friends. However, when she tries to organize the personalities and events of 18th-century Europe from her history textbook, she's hopelessly lost.
3. Jane is an English literature professor, and a luddite. She's finally getting around to using the internet to communicate with her students. She is surprised by the short, abrupt, and casual messages they send to her. She is unable to catch subtlety and has difficulty interpreting the tone of the messages she receives. She tries to write short responses back, but invariably ends up sending emails that are too long and take her too much time to put together.

It's easy to see how different types of Reading Comprehension exams would score Ted, Sally, and Jane very differently. The truth is, none of us has a definable (or quantifiable) level of reading comprehension. Put simply, our reading comprehension ability is highly variable. It depends on many factors, including our familiarity with the subject matter, the manner in which the material is written, the purpose of our read, and our overall interest and focus level.

For a few of you, the strengths you possess as readers already align with the LSAT Reading Comprehension test. In other words, your ability to read and comprehend LSAT passages is similar to Sally's ability to organize and synthesize her text messages. However, for most of us, the complex passages that appear on the LSAT do not naturally fall into our reading "sweet spot." So what do we do? We must work to become intimately familiar with the characteristics of LSAT passages, and then define our reading approach based on these characteristics. In other words, we must expand our sweet spot to *include* the LSAT.

This book is designed to lead you through this process, one step at a time. If you are not already an "LSAT reader," you will become one by the time we are through.

Your Path to Success

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Mastering Reading Comprehension on the LSAT is not easy. It takes a lot of work to get to the point where you can read and understand an LSAT passage just as comfortably (or at least *almost* as comfortably) as you would the articles in your favorite magazine. Here are the steps we're going to take to get you there:

1. Build familiarity. In general, when readers read material that they already know something about, they tend to comprehend at a much higher level than when reading something about an unfamiliar topic. Ted, from the previous page, is a perfect example. Material related to engineering, even if out of his direct area of expertise, is easier for him to read and comprehend because he has a framework of prior knowledge upon which he can “hang” any new, related material, and he understands the fundamental logic of engineering principles. When he reads about the stock market and investment theory, however, he lacks a preexisting framework of knowledge and he struggles to comprehend.

In an ideal world, we would all be experts on the subject matter covered in LSAT Reading Comprehension passages, and we'd be able to leverage our prior knowledge to better understand what we read. Ted would ace the Reading Comprehension section of the LSAT if every passage were related to engineering!

The issue is that, for the purposes of the LSAT, we cannot rely on prior knowledge of the subject matter to help us. For most of us, the good majority of passages will cover subjects that we know little about. Should we spend our preparation time anticipating and studying everything that could appear in an LSAT passage? Not very practical, and because of the broad net of possibilities, not to our advantage.

We need to generate a different kind of framework off of which to “hang” new information. Instead of using a *subject matter* framework, we will use a **structure** framework.

Consider the following example:

Knock, knock.

Who's there?

Shelby.

Shelby who?

Shelby coming round the mountain when she comes.

Imagine for a second that you'd never before in your life heard a knock-knock joke. This text would make absolutely no sense to you at all! Only because you are completely familiar with the form of knock-knock jokes are you able to immediately process and understand the joke. You know, for instance, that lines 1, 3, and 5 are spoken by the joker, and that lines 2 and 4 are spoken by the person to whom the joke is being delivered. You know to expect a play on the name “Shelby” in the punchline. You know that the joke will likely not make a whole lot of logical sense, but you're able to read it, understand it, and appreciate it nonetheless because you related the *structure* of this particular text to previous experience with knock-knock jokes.

LSAT passages are built around a very consistent structure as well. If you learn to see this structure, it will be much easier for you to organize the various elements of the passage, and to understand their significance.

2. Define your reading perspective. The perspective from which you read can have a huge impact on how you make sense of a given piece of text. Let's go back to high school for a minute. Imagine your English teacher has assigned Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and that your reading of the play will be evaluated in one of the following three ways:

1. You will be given a quote exam, during which you will be asked to identify certain lines taken from the text of the play.
2. You will be asked to write an essay about the major themes in the play.
3. You will be assigned one of the roles in a high school production of the play.

If you were asked to complete a quote exam, you would read with a particular focus on learning the characters and understanding the basic plot. If you were asked to write an essay on the major themes, you would interpret and extrapolate, attempting to uncover the author's implicit messages. If you were asked to act out the play, you would read with an eye towards character development, and you would pay close attention to the emotions of the characters at different points in the story. Needless to say, your interaction with the text, and your interpretation of the play, would be greatly affected by the perspective that you adopt.

We'll spend a good deal of time in this book defining an advantageous perspective from which you'll want to read all LSAT passages: from the perspective of a law student. This perspective will help you quickly recognize and organize the most important information in a given passage.

3. Understand the core competencies. Every Reading Comprehension question on the LSAT tests your ability to do one or more of the following: (1) IDENTIFY a piece of supporting text, (2) INFER from a piece of text, and (3) SYNTHESIZE multiple pieces of text in order to make a general interpretation.

We'll spend a chapter examining the characteristics of these core competencies. You'll develop a keen sense for what correct answers should accomplish.

4. Identify patterns in incorrect answer choices. Success on reading comprehension questions depends, in large part, on your ability to eliminate incorrect answers. For the hardest problems, the right answer can be unpredictable and not ideal. In fact, it is often easier to spot wrong answers than it is to spot the right answer. With this in mind, it is important that you develop a sense for how the testwriter creates incorrect choices.

We'll examine the common characteristics of incorrect answers and learn to use our understanding of these characteristics to effectively eliminate bad choices.

With these four tools in hand, you'll be ready to master Reading Comprehension on the LSAT. Before we get started with the process of expanding your reading "sweet spot" to include LSAT passages, let's discuss some of the logistics of the Reading Comprehension section of the test.

Reading Comprehension on the LSAT

Section Breakdown

The entire LSAT exam is comprised of the following sections (not necessarily in this order):

| SECTION | QUESTIONS | SCORED? | TIME |
|-----------------------|-----------|---------|------------|
| Logic Games | 22–23 | yes | 35 minutes |
| Reading Comprehension | 26–28 | yes | 35 minutes |
| Logical Reasoning (1) | 24–26 | yes | 35 minutes |
| Logical Reasoning (2) | 24–26 | yes | 35 minutes |
| EXPERIMENTAL | 22–28 | no | 35 minutes |
| Essay | 1 essay | no | 35 minutes |

Note that every LSAT exam will contain one Reading Comprehension section that will count towards your final score. Thus, just about one-quarter of the total questions on the LSAT will be Reading Comprehension questions.

Keep in mind that the Experimental section could end up being a Reading Comprehension section as well. If you do receive two RC sections on your exam, only one of those two sections will actually count towards your final score (unfortunately, it's impossible to know which one).

Scoring

Each Reading Comprehension question, and every other question on the LSAT for that matter, is worth exactly 1 point. If you answer a question correctly, you will be credited with 1 point for that question. If you answer the question incorrectly, or if you fail to answer the question, you will be credited with 0 points for that question.

It is important to note that there is no guessing penalty on the LSAT. An incorrect answer is scored the same as a “no answer.” Thus, it is to your advantage to answer every single question on the exam, even if some of those answers are guesses.

During the scoring of your exam, your points are totaled and then converted to a scaled score between 120 and 180. The conversion depends on the performance of all the other test-takers who took the same exam; a standardized curve is used to assign your scaled score.

Subject Matter: Do I have to know about the law?

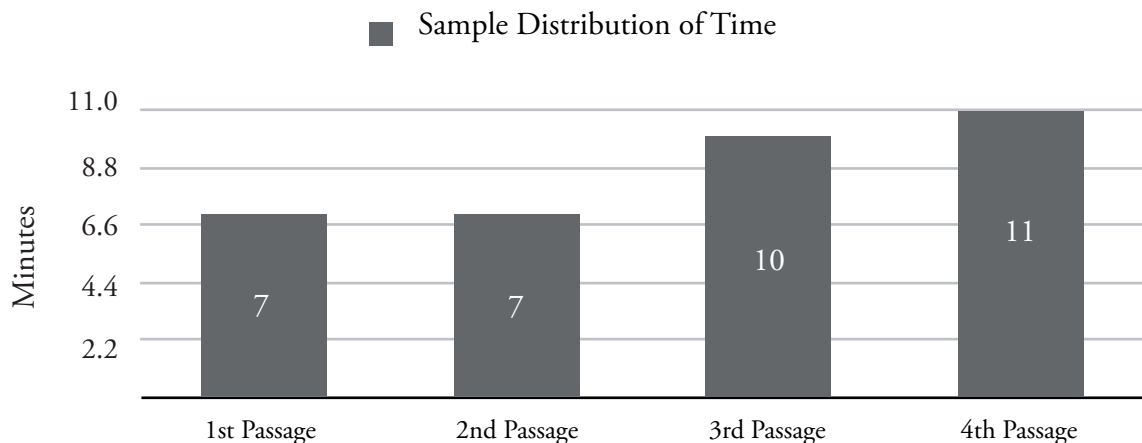
Every Reading Comprehension section contains four passages. You can expect to see one passage per section in each of the following four subject areas:

| <i>Subject Area</i> | <i>Expect to see passages on...</i> |
|---------------------|---|
| THE LAW | legal history, international law, legal theory, social ramifications of law |
| NATURAL SCIENCES | evolution, biology, chemistry, physics |
| SOCIAL SCIENCES | history, political science, sociology, economics |
| HUMANITIES | literature, art, film |

The LSAT does NOT expect that you have any prior knowledge when it comes to the law, natural sciences, social sciences, or humanities. All the information you will need to answer the questions will be contained in the passage. That said, students with a certain level of familiarity in these subject areas will have a slight advantage. As we discussed earlier, the more familiar you are with the subject matter, the more likely you are to comprehend what you are reading.

Pacing

You will have a total of 35 minutes to complete the four passages. This works out to 8:45 per passage. However, you will need to be faster than 8:45 on easier passages in order to have the extra time necessary for the more difficult passages. Generally speaking, the four passages on the LSAT are arranged from easier to harder (easier passages at the start of the section and harder passages at the end; this is a tendency, NOT an absolute). With that in mind, consider the following pacing plan for a Reading Comprehension section:



For each specific passage, time must be allocated to reading the text and answering the questions. In general, it is recommended that you spend more time on answering the questions than on reading the text, but this ratio of time spent will depend on your own personal style and your particular strengths and weaknesses.

As you go forward in this book, and as you practice more on real exams, keep returning to the following list in order to hone your process:

| SIGNS THAT YOU ARE SPENDING TOO LITTLE TIME IN THE READING PROCESS | SIGNS THAT YOU ARE SPENDING TOO MUCH TIME IN THE READING PROCESS |
|--|---|
| <p>You have trouble recognizing the central argument.</p> <p>You have trouble organizing the information in the passage relative to the argument.</p> <p>You don't understand the role each paragraph plays relative to the rest of the passage.</p> <p>You have trouble paraphrasing the purpose of a paragraph.</p> <p>You don't have a clear sense of the author's opinion.</p> <p>You don't have a clear sense of which opinions contrast one another.</p> <p>You often miss problems pertaining to the passage as a whole.</p> <p>You often have to go back and reread the text in order to answer questions about the passage as a whole.</p> <p>You do poorly on questions that ask you to compare the text to some sort of analogy.</p> <p>You often feel lost when you have to go back into the text to find answers to questions that ask about a specific detail.</p> | <p>You try to memorize and notate every single detail in the text.</p> <p>While you are reading, you try to go beyond understanding the text relative to the central argument and try to see what else you can infer.</p> <p>You spend a lot of extra time trying to understand specific elements of the text, elements that ultimately don't show up in the questions.</p> <p>You feel rushed while going through the questions.</p> <p>You often feel that you do not have time to go through the process of elimination.</p> <p>You often answer off of a "gut" feeling.</p> <p>You often feel that you do not have enough time to return to the text to verify answers.</p> |

Again, remember that there are no absolutes when it comes to timing. Use this book and your own practice to get a sense for how you should allocate time between reading the text and answering the questions.

Let's get to work.

Chapter *of* 2

Reading Comprehension

Part 1: Read Like a Law Student

Recognizing the Argument

Getting Familiar

2

Read the following passage in two to three minutes. Underline and notate however you would like. At the end of your reading process, look over the text again, and try to create a quick summary of the passage in the box provided. Don't worry about writing in complete sentences, etc. Style is not important. Just try to identify the key points.

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Recognizing the Argument

A Look into the Future...

We'll get back to the passage on the previous page momentarily, but first, let's fast-forward into the future. Imagine yourself as a law student, a legal scholar. There you sit, poring through legal cases, frantically scribbling notes, wondering if your name will be cold-called in tomorrow's lecture. You have so many cases to read, and so little time.

While the reading will be challenging, and you'll often wonder if you'll be able to get through it all, your fundamental task for each case that you read can be thought of in very simple terms: your job will be to (1) clearly define the two sides of a central argument, or case, (2) make note of the parties that fall on each side of the argument, and (3) consider any evidence that is presented in support of either side.

This all makes good sense. After all, law school is designed to prepare you for a career in law. In order for a lawyer or judge to successfully prepare for a case, she must understand the two sides of a central argument in a clear and specific manner. This understanding creates the framework from which she can evaluate and organize the evidence and opinions that are presented.

It is no wonder, then, that the LSAT would test your ability to deconstruct a reading passage in just this way.

Defining Your Perspective: Read Like a Law Student

Though LSAT Reading Comprehension passages vary a good deal in terms of subject matter, they are remarkably consistent when it comes to structure. Most LSAT passages contain the features that you would find in a standard legal case (though, fortunately, without all the legal language). Most passages will:

1. Give background information necessary to understand an argument.
2. Present two sides of an argument.
3. Provide evidence or support for one side, or both.

Think of your approach to reading LSAT passages as similar to that which you would use to understand and analyze a legal case. In short, think of yourself as a law student as you read. It is from this perspective that you will most effectively organize and understand the information presented.

Visualizing the Scale

As you read any given LSAT passage, your top priority should be to identify, in a clear and specific way, the two sides of the argument. In doing so, it is helpful to imagine the two sides of a balance scale as representing the competing sides of the argument.

For example:

Some passages will give equal consideration to both sides of an argument.

Literature should not be required
to convey cultural roots.

It is important for literature
to express its cultural roots.



Some passages will give consideration to both sides, but place emphasis on one side over the other.

Paul McCartney was not
the most important Beatle.

Paul McCartney was the
most important Beatle.



Some passages will introduce an argument but focus entirely on the evidence for one side.

Fossil fuels continue to be
a good energy source.

Renewable energy sources
need to be explored.



Occasionally these passages will use the argument as a springboard to a related topic. For example, a passage that starts out, “Renewable energy sources need to be explored,” may go on to talk about one specific method of utilizing solar energy, and the positives and negatives of that particular method.

The two sides of the argument will provide you with a frame for “hanging” all of the other elements of the passage. *Everything* else in the passage exists in order to inform the sides of the argument in some way. In short, the scale image provides a simple approach for organizing the elements of the passage as you read.

In the next chapter, we’ll look more closely at this concept of using the scale to organize your reading.

The Curveballs

Every now and again you’ll see a passage that deviates from the standard argument structure. Here are the most common curveball types:

1. Strictly informative. A few rare passages will not contain an argument at all. These passages are similar perhaps to what a law student might read for background information. These passages tend to be objective in nature, without opinion or emotion. Because of that, these passages will tend to

be structured so as to give the reader information in an organized way, rather than in the conflicting manner of an argument. Often these passages are structured chronologically (perhaps the passage describes changes to the interpretation of a law at different periods in a country's history) or by logical necessity (perhaps it describes the workings of an artificial protein by discussing its individual parts).

2. Two sides, but not opposing. There have also been a couple of instances in the past few years where the two sides of an LSAT argument are somewhat conflicting but not opposites. For example, certain critics might say that a new law is flawed because it negatively impacts workers. Others say the law is flawed because it negatively impacts managers. In these instances, it is helpful to understand, going into the questions, that these are not opposing arguments, and that these opinions may play supporting roles in a bigger argument (that the new law is flawed).

Overall, however, the vast majority of passages that have appeared on the LSAT in the past 10 years have centered around a debatable argument. Finding the argument, and using it to mentally organize the passage, will make the reading process much easier. In the rare cases above, recognizing that an argument *isn't* present will generally give you an advantage when it comes to answering the questions.

The Challenges of Recognizing the Argument

It can sometimes take lawyers and judges weeks or months to identify the crucial argument in a case. Fortunately for you, the LSAT isn't given over the course of weeks. Still, the test writers like to challenge you by making the argument difficult to find. Here are two tips to help you overcome such obstacles:

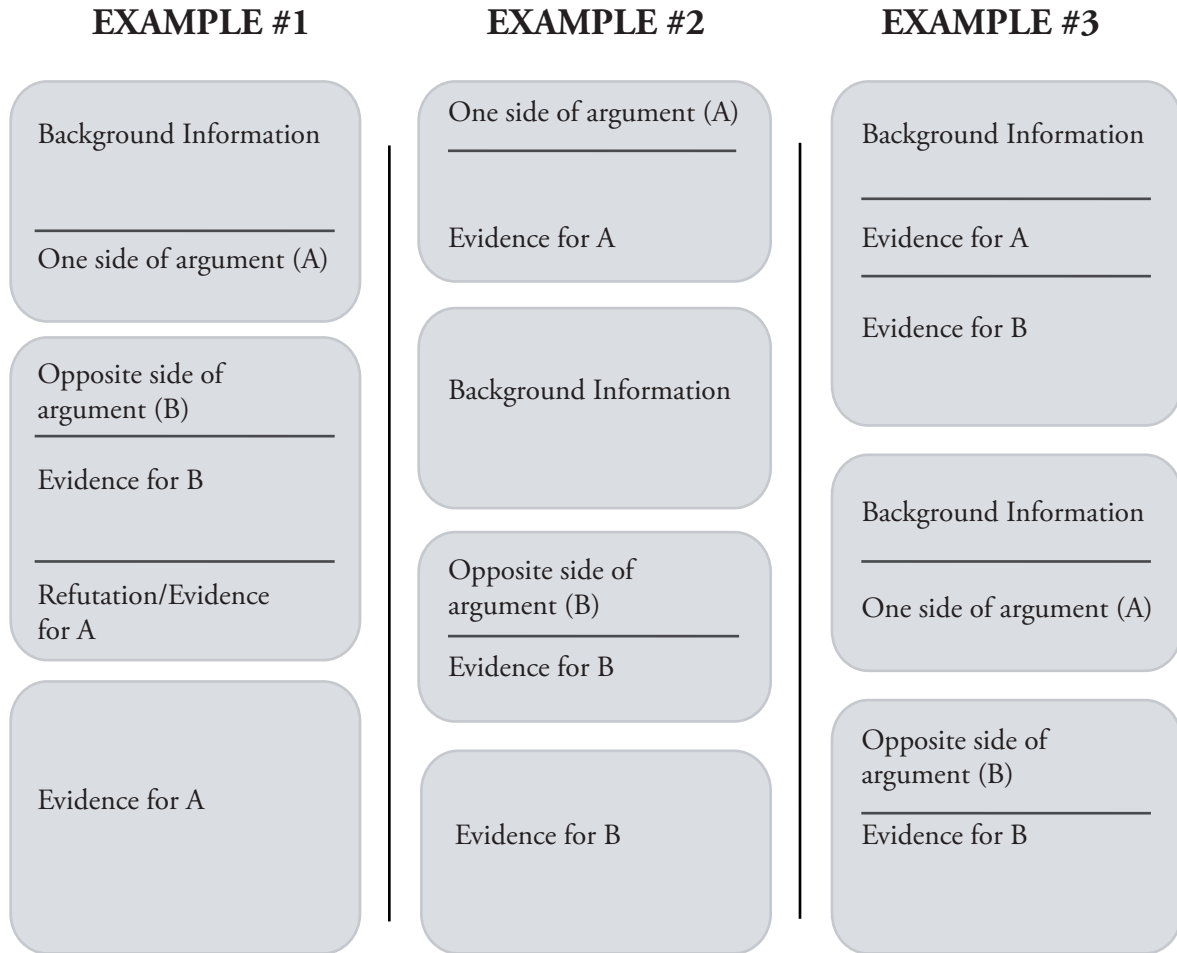
1. The central argument will not necessarily be revealed at the start of the passage.

Remember that, in general terms, LSAT passages:

1. Give background information necessary to understand the argument.
2. Present the argument.
3. Provide evidence or support for one side, or both.

Unfortunately, the LSAT does not always give us passages written in this order. In fact, as the passages become more difficult, the three elements tend to get more and more mixed up. Do NOT use physical structure to anticipate where the meat of the argument is. Rather, maintain some flexibility as you search for the fundamental debate in the passage.

Here is a visual representation of three different ways in which a passage might be structured. These are representative of what you might see on the exam, but this is certainly not an exhaustive list of possibilities. The gray boxes represent paragraphs:



2. The Argument is NOT to be confused with a comparison. In a challenging passage, it is easy to confuse a comparison with an argument. What's the difference? Let's use an analogy you may have heard once or twice before in your life:

On one side you have apples and on the other side oranges.

Is this an argument? Absolutely not. You can compare apples and oranges, but they are not two sides of an argument. If one person debates, "Apples!" and the other, "Oranges!" you would be listening to an illogical argument.

Now, let's think of some logical arguments we can make using apples and oranges:

"Apples taste better than oranges."

"Oranges don't taste as sweet as apples."

"Apples are healthier for children than oranges are."

Notice, all of these arguments are debatable, involve an opinion, and contain two sides. Furthermore, they all involve an action: "taste, don't taste, are." Let's revisit the beginning part of the passage that appeared at the start of the chapter:

Passage:

Intellectual authority is defined as the authority of arguments that prevail by virtue of good reasoning and do not depend on coercion or convention. A contrasting notion, institutional authority, refers to the power of social institutions to enforce acceptance of arguments that may or may not possess intellectual authority.

Comment:

The passage begins by COMPARING intellectual authority and institutional authority, but it would be a mistake to assign those ideas, in and of themselves, to opposite sides of an argument. They are contrasting ideas, but we have yet to be introduced to a debate. We can consider this background information.

Rushing to judgment at this point leads to the following INCORRECT scale analysis:



The authority wielded by legal systems is especially interesting because such systems are institutions that nonetheless aspire to a purely intellectual authority.

This is more background information that narrows down the scope of the argument. Now we have an arena, "legal systems," for these contrasting ideas to square off in.

One judge goes so far as to claim that courts are merely passive vehicles for applying intellectual authority of the law and possess no coercive powers of their own.

This is the first concrete opinion that has been presented: one judge claims that courts are vehicles for intellectual authority, and have no institutional authority.



In contrast, some critics maintain that whatever authority judicial pronouncements have is exclusively institutional . . .

We could probably anticipate this before we get to this point. An opposing opinion is presented: some critics say that the power of legal systems is purely institutional. Now we have the two sides of our central argument.



At this point, take a look back at the passage summary you wrote on the first page of the chapter and compare it with this scale. The central argument is the most important information in a passage, and your notes should reflect that.

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When you read a real LSAT argument, you should not try to draw this scale. However, it is a useful mental structure to train yourself to use.

Let's get some practice looking for the central argument and the two sides of the scale.

DRILL IT: Recognizing the Argument

Each of the following is a truncated version of a real reading passage that has appeared on a past LSAT. Give yourself one minute per passage. Your goal is to correctly identify the two sides of the argument.

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