

Chapter 1

of

Reading Comprehension

Part 1: Change How You Read

Reading Comprehension

Overview



Why Study Reading Comprehension?

I already know what reading comprehension is. What can this book do for me?

We strongly suspect that you already know how to read! Not only that, but your reading comprehension has probably been tested many times before, starting in elementary school and continuing on through the SAT and now 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 respond to written information in a time-efficient manner. Of course, these are also skills you'll need as a law student and as a lawyer.

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. Terry is an electrical engineer. She has been working in a niche industry for years, but it's very easy for her to understand and evaluate articles on engineering concepts that fall outside of her specialty, even when she isn't familiar with the specific terminology involved. She's recently become interested in the stock market and has been trying to read up on it. However, she's having a lot of trouble understanding and organizing the investment advice that she's read in various financial publications.
2. Chad is a freshman in high school. He has mastered the art of instant messaging, sending and receiving hundreds of messages a day. He filters and organizes them easily and is able to weave together a cohesive understanding of the lives of his friends. However, when he tries to organize the personalities and events of 18th-century Europe from his history textbook, he'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 can quickly make sense of complex texts on abstract literary theory, but in this new format she is unable to catch subtleties 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, our purpose for reading, and our overall interest and focus level.

For a few of you, the strengths you possess as readers already align with the skills tested by LSAT Reading Comprehension. In other words, your ability to read and comprehend LSAT passages is similar

to Chad's ability to organize and synthesize his 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 have to do much more than simply read a bunch of LSAT passages. We must work to become intimately familiar with the characteristics of LSAT passages and then refine our reading approach in response to these characteristics. In other words, we must expand our sweet spot to *include* the LSAT.

Your Path to Success

Do not believe those who say that you cannot improve your Reading Comprehension. You can, and if you do the work, you will. This book is designed to lead you through that process, one step at a time. If you are not already an "LSAT reader," you will become one by the time we are through. That said, 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. 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 you to read *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, both your interaction with the text and your interpretation of the play would be greatly affected by the perspective that you adopted.

We'll spend a good deal of time in this book developing an advantageous perspective from which to read any LSAT passage: the perspective of a law student. We'll use the image of a scale to represent this perspective. Thinking in terms of the scale provides a clear and consistent approach to each passage and makes it easier to quickly recognize and organize the most important information.

2. Develop an effective routine.

Once you have your perspective set, you will want to develop a strong technique that you can bring to bear on each and every passage. Although the subject matter on the LSAT can range widely, you can create a consistent and successful reading experience for yourself by practicing the active reading techniques outlined in chapters 3 and 4.

3. Understand what the test is asking you to do.

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, or (3) **synthesize** several parts of the text to come to a new understanding. It's important that you recognize your task in each case and that you know how to find support for each kind of question.

We'll spend chapter 5 looking at 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. On a harder problem, the right answer may be far from ideal and impossible to predict. 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 test writers create those incorrect choices.

In chapter 6, we'll examine the common characteristics of incorrect answers and learn to use our understanding of these characteristics to work wrong-to-right, eliminating bad choices and narrowing the field down to those answers that are worthy of another look.

5. Prepare to handle any situation.

After you've learned our core techniques in the first six chapters, we'll take a brief "intermission" to examine your progress and talk about timing strategy. After that, you will get a chance to apply everything you've learned to a wide range of passages, and you'll receive guidance on how to handle extreme situations—the time crunch, the passage that confounds your expectations, or the passage that looks like it's in another language!

With all these tools in hand, you'll be ready to dominate LSAT Reading Comprehension. Before we get started with the process of expanding your reading sweet spot, 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, about one-quarter of the total scored 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 if you're facing a "real" section while you're facing it.

Scoring

Every 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 1 point for that question. If you answer the question incorrectly, or if you fail to answer the question, you will be credited 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 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 and on statistical data from past LSAT exams.

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

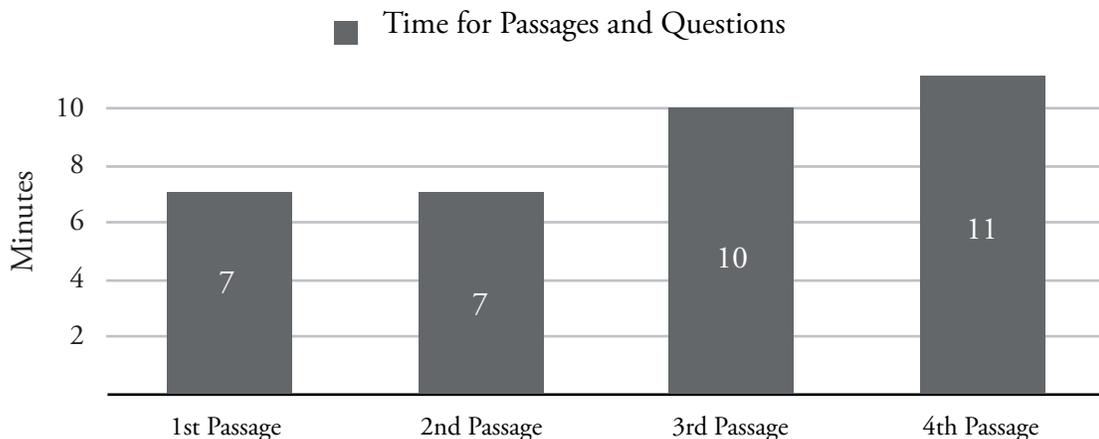
Every Reading Comprehension section contains four passages. You can expect to see one passage per section in each of the following four subject areas:

Subject Area	Expect to see passages on...
LAW	legal history, international law, legal theory, social ramifications of law
NATURAL SCIENCES	evolution, biology, chemistry, physics, agriculture
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 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 with 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. If you'd like to do a little outside reading to boost your background knowledge in a particular area, you can take a look at the reading list we provide in your online Student Center (go to page 7 for access instructions). However, you will probably want to devote most of your precious study time to LSAT-specific materials.

Pacing

You will have a total of 35 minutes to complete the four passages. This works out to an average of 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 in order from easier to harder, but this is a rough approximation at best. Every section is different, and so is every reader! We recommend a flexible approach to timing—we'll go over this in detail in chapter 7—but here's a sample of what your time usage might look like on a typical Reading Comprehension section:



Within each passage, you will generally need to spend more time answering the questions than reading the text, but the precise ratio will depend on your own personal style and your particular strengths and weaknesses. There are no absolutes when it comes to timing. Use this book and your own practice to get a sense of how to allocate time between reading the text and answering the questions.

Let's get to work.

Chapter *of* 2

Reading Comprehension

Reading for the Scale



Getting Familiar

2

Read the following passage untimed, notating 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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Identifying the Scale

Defining Your Perspective: Read Like a Law Student

We'll get back to the passage on the previous page soon enough, but first, let's fast-forward into the future. Imagine yourself as a law student, a legal scholar. There you sit, poring over 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 tasks for each case that you read can be thought of in very simple terms: (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 lawyers or judges to successfully prepare for a case, they must understand the two sides of a central argument in a clear and specific manner. This understanding creates the framework through which they 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. Though LSAT Reading Comprehension passages vary a good deal in terms of subject matter, they are rather consistent when it comes to structure. Most LSAT passages provide exactly what you'd expect as a law student: information about two sides of an argument and supporting evidence for one or both sides.

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

So how does a law student read a passage efficiently? Because the typical passage is organized around an argument, your top priority should be to identify, in a clear and specific way, the two sides of this argument. The image of a balance scale is a useful way to visualize how the competing sides of the argument are presented in the passage. Let's look at a few examples:

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



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.

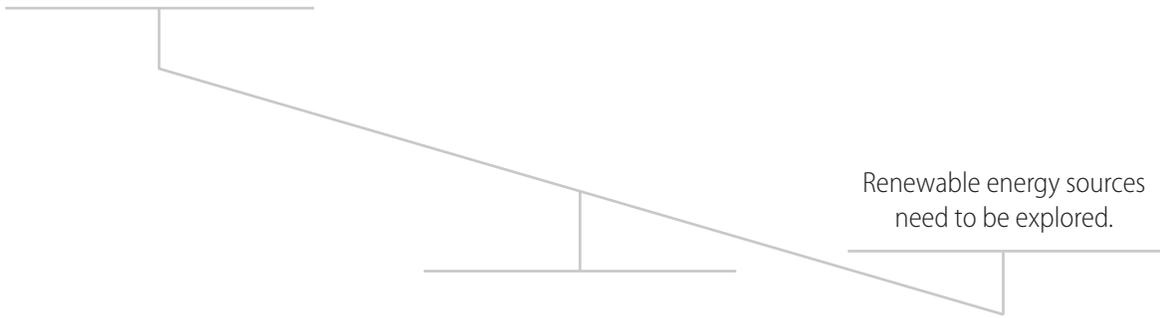


As you can see, we are adding a tilt to the scale to indicate which side the passage discusses more. This tilt does not indicate which side the author agrees with, only which side receives more attention in the passage.

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.



Although you won't want to take the time to draw a scale on your paper during the LSAT, the idea of a scale provides a simple way to organize the contents of each passage as you read. *Everything* in the passage exists in order to inform the sides of the argument in some way. By identifying the scale, you will have a structure on which to hang all of the other elements of the passage.

However, not every passage will have a clear scale. For instance, you will occasionally come across a passage that is strictly informative and contains no argument at all. Think of this as a refreshing break from all that arguing! We'll get into more detail on these passages in chapter 10, but for now, let's focus on the scale, which is going to serve you well on the vast majority of passages. Even when there is no argument, simply taking a moment to recognize that fact may give you an advantage when it comes to answering the questions.

The Challenges of Identifying the Scale

Now that we've defined our reading perspective, let's revisit the Getting Familiar passage from the start of the chapter and see if we can identify the scale.

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:

Great! The passage immediately contrasts intellectual authority and institutional authority. But we have to be careful—we can't simply put these two kinds of authority on either side of the scale. They are contrasting ideas, but we have yet to be introduced to a debate.

It's important not to be in too much of a rush to finalize our scale. We will frequently need to fine-tune or overhaul the scale as we read on. In fact, trying to figure out the scale as we read is an important technique for staying alert throughout the passage!

Passage:

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

Comment:

We don't have an argument yet, but we seem to be narrowing the scope of the discussion. Do legal systems have intellectual or institutional authority? They are institutions, but apparently they "aspire" to intellectual authority. It's kind of strange for legal systems to have aspirations! So far, the author hasn't presented one side of a debate.

Passage:

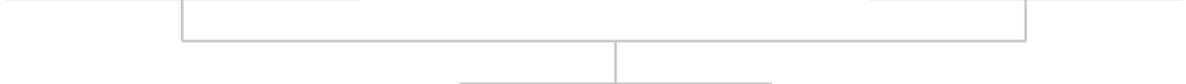
One judge goes so far as to claim that courts are merely passive vehicles for applying the intellectual authority of the law and possess no coercive powers of their own.

Comment:

There we go—a concrete opinion: one judge claims that courts apply intellectual authority and have no institutional authority. Maybe we have one side of the scale?

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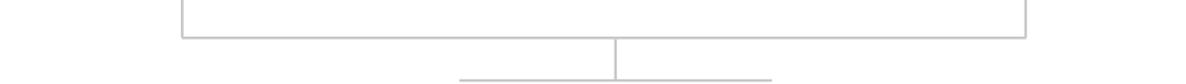
Courts apply intellectual
authority only.



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

Now that we have noted one opinion, it's not too surprising to see that someone else holds the opposite opinion. Now we have the two sides of an argument, so it feels pretty safe to set up our scale like this:

Courts apply intellectual
authority only.



Courts apply institutional
authority only.

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. Did you note a central argument? If not, what did you focus on? Note that we have not finished reading the passage, and our scale might change by the end (hint, hint), so don't worry if you included ideas that aren't captured by the above scale; we'll come back to that a little later in the chapter.

In the meantime, let's get some practice reading for the scale.

DRILL IT: Identifying the Scale

Each of the following is a truncated version of a Reading Comprehension passage from a past LSAT. Your goal is to correctly identify the two sides of the argument.

2

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