

CRITICAL READING STRATEGIES

SECTION 2

The Reading Section on the SSAT doesn't only test whether you are able to understand a passage. The section also test whether you are able to read **critically**, which means examining and interpreting what the passage means as a whole. This means that you should look not only for the facts of the passage, but also what the author is saying about those facts and how the author is saying it.

For every passage you read, ask yourself:

1. What are the author's **topics**, or the key details being discussed in this passage?
2. What is the author saying about these topics, or what is the **main point** of the passage?
3. What is the author's **purpose** in this passage?

In this section, we'll discuss how to go about answering these questions. We'll take a look at several strategies that will build your critical reading skills and help you become a more active reader for the SSAT. Because you have a unique learning style, some of these strategies might work better for you than others. Identify the strategies that help you the most, and practice using these for each new passage you read.

UNDERSTANDING THE PASSAGE

Your first step to understand the passage is to identify the basic facts that the author is discussing. As you read, stop yourself after each paragraph and take the time to mentally **summarize** the basic facts that you have read. Summarizing these basic facts **in your own words** is important because it allows you to prove to yourself that you have really understood what the passage is saying. The questions on the SSAT might also ask you to recognize concepts from the passage in slightly different words, so you can't be tied down to the exact words that the author uses.

THE 5 W'S

What is the best way to quickly summarize the passage? You may have heard about the **5 w's**: “who,” “what,” “where,” “when,” and “why.” As you read, ask yourself these five questions:

1. **Who** is involved in this passage? If the passage is fiction, look for the characters and the person telling the story. If the passage is nonfiction, look for any people being discussed and think about who might be writing this passage.
2. **What** is being discussed in this passage? Look for the major concepts in each section of the passage.
3. **Where** are the events in this passage taking place? If the passage is fiction, where is the story taking place? If it is nonfiction, look for any important places that are being discussed.
4. **When** are the events in the passage taking place? If this passage is fiction, can you guess when the story might be taking place? If the passage is nonfiction, look for any clues that might tell you the dates of the events taking place. Also see if you can guess when the author might have written the passage.
5. **Why** is the information in this passage important? In other words, how are the ideas in the passage connected, and what purpose or main point is the author illustrating with all of these details? We'll discuss this in greater detail in the next section.

KEY WORDS

As you read, underline the **key words** that answer these questions in the passage. Be an **active reader** and read with your pencil! Underlining as you read will improve your concentration and keep you focused on the most important information in the passage. Identify whether the words you underline answer the questions “who,” “what,” “where,” “when,” or “why.”

As you read, also pay close attention to how the author connects information within the passage. Underline any **transitional words** or phrases that the author uses to move from one idea to another. The author might use words like “additionally,” “furthermore,” or “consequently” to show how one idea follows from or supports another. She might use words like “but,” “yet,” or “however” to show how one idea contrasts with another.

Take a look at the example passage below. What key words would you underline to answer the questions “who,” “what,” “where,” “when,” and “why”? What other transitional words would you underline? You might try something like this: