Reading Comprehension

Many questions on the GRE will ask you to read a passage and to answer questions based on your reading. Don’t waste time carefully reading the whole passage the first time you see it! You’re reading to earn points, not to paraphrase the writer’s argument.

Reading Comprehension questions may be 1 to 6 paragraphs long and may be followed by 1 to 6 questions. Reading Comprehension questions can have good answers and better answers. Don’t select one answer until you’ve considered all of them.

The Questions

- Reading Comprehension questions come in three formats:
  - Multiple Choice: one right answer
  - Multiple Choice: more than one right answer
  - Text Selection: highlight the part of the text that answers the question

- Reading Comprehension questions come in three types:
  - Recognition (the answer is explicitly in the reading)
  - Reasoning (the answer is not explicitly in the reading and must be inferred)
  - Vocabulary

Your Approach

- Use your scratch paper: write down ABCDE and cross the corresponding answers off as you eliminate them. This strategy is especially important for negative questions (“Which of these is not…”).

- Skim the passage first to find the main idea.
  - read the first and last sentences of the passage.
  - read the first and last sentences of each paragraph
  - jot down a few words that express
    - the main idea
    - the kind of writing it is: explaining? arguing? problem-posing?
    - the author’s point of view

- Analyze the question and reword it so it tells you what you’re looking for—you might start with “what” or “why.” Reword negative questions as positive questions and cross answers that fit them off on your scratch paper.

Example: “The passage states that Jordan did all of the following EXCEPT…”
Rewording: Which of these did Jordan do?
If it asks about a specific word or idea in the passage,
- Skim the text until you see a keyword from the question and then start reading carefully about four lines before that word. Read until about four lines after.
- Predict an answer to the question before you look at the choices.

If it asks a broader question,
- Reread the passage carefully to find the answer.
- If you can predict an answer to the question before you look at the choices, great; more often, you’ll move straight to the answer choices.

- Read the answers and eliminate any that you can.

- Choose the remaining answer closest to your prediction and go on.

Be careful!

- In reading questions, pay careful attention to the number of concepts you’re being asked about. If the question mentions two concepts, eliminate any answer that applies to only one—and vice-versa.
- Pay close attention to words like must, every, all, each, totally, always, least, except, and not, and avoid all over-general answer choices.
- Readings require no outside knowledge, so don’t worry about technical terms you don’t know. Most other readers don’t know them either, and the questions won’t be about them.
- Watch out for (and eliminate) answer choices that include elements not specifically mentioned in the passage.
Practice Test: Reading Comprehension

First Passage

Many Iranian Americans, whether they are immigrants or American born, identify themselves as being of Persian heritage. This descriptor is a frequent cause for confusion among non-Persians who know the country as Iran and understand Persia as an antiquated name for the empire that encompassed part of Iran as well as parts of modern-day Pakistan and Afghanistan. Opponents of the term argue that because some Afghani and Pakistani groups refer to themselves as being of Persian heritage, the term loses meaning as a signifier of nationality. However, critics argue that just as the English language recognizes “Spain” rather than “Espana,” English speakers should refer to the country as Persia, and not as Iran, which is the Persian translation of the country’s name.

1. The author is primarily concerned with

   A. arguing that the English usage of descriptors of nationality should reflect usage within the native languages of the countries in question.
   B. clarifying how the fall of the Persian Empire has influenced the terminology that modern citizens of Iran use to define their nationality.
   C. distinguishing among three groups that use the same term to describe their national identities.
   D. explaining two opposing positions in an argument about the use of a descriptor of national identity.
   E. persuading readers that in order for the term Persian to have a clear relationship to nationality, only Iranians, not Afghanis or Pakistanis, should use the term.

2. Based on the information in the passage, which of the following individuals might describe themselves as Persian?

   A. an Afghani-born woman who is a naturalized citizen of Iran
   B. an American man born in the United States to Iranian immigrant parents
   C. an American woman of English descent who has worked in Pakistan for 15 years

3. According to the passage, the ancient Persian Empire

   A. covered parts of modern-day Pakistan and Iran, and all of modern-day Afghanistan
   B. covered the entirety of the modern-day nations of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran
   C. covered parts of modern-day Afghanistan and Pakistan, and all of modern-day Iran
   D. covered all of modern-day Iran and Afghanistan, and parts of modern-day Pakistan
   E. covered parts of the modern-day nations of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran
Second Passage

For each of questions 4-6, select one answer choice.

It would then be expected that a novel by a figure as prominent as W.E.B. DuBois would attract the attention of literary critics. Additionally, when the novel subtly engages the issue of race, as DuBois’ *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911) does, it would be a surprise not to encounter an abundance of scholarly work about that text. But though valuable scholarship has examined DuBois’ political and historical thought, his novels have received scant historical attention. Perhaps DuBois the novelist must wait his turn behind DuBois the philosopher, historian, and editor. But what if the truth lies elsewhere: what if his novels do not speak to current concerns?

4. Which of the following can be inferred from the passage regarding DuBois’ *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*?

   A. The lack of attention devoted to *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* can be attributed to the fact that it was DuBois’ first novel.
   B. Among DuBois’ novels, *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* is unusual in that it has received scant attention from scholars.
   C. *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* has at least one feature that would typically attract the attention of literary scholars.
   D. *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*, given its subtle exploration of race, is probably the best novel written by DuBois.
   E. Much of the scholarly work that has focused on *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* has been surprisingly critical of it.

5. In the fourth sentence (“Perhaps DuBois . . . editor.”), the author of the passage is most likely suggesting that

   A. scholars will find that DuBois’ novels are more relevant to current concerns than is his work as philosopher, historian, and editor.
   B. more scholarly attention will be paid to *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* than to DuBois’ other novels.
   C. Du Bois’ novels will come to overshadow his work as philosopher, historian, and editor.
   D. Du Bois’ novels may eventually attract greater scholarly interest than they have to date.
   E. it will be shown that DuBois’ work as philosopher, historian, and editor had an important influence on his work as novelist.
6. Which of the following best describes the central issue with which the passage is concerned?

A. The perfunctoriness of much of the critical work devoted to DuBois’ novels.
B. The nature of DuBois’ engagement with the issue of race in *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*.
C. Whether DuBois’ novels are of high quality and relevant to current concerns.
D. The degree of consideration that has been given to DuBois’ novels, including *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*.
E. The relationship between DuBois the novelist and DuBois’ the philosopher, historian, and editor.

**Third Passage**

When marine organisms called phytoplankton photosynthesize, they absorb carbon dioxide dissolved in seawater, potentially causing a reduction in the concentration of atmospheric carbon dioxide, a gas that contributes to global warming. However, phytoplankton flourish only in surface waters where iron levels are sufficiently high. Martin therefore hypothesized that adding iron to iron-poor regions of the ocean could help alleviate global warming.

While experiments subsequently confirmed that such a procedure increases phytoplankton growth, field tests have shown that such growth does not significantly lower atmospheric carbon dioxide. When phytoplankton utilize carbon dioxide for photosynthesis, the carbon becomes a building block for organic matter; but the carbon leaks back into the atmosphere when predators consume the phytoplankton and respire carbon dioxide.

**For the following question, consider each of the choices separately and select all that apply.**

7. It can be inferred from the passage that Martin’s hypothesis includes which of the following elements?

A. A correct understanding of how phytoplankton photosynthesis utilizes carbon dioxide
B. A correct prediction about how the addition of iron to iron-poor waters would affect phytoplankton growth
C. An incorrect prediction about how phytoplankton growth would affect the concentration of atmospheric carbon dioxide.

8. It can be inferred that the author of the passage mentions predators (line 10) primarily in order to

A. help explain why Martin’s hypothesis is incorrect
B. identify one effect of adding iron to iron-poor waters
C. indicate how some carbon dioxide is converted to solid organic matter
D. help account for differences in the density of phytoplankton between different regions of the ocean
E. point out a factor that was not anticipated by the scientists who conducted the field tests mentioned in the passage.
Fourth Passage

In a recent study, David Cressy examines two central questions concerning English immigration to New England in the 1630’s: what kinds of people immigrated and why? Using contemporary literary evidence, shipping lists, and customs records, Cressy finds that most adult immigrants were skilled in farming or crafts, were literate, and were organized in families. Each of these characteristics sharply distinguishes the 21,000 people who left for New England in the 1630’s from most of the approximately 377,000 English people who had immigrated to America by 1700.

With respect to their reasons for immigrating, Cressy does not deny the frequently noted fact that some of the immigrants of the 1630’s, most notably the organizers and clergy, advanced religious explanations for departure, but he finds that such explanations usually assumed primacy only in retrospect. When he moves beyond the principal actors, he finds that religious explanations were less frequently offered and he concludes that most people immigrated because they were recruited by promises of material improvement.

9. In the passage, the author is primarily concerned with
   A. summarizing the findings of an investigation
   B. analyzing a method of argument
   C. evaluating a point of view
   D. hypothesizing about a set of circumstances
   E. establishing categories

For the following question, consider each of the choices separately and select all that apply.

10. The passage indicates that Cressy would agree with which of the following statements about the organizers among the English immigrants to New England in the 1630s?
   A. Some of them offered a religious explanation for their immigration.
   B. They did not offer any reasons for their immigration until some time after they had immigrated.
   C. They were more likely than the average immigrant to be motivated by material considerations.

11. Select the sentence that provides Cressy’s opinion about what motivated English immigrants to go to New England in the 1630s.

12. In the context in which it appears, “primacy” (line 11) most nearly means
   A. verifiability
   B. supremacy
   C. honesty
   D. piety
   E. visibility