

HOW TO ACE THE READING SECTION IN NO TIME

Reading probably takes the cake as one of the most important skills men in modern-day society will ever have to master, the absorption of knowledge via the medium of literature. It is this skill that may be tested in various examinations of English ability and in many formats, coming in all such varieties as paragraph filling, header matching, and more. To this end, we present several reading tips which may enable you to achieve better results in your future pursuits.

I. TIPS

1. Skimming:

Skimming is a step you should always take before reading any article of factual or practical narrative. Skimming uses the same type of skill as scanning but is mentally different. Elaborating on that, in scanning, you know what you are looking for while in skimming, you don't.

Since you barely have any idea about what you are looking for while skimming, prepare yourself by reading the title, source, author, and picture: then question yourself, -- who, what, when, and where is this likely to be mainly about. This should be done in only less than two minutes before you start skimming the questions. You needn't study all the text in detail, but try to understand and extract information quickly

Skim words like nouns and verbs, exact names of people, places, things, ideas, numbers, and linking words such as "therefore", "whenever", "until", "because", and "instead", to clue you into the how and the why.

You shouldn't go deep into the details of the text as this may take up a lot of time.

From experience, I used to do reading exercises without skimming and it caused me a lot of trouble trying to figure out the main idea of the passage, which resulted in me lacking time to do the other sections of the tests at times. Skimming is a difficult skill to effectively utilize so it most likely won't be acquired overnight, but it'll be very valuable once you master it.

2. Answering Process

Generally, after reading the passage, you should get the gist of what each paragraph talks about and what ideas are brought up in those paragraphs. And questions usually correspond to those paragraphs.

Now, to answer a question, first ask yourself what the interrogative component of the question is: what is the question asking? From there, you should soon have an idea as to where to look for evidence for the answer, and then, you can verify your answer.

Sometimes, in harder reading sections, especially in English Olympiads, you won't be able to figure out where to look for the answer to your question: in this case, it's best to skim through the passage again quickly.

Finally, and this is a habit I acquired after long-term involvement with English Olympiads, I usually skim through the passage again after choosing an answer to make sure that I'm not missing anything. This also helps with refreshing your understanding of the passage, reminding you of where things are.

3. Time management

Time management is vital on IELTS tests, and even more so during English Olympiads. Here are a few tips and heuristics you should know:

- Don't dawdle on questions where you're ambivalent between two answers. A lot of the time, you won't even be able to make up your mind on which option is correct. It's better to spend this time on other parts of the test.

- On certain sections, it's best to leave double-checking until after finishing those sections. An example is the paragraph fill section of English Olympiads, a portion of the test where a passage has had several paragraphs removed and you need to find the correct order to place them back in. In this section (the one I struggled the most with), I once made the fatal mistake of spending too much time rearranging paragraph after paragraph and spending too much time I could've used on other parts, for example, the Writing section.

- You should pre-allocate the amount of time you intend to spend on each reading passage and try to stick to that allocation closely.

- A simple but often overlooked trick is to just read faster. I acquired this skill to handle my immense workload during studying for the National Olympiad when my teacher would assign literal stacks of assignments for the class to do. You should learn speed-reading skills as they'll cut down on the amount of time you need to spend doing the reading.

4. Common Mistakes

Some common mistakes when reading are:

- Not noticing the usage of hyperbolics in questions or in answers. You may find that an answer has the right idea but pay close attention as sometimes words like “all”, “every”, or “none” will invalidate your answer.
- Not having enough evidence for an answer. Reading can often be an exercise of finding the most “correct” option. You may find marginal support for certain ideas or answers, especially in abstract and highly complicated texts. But, you should prioritize answers which have more direct and obvious support— inference can only go so far before it becomes wishful thinking
- Disregarding certain options too quickly. Some options may seem “obviously” incorrect very early in the answer selection process, but keep in mind that sometimes false answers also need evidence stating otherwise.
- Not paying attention to keywords. Certain such words may include “not” or “might” which completely change the meaning of a sentence.
- Not eliminating answers when stuck. Mathematically speaking (though this is an article about English reading), the more answers you eliminate, the better your chances are if you, at random, choose an answer. The elimination method requires finding contradictions or lack of evidence for certain answers.

II. COMMON QUESTION TYPES

a. True/False/Not Given questions:

This type of question requires you to fill in True, False, or Not Given for certain statements in the text, using information from the passage.

Sometimes, it’s hard to say whether a statement is False or Not Given, and sometimes the text mentions something tangentially related to a statement that doesn’t agree with the statement but doesn’t completely disagree with it either. In this case, False would be your best bet.

b. Multiple choice:

This is the classic question type we’re all familiar with. Choose either A, B, C, or D. Generally, it helps to find the paragraph to which the question is referring to for the related information.

c. Short answer questions (sentence completion):

In IELTS tests, there exists a question format requiring you to write down words to fill in the gap. The words should come straight from the text, and no inference should be required. Pay close attention to the answer requirements, such as word limits, number limits, etc.

d. Matching headings:

This format requires you to match paragraphs with certain headings. In general, you should pay close attention to certain elements of a paragraph to help you with this. Firstly, the topic sentence is a major point of interest. If the topic sentence of a paragraph is encapsulated in meaning by a heading, then there is a high probability that the heading is the right one.

In heading matching, it's extremely plausible you might be entirely sure of the heading of a paragraph. You should skip it in this case and hopefully eliminate the option later.

III. STUDY TIPS

a. Vocabulary builders:

It's almost futile to have all the reading skills in the world if you don't have the prerequisite vernacular for the elucidation of discourse in texts. There are 3 stages to building new vocabulary:

1. Acquisition:

This is the first stage of learning new vocabulary. It is in this stage that you first encounter a new word to add to your vocabulary. In order to acquire new words, you must first expose yourself to the word in context, i.e., in films, literature, or on YouTube. Exposure will be your best friend here.

Some tools which might help you are Anki, which utilizes spaced repetition to help you memorize your words; Theasaurus.com, which may teach you a new way to say an old thing; and simply watching English YouTube Videos.

2. Passive Vocabulary Stage:

After enough exposure, the word goes into your passive vocabulary, meaning that in future encounters with the word, you'll know what it means, but you won't be using it actively in your writing or speaking. It's much easier to get into this stage than starting to actively utilize your words.

It is especially important that you know a lot of words as reading tests may throw at your countless unique permutations of letters.

3. Active Vocabulary Stage:

In this stage, you will start using the words you know in situations that necessitate them. Writing often will help you refresh your memory of these words.

b. Test Practice

The best way to learn is by doing. Do practice tests of the real thing (and monitor the time) to help you get a feel for the test, the timing, and everything else. In general, it's going to be a lot harder in the test room when the stakes are high and whatever you do will determine your fate.

Hopefully, some of the tips mentioned in this article will help you to achieve your goals, whatever they may be. Now, until next time, TGB out!

