



The BIG Secret to SHSAT and SAT Reading Exams

The answers to reading problems are 100% objective like $2 + 2 = 4$ in mathematics, and the answer can be determined by learning the rules of the test. Most students never learn the rules and, instead, approach the SHSAT or SAT like an English exam in class, which does not reward the same classroom approaches. The standardized exam is “evidence-based” which means students must read the text literally -- far more literally than they are accustomed to doing. Even inference questions and main idea questions must have evidence to justify every part of the answer choice exactly. Pause and think about that carefully -- every part...exactly. In fact, the SHSAT and SAT reading exams write inference questions in a way to deceive students and lure them into making subjective interpretations that seem natural. Many answer choices will provide rational, almost seemingly obvious interpretations or judgment calls based on the text, but these options are designed to trap students. The correct answer to an SHSAT or SAT reading question can never be based on a subjective interpretation. Otherwise, the test will be open to challenge and cannot be valid. As a result, test designers thoroughly review all questions to make sure there is a single objectively correct answer based on the text. If you ever feel the correct answer might hinge on this interpretation or that and two answers are possible, then it is you who are mistaken. Trained test takers will realize they missed the relevant text, and they will instead look to find the objectively correct result. The big secret trained test takers know is the following:

Every correct answer to an SHSAT reading problem either...

1. **restates** the relevant text provided in the passage or
2. **provides an exact example** of whatever is described in the text.

This realization will most likely change your approach to SHSAT reading. It may be a relief for many who shudder at the prospect of being able to offer insights into passages equal to or better than the A+ English students in their class. For others, the rigid mechanical process that results may be a disappointment. In either case, trained test takers on the SHSAT will focus on the answer choices that restate or demonstrate the text in the passage without missing any part of the relevant text or being off by even a single word. Trained test takers learn to apply this literal evidence-based reading approach religiously without exception. They learn to identify the subtle traps in the test and avoid the mistakes of sometimes highly intelligent, but untrained test takers. In essence, even the students who excel at math have the skills in place to excel in reading with the proper training, and many will ultimately find reading as easy and objective as $2 + 2 = 4$. Let's see some examples of this secret in action. The following is a snippet of text from the SAT, but the approach is the same.

"We have an understanding. Please don't judge my candidacy by the unseemliness of this proposal. I ask **directly** because the use of a go-between takes much time. Either method comes down to the same thing: a matter of parental approval."

As used in line ..., "directly" most nearly means

- A) frankly.
- B) confidently.
- C) without mediation.
- D) with precision

Each answer choice is a possible synonym for “directly” in an appropriate context. The question phrase “most nearly” suggests that a level of judgment or interpretation will be required to differentiate between equally valid choices. That is not the case. The text indicates “directly” is the alternative to the phrase “go-between” in the same sentence and must mean “without a go-between.” Only answer choice C “without mediation” restates the text. It is the correct answer.

The following is a similar question type, but the text demonstrates rather than restates the description in the correct answer choice. The relevant text is:

“Lady Carlotta stepped out on to the platform of the small wayside station and took a **turn** or two up and down its uninteresting length, to kill time till the Line train should be pleased to proceed on its way.”

In line..., “turn” most nearly means

- A) slight movement.
- B) change in rotation.
- C) short walk.
- D) course correction.

The text, in this case, is an example of the correct answer. Lady Carlotta is stepping onto a platform and traveling up and down its length over the course of time in the text of the passage. “Stepping, up and down, to kill time” do not depict a slight movement, rotation, or course correction. Each of these is an instantaneous event rather than up and down movement over time, and none of them indicate stepping. The example in the text can only demonstrate a short walk, answer C because only a short walk incorporates all the elements of the text in the example.

Let’s see an example from the SHSAT. The relevant section of the passage is shown below.

“For centuries before trading with Europe, the Swahili had sailed the African coast in small, seaworthy boats of their own design. They were expert navigators, and their knowledge of the dangerous coastal waters enabled them to expand their influence along 3,000 kilometers of East African coastline. In this region, known as the Swahili corridor, the Swahili traded salt, cloth, and iron products for a wide range of goods from groups living in the African interior.

In the ninth century, the Swahili began also trading with Persian Gulf merchants, who in turn traded with China. The exchanges involved Chinese pottery—discovered in recent East African coastal excavations—for African goods, particularly ivory. In the tenth century, a new trade sprang up as Muslim traders from the Red Sea came to East Africa seeking African gold, ivory, and crystals to sell to Mediterranean Europe. They found the Swahili trading network already in place. For the goods they sought, the Muslims offered not only money but technical advice...”

First, let’s review a “Little Picture/Detail” question. In this type of question, the prompt is asking the reader to find the detail or fact from the relevant text in the passage.

Who were the Swahilis’ first trading partners?

- A. the Chinese
- B. European countries

- C. other African societies
- D. Red Sea merchants
- E. Persian Gulf merchants

A careful reading of the text indicates the Swahili expanded their influence along the East African coastline centuries before trading with Europe (10th century A.D.). In this region, they traded with the African interior. The correct answer choice, “other African societies,” restates the text.

Let’s tackle an inference question.

What was most important in enabling the Swahili to establish their trade along the East African coast?

- A. large holdings of gold and ivory
- B. knowledge of the coastal waters
- C. ability to trade with European countries
- D. knowledge of European art
- E. possession of goods from China

The keywords “most important” in the text suggest the test taker has to make a judgment that requires the student to differentiate between the subjective idea of important and unimportant. Furthermore, he or she must do it well enough to judge grades of importance and select the answer choice that displays the greatest amount of the attribute “important.” Nonsense! If you want to excel on SHSAT reading and SAT reading for that matter, avoid the tendency to make these kinds of interpretations. Focus only on the text and find the answer that restates the text in all its points or provides an example. See the following relevant sentence from the passage.

“They were expert navigators, and their knowledge of the dangerous coastal waters enabled them to expand their influence along 3,000 kilometers of East African coastline.”

Answer choice B, knowledge of the coastal waters (enabled the Swahili to establish their trade route), restates the text in the passage. The correct answer is objective and obtainable without any interpretation or clever insight. If you find yourself wavering between two possible answer choices, then remember one of the choices is not possible. You have missed the relevant text.

Last but not least, let’s again test our evidence-based reading against a Big Picture/Main Idea question on the SHSAT. The main claim of an essay or passage, the thesis, is stated in the first paragraph and summarized in the last paragraph. I suspect this idea is not new and your writing instructors have repeatedly conveyed the concept to every student during writing class. Let’s take advantage of that knowledge from writing class. Let’s take the same SHSAT passage from above and show the relevant text.

Paragraph 1:

“The tenth century a.d. was a period of cultural and artistic revival in the European countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea. The magnificent works of art and architecture of that period used, among other materials, African gold, ivory, and rock crystals. But most of these materials would have been unavailable to European artists without a sophisticated trading network established along the east coast of Africa, from present-day Somalia to northern Mozambique.”

Final Paragraph:

“The Swahili trading network did more than help the circulation of international products throughout Europe, Asia, and Africa. Since the Swahili traded with varied African societies, from herders and farmers to hunters, they became a source of exchange for both goods and information within the region. Their network brought both economic advancement and a degree of cultural unity among the people of East Africa.”

Which of the following best tells what this passage is about?

- A. the role played by the Swahili in international trade in the ninth and tenth centuries
- B. the Swahili contribution to a revival of African art and culture
- C. the effect of the Swahili traders on the art of tenth-century Europe
- D. the sailing and boat-building skills of the Swahili traders
- E. how the Swahili traders used their wealth to develop their homeland

The text from the end of the first paragraph throughout the final paragraph provides repeated examples of answer choice A: the role played by the Swahili in international trade in the ninth and tenth centuries. Notice how answer A describes every part of the examples demonstrated by the text. The text examples indicate the time frame in answer A -- “The tenth century a.d.” “The role played by the Swahili in international trade” from answer A is evidenced by the text examples -- “these materials would have been unavailable to European artists without a sophisticated trading network established along the east coast of Africa.” European trade is international, and the East African trading network refers to the Swahilis’ trade network. The passage text provides an additional example of international trade. “The Swahili trading network did more than help the circulation of international products throughout Europe, Asia, and Africa.” Option A restates all relevant points in the text.

Hopefully, at this point, you are beginning to better understand the big secret of the SAT and SHSAT reading exams. The reading exam is not subjective. It is every bit as objective as the math exam if test takers understand the standardized reading exam design. Evidence-based reading is a flashy way to say the answer to every reading question is unique and accessible directly from the text, no creative interpretation required. Every correct answer must be either a complete restatement of the relevant text in the passage or an example of the description provided -- or, in reverse order, the passage provides the exact example demonstrating the description provided in the answer choice as we just reviewed in the last Main Idea question.

But wait! Many of you may point out that, up until this point, we have only covered the correct answers and demonstrated each must restate or demonstrate the literal text in the passage. How can we be certain other answer choices don’t do the same? For example, the last passage begins with a discussion of the artistic and cultural revival in Europe. Why isn’t the correct main idea answer choice C, which cites “the effect of the Swahili traders on the art of tenth-century Europe”? Is that not also in the text? The inquiry raises an excellent question and a valid point, which provides the perfect transition into the next lesson focused on analyzing the incorrect answer choices. Paltry attention to analyzing wrong answers is one of the main reasons why so many test prep booklets and even the official answer explanations fail to help students who want to learn from their mistakes. It isn’t enough to understand how the correct answer works. Any real analysis that will help students learn from their mistakes and improve their scores will also explain why the other choices do not work. Notice the answer explanation provided in the official handbook.

Option B may seem correct; however, the term “revival” in the passage refers to European, not African culture and art. Options C and D are details. Option E is not mentioned. Option A is the best answer because it gives an excellent summary that is neither too broad nor too detailed.

The official explanation above is not very helpful especially to students who did not get the correct answer. The explanation tells us the correct answer is an excellent summary. That essentially amounts to, “it is correct because it is correct.” But why is it correct? Now that you understand the big secret, you know option A is an excellent summary. It is neither too broad nor too detailed because *the text in the passage demonstrates every part of the description provided in answer A*. As for the student who answered option C, he or she learns only that the answer is a detail. How can that possibly help the student learn from their mistakes and improve? By the way, these types of answer explanations are typical of the SAT College Board official tests also. We mentioned earlier that students, whenever possible, should only train with the official tests developed by the same rules as the actual tests and for the SAT that is the College Board practice exams. However, the answer explanations provided by the College Board are arguably the last place to turn for helpful training advice. They have no interest in explaining their test design and providing you with ways to exploit that design.

Examples like the one above motivated us to change our SHSAT answer explanations to include complete walkthroughs for each question including an analysis of why the wrong answers are incorrect. Analysis of wrong answers is essential to learning how to defeat the SHSAT and other standardized exams. If we haven’t said it before, we will say it now. Analysis of student practice exam results is the most important element of test preparation. Do not skip over this process lightly. It is hard work that yields positive results. Too many students invest their time taking practice exams, yet they fail to improve in many cases because they fail to put effort into understanding the test design and why they make mistakes.

The next lesson will follow immediately on the suggestions in this lesson, but address the identification of wrong answers -- an essential skill to perform well on standardized test reading. Before we progress, I will provide some insight into answer C above. In writing class, your instructor perhaps also taught you to improve introductory paragraphs by use of a hook, a short scenario or scene setting sentence or two at the very beginning that will grab the reader’s attention and lead into the main idea or thesis. Note, this precisely is what the first few sentences achieve.

1. Sentence 1 - Author introduces that 10th century Europe underwent an artistic revival.
2. Sentence 2 - The works of art in that period used specific materials.
3. Sentence 3 - Those materials would not have been available without the Swahili trading network.

Option C, the effect of the Swahili traders on the art of tenth-century Europe, is the hook, not the main idea. Many passages even in the SAT purposely use this technique at the beginning of passages to use one idea as an introduction to a different main idea. It is a writing technique worth recognizing to avoid confusion about main ideas.