

Big Picture Questions in SAT Reading: Strategies and Tips

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Of the many question types on SAT Reading, "big picture" questions are the ones that require the most thorough comprehension of large amounts of text. You'll be asked to discuss and examine the main claim or purpose of a paragraph, passage, or even multiple passages.

But how do you identify these "big picture" questions on SAT Reading? And what are the best ways to approach answering them?

Below, I'll discuss the three primary types of big picture questions you'll encounter on the SAT, along with common ways the SAT will ask you about each. I'll also give you expert SAT Reading strategies to answer these questions, illustrated with examples from real practice questions.

[Secret Bunker Turn Right and My Garden](#) in [The Big Picture](#) by [Amanda Slater](#), used under [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)/Cropped and rotated from original.

Big Picture Questions: A Brief Intro

On SAT Reading, there are three kinds of questions that require you to read large amounts of text and distill them down into answers. At PrepScholar, we call these "big picture" questions.

In contrast to "[little picture](#)" questions that ask for specific details, **big picture questions tend to ask about big ideas found in large chunks of text**, which can be anything from a paragraph or a series of paragraphs up to an entire passage (or multiple passages, if it's a [paired passage](#) question).

Learning to answer these sorts of questions will prove very useful for college or university, where professors will expect you to do exactly this with even more dense and academic writing.

Type 1: Main Point, Perspective, and Author Attitude

On the SAT, you'll rarely get asked questions about the main point of a passage outright like this:

"The main idea of the passage is that the author..."

"Over the course of the passage, the main focus shifts from..."

Instead, questions are far more likely to ask you about the author's attitude or perspective towards something discussed in the passage.

Here are a few examples of ways I've seen these questions asked, all modified from actual SAT questions:

- "This passage is written from the point of view of a..."
- "The author's attitude toward narrative structure is best described as one of..."
- "Which of the following best characterizes Staffaroni's attitude toward 'today's digital technologies' (lines 42-43)?"
- "Which best reflects the perspective of the "narrativists" (line 42) on aleatoric music?"
- "The authors of both passages agree that Valve's *Portal*..."
- "With which of the following statements about the role of music in games would the author most likely agree?"

In some ways, these perspective questions are just inference questions that are only focused around the point of view of the author (or narrator). What makes these questions big picture questions, rather than inference questions, is that **the perspective of the author or narrator inevitably affects what is written in the whole passage.**

Being able to answer these kinds of perspective questions is not only important for your SAT score, but an important skill for you to have going into post-high school life: if you can figure out where someone's coming from and what their attitude is, you can use that to inform how trustworthy you should consider their information.

Type 2: Primary Purpose

These questions ask what's *the* point (vs. what's *a* point, which would

be a detail question).

Is the cited text describing an issue or event? Is it trying to review, inform, prove, contradict, parody, or hypothesize? Primary purpose questions are almost always asked in this way:

"The primary/main purpose of the passage(s)/paragraph/X paragraphs is to..."

On occasion, there's a little variation in the wording:

- "The sixth paragraph (lines 67-68) is primarily concerned with establishing a contrast between..."
- "The passage primarily serves to "

Sometimes questions asking about purpose are function questions, rather than big picture questions; which type of question it is depends on the answer choices. **More specific answer choices** that include information about *what* the point of the paragraph is **indicate a big picture question, while vaguer answer choices** point to questions asking about the paragraph's **function** (what does the paragraph *do*).

For example, if the question was "The primary purpose of the paragraph is to...", answer choices like "analyze a faulty assumption" or "disparage an opposing viewpoint" would indicate this is more of a function question.

If, on the other hand, the answers choices were more like "discuss findings that offer a scientific explanation for the Venus flytrap's closing action," "describe Nawab's various moneymaking ventures," or "convey the passage's setting by describing a place and an object," then it would be safe to assume it is a big picture question.

Type 3: Rhetorical Strategy

Rhetorical strategy questions are more commonly asked about, but not limited to, paired passages. Rather than asking *why* something happens in the passage (an inference question), **these questions ask *how* something happens/happened in the passage(s).**

In contrast to primary purpose questions, which have relatively specific answer choices (eg. "The primary purpose of this paragraph is to...explain what rhetorical strategy questions are"), rhetorical strategy questions sometimes require generalization. Like the answers to primary purpose questions, however, the answers to rhetorical strategy questions are usually in the form of "verb a noun" (or more often, "verbs an X of Y," as in "explaining the appeal of a discredited tradition").

Abstract answer choices can be tricky, because they can require some degree of analogy/inference skill (you have to take the answer choices and see if they apply to the passage). How do you get around this? Answer the question in your own words first, *then* see which answer aligns with yours (we'll show an example later on).

Here are some examples of questions you might be asked that fall into the rhetorical strategy category:

- "Which best describes the overall relationship between Passage 1 and Passage 2?"
- "Which choice identifies a central tension between the two passages?"
- "Which best describes the overall structure of the passage?"

Notice that the wording of some of these questions is similar to that of little picture/detail questions. Again, just as with primary purpose questions, the answer choices are what turn the question into rhetorical strategy.

Here's a specific example:

In the context of each passage as a whole, the questions in lines 25-27 of Passage 1 and lines 67-69 of Passage 2 primarily function to help each speaker

(A) cast doubt on the other's sincerity.

(B) criticize the other's methods.

(C) reproach the other's actions.

(D) undermine the other's argument.

This is a rhetorical strategy question because the answer choices are relatively **abstract**. If the answer choices were more specific (eg "relate Maguire's study of mental athletes to her study of taxi drivers"), then this would be a detail question, and you would need to use little picture skills to find this specific detail in the passage.

A Brief Warning: Big Picture Questions ≠ Function Questions



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Big picture questions are different from function questions because they ask *what* the author said (not asking why the author wrote a thing). The wording of the questions sometimes makes it difficult to clearly see this, so I wanted to hash it out here.

Questions about the author's purpose (function question) ask "why is the author writing this?" rather than "what is the perspective the author is saying/arguing?" (which would be a big picture question).

Questions about the paragraph's function ask "how does this paragraph function?" or "what is the purpose of this paragraph in the context of the passage as a whole?" rather than "The main argument of this paragraph is," "what is the primary purpose of this paragraph" or "The author develops her argument by..." [Read more about what exactly goes into answering SAT](#)

[Reading function questions in this article.](#)

Strategies For Answering Big Picture Questions

Naturally, part of your strategy depends on how you read the passages. **If you have enough time to read each passage all the way through, then you should be trying to figure out the main point and author perspective as you read.** You can do a quick check to see if there will be any questions about it first (usually they're among the first few questions on the passage), but even if there aren't any questions that directly ask you about the main point, knowing it can be helpful in answering other questions (more on that later).

If you read the questions first before going back to the passage, you may be able to get a sense of what the big picture is just by the various questions that are asked—for instance, if all the passages are asking about food in the UK, you can be pretty sure that the main point of the passage isn't going to be about the Mayan calendar. This is also the one case where I **recommend answering detail questions first**—those are much easier to answer with just line numbers, and their answers (as well as the questions themselves) may give you even more clues about the main point/primary purpose/rhetorical strategy of the passage.

If you skim the passage, then attack questions, you should focus on just the key information the first time skimming through and answer the big picture questions first. But how do you know what the key information is? Read on for three strategies to help you out with that.

#1: Check The Introduction and Conclusion

When it comes to nonfiction passages, chances are that if the author's done a good job, the main point and perspective should be clear in the conclusion (if not also in the introduction). This can be true for fiction passages as well, but since having a clear thesis isn't as essential to the construction of a successful piece of fiction, the author doesn't always structure her writing that way.

When finding the main point of a single paragraph, however, this rule gets a little fuzzy, because sometimes there will be direction-changing words in the middle of the paragraph that are essential to understanding the main point. In addition, last/conclusion sentences often try to take the argument a step beyond what has been discussed in the article, placing it in a broader context.

Still, reading the introduction and conclusion can be helpful as a place to start. **If the introduction and conclusion seem to contradict each other, that is a clear sign that you need to go even deeper into the passage/paragraph to find the main point/primary purpose/rhetorical strategy.**

#2: Use Key Words as Clues

If you're looking for key words in a passage or paragraph, it makes sense that you'd want to note where the author says things like "important" or "significant"—those things probably are important (or even significant). What isn't as obvious, however, is that you should also pay attention to words that signal changes of direction to help uncover key information.

Words like "in contrast," "while," "however," and so on, indicate important, contrasting information, while words like "again," "still," and "similarly" indicate the information is the same (or comparable to) what was just written. Spotting key words and reading

the sentences around them can help you get to the meat of the issue and also help you avoid the trap of just reading the first sentence of a paragraph and assuming that's what the paragraph will be about. Let's take a look at this strategy in the context of a sample of my own writing:

This paragraph is excerpted from the paper "‘This was a triumph:’ Narrative and dynamic uses of music in Portal" by Laura Staffaroni (©2013 by Laura Staffaroni). This paper was written as the final assignment for a Research and Materials class.

In general, because *Portal* is a puzzle game, it might be expected to lack a strong narrative; this, however, is not the case. While the gameplay is focused on the solving each level's puzzle, you are also provided with tantalizing bits of story in the form of dialogue spoken to you by GLADoS, the AI directing the "tests." Bits of the story are revealed over the course of the game in this way, picking up with the introduction of secret rooms with writing on the walls and the adorable but deadly turrets.

The beginning sentence seems to start with "*Portal* doesn't have a strong narrative," which might cause you to stop reading—after all, you've found the author's argument, right? **Not so fast!** The word "however" in that sentence should catch your eye, as should the following sentence that starts with "While", because they indicate that something in contrast to the opening statement is being presented.



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Don't just read the first part of a sentence or paragraph and walk away—look out for key words as well!

#3: Answer In Your Own Words First

If you come across a question that asks you a big picture question, **try to formulate the answer using your own words before you look at their answer choices.**

When doing this, it's important that you rely only on what you read in the

passage or paragraph, not on things that *could be* true but aren't supported by the passage. After you've answered the question in your own words, when you go to look at the answer choices you can simply see which one best matches your own answer and choose it.

You must be careful, however, not to oversimplify with this strategy. Remember, the central argument and primary purpose are asking about the specific point the author is making, not a general topic or theme. Also, since you're not being directly scored on your "own word" answers, you should use as few words as possible to write them down—you don't want to waste too much time on something that won't be graded.

Putting SAT Reading Strategies To Use: An Example

Before I set you loose on big picture practice questions, I've written out a walkthrough of an example from an [actual SAT](#) to find the primary purpose of a paragraph.

Here's the relevant paragraph for the purposes of this question (fifth paragraph, lines 45-56 of the passage):

This passage is adapted from Ian King, "Can Economics Be Ethical?" ©2013 by Prospect Publishing.

There is yet another approach: instead of rooting ethics in character or the consequences of actions, we can focus on our actions themselves. From this perspective some things are right, some wrong—we should buy fair trade goods, we shouldn't tell lies in advertisements. Ethics becomes a list of commandments, a catalog of "dos" and "don'ts." When a finance official refuses to devalue a currency because they have promised not to, they are defining ethics this way. According to this approach devaluation can still be

bad, even if it would make everyone better off.

Here's the question:

The main purpose of the fifth paragraph (lines 45-56) is to

(A) develop a counterargument to the claim that greed is good.

(B) provide support for the idea that ethics is about character.

(C) describe a third approach to defining ethical economics.

(D) illustrate that one's actions are a result of one's character.

Where should I start with figuring out the main purpose of the fifth paragraph?

Step 1: Check out the introduction and conclusion (sentences, in this case).

Introduction:

There is yet another approach: instead of rooting ethics in character or the consequences of actions, we can focus on our actions themselves.

Conclusion:

According to this approach devaluation can still be bad, even if it would make everybody better off.

What do these sentences reveal about the main purpose of the paragraph?

My thinking:

Both these sentences call whatever's being discussed in this paragraph an "approach", so the main purpose probably has something to do with whatever this approach is. Since both the intro and conclusion tie back into this approach, maybe the main purpose of the paragraph is to explain it? Not enough information just from this to be sure, though.

Step 2: Look for direction words

The next step is to look within this paragraph for words that indicate the author might be presenting information that either contrasts with or matches what he already wrote about.

Direction words in this paragraph: "yet another", "instead", "even if"

My thoughts:

Wow, there are a lot of direction words in this paragraph, most of them in that first sentence:

"There is yet another approach: instead of rooting ethics in character or the consequences of actions, we can focus on our actions themselves."

So "yet another" is interesting because it implies that there were at least two other approaches before the one described in this paragraph; if it were just one other approach, the author wouldn't bother with the "yet" and would just say "another". The word "instead" also backs this up, because it implies that in previous paragraphs at least one alternate approach was taken. Plus, two alternate approaches (rooting ethics in character and rooting ethics in consequences of actions) are listed in the same sentence.

What about "even if"? Does that add or change anything?

"According to this approach devaluation can still be bad, even if it would

make everybody better off."

Hmm, not much more here. It further fleshes out the idea that doing a thing that some might see as good (devaluation) can be bad under the approach described in this paragraph, I guess.

Step 3: Answer the question in your own words

The final step is to answer the question in my own words before looking at the answer choices.

My thoughts:

The main thing this paragraph talks about is the ethical approach of focusing on actions themselves, rather than on their character or consequences, which means the main purpose of the paragraph is probably something like "describe the action-focused ethics approach?" maybe? let's check how it fits into the rest of the passage to see if that changes everything —nope, that seems pretty accurate.

Here's the question, once more:

The main purpose of the fifth paragraph (lines 45-56) is to

- (A) develop a counterargument to the claim that greed is good.
- (B) provide support for the idea that ethics is about character.
- (C) describe a third approach to defining ethical economics.
- (D) illustrate that one's actions are a result of one's character.

Okay, now that I've gone looked at the first and last sentences, key words, and answered it in my own words, let's consider the answer choices one by

one.

(A) develop a counterargument to the claim that greed is good.

Not really? I guess it kind of has a counterargument to the other two ethics approaches, but it doesn't really say one thing or another about greed being good. Oh and plus there's that thing about this approach seeing devaluation as bad even if it technically is better for everyone, which doesn't seem greedy. I'm going to put this one as a probable nope.

(B) provide support for the idea that ethics is about character.

This one is a definite no—in the very first sentence of the paragraph it says that the approach being discussed in this paragraph is an alternative to ethics being about character ("instead of rooting ethics in character"). And the rest of the paragraph follows through on ethics being about actions, not character.

(C) describe a third approach to defining ethical economics.

*Yep, this is pretty much what this paragraph does. The author talks about "yet another approach" which is at least the third approach based on wording, definitely the third approach based on reviewing the rest of the passage and counting the other approaches mentioned. And this answer lines up with my "answer in my own words" answer, which was "describe the action-focused ethics approach." This answer's certainly more correct than choices **(A)** or **(B)**. I'll double check that the last choice isn't an even better answer, though.*

(D) illustrate that one's actions are a result of one's character.

*For one thing, no, it doesn't do that; for another, isn't that basically the same as **(B)**? I guess not exactly, but either way, it's still wrong. The main*

purpose of this paragraph is to say that in yet another approach, you could say that ethics is about the actions we take. It doesn't say anything about whether or not those actions are a result of one's character in particular.

Looking back over the answers, (C) is clearly the one that discusses the main purpose of this paragraph, which is to talk about "yet another" way to define ethical economics. Boom!

The answer is **(C)**.



[August 25th "The Big Picture We've Done It_ I'm a World Record Holder!"](#) by [Amanda Slater](#), used under [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)/Cropped from original.*Huge*

success!

Try It Out on Your Own!

Below, I've provided three questions on short paired passages from an official, [publicly available SAT practice test](#). As a bonus, these questions also involve paired passages (for more on paired passages, read my article about [how best to attack paired passages on the SAT](#)).

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Questions 1-3 are based on the following passage.

This passage is adapted from Henry W. Blair's statement to the United States Senate during the 1886 "Debate on Woman Suffrage" in Washington, D.C.

There is no escape from it. The discussion has passed so far that among intelligent people who believe in the republican form—that is, free government—all mature men and women have under the same circumstance and conditions the same rights to defend, the same grievances to redress, and, therefore, the same necessity for the exercise of this great fundamental right of all human beings in free society. For the right to vote is the great primitive right. It is the right in which all freedom originates and culminates. It is the right from which all others spring, in which they merge, and without which they fall whenever assailed.

This right makes, and is all the difference between, government by and with the consent of the governed and government without and against the consent of the governed; that is the difference between freedom and slavery. If the right to vote be not that difference, what is?

No, sir. If either sex as a class can dispense with the right to vote, then take it from the strong, and no longer rob the weak of their defense for the benefit of the strong.

It is impossible to conceive of suffrage as a right dependent at all upon such an irrelevant condition as sex. It is an individual, a personal right. It may be withheld by force; but if withheld by reason of sex it is a moral robbery.

But it is said that the duties of maternity disqualify for the performance of the act of voting. It can not be, and I think is not claimed by anyone, that the mother who otherwise would be fit to vote is rendered mentally or morally less fit to exercise this high function in the state because of motherhood. On the contrary, if any woman has a motive more than another person, man or woman, to secure the enactment and enforcement of good laws, it is the mother. Beside her own life, person, and property—to the protection of which the ballot is as essential as to the same rights possessed by man—she has her little contingent of immortal beings to conduct safely to the portals of active life through all the snares and pitfalls woven around them by bad men and bad laws which bad men have made. And she has rightly to prepare them for the discharge of all the duties of their day and generation, including the exercise of the very right denied to their mother.

I appeal to you, Senators, to grant this petition of woman that she may be heard for her claim of right. How could you reject that petition, even were there but one faint voice beseeching your ear? How can you deny the demand of millions who believe in suffrage for women, and who can not be forever silenced, for they give voice to the innate cry of the human heart that justice be done not alone to man, but to that half of this nation which now is free only by the grace of the other. By our action today we indorse, if we do not

initiate, a movement which, in the development of humankind, shall guarantee liberty to all without distinction of sex, even as our glorious Constitution already grants the suffrage to every citizen without distinction of color or race.

#1: The central claim of the passage is that

- (A) the United States Senate should extend suffrage to women.
- (B) both sexes should have all of the same roles and responsibilities.
- (C) members of the Senate wish to enslave women by denying them the vote.
- (D) the female vote will lead to improved laws and better politicians.

#2: The second paragraph is primarily concerned with establishing a contrast between

- (A) the interests of men and the interests of women.
- (B) politics before and after slavery ended.
- (C) governments in different countries.
- (D) having and not having suffrage.

#3: With which of the following statements about the right to vote would the author most likely agree?

- (A) It is unrelated to the protection of other privileges
- (B) It is essential to the preservation of liberty
- (C) It is difficult to institute and execute in society.

(D) It is unnecessary to some social groups.

Answer key (scroll down when ready):

1. A 2. D 3. B

In Conclusion

- Big picture questions require being able to **read through a text and sum up** "what's the point," "what's the author's point of view," or "what does the author do here?"
- Knowing the **answers to these questions can be useful for answering other types of questions**, like function and author technique questions, that rely on you understanding the "big picture" of what's going on in the passage.
- No matter how you approach the passage, use the strategies of **checking the intro/conclusion, looking for key words, and coming up with the answer in your own words** to help you answer big picture questions

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