

Reading comprehension modules

Objectives

1. To familiarize you with the nature of comprehension testing in the CAT and other exams
2. To expose you to the type of passages tested
3. To familiarize you with the type of questions given
4. To enable you to acquire skills necessary for efficient reading
5. To expose you to result-oriented strategies for better comprehension
6. To provide you with adequate practice material to reinforce learnt strategies
7. To enable you to evaluate and monitor your own performance
8. To diagnose and identify areas that need remedial work.
9. To provide guidance for additional reading to compensate for reading deficiencies.
10. To provide you with test taking strategies toward computer adaptive tests.

What follows

- detailed description of the various comprehension question types
- description of the skills tested
- approaches to build up reading skills
- strategies for cracking each of the question types

In the CAT you are presented with 3 – 4 a page or more long passages, each passage followed by 3-5 questions based on their content – either **stated in** or **implied by** the passage

The reading comprehension questions in the verbal sections tests your interpretive, applicative and inferential skills. The passages contain words ranging from **75 words to 300 words**. And these discuss topics from the pure sciences, social sciences and art/literature. Since the reading passages include several different content areas, you will probably be generally familiar with some of the material. However, neither the passages nor the questions assume detailed knowledge of the topics discussed.

What do these passages test

Reading comprehension questions measure your ability to understand, analyse and apply information and concepts presented in written form. All questions are to be answered on the basis of what is **stated or implied** in the reading material, and no specific knowledge of the material is required.

Reading comprehension, therefore evaluates your ability to

- Understand words and statements in the reading passages (questions of this type are not vocabulary questions. These questions test your understanding of and ability to use specialised terms as well as your understanding of the English language. You may also find that questions of this type ask about the overall meaning of the passage).
- Understand the logical relationship between significant points and concepts in the reading passages, for instance such questions may ask you to determine the strong and weak points of an argument or to evaluate the importance of arguments and ideas in a passage.
- Draw inferences from facts and statements in the reading passages. (The inference questions will ask you to consider the factual statements or information and on the basis of that information, reach a general conclusion)

What factors contribute to success in CAT passages

Read this before

Previous knowledge of the content of a given reading selection or

familiarity of jargon invariably helps in efficient comprehension and in reading with speed. A technical test taker, therefore, familiarizes himself with varied contents and domains of knowledge. The single factor that contributes to your reading ability consequently is, wide reading. Read as much as you can. There's nothing like being able to prepare for your reading comprehension test while having your morning cuppa!

- **Language proficiency**

Language competence most necessarily means better reading in terms of speed and comprehension. Shifts in meaning in a sentence are generally signalled by those structural words that carry profundity of ideas; you overlook them and the essence of the sentence is not grasped. So is the tone of a write up determined by the language intonations! If you're a voracious reader you are fluent in reading and understanding written information. Some of you wouldn't have been able to maintain your reading habits due to reasons such as the nature of academic course chosen, lack of time, and / or a host of other reasons. In order to compensate for it you have to spend more time now catching up with your reading.

Subject-specific diction

Contributes greatly to your performance in reading passages. If you have a

flair for reading you would find passages from any source readable – whether the passage is on art, history or science. Read all these

Abstractions

Often you'll come across passages that would require thorough reading. The text may be highly abstract and may require repeated reading. You may not be able to cope with the expected accuracy. Such passages as philosophy, history and literature come under this category.

Vague text

The general clarity of writing seen in well-organized articles may be missing in certain passages. Their inclusion most certainly is to add to difficulty. Such passages may have to be scanned thoroughly.

RC challenges

Essentially reading comprehension questions in any aptitude test, measure your ability to comprehend information given in the passages and to answer the questions that follow the passage, based on what is *stated* or *implied* in the passage.

The passages that we see in the CAT verbal section are intended to measure your ability to read and comprehend the information so that the questions that follow are answered with maximum accuracy. The challenges that test takers encounter are manifold:

Uninteresting and dry text

Higher order questions such as inferential, application and evaluation

Difficult-to-eliminate choices

Added to these is the stress and anxiety that goes with taking a test!

In order to overcome these difficulties you need strategies

- to overcome reading difficulties methods
- to increase speed practical tools
- to improve up on your current comprehension levels
- to crack the of the varied types of question types strategies for answering the different question types

Skill building

Reading ability is a cognitive disposition acquired over years of learning and practice – both conscious and unconscious. Reading ability depends, to a greater extent, on readability – the attribute of the reading material. You should not assume that your reading ability is poor by assessing the speed with which you have read, say a passage on philosophy, in a given time. Even if you have previous reading in philosophy, you require more time to read a philosophy passage with fairly good comprehension, owing not only to the abstraction involved but also to the implicit meaning underlying such text than read a passage on a concrete readable text.

At the same time you should realize that there are certain cognitive behaviours that are peculiar to efficient readers, viz., concentration, mental translation as one navigates through the passage. Summation, connecting ideas, inferring, judging the material read etc.

When do we consider a passage readable?

Or why do test takers differ in their ability to read?

There are differences between the reading skills required in an academic environment and those that are required on an aptitude test. If you have a good sense of the passage structure and gist of paragraphs, you'll have no problem navigating through the text.

Read involved

An involved reader:

He thinks about what he is reading and assimilates denotations

He goes beyond the denotations, searches for connotations (implicit ideas)

Translates ideas into his own language

Poses questions to himself as he reads

Skims through illustrative matter and scans through meaty points

Looks for both matter discussed, and the speaker's points of view

As you read across the passage, build a cognitive map of the information assimilated – while reading you should keep asking these questions:

What is the topic the author is dealing with?

Does he give reasons or examples to support his main thesis? How do these examples or reasons support the claim?

What shift does the author have in mind when moving on to another paragraph?

What bearing does this paragraph have on the author's main idea?

Is he proposing a new idea?

Is he making any recommendations?

Challenging notions? Criticizing policies?

Much of our reading is neither accurate nor thoughtful. When relaxed, we naturally skip and skim. Ordinarily, such reading neither deserves nor receives careful attention. But, often, we attempt to read closely reasoned and fast packed texts. Reading to understand involves attention, retention and awareness. The reading of genuinely important material must be painstakingly careful. Comprehension passages in tests need to be carefully read:

- to gain and understand accurate information and ideas
- to recognize author's organization of the content and style of writing.
- to interpret author's intent and
- to analyze and evaluate the textual matter

Reading effectively is reading with both comprehension and speed. An efficient reader reads thought units, not word by word. Your aim should be to reduce the number of fixations, and lengthen the eye span. Your reading rate will increase as you learn to do this efficiently and so will your comprehension. A skilful reader does not work with isolated units but with context – what precedes and follows the particular material being read. A good reader rarely loses time by having to refer to the beginning of a sentence or paragraph. Rather, the thought will have been carried through in one series of lengthened glances.

The best way of learning to read with speed as well as comprehension is to “read with your mind assisted by your eyes”. Doing this will enhance comprehension by reducing the number of fixations and increasing concentration. Practice finding main thoughts in a passage and separating them from purely illustrative matter. Learn to find key words and phrases that summate the main ideas of the passage. These steps will greatly increase reading speed, although you must not forget that different kinds of material require different reading speeds.

An efficient reader assimilates information that is read and translates it into his own language. Recall of information exactly as it is, is neither possible nor necessary. Instead, gather the gist of the information, form opinions and draw conclusions. Careful reading of any selection should

lead to an understanding of the central theme and purpose as well as organization of the main thoughts.

If you're methodic, that is good for your academic reading. For aptitude test preparation, take the road not taken. You can't approach an aptitude test in a casual, piecemeal way. If you want to maximize your likelihood of success, you have to take advantage of the unconventional approaches.

The number of passages ranges from 2 to 4; the number of questions ranges from 6 to 10 and the length of the passages ranges from 7 to 250 words. The passages are either run-on matter or with indented paragraphs. Therefore, be sensitive to issue of topic, scope, structure and source of such passages in order to draw from the repertoire of your tactics to maximise your performance.

In sum, read to locate those crucial ideas:

- to find out where answers to specific questions lie
- to get the gist of each paragraph
- to distinguish opinions or interpretations from factual assertions; this is an important skill in reading
- to attack the passage for author's view
- when asked for meanings of words/phrases look for nearby context
- finally get the author's purpose in writing the text, to help you answer inferential questions (if any)

Know these facts

- Different questions require different strategies.
- The reading comprehension questions are of varying difficulties.

CAT PASSAGES – analysis

A. Source of the passages:

Where are these reading passages drawn from? Are they from college textbooks? No.

These passages are drawn from:

- 1. Pure Sciences:** articles from biology, chemistry, physics, earth sciences or any other sub branches or related disciplines.

or

evaluation of research hypotheses

discussion of recent findings

research report drawn from science journals

new scientific observations

new developments in a specific science discipline

history of a discovery / events that led to a discovery

2. **Socio-political/cultural** : A passage pertaining to social /
economic / political / history

It may be a discussion on:

cultural heritage of the country

an event from Indian history

economic / trade matters

contributions of famous personalities

discussion of cults / movements etc.

3. **Art / Literature** : A passage from humanities – related to art,
literary criticism, or history of any of these.

discussion on / evaluation of art forms

book review

author review

comparative discussion of books / authors

trends / progress in art / literature

philosophical discourses / discussions

literary movements

philosophical articles

anthropological discussions

B. Question types

The common comprehension questions are:

The questions that are based on the information stated directly in the passage (denotations) include these.

1. main idea question
2. specific idea question (mostly with paragraph references)

STRUCTURE BASED QUESTIONS

These questions ask you to analyze and evaluate

the organization and logic of a passage

the author's style of writing

how the paragraphs are arranged

how the author takes the discussion forward

APPLICATION QUESTIONS

These are questions that ask how information given in the passage can be applied in contexts outside the passage.

These include:

- working with hypothetical situations
- recognizing scope of the text outside its context
- evaluating analogous situations
- the ideas the author would agree / disagree with

INFERENCE QUESTIONS

These questions ask about ideas that are implied in the passage (connotations)

1. Meanings that are drawn from the passage
2. Suggested ideas
3. Inferences based on comparisons
4. Inferences based on cause-effects
5. Drawing generalizations / conclusions

EVALUATION QUESTIONS

A higher-difficulty question type based on a passage involves evaluation questions. The questions requires you to judge the information given in the passage, evaluate the authors arguments and / or assess the scope and application of the information in the passage. These questions would also require you to identify, if any, the flaws in judgment; question the validity of a proposition and the like.

ASSUMPTION QUESTIONS

These are questions in which you are required to identify the assumption that the author is making while stating something within a passage.

LOGICAL CONCLUSION QUESTIONS

In this question type you are asked to identify a statement that would logically follow the passage. The answer is closely related to the content in that it summarises the ideas discussed in the passage.

ATTITUDE / TONE QUESTIONS

These questions require you to make a statement about the author, his attitudes, values and principles as inferable from the passage or the tone of the passage (again an indirect reference to the author himself).

SPECIALISATION OF THE AUTHOR

A not so common question; nevertheless, there could be questions in which you are asked to infer the specialization of the author.

Next.....comprehension with short passages