

Time Running Out in LSAT Reading Comprehension



When considering another post on our blog, Mind-Wandering, Mindfulness, and Reading Comprehension, some other RC concerns we hear from students come to mind. How do I approach the final passage when I'm running out of time? What is the best strategy for attacking a passage with only 3-5 minutes remaining in the section?

Considering that the typical test taker needs 9-10+ minutes to get through a passage and its questions, this scenario is unfortunately common. I want to examine two broad-based approaches that should help you maximize the value of your last few minutes.

Go Global

That is, skim the passage and answer the global questions. In general, I tend to advise against skimming. The test-makers design the passages in a way that easily defeats skimming as an effective strategy. Students who skim the passages are simply unable to answer all of the questions correctly.

However, when time is running low, skimming may be able to help you answer at least a few questions without issue. The idea here is to skim the text very quickly, attempting to glean the gist of the passage and the author's general position. Then, find all of the Global questions (broad questions that don't reference a specific line/element within the passage) and attempt to answer each based on your big-picture understanding of the passage. Hopefully, you will encounter at least one Main Point and Global Purpose question. You can then use your general knowledge of the passage to answer those quickly.

Go Local

What this means is to read the questions first and do only the Specific Reference questions. With this approach you employ another stratagem I tend to caution students against. That is, reading the questions first and then attempting to find the answer to each by looking back to a passage section.

The key is to carefully select the questions to do. By doing only the Specific Reference questions (questions that refer to a specific line/portion/element within the passage), you can use the line references to return to precise areas of the passage. This helps you gain the knowledge needed to hopefully answer the questions. Thus, with this stratagem you do not read or skim the passage at all; you just read small sections very closely in response to the details in the questions.

The choice of strategy is yours, but note that it's somewhat dependent on the nature of the questions. If you know you are low on time, when you arrive at the passage you should glance at the questions and attempt to determine if there are more Specific Reference questions or more Global questions. Then use that information and your personal preferences to decide which strategy to use. You cannot predetermine which strategy to choose; you must make the decision when you reach and review the passage and its questions.