

😞 How to MEMORIZE ELA Passages? --> DON'T + How can I Read Passages Faster? 😞  
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I often run into students stating "I'm getting exhausted at the end of the passage" and "I don't know what I'm reading" and "reading comprehension is overwhelming." Unfortunately, this is often somebody working hard but not working smart. It's also often somebody confused about the premise and purpose of the task at hand.

Often too, students actually do not know exactly what they're being asked, are unfamiliar with terminology, unfamiliar with author's craft, and as a consequence they flip into answering questions via osmosis. We want students to have fluidity of literacy but this is not that. Being 75% clear, for example, usually leads to less than 75% results. Without pinning things down, it's often a spiral to nowhere. For many students, their sole solution to this is to read more passages. Yes, practice is important, but you need to practice with purpose, and with appropriate literary tools. Otherwise it is kind of like a car doing donuts in a parking lot; it's spinning, screeching, burning rubber, eating gas, but simply going nowhere.

As test prep is not cramming nor gaming of the material, students need to read offline, whether it is a newspaper, the internet, a comic book, a manual, or a novel. Additionally, they need to at least sometimes think about what they're reading afterwards. That is, you need to consciously read.

Many students don't realize they're supposed to be considering the main idea as a whole, in parts, and synthesized, and to treat main idea as one cornerstone to the task of reading comprehension. Furthermore, even many good students do not even know what the notion of main idea is. I rarely have a student who can communicate it. I do buy to a certain extent that sometimes you can know something without being able to explain it, but here, that's not a strategy that's helpful. As above, if you only kinda know what it is then you're only kinda going to get the answer kinda right. Not good.

Another thing is that a student's job is not to memorize the passage. If you can, or you have a photographic memory, fine, but if not then don't go there. But many students kick and scream towards this goal. However, doing that is usually a fundamental misunderstanding of what reading comprehension of this form entails, wasting time, and demeaning. Sure, if you have good recall skills take advantage of that, but at the same time, the task at hand includes concepts such as understanding, comprehension, and inferencing. Remember too, as much as this is about your reading comprehension of the passage, it is also about your reading comprehension of the question, and your reading comprehension of every answer choice! (I will repeat this below.)

Another thing is that students find passages boring which exacerbates the above. One alternative is to figure out ways to stay interested in the passage. One way to stay interested in a passage is by convincing yourself that the passage is the best thing ever. Yup, fool yourself. Oddly, with practice, the fooling turns natural and turns into reality.

Additionally, don't read long passages long. I don't mean skip them but to instead purposely read -- and rip -- passages in cognitive pieces/groups. Normally the piece of the passage at hand is a paragraph; think of this as your "atom." Make note of the paragraph, ask yourself what it's about, and circle, underline and make BRIEF notations of things that leap out at you. This "bookkeeping" also helps keep you engrossed(!) -- you're a detective looking for something. This is a must.

A passage should not just be treated as happenstance. You should be purposely and consciously reading and looking for specific things instead of making Herculean efforts to memorize the passage. This is true for reading comprehension passages and for many other passages types such as for poetry, for science passages, and for those passages dealing with grammar, English language, revising and editing, etc.

Authors make use of certain specific literary strategies and techniques, and part of your job is to pick up on those clues and connect to and through them. As you read, stop and ask yourself questions, try to guess where the passage is going, ask why the

author or character did or didn't do something, etc. In other words, interact with what you're reading and be a participating reader! And this is not a 2-hour introspection wasting time, but a streamlined integral part of what you do in passing. Always. Don't not do this. This is the crux of the matter.

Sometimes too, one paragraph is packed with names, dates, data, new terminology, you name it. Grok a paragraph like that, yeah, got to for sure; that's tied into the goal, but going overboard on every last detail is a flag that you're probably not filtering the information and not acknowledging that you probably going TO NEED to GO BACK to that paragraph at question time. So go back when needed, using your mapping of the passage. If not needed, don't go back. This helps in the balance of what's important, what's unimportant, and not wasting time on something you may not even be asked about!

As well, make note of turning points in the passage, "odd" use of vocabulary, what's important vs unimportant, what's supporting details and what's not, what's the topic and what's not, what's the main idea and what's not, and what is basically click bait narrative that's wasting your time. And I'm talking about making note of these things as you read, mentally and with annotations and markings. For instance, did you identify a turning point, even if buried inside a paragraph? It can happen! Mark it as such. With proper guidance and practice, these things start leaping out at you as you're reading and you can in many cases actually start predicting what you might be asked.

Ditto for tone. Let it guide you. Tone can seem orthogonal to everything but it is often critical to the comprehension and to the answers. It's there for a reason. So is the author's point of view therefore you need to determine it.

Dialogue narrative can throw a wrench into things, but turning points, natural flows, change of tone or setting, etc., will avail themselves. So use them! As such instead of physical breaks (paragraphs, sections, stanzas, etc.) in the passage, there will be conceptual breaks that occur organically.

Interestingly, these same conceptual breaks are just as critical when things are in paragraphs not involving dialogue, as paragraphs can be misleading to depend upon! A paragraph does not guarantee continuity! A paragraph can often be useless. A paragraph can often break the main idea into pieces that need to be synthesized across paragraph X then skipping to paragraph Y or even across the whole passage. Regarding a related notion, the topic sentence does not have to be the first sentence of a paragraph, nor does a topic sentence need to exist. Be alert and be aware.

As indicated, MAIN IDEA is always key. Not figuring that out yields a mess. As soon as a passage is finished a student should snapshot the main idea of the passage as a whole and WRITE IT DOWN so as to not lose it and not let the questions start to drag your brain elsewhere. What's written down for the main idea should not be a paragraph or even a sentence but a "mere" phrase.

Switching gears some, I am also often asked how to read a passage faster. As mentioned above, one way is to read more and to be aware of your timing and work on it. Another is to learn how to speed read. Both these suggestions take time and therefore should be planned for and practiced. Neither these nor anything discussed here will happen magically.

Interestingly though, if one uses many of the ideas expressed above, and the other tips I've provided elsewhere, you'll find that your pacing isn't too bad after all. Contrarily, when you don't understand the passage, don't understand the questions, and don't understand the choices, of course it's going to take longer, be less reliable, etc.

Double interesting is that with so much attention given to the passage, as far as I'm concerned, it's equally important to consider your reading comprehension of the questions and your reading comprehension of the choices! This is often underestimated or not considered at all. Remember, at the end of the day, you're being scored on answering questions which are an artifact of having read a passage. This introduces a kind of weird bidirectional double layer of indirection.

Students often find it easier to conceptually granularize math questions but view ELA as a big monolithic blob. However, ELA is also broken down in finely distinguishable topics, subtopics, and concepts. Math is also often taught in strictly broken down components asking you for one answer whereas ELA in the classroom is often left open for interpretation. This creates a weird dynamic that gets ingrained into a student's psyche reading ELA. But some of that is not the case here.

In practice this means a math question might be random but it's often compact enough for many students to analyze and rip it apart in such a small context. However, since most passages are larger and their context is too, said analysis and ripping apart can get harder and immediately leaves students grasping for something, anything. That does not need to be the case. By methodically considering your givens, what's a distraction/unimportant, and using author's craft (main idea, tone, turning points, flow, structure, author's point of view, theme, moral, plot, summary, figurative language, organization, cause and effect, opinion vs fact, main characters, compare and contrast, etc.) there are ways to put passages in their place.

Understanding why the passage exists -- ask "Who cares?" -- is your goal. Don't just read random words connected into random sentence connected into random paragraphs and move on. Query the layers of meaning that the author is expressing at each level and make the connections necessary.

This document represents a high level discussion of some ELA concerns. The latest version of this document can be found at:

<https://www.GregsTutoringNYC.com/PDFs/memorizingELASHSAT.pdf>

I have various links covering related ELA concerns that can be found thus:

<https://www.GregsTutoringNYC.com/shsat-faqs> -- Overall links including ELA topics  
<https://www.GregsTutoringNYC.com/shsat-ela> -- covers things such as Main Idea, poetry  
<https://www.GregsTutoringNYC.com/shsat-handbook-reviews> -- live coverage of dozens of passages

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