

Test Prep · SAT Reading & Writing · Free sample

The SAT Companion Sample

One strategy chapter and Lesson 1 of each series, taken straight from The SAT Companion.

In this sample

- Strategy chapter — Core strategy
- SAT Reading and Writing · Lesson 1 — Read the text before the choices

The full Companion

Strategy chapters and all sixteen lessons for SAT Reading and Writing, every practice test with its answer key, and the Test Prep Learning Log at the end.

Contents, pricing, and Hub access: www.hearn.consulting/sat-companion

Core strategy

The Digital SAT rewards a small set of habits applied consistently across all four domains. The short-passage format makes them easier to use than they sound.

Read the passage with the right kind of attention

On the Digital SAT, the passages are shorter, but the reading job is the same: identify the central claim, notice how the text supports or develops it, and track how the sentences are structured — contrast, cause and effect, example, definition, problem and solution, or qualification — before choosing an answer. Three or four sentences may carry one central claim, one piece of evidence, one shift, and one nuance; missing any of them tends to put the right answer out of reach. Comprehension should drive your answer choice, not the other way around.

Anchor in the text, not the choices

Answers come from the text, not from the choices. Choices that are true in the world but not supported by the passage are wrong. Choices that match a word in the passage but not its meaning are wrong. Choices that go a step too far beyond what the passage supports are wrong.

Flag and return

If an item is not resolving and you have not yet seen all the items in the module, mark it for review and move on. Within a module, flag-and-return is a strategy, not a failure. Use it deliberately, not as escape from a hard moment.

Lesson 1

Read the text before the choices

Foundations · the three-question reading framework and the Passage notes box

SKILLS COVERED

- The three-question reading framework: central idea, support, structure.
- How to use the Passage notes box to read a Digital SAT text.
- How to predict the answer before reading the choices.
- How to verify the answer against the text.

What this lesson asks you to do

Read the text. Build a working understanding. Then judge the answer choices against the text. The order matters. If you let the choices drive your comprehension, you will pick whichever choice sounds reasonable and never find out what the text actually said.

Your comprehension should drive your answer choices. The answer choices should not drive your comprehension.

The three-question framework

Every SAT Reading & Writing text is short, but it still makes a single point and supports it in a specific way. Three questions are enough to read it well:

- 1. What is the central idea?** In one sentence, what is the text saying? Use your own words.
- 2. How does the author support the central idea?** A study, an example, a contrast, a personal detail, a claim from another source — name the kind of support.

- 3. How is the passage structured?** Where does the text move? A shift, a contrast, a question and answer, a claim and qualification, a setup and surprise.

The Passage notes box

After you read the text and before you read the choices, write four short lines:

Passage notes

Central idea	
Support	
Structure / movement	
Answer choice check	

For shorter items, this can be a compact box. For Cross-Text Connections and harder reading items, expand the box and use more lines for support and structure.

Worked example

WORKED EXAMPLE · TEXT

When ecologists first introduced the term "ecosystem engineer" in the 1990s, the label was applied almost exclusively to charismatic species like beavers, whose dams remake entire watersheds. Recent fieldwork, however, has expanded the category to include far less visible actors — earthworms, fungi, and even certain colonies of bacteria — whose effects on soil structure, nutrient flow, and plant communities can be just as transformative. The shift matters because conservation funding has historically tracked visibility. If smaller organisms can engineer ecosystems too, the question of which species deserve protection becomes harder to answer.

1. Which choice best states the main purpose of the text?
- A) It argues that beavers are no longer the most important ecosystem engineers.
 - B) It explains how a broader definition of "ecosystem engineer" complicates a conservation question.
 - C) It describes the methods scientists use to study soil bacteria.
 - D) It claims that conservation funding is unfairly distributed.

How to think about it

Central idea	The definition of "ecosystem engineer" has expanded, and that expansion makes conservation decisions harder.
Support	A historical contrast (beavers used to define the term) and recent fieldwork (smaller, less visible species do similar work).
Structure	Old definition → new evidence → why the expansion matters. The text ends on a question, not an answer.
Prediction in your own words	The text explains how the broader definition makes the funding question harder.
Answer choice check	Choice B matches the prediction. A overreads the contrast — the text does not rank beavers below other species. C is off-topic. D is an outside claim the text does not make.

Guided practice

Use the framework on the next two items. The Passage notes box appears under each text. Fill it in before you look at the choices.

GUIDED · ITEM 2

In her debut novel *Soft Iron*, Mireille Achebe spends nearly fifty pages on what other writers would treat as throwaway scenes — a worn rug being rolled, a kettle being descaled, a fence post being replaced. Reviewers have disagreed about whether the choice is bold or self-indulgent. What is clear, however, is that the slow accumulation of these scenes lets the reader feel the weight of the household before the novel's main conflict arrives, so that the family's eventual decision to leave it behind lands with a force that summary alone could never carry.

2. Which choice best describes the function of the underlined sentence (the final sentence) in the text overall?

- A) It introduces a counterargument the writer goes on to refute.
- B) It illustrates why some reviewers have called the novel self-indulgent.
- C) It explains why the slow scenes in the novel serve the writer's larger purpose.
- D) It compares Achebe's debut novel to her later work.

Passage notes

Central idea	
Support	
Structure / movement	
Answer choice check	

GUIDED · ITEM 3

In the 1840s, the daguerreotype was the most common form of photography in the United States. The process produced a sharp, mirror-like image on a polished silver plate, but each plate was a one-of-a-kind object: no negative existed, and no copies could be made. By the 1860s, the cheaper and reproducible "carte de visite" had largely replaced the daguerreotype in everyday life. Historians who study nineteenth-century portraiture often note that the shift changed not only how photographs were made but also how families thought about them — from singular keepsakes to objects meant to circulate.

3. Which choice most accurately states the main idea of the text?

- A)** The daguerreotype produced sharper images than later forms of nineteenth-century photography.
- B)** A technical shift in photography in the mid-nineteenth century changed both production and how people thought about photographs.
- C)** Carte de visite portraits were less valuable to families than daguerreotypes had been.
- D)** Historians of photography disagree about when the daguerreotype was first introduced.

Passage notes

Central idea	
Support	
Structure / movement	
Answer choice check	

Independent practice

No scaffolding from here. Fill the Passage notes box on your own. After all five items, check the answer explanations and tag any miss in the Learning Log.

INDEPENDENT · ITEM 4

Among materials engineers, "self-healing" concrete is no longer a thought experiment. Recent designs embed dormant bacteria into the mix, along with calcium lactate. When water reaches a crack, the bacteria activate, consume the lactate, and produce limestone that fills the gap. Field tests in coastal infrastructure suggest the approach can extend the service life of a structure by years. Critics, however, point out that the bacteria-based mixes cost more than standard concrete and that long-term performance data remains thin.

4. Which choice best states the main purpose of the text?

- A)** To describe a new construction material and acknowledge ongoing concerns about it.
- B)** To argue that self-healing concrete should replace standard concrete in coastal infrastructure.
- C)** To summarize how bacteria typically interact with limestone in natural environments.
- D)** To explain why standard concrete fails in coastal infrastructure.

Passage notes

Central idea	
Support	
Structure / movement	
Answer choice check	

INDEPENDENT · ITEM 5

In their 2022 study, biologist Renata Solís and her team tracked a population of urban red foxes in Madrid over four winters. The foxes did not migrate, but their territories shifted in striking ways: in colder months, their nightly ranges contracted around restaurant alleys and apartment block courtyards, where food waste was concentrated. By spring, the same foxes had returned to larger, more typical territories on the city's outskirts. Solís argues that what looks like adaptability in urban wildlife is often a quieter story of constraint, with animals shrinking their range to whatever the city makes available.

5. Based on the text, what is Solís's view of "adaptability" in urban wildlife?

- A) It is the main reason urban foxes are able to survive in cities.
- B) It is often a sign that wildlife has plentiful food in urban areas.
- C) It is sometimes a description of behavior that is actually shaped by limitation.
- D) It is identical to the behavior of foxes in non-urban environments.

Passage notes

Central idea	
Support	
Structure / movement	
Answer choice check	

INDEPENDENT · ITEM 6

The following text is adapted from a contemporary short story. The narrator is describing his grandmother's kitchen.

My grandmother kept the spice tins in a metal drawer that had to be tugged at a slight upward angle to open, a trick none of us mastered as quickly as she had. The tins themselves were unlabeled. She knew which was which by the weight of them, the way a piano tuner knows a string by its tension rather than its name. When I was small I thought this was a kind of magic. Later, when I tried and failed to identify even cumin by feel, I understood that it was a kind of attention — the slow, unflashy attention that years in the same kitchen will build, if you let them.

6. Which choice best states the main idea of the text?

- A)** The narrator believes his grandmother's skill was a result of natural talent rather than practice.
- B)** The narrator regrets that he never learned to identify spices the way his grandmother did.
- C)** The narrator describes the design flaws of an old kitchen drawer.
- D)** The narrator comes to understand that what looked like magic was actually attention developed over time.

Passage notes

Central idea	
Support	
Structure / movement	
Answer choice check	

INDEPENDENT · ITEM 7

The Mongolian wild horse, known as the takhi, was declared extinct in the wild in the 1960s. Decades of careful breeding in zoos and reserves allowed researchers to reintroduce small herds to the Mongolian steppe beginning in the 1990s. As of recent surveys, the wild population has grown to several hundred animals. Conservationists describe the takhi's return as a success, but they also note that genetic diversity in the species remains narrow, because every living takhi descends from only twelve individuals from the original captive program.

7. Which choice best states the main purpose of the text?

- A) To describe a conservation outcome along with a remaining limitation.
- B) To argue that the takhi should be reclassified as no longer endangered.
- C) To compare the takhi with other species reintroduced from captivity.
- D) To explain why the takhi went extinct in the wild in the 1960s.

Passage notes

Central idea	
Support	
Structure / movement	
Answer choice check	

INDEPENDENT · ITEM 8

In a recent essay, philosopher Ada Forrester argues that the modern phrase "follow your passion" is more misleading than motivating. Passions, she notes, are rarely fully formed at the start of a life — they are built, slowly, by doing work one is not yet good at. The advice "follow your passion" assumes the passion already exists and only needs to be located. Forrester suggests a quieter formulation: pay attention to which difficulties seem worth your time, and let your passion grow toward whatever survives that attention.

8. Based on the text, what is Forrester's view of the phrase "follow your passion"?

- A)** It is useful for people who have not yet identified an interest.
- B)** It misrepresents how passions actually develop in most people's lives.
- C)** It is the same advice once given by ancient philosophers.
- D)** It applies only to early-career workers, not to experienced ones.

Passage notes

Central idea	
Support	
Structure / movement	
Answer choice check	

LEARNING LOG STEP

Before checking answers, write three lines in your Learning Log:

- Which Learning Log category fits this miss?
- What does the miss tell you about how you read or judged the choice?
- What will you verify against the text next time?

Answer explanations

- 2. Correct answer: C.** The final sentence explains that the slow accumulation of small scenes lets the family's leaving "land with a force that summary alone could never carry." That is a function: the sentence justifies the slow scenes as serving the writer's purpose.

A	Reviewers disagree earlier in the text, but the final sentence does not introduce a counterargument so much as resolve the disagreement.
B	The sentence is the opposite — it explains why the slow scenes work, not why some readers find them self-indulgent.
D	No later work is mentioned.

If you missed this, log it as: **Misread structure**

3. **Correct answer: B.** The text traces a shift from daguerreotypes to cartes de visite and then names two effects: how photographs were made and how families thought about them. Choice B captures both effects.

A	Sharpness is mentioned but is a detail about one process, not the main idea.
C	The text does not compare the value families placed on each format.
D	No disagreement among historians is described.

If you missed this, log it as: **Out-of-scope answer**

4. **Correct answer: A.** The text describes the new material and then names the cost and the thin data as ongoing concerns. The two-part structure — description plus acknowledged concern — matches choice A.

B	The text does not argue for replacement; the critics' concerns are presented neutrally.
C	The natural behavior of bacteria with limestone is not the subject.
D	The text mentions extending service life, not explaining why standard concrete fails.

If you missed this, log it as: **Out-of-scope answer**

5. **Correct answer: C.** Solís reframes "adaptability" as "a quieter story of constraint." Choice C matches that move: behavior shaped by limitation rather than by genuine flexibility.

A	The text gives no general claim that adaptability is the main reason foxes survive.
B	The text suggests food is concentrated, not plentiful, and Solís focuses on constraint, not abundance.
D	Non-urban foxes are not the subject.

If you missed this, log it as: **Misread central idea**

6. **Correct answer: D.** The narrator names the shift directly: what he once thought was magic he later understood as a kind of attention built over time.

A	The opposite — the text emphasizes time and attention, not natural talent.
B	The narrator describes failing to identify cumin but the text's focus is the realization, not the regret.
C	The drawer is a detail, not the main idea.

If you missed this, log it as: **Misread central idea**

7. **Correct answer: A.** The text describes the reintroduction as a success and then names a remaining limitation: narrow genetic diversity from only twelve founders. That two-part structure is the purpose.

B	No reclassification is suggested.
C	No other species are introduced for comparison.
D	The cause of the original extinction is not the subject.

If you missed this, log it as: **Misread structure**

8. **Correct answer: B.** Forrester argues that the phrase assumes a passion already exists, which "misrepresents" how passions actually develop — they are built by doing work one is not yet good at. Choice B matches.

A	Forrester argues the phrase is misleading even for people who have not yet identified an interest, because it assumes the interest is there to be located.
C	No ancient philosophers are mentioned.
D	No early-career restriction is given.

If you missed this, log it as: **Misread central idea**