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READING COMPREHENSION POINTERS

Coherence, Unity, Analysis and Inference

I. Critical Reading

MAIN IDEA

The main idea is the one central idea that the rest of the paragraph develops. It is found in the topic sentence which is usually found at the beginning, at the middle or at the end of a paragraph; sometimes it is just implied. I repeat. To find the main idea, look for the topic sentence.

A passage consisting of many paragraphs may be confusing. Each paragraph will have its own main idea. Remember however that somewhere in the passage is the central thought that connects all the paragraphs of the passage, the central idea that is developed by all the paragraphs.

INFERENCE

In reading comprehension exams, you're going to be asked to make an inference. To be able to do so, you should understand each of the statements, and the relationship among the statements. More importantly, you should be able to pinpoint the general impression or feeling that the passage leaves. Is the passage generally happy, angry, sad, detached, or desperate?

Please remember that inferring requires understanding of what has been read. Inferences are based on the passage and not on your own knowledge. That is, answer all the questions based on what the passage says, not what you know about the topic of the passage.

CONCLUSION

Conclusions usually come at the end of passages. When asked what you can conclude from a paragraph, refer back to its end to look for it. If the passage did not include a conclusion and you are left to formulate one yourself, do so with logic. Refer to what the passage or paragraph says and form your conclusion based on

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them. Again, do not give priority to what you know about the topic, but to what the passage says about the topic.

RETENTION OF DETAILS

While reading the passage, you must note specifics, names and dates which may be asked for later. Thus, when you are asked about a name you remember, you'll save time by not going back to the passage to look for it. Just remember, however, that if you still have time, it's better to check if the detail you remember is indeed correct.

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II. Figurative Expressions

LITERARY DEVICES

- Simile – a figure of speech directly assessing a resemblance in one or more points, of one thing to another. It compares two things using the expressions *like*, *as... as*, *resembles*, etc.
My patience is like traffic in EDSA—it is endless.
- Metaphor – a figure of speech that does say that something is *like* something or *resembles* something. It pretends that something *is* something.
She is a rock — rigid and immovable.
- Synecdoche – a figure of speech by which a part is put for the whole or the whole for the part.
A multitude of legs crossed the freeway.
- Personification – a figure of speech by which inanimate objects are bestowed with human traits.
The heavens, cried bitter and noisy tears, whispering and screaming in turns.
- Metonymy – a figure of speech by which an object is used to represent another.
Ladies and gentlemen, please lend me your ears.
- Hyperbole – a figure of speech by which a strong effect is achieved through an exaggeration and an overstatement.
His neck stretched out a mile so that he could see what was going on.

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III. Organization of Ideas

COHERENCE

I have only one word for you: coherence. Within a paragraph, sentences should be arranged and tied together in such a way that the reader can easily follow the train of thought. The relationship between the sentences must be clear. It is not enough that the reader knows what each sentence means. It's equally important that he sees its relationship to the sentence that precedes it and to the one that follows it. It should also be clear to him the direction and thought where all the sentences are going.

To achieve such coherence, you must arrange the sentences into some logical and recognizable order. The kind of organization will depend on the kind of material which is to go into the paragraph.

PRINCIPLES OF ORGANIZATION

I think you can develop a more flexible sense of organization if you also look at some patterns that are more exclusively patterns or principles of organization. You should understand, though, that these four broad principles have many variations, that they sometimes overlap with patterns of development or exposition, and that good writing sometimes combines different methods.

Chronological Order (order of Time)

In chronological order or time order, items, events, or even ideas are arranged in the order in which they occur. This pattern is marked by such transitions as *next, then, the following morning, a few hours later, still later, that Wednesday, by noon, when she was seventeen, before the sun rose, that April*, and so on.

Chronological order can suit different rhetorical modes or patterns of exposition. It naturally fits in narration, because when we tell a story, we usually follow the order in which events occur. Chronological order applies to process in the same way, because when we describe or explain how something happens or works, we usually follow the order in which the events occur. But chronological order may also apply to example, description, or parts of any other pattern of exposition.

Spatial Order

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Another principle of organization is spatial order. In this pattern, items are arranged according to their physical position or relationships. In describing a shelf or desk, I might describe items on the left first, then move gradually toward the right. Describing a room, I might start with what I see as I enter the door, then what I see as I step to the middle of the room, and finally the far side. In explaining some political or social problem, I might discuss first the concerns of the East Coast, then those of the Midwest, then those of the West Coast. Describing a person, I might start at the feet and move up to the head, or just the other way around. This pattern might use such transitions as *just to the right*, *a little further on*, *to the south of Memphis*, *a few feet behind*, *in New Mexico*, *turning left on the pathway*, and so on. Spatial order is pretty common in description, but can also apply to examples, to some comparisons, some classifications [the southern species of this bird . . . ; rhinos in Southeast Asia . . .], some narrations [meanwhile, out on the prairie], and other forms of exposition as well.

Climactic Order (Order of Importance)

A third common principle of organization is **climactic order** or **order of importance**. In this pattern, items are arranged from least important to most important. Typical transitions would include *more important*, *most difficult*, *still harder*, *by far the most expensive*, *even more damaging*, *worse yet*, and so on. This is a flexible principle of organization, and may guide the organization of all or part of example, comparison & contrast, cause & effect, and description.

A variation of climactic order is called **psychological order**. This pattern or organization grows from our learning that readers or listeners usually give most attention to what comes at the beginning and the end, and least attention to what is in the middle. In this pattern, then, you decide what is most important and put it at the beginning or the end; next you choose what is second most important and put it at the end or the beginning (whichever remains); the less important or powerful items are then arranged in the middle. If the order of importance followed **1, 2, 3, 4, 5**, with 5 being most important, psychological order might follow the order **4, 3, 1, 2, 5**.

Still other principles of organization based on emphasis include:

- general-to-specific order,**
- specific-to general order,**
- most-familiar-to-least-familiar,**
- simplest-to-most-complex,**
- order of frequency,**

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order of familiarity, and so on.

Topical Order

A fourth broad principle of organization is called **topical order**, and this is sort of a catchall pattern. It refers to organization that emerges from the topic itself. For example, a description of a computer might naturally involve the separate components of the central processing unit, the monitor, and the keyboard, while a discussion of a computer purchase might discuss needs, products, vendors, and service. A discussion of a business might explore product, customer, and location, and so on. Topical order, then, simply means an order that arises from the nature of the topic itself. Transitions in this pattern will be a little vague—things like *another factor*, *the second component*, *in addition*, and so on.

I'm not sure any single list can identify all of the different logical ways of organizing information. You may have forms in your workplace that impose a certain order on how an event or action is reported. Many people trying to persuade others to change policy or behavior often examine the issue in the order of need or problem first, then the benefits of the change, then the mechanics or ease of implementing the change. You may see a question-answer pattern, a problem-solution pattern, or sometimes a solution-problem pattern. You will also see (and use) combinations of patterns as your ideas and purposes become more complex.

You do need to see, though, that imposing order on information makes the information easier to talk about, easier to understand, and easier to remember. If you choose a clear, recognizable pattern (on the level of the single paragraph, and also on the level of the whole essay body), you guide yourself in selecting details and choosing transitions, and you also guide your reader in discovering relationships that connect things, that make things seem more coherent.

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Principle of Organization*	Associated Patterns of Development or Rhetorical Modes**	Sample Transitions***
chronological order	narration, process, examples and illustrations, cause & effect	next; later; the following Tuesday; afterwards; by noon; when she had finally digested the giant burrito; as soon as; in 1998
spatial order	description, examples & illustrations	just to the right; a little further on; to the south of Memphis; a few feet behind; directly on the bridge of his nose and a centimeter above his gaping, hairy nostrils; turning left on the pathway
climactic order	examples & illustrations, description, comparison & contrast, analogy	more importantly; best of all; still worse; a more effective approach; even more expensive; even more painful than passing a kidney stone; the least wasteful; occasionally, frequently, regularly
topical order	classification & division, comparison & contrast, analogy, definition, examples & illustrations	the first element; another key part; a third common principle of organization; Brent also objected to Stella's breath

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IV. Identifying an Irrelevant Sentence

UNITY AND CONCISENESS

A construction must have unity; that is, its parts and elements must be working together to clearly say something. It must also be concise; that is, it says in as few words as possible, what is needed to be said.

An irrelevant sentence is a sentence that does not contribute anything to the main thought of the passage or selection. It doesn't help *move* the paragraph along to its conclusion. In short, it is not necessary.

As a simple technique, look for the sentence among the selection that does not *cooperate* with the rest of the sentence, in terms of direction and support value.

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