

16. Basic Answer Choice Ranking

We now approach perhaps what is the biggest obstacle in terms of attaining perfection in Reading Comprehension. The next two chapters will be entirely devoted to **Stage 2** of our answer choice selection process, or **Answer Choice Ranking**.

Most of us, especially the advanced student, will probably have encountered the following scenario:

We are moving through the answer choices, being able to eliminate a few that are obviously wrong or completely out of place. We are eventually left with two answer choices and stuck. We look at both answer choices, both may sound reasonable, both may have support from the passage, and both may have issues that we don't particularly like.

With time running out we end up picking one. The choice may have some justification, or maybe it was entirely arbitrary. But when we score the test, we realize that we have gotten the question wrong. This was probably not the first time that this happened, you are consistently making that same number of mistakes in RC, and with nearly every mistake, you are able to narrow it down to two answers, but nearly always pick the wrong one.

This experience is highly frustrating. Many students end up stuck in this purgatory and never end up seeing improvement until exam day. For others, their accuracy rate fluctuates wildly, but being unable to pick the right answer out of two attractive choices consistently remains one of the biggest obstacles to perfecting their RC.

For readers of LR Perfection, this situation reminds us of the hardest Strengthen, Weaken, and MSS Questions. The need to rank answer choices based on their respective merits and shortcomings, rather than simply eliminating four wrong answers and ending up with the right one, was the key to success in those question types. The need to rank answers and adopt a relative comparison framework was so important that we devoted an entire chapter to it, and Ranking formed the last building block of the SLAKR Method which we learned in LR Perfection.

After working with hundreds of students in the past few years and reworking through all the RC sections from PT 1 to PT 90 in preparation for this book, one of the key questions that always came to the forefront was this: “*Is there a set of objective criteria that can be applied consistently to the remaining two or three answer choices to determine what the correct answer is?*” In other words, when none of the answer choices are perfect, when none of them match up with what we really want, what is **the standard** that we apply to our answer choice selection process?

The answer to this question, unfortunately, is complicated. The ability to pick the correct answer is dependent on a multitude of factors including our understanding of the passage, our ability to locate hard to find details in the passage, our grasp of the Author's Purpose and Main Point, our familiarity with the question type, and finally, our ability to discover the meaning behind the wording of the answer choices, and the gaps between what was said in the passage and what was stated in the answer choice.

In other words, there exists, in the LSAT RC universe, multiple ways to determine whether the answer choice you have your eyes on is in fact the most suitable. Some of these methods will be fairly straightforward, some other ones will be more troublesome to apply. Some of these methods will work on certain answer choices, but there is no one method fits all approach. It is only through encountering and practicing tricky questions that we become more at ease with the methods that I'm about to show you. So try to incorporate these skills and habits into your answer ranking repertoire, and try to apply them when you are stuck.

Finding the Most Textual Support

Since the majority of RC Questions are asking us to derive the correct answer via information from the passage, one of the most straightforward and intuitive things we can do when stuck on two answer choices is to go back to the passage and look at the support each of these answers have, respectively.

For Inference Questions and similar question types, this requires minimal effort but can still be quite effective. Instead of comparing the two prospective answer choices in isolation, we go back to the passage, identify their purported support, and ask ourselves this:

Based on the information in the passage, and based on each answer choice's respective textual evidence, which answer has **more explicit backing** from the passage?

For instance, if we were able to eliminate answer choices B, C, and E in a question, that would leave us with only A and D. Now we would read A and D, and go back to the passage to see if there is information supporting either answer choice.

Chances are that both would have partial support, otherwise we should have been able to solve this question during the first stage of the Answer Choice Selection process, the elimination stage. So our job now is to isolate the supporting evidence for both A and D, and to consider the relationship between each answer choice and their respective supporting material.

Let's say that Answer Choice A seems to be supported by a sentence from the beginning of the second paragraph; and Answer Choice D seems to be supported by a statement from the end of the third paragraph; our job now is to look at the support, and look at the answer choices, and ask ourselves which answer choice is *most strongly supported* by their respective textual evidence?

This process can be tricky because sometimes we might miss the purported textual support for an AC entirely and thereby eliminating it. There might be multiple pieces of the text backing an AC but we did not find all of them and as a result deemed it lacking in support. If this is frequently happening to you, then the only thing to do really is to pay more attention to the details of a passage during the initial reading, and in order to do that we need to be fully comfortable with the reading habits developed in Part I of the book.

Let's look at a few questions and see how this test operates in reality:

PT25 S1 Q10 (PT25 Passage 2)

While a new surge of critical interest in the ancient Greek poems conventionally ascribed to Homer has taken place in the last twenty years or so, it was nonspecialists rather than professional scholars who studied the poetic aspects of the Iliad and the Odyssey between, roughly, 1935 and 1970. During these years, while such nonacademic intellectuals as Simone Weil and Erich Auerbach were trying to define the qualities that made these epic accounts of the Trojan War and its aftermath great poetry, the questions that occupied the specialists were directed elsewhere: “Did the Trojan War really happen?” “Does the bard preserve Indo-European folk memories?” “How did the poems get written down?” Something was driving scholars away from the actual works to peripheral issues. Scholars produced books about archaeology, and gift exchange in ancient societies, about the development of oral poetry, about virtually anything except the Iliad and the Odyssey themselves as unique reflections or distillations of life itself—as, in short, great poetry. The observations of the English poet Alexander Pope seemed as applicable in 1970 as they had been when he wrote them in 1715: according to Pope, the remarks of critics “are rather Philosophical, Historical, Geographical . . . or rather anything than Critical and Poetical.”

Ironically, the modern manifestation of this “nonpoetical” emphasis can be traced to the profoundly influential work of Milman Parry, who attempted to demonstrate in detail how the Homeric poems, believed to have been recorded nearly three thousand years ago, were the products of a long and highly developed tradition of oral poetry about the Trojan War. Parry proposed that this tradition built up its diction and its content by a process of constant accumulation and refinement over many generations of storytellers. But after Parry’s death in 1935, his legacy was taken up by scholars who, unlike Parry, forsook intensive analysis of the poetry itself and focused instead on only one element of Parry’s work: the creative limitations and possibilities of oral composition, concentrating on fixed elements and inflexibilities, focusing on the things that oral poetry allegedly can and cannot do. The dryness of this kind of study drove many of the more inventive scholars away from the poems into the rapidly developing field of Homer’s archaeological and historical background.

Appropriately, Milman Parry’s son Adam was among those scholars responsible for a renewed interest in Homer’s poetry as literary art. Building on his father’s work, the younger Parry argued that the Homeric poems exist both within and against a tradition. The Iliad and the Odyssey were, Adam Parry thought, the beneficiaries of an inherited store of diction, scenes, and concepts, and at the same time highly individual works that surpassed these conventions. Adam Parry helped prepare the ground for the recent Homeric revival by affirming his father’s belief in a strong inherited tradition, but also by emphasizing Homer’s unique contributions within that tradition.

The passage suggests which one of the following about scholarship on Homer that has appeared since 1970?

- A. It has dealt extensively with the Homeric poems as literary art
- B. It is more incisive than the work of the Parrys
- C. It has rejected as irrelevant the scholarship produced by specialists between 1935 and 1970
- D. It has ignored the work of Simone Weil and Erich Auerbach
- E. It has attempted to confirm that the Iliad and the Odyssey were written by Homer

We know from the passage that between 1935 and 1970, it was the non-specialists who studied the poetic aspects of the Homeric epics. Since the question is asking about developments post-1970, I think it's safe to assume that the years since 1970 marked the return of the specialists to studying the literary qualities of the Iliad and the Odyssey.

Do we have any further evidence as to what happened since 1970? Well, now that we know the specialists returned to the literary tradition, we can take another look at the last paragraph. We know Milman's son was one of the people responsible for this revival.

The passage seems to be supporting a potential answer that tells us there was a return to the literary tradition by specialists since 1970. Let's see if such an answer exists.

A. *It has dealt extensively with the Homeric poems as literary art*

I didn't like this answer very much, the language seemed a little strong for my preferences. We know that scholars returned to the literary tradition, does that mean they are "dealing extensively" with the Homeric poems as literary art?

B. *It is more incisive than the work of the Parrys*

Being incisive means to be clear and focused. Can we argue that a return to the literary traditions was more focused? Possibly.

But we also know that Parry Jr. was also part of the movement, so this answer is saying that "the analysis of the post 1970 group, of which Parry Jr. was a part of, was more incisive than the work of both Parry Sr. and Parry Jr."

If the answer had said "it was more incisive than the work of scholars between 1935 and 1970," then maybe it would have been a contender.

C. *It has rejected as irrelevant the scholarship produced by specialists between 1935 and 1970*

There is a return to the literary aspects of Homer, but does a change in research direction = rejection of past research?

This is a fairly big gap. But let's keep it for now.

D. *It has ignored the work of Simone Weil and Erich Auerbach*

SW and EA were mentioned in the first paragraph. They were non-specialists who focused on the literary aspects of Homer. What this answer is saying is that the "specialists who focused on Homer as literature ignored the earlier non-specialists who did the same thing."

Nowhere is this contention supported in the passage, I think it's a safe elimination.

E. *It has attempted to confirm that the Iliad and the Odyssey were written by Homer*

Scholars returned to literary analysis of Homer, we don't know if they examined the epics' authorship.

We are now left with answer choices A and C. Let's look at each of them in turn, and see which answer is more supported by the relevant evidence from the passage:

- A: We know from the passage that scholars returned to literary analysis, can we infer that this means they are now dealing extensively with literary analysis?
- B: The scholars returned to literary analysis, does this mean that they are rejecting past scholarship?

Let's use an analogy to help us see the leap in reasoning in both answers:

Let's say that *you moved back home to live with your parents during COVID*. What would be the more reasonable inference?

You are now dealing extensively with your parents?

Or

You are rejecting your friends?

Here, changing the focus of your research probably means that you are “dealing extensively” with the topic and scope of your new research. Answer choice A is stronger than the support from the passage, but I think it's a reasonable inference.

Whereas for Answer C, we have no evidence to suggest that research on the literary aspects of Homer necessitates a wholesale rejection of the non-literary studies of Homer in the past.

The correct answer is A.

PT27 S3 Q11 (PT27 Passage 2)

Personal names are generally regarded by European thinkers in two major ways, both of which deny that names have any significant semantic content. In philosophy and linguistics, John Stuart Mill’s formulation that “proper names are meaningless marks set upon . . . persons to distinguish them from one another” retains currency; in anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss’s characterization of names as being primarily instruments of social classification has been very influential. Consequently, interpretation of personal names in societies where names have other functions and meanings has been neglected. Among the Hopi of the southwestern United States, names often refer to historical or ritual events in order both to place individuals within society and to confer an identity upon them. Furthermore, the images used to evoke these events suggest that Hopi names can be seen as a type of poetic composition.

Throughout life, Hopis receive several names in a sequence of ritual initiations. Birth, entry into one of the ritual societies during childhood, and puberty are among the name-giving occasions. Names are conferred by an adult member of a clan other than the child’s clan, and names refer to that name giver’s clan, sometimes combining characteristics of the clan’s totem animal with the child’s characteristics. Thus, a name might translate to something as simple as “little rabbit,” which reflects both the child’s size and the representative animal.

More often, though, the name giver has in mind a specific event that is not apparent in a name’s literal translation. One Lizard clan member from the village of Oraibi is named Lomayayva, “beautifully ascended.” This translation, however, tells nothing about either the event referred to—who or what ascended—or the name giver’s clan. The name giver in this case is from Badger clan. Badger clan is responsible for an annual ceremony featuring a procession in which masked representations of spirits climb the mesa on which Oraibi sits. Combining the name giver’s clan association with the receiver’s home village, “beautifully ascended” refers to the splendid colors and movements of the procession up the mesa. The condensed image this name evokes—a typical feature of Hopi personal names—displays the same quality of Western Apache place names that led one commentator to call them “tiny imagist poems.”

Hopi personal names do several things simultaneously. They indicate social relationships—but only indirectly—and they individuate persons. Equally important, though, is their poetic quality; in a sense they can be understood as oral texts that produce aesthetic delight. This view of Hopi names is thus opposed not only to Mill’s claim that personal names are without inherent meaning but also to Lévi-Strauss’s purely functional characterization. Interpreters must understand Hopi clan structures and linguistic practices in order to discern the beauty and significance of Hopi names.

The primary function of the second paragraph is to

- A. Present reasons why Hopi personal names can be treated as poetic compositions
- B. Support the claim that Hopi personal names make reference to events in the recipients life
- C. Argue that the fact that Hopis receive many names throughout life refutes European theories about naming
- D. Illustrate ways in which Hopi personal names may have semantic content
- E. Demonstrate that the literal translation of Hopi personal names often obscures their true meaning

We know that the entire passage is a challenge towards European theories of naming conventions. JSM thinks that names are meaningless, while CLS thinks names to be tools of social classification. The author uses Hopi names as examples of exceptions to these theories. Hopi names not only confer an identity upon them, situate them in society, but can also be seen as poetic compositions.

The second paragraph describes how Hopi names confer an identity upon the named, (“little rabbit”) and situate them within society. (“names refer to the name giver’s clan”)

Let’s find an answer that tells us that.

A. Present reasons why Hopi personal names can be treated as poetic compositions

This is the subject matter of paragraph 3. We can eliminate it.

B. Support the claim that Hopi personal names make reference to events in the recipients life

We are told that Hopis receive names to mark events in their lives (birth, entry into society, puberty, etc.)

But do names refer to these events? Let’s keep this one for now.

C. Argue that the fact that Hopis receive many names throughout life refutes European theories about naming

I think the content in the second paragraph refutes JSM, who thinks names meaningless. But it’s not because that Hopis receive many names, but rather that names like “little rabbit” actually do have meaning.

I don’t think the information in the second paragraph refutes CLS though. Because Hopi names also refer to the child’s name giver’s clan, so there is a social aspect to Hopi naming conventions as well.

Too many issues with this answer, I think it can be eliminated.

D. Illustrate ways in which Hopi personal names may have semantic content

“Semantic content” just means words with meaning, I think. I suppose that by giving names that “refer to that name giver’s clan, the clan’s totem animal, and the child’s characteristics,” the paragraph is demonstrating that Hopi names have “semantic content.”

The answer I was looking for is a little more specific though, if the answer had said “conferred identity,” it would have been perfect. Let’s keep this one for now.

E. Demonstrate that the literal translation of Hopi personal names often obscures their true meaning

Paragraph 3 talks about Hopi names being imagist poems that may not be apparent in their literal translations. We are being asked about paragraph 2.

So again, we are left with two answer choices: B and D. Let’s see which one has more support from the text.

In order for answer choice B to stand, we must believe that receiving a new name on your thirteenth birthday is means that the name itself will refer to your thirteenth birthday.

This doesn't sound right to me. If you had spent your 13th birthday with your family at Yosemite, then your new name would be Yosemite, or perhaps El Capitan. That's what answer B is saying.

In paragraph 3, we know that names can refer to processions up the Mesa, but this procession doesn't happen on the special day during which the child receives their name, either.

Let's look at answer D.

Is having "semantic content" something that happens in paragraph 2? Yes, but is it too narrow in scope to be the purpose of the paragraph?

On a first glance, yes. Our anticipated purpose was to show that Hopi names have meaning, as well as fulfill a social purpose. This answer only covers the "meaning" part. Having "semantic content," I think, is the same as having meaning. So it is rejecting JSM's characterization of what names are, but leaving CLS's views untouched. So the problem with this answer choice is that it's incomplete.

But if you take a broad enough perspective on the term "semantic content," then perhaps "social classification" also constitutes a part of the meaning of names.

But at the end of the day, even though D was not what we were looking for originally, it can be supported amply by the text of the passage. It's not a perfect match with our anticipated answer choice, but there is a high level of overlap.

That's more than what I can say for answer choice B.

The correct answer is D.

Unexpected Wording

In the previous question, we saw the correct answer as something that was totally unexpected. That threw us off during the initial answer choice elimination process. Indeed, as we have encountered before, the correct answer may often be worded in a more vague and abstract manner than we'd like. This is not a random coincidence, the test makers do this on purpose to entrap you. As we saw in Role and Method Questions back in LR Perfection, **do not eliminate an answer choice simply because you don't understand it.** Only eliminate an answer if you can point to an exact reason why it is wrong.

When we are left with two answer choices and one or both of them are incomprehensible, fear not. Rather than trying to come to a hasty conclusion on what the correct answer might be, seek first to understand what the AC is really saying.

When it comes to ranking answer choices, unexpected, abstract, or vague answers **should not be penalized.**

PT33 S2 Q15 (PT33 Passage 3)

Experts anticipate that global atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide (CO₂) will have doubled by the end of the twenty-first century. It is known that CO₂ can contribute to global warming by trapping solar energy that is being reradiated as heat from the Earth's surface. However, some research has suggested that elevated CO₂ levels could enhance the photosynthetic rates of plants, resulting in a lush world of agricultural abundance, and that this CO₂ fertilization effect might eventually decrease the rate of global warming. The increased vegetation in such an environment could be counted on to draw more CO₂ from the atmosphere. The level of CO₂ would thus increase at a lower rate than many experts have predicted.

However, while a number of recent studies confirm that plant growth would be generally enhanced in an atmosphere rich in CO₂, they also suggest that increased CO₂ would differentially increase the growth rate of different species of plants, which could eventually result in decreased agricultural yields. Certain important crops such as corn and sugarcane that currently have higher photosynthetic efficiencies than other plants may lose that edge in an atmosphere rich in CO₂. Patterson and Flint have shown that these important crops may experience yield reductions because of the increased performance of certain weeds. Such differences in growth rates between plant species could also alter ecosystem stability. Studies have shown that within rangeland regions, for example, a weedy grass grows much better with plentiful CO₂ than do three other grasses. Because this weedy grass predisposes land to burning, its potential increase may lead to greater numbers of and more severe wildfires in future rangeland communities.

It is clear that the CO₂ fertilization effect does not guarantee the lush world of agricultural abundance that once seemed likely, but what about the potential for the increased uptake of CO₂ to decrease the rate of global warming? Some studies suggest that the changes accompanying global warming will not improve the ability of terrestrial ecosystems to absorb CO₂. Billings' simulation of global warming conditions in wet tundra grasslands showed that the level of CO₂ actually increased. Plant growth did increase under these conditions because of warmer temperatures and increased CO₂ levels. But as the permafrost melted, more peat (accumulated dead plant material) began to decompose. This process in turn liberated more CO₂ to the atmosphere. Billings estimated that if summer temperatures rose four degrees Celsius, the tundra would liberate 50 percent more CO₂ than it does currently. In a warmer world, increased plant growth, which could absorb CO₂ from the atmosphere, would not compensate for this rapid increase in decomposition rates. This observation is particularly important because high-latitude habitats such as the tundra are expected to experience the greatest temperature increase.

Which one of the following best states the main point of the passage?

- A. Elevated levels of CO₂ would enhance photosynthetic rates, thus increasing plant growth and agricultural yields
- B. Recent studies have yielded contradictory findings about the benefits of increased levels of CO₂ on agricultural productivity
- C. The possible beneficial effects of increased levels of CO₂ on plant growth and global warming have been overstated
- D. Increased levels of CO₂ would enhance the growth rates of certain plants, but would inhibit the growth rates of other plants
- E. Increased levels of CO₂ would increase plant growth, but the rate of global warming would ultimately increase

We have encountered this passage before, the Main Point of the passage is that increased levels of CO₂ will neither lead to an increase in beneficial plants nor gradually slow down the rate of further CO₂ increase and global warming. To put it succinctly, the CO₂ increase that we are witnessing will not have the positive benefits some research has suggested.

- A. *Elevated levels of CO₂ would enhance photosynthetic rates, thus increasing plant growth and agricultural yields*

This is wrong. The passage states that the growth rate of weeds will increase but agricultural yields will not.

- B. *Recent studies have yielded contradictory findings about the benefits of increased levels of CO₂ on agricultural productivity*

Yes, this describes the second paragraph, but it's incomplete at best, since we are looking for the Main Point of the entire passage.

An incomplete MP answer is not automatically wrong, so I won't just eliminate this one yet.

- C. *The possible beneficial effects of increased levels of CO₂ on plant growth and global warming have been overstated*

This one talks about both plant growth and global warming, but instead of saying that the benefits of both are non-existent, the word "overstated" is used. It's not exactly an accurate reflection of the author's tone, but I suppose that thinking CO₂ had agricultural and global warming benefits when it doesn't is a form of "overstatement."

So other than its weak wording, there's nothing factually wrong with this AC. Let's keep it for now.

- D. *Increased levels of CO₂ would enhance the growth rates of certain plants, but would inhibit the growth rates of other plants*

Yes, this is also factually correct, but extremely limited in scope. It's almost the same as B.

- E. *Increased levels of CO₂ would increase plant growth, but the rate of global warming would ultimately increase*

This, on its surface, is not wrong per se. But I feel like it's an oversimplification of the actual message of the passage.

The passage tells us that increased levels of CO₂ would lead to increased growth of weeds and not "good plants," while global warming would continue and release more CO₂ into the atmosphere, and the initial increase in CO₂ levels would not slow this process down.

It does cover (partially) the content of the second paragraph, as well as the third paragraph. So in that sense it's better than B and D.

So let's take a look at C and E.

The passage tells us the CO₂ will not lead to positive plant growth and lessened global warming. Answer choice C tells us that the "beneficial effects...have been overstated."

Is it an “overstatement?” To put it mildly, yes. Let’s say that you met someone on Tinder whose photos had them sitting in a Rolls Royce and in Private Jets. But in real life they are unemployed and is trying to scam you. Would you say that they have “overstated” their wealth?

That would be a bit of an understatement, although it would technically be correct.

Let’s look at answer E. The issue I had with this answer was that the passage was talking about not just increased plant growth, but increased growth of weeds at the expense of agricultural yields. So E is an oversimplification that is actually quite misleading.

The choice boils down to C, which is an overly modest but factually correct answer; and E, which is an oversimplified and potentially misleading answer.

I think C wins over E. C is the better answer here.

PT25 S1 Q12 (PT25 Passage 2)

While a new surge of critical interest in the ancient Greek poems conventionally ascribed to Homer has taken place in the last twenty years or so, it was nonspecialists rather than professional scholars who studied the poetic aspects of the Iliad and the Odyssey between, roughly, 1935 and 1970. During these years, while such nonacademic intellectuals as Simone Weil and Erich Auerbach were trying to define the qualities that made these epic accounts of the Trojan War and its aftermath great poetry, the questions that occupied the specialists were directed elsewhere: “Did the Trojan War really happen?” “Does the bard preserve Indo-European folk memories?” “How did the poems get written down?” Something was driving scholars away from the actual works to peripheral issues. Scholars produced books about archaeology, and gift exchange in ancient societies, about the development of oral poetry, about virtually anything except the Iliad and the Odyssey themselves as unique reflections or distillations of life itself—as, in short, great poetry. The observations of the English poet Alexander Pope seemed as applicable in 1970 as they had been when he wrote them in 1715: according to Pope, the remarks of critics “are rather Philosophical, Historical, Geographical . . . or rather anything than Critical and Poetical.”

Ironically, the modern manifestation of this “nonpoetical” emphasis can be traced to the profoundly influential work of Milman Parry, who attempted to demonstrate in detail how the Homeric poems, believed to have been recorded nearly three thousand years ago, were the products of a long and highly developed tradition of oral poetry about the Trojan War. Parry proposed that this tradition built up its diction and its content by a process of constant accumulation and refinement over many generations of storytellers. But after Parry’s death in 1935, his legacy was taken up by scholars who, unlike Parry, forsook intensive analysis of the poetry itself and focused instead on only one element of Parry’s work: the creative limitations and possibilities of oral composition, concentrating on fixed elements and inflexibilities, focusing on the things that oral poetry allegedly can and cannot do. The dryness of this kind of study drove many of the more inventive scholars away from the poems into the rapidly developing field of Homer’s archaeological and historical background.

Appropriately, Milman Parry’s son Adam was among those scholars responsible for a renewed interest in Homer’s poetry as literary art. Building on his father’s work, the younger Parry argued that the Homeric poems exist both within and against a tradition. The Iliad and the Odyssey were, Adam Parry thought, the beneficiaries of an inherited store of diction, scenes, and concepts, and at the same time highly individual works that surpassed these conventions. Adam Parry helped prepare the ground for the recent Homeric revival by affirming his father’s belief in a strong inherited tradition, but also by emphasizing Homer’s unique contributions within that tradition.

According to the passage, which one of the following is true of Milman Parry’s immediate successors in the field of Homeric studies?

- A. They reconciled Homer’s poetry with archaeological and historical concerns.
- B. They acknowledged the tradition of oral poetry, but focused on the uniqueness of Homer’s poetry within the tradition.
- C. They occupied themselves with the question of what qualities made for great poetry.
- D. They emphasized the boundaries of oral poetry.
- E. They called for a revival of Homer’s popularity.

We just keep on returning to this passage. **In many ways I think it's better to re-use the same passage, because our energy will be focused on the nuances of the answer choices, as opposed to trying to understand the reading itself.**

What do we know about MP's immediate successors? This information is found in the latter part of the second paragraph:

But after Parry's death in 1935, his legacy was taken up by scholars who, unlike Parry, forsook intensive analysis of the poetry itself and focused instead on only one element of Parry's work: the creative limitations and possibilities of oral composition, concentrating on fixed elements and inflexibilities, focusing on the things that oral poetry allegedly can and cannot do.

They stopped analyzing the poetry itself. They focused the limitations and possibilities of oral poetry.

The correct answer is D, *"they emphasized the boundaries of oral poetry."*

That's just another way of saying "they focused on the limitations of oral poetry."

We saw in this section two questions where the correct answer choice was something we weren't expecting. When we are ranking answer choices based on their desirability, it's important to remember that just because an answer is worded awkwardly or in an unexpected way is not grounds for dismissal.

Read these answers word for word and try to interpret them into more comprehensible language, then compare them to the text of the passage. Only eliminate an answer choice if it contains a specific error or flaw.

We saw two such correct answer choices just now. In both of these answers, we were resistant to them more because of the way they were phrased rather than any gaps or mistakes they contained. Perhaps they were worded too vaguely and not as specific as we'd have liked; perhaps we felt that the strength of the wording was a little off. But they were not wrong, per se. Furthermore, if you compared them to the next best alternative, you'll find that the other answers had even more issues.

Incomplete Answers

Let's look at another type of correct answer choices that are easily eliminated or discarded during answer choice ranking. We have seen these answer choices before, in Chapter 8, and they feature predominantly in **Main Point Questions**. For a lot of more recent MP questions, the correct answer choice may have skipped over a significant portion of the passage. But as long as the overall central thesis of the passage is expressed in that answer choice, and there are no better alternatives, an incomplete Main Point answer choice is acceptable. **However, if there are MP answer choices that offer more holistic coverage of the argument and its components, those should be picked first.**

PT25 S1 Q22 (PT25 Passage 4)

Scientists typically advocate the analytic method of studying complex systems: systems are divided into component parts that are investigated separately. But nineteenth-century critics of this method claimed that when a system's parts are isolated its complexity tends to be lost. To address the perceived weaknesses of the analytic method these critics put forward a concept called organicism, which posited that the whole determines the nature of its parts and that the parts of a whole are interdependent.

Organicism depended upon the theory of internal relations, which states that relations between entities are possible only within some whole that embraces them, and that entities are altered by the relationships into which they enter. If an entity stands in a relationship with another entity, it has some property as a consequence. Without this relationship, and hence without the property, the entity would be different—and so would be another entity. Thus, the property is one of the entity's defining characteristics. Each of an entity's relationships likewise determines a defining characteristic of the entity.

One problem with the theory of internal relations is that not all properties of an entity are defining characteristics: numerous properties are accompanying characteristics—even if they are always present, their presence does not influence the entity's identity. Thus, even if it is admitted that every relationship into which an entity enters determines some characteristic of the entity, it is not necessarily true that such characteristics will define the entity; it is possible for the entity to enter into a relationship yet remain essentially unchanged.

The ultimate difficulty with the theory of internal relations is that it renders the acquisition of knowledge impossible. To truly know an entity, we must know all of its relationships; but because the entity is related to everything in each whole of which it is a part, these wholes must be known completely before the entity can be known. This seems to be a prerequisite impossible to satisfy.

Organicists' criticism of the analytic method arose from their failure to fully comprehend the method. In rejecting the analytic method, organicists overlooked the fact that before the proponents of the method analyzed the component parts of a system, they first determined both the laws applicable to the whole system and the initial conditions of the system; proponents of the method thus did not study parts of a system in full isolation from the system as a whole. Since organicists failed to recognize this, they never advanced any argument to show that laws and initial conditions of complex systems cannot be discovered. Hence, organicists offered no valid reason for rejecting the analytic method or for adopting organicism as a replacement for it.

Which one of the following most completely and accurately summarizes the argument of the passage?

- A. By calling into question the possibility that complex systems can be studied in their entirety, organicists offered an alternative to the analytic method favored by nineteenth century scientists
- B. Organicists did not offer a useful method of studying complex systems because they did not acknowledge that there are relationships into which an entity may enter that do not alter the entity's identity
- C. Organicism is flawed because it relies on a theory that both ignores the fact that not all characteristics of entities are defining and ultimately makes the acquisition of knowledge impossible
- D. Organicism does not offer a valid challenge to the analytic method both because it relies on faulty theory and because it is based on a misrepresentation of the analytic method
- E. In criticizing the analytic method, organicists neglected to disprove that scientists who employ the method are able to discover the laws and initial conditions of the systems they study

We have encountered this passage before, recall our takeaways from this passage during an earlier read:

- Paragraph 1: Scientists break systems into components in order to study them, but organicists believe that you can't understand parts without understanding the whole.
- Paragraph 2: Organicists believe in the theory of internal relations, which states that you can't take the parts out of a whole when trying to understand a problem. (Parts are defined by their relationship to the whole, and parts change when they interact as a part of a whole.)
- Paragraph 3: But a problem with this theory is that even though parts can change, these changes may be inconsequential.
- Paragraph 4: This theory also creates a slippery slope that makes acquiring knowledge impossible.
- Paragraph 5: The scientific method doesn't really study parts in full isolation, the organicists overlook this, and they were wrong.

Overall, the relationship between each paragraph and the passage of a whole is pretty clear. Paragraph 1 provides background information, paragraph 2 explains the theory underlining the organicists' argument (opposing viewpoint). Paragraphs 3-5 provides critiques of the organicists' position, with the passage's Main Point is the last sentence of the passage.

If this passage were a massive LR argument, then paragraph 1 would be background information, paragraph 2 the opposing viewpoint, paragraphs 3-4 the argument's premises, and paragraph 5 containing an additional premise and the main conclusion.

The purpose of this passage is rather straight forward as well: to provide a critique/attack the organicists' position.

Let's now look at the question:

Which one of the following most completely and accurately summarizes the argument of the passage?

Something important to note here: even though the question stem make it seem like its asking for a "summary" of the argument of the passage, this is still essentially a **Main Point Question**. I had to learn the hard way that the correct answer is not a detailed summary of what happens in every paragraph.

- A. *By calling into question the possibility that complex systems can be studied in their entirety, organicists offered an alternative to the analytic method favored by nineteenth century scientists*

We know that this is contrary to the idea expressed by the passage. The passage is criticizing the organicists' alternative. This answer can be eliminated in the first round.

- B. *Organicists did not offer a useful method of studying complex systems because they did not acknowledge that there are relationships into which an entity may enter that do not alter the entity's identity*

This answer choice talks about the first problem with organicists, but not the second. But like we said, an incomplete MP answer choice is okay if there are none better, so let's keep it for now.

- C. *Organicism is flawed because it relies on a theory that both ignores the fact that not all characteristics of entities are defining and ultimately makes the acquisition of knowledge impossible*

This answer covers both the point made in Answer Choice B, as well as the sub-point of the fourth paragraph. This is better than B, so let's eliminate B and keep C.

D. Organicism does not offer a valid challenge to the analytic method both because it relies on faulty theory and because it is based on a misrepresentation of the analytic method

This answer is very similar to C, the direction of the answer choice is fine, and it describes two of the sub-points mentioned in the passage. Let's keep this one for now as well.

E. In criticizing the analytic method, organicists neglected to disprove that scientists who employ the method are able to discover the laws and initial conditions of the systems they study

This one is confusing, what does it mean to "neglect to disprove?" Does it mean that they should have disproven something, but didn't? What should they have disproven?

Organicists should have disproven that analytic method scientists are able to discover the laws and initial conditions of the systems they study.

In other words, organicists should have shown that analytic scientists cannot discover the laws and initial conditions.

But this is contrary to the information from the last paragraph, where we are told that the analytic scientists are in fact able to discover the laws and initial conditions of the systems they study.

Furthermore, the idea should be that "the organicists are wrong because they ignore the fact that analytic scientists are able to discover the laws and initial conditions."

This answer also only covers a part of the last paragraph.

So we saw that Answer B is a partial answer, whereas answer choices C and D were more complete. So let's look at C and D to see which is a better option.

Remember, the Main Point of the passage was that "the organicist criticism of the analytic method is flawed." The support for this is three-fold:

One, the Theory of IR (upon which organicism depends) overlooks that not all properties will define or change an entity.

Two, the Theory of IR makes the acquisition of knowledge impossible, and

Three, the organicists misunderstand the analytic method.

Answer C covers #1 and #2 criticisms.

Answer D covers #3 for sure, but does it cover #1 and #2? Remember, both #1 and #2 are attacking the underlying theory of organicism, the theory of internal relations. Answer D offers a very generalized description of this: "it relies on faulty theory."

Even though it's not as specific as we would have liked, both the first and second points made in criticism of organicism are in fact pointing out the faults behind the theory of internal relations.

So answer choice D has in fact covered all three criticisms.

The correct answer is D.

PT51 S2 Q8 (PT51 Passage 2)

A vigorous debate in astronomy centers on an epoch in planetary history that was first identified by analysis of rock samples obtained in lunar missions. Scientists discovered that the major craters on the Moon were created by a vigorous bombardment of debris approximately four billion years ago—the so-called late heavy bombardment (LHB). Projectiles from this bombardment that affected the Moon should also have struck Earth, a likelihood with profound consequences for the history of Earth since, until the LHB ended, life could not have survived here.

Various theoretical approaches have been developed to account for both the evidence gleaned from samples of Moon rock collected during lunar explorations and the size and distribution of craters on the Moon. Since the sizes of LHB craters suggest they were formed by large bodies, some astronomers believe that the LHB was linked to the disintegration of an asteroid or comet orbiting the Sun. In this view, a large body broke apart and peppered the inner solar system with debris. Other scientists disagree and believe that the label “LHB” is in itself a misnomer. These researchers claim that a cataclysm is not necessary to explain the LHB evidence. They claim that the Moon’s evidence merely provides a view of the period concluding billions of years of a continuous, declining heavy bombardment throughout the inner solar system. According to them, the impacts from the latter part of the bombardment were so intense that they obliterated evidence of earlier impacts. A third group contends that the Moon’s evidence supports the view that the LHB was a sharply defined cataclysmic cratering period, but these scientists believe that because of its relatively brief duration, this cataclysm did not extend throughout the inner solar system. They hold that the LHB involved only the disintegration of a body within the Earth- Moon system, because the debris from such an event would have been swept up relatively quickly.

New support for the hypothesis that a late bombardment extended throughout the inner solar system has been found in evidence from the textural features and chemical makeup of a meteorite that has been found on Earth. It seems to be a rare example of a Mars rock that made its way to Earth after being knocked from the surface of Mars. The rock has recently been experimentally dated at about four billion years old, which means that, if the rock is indeed from Mars, it was knocked from the planet at about the same time that the Moon was experiencing the LHB. This tiny piece of evidence suggests that at least two planetary systems in the inner solar system experienced bombardment at the same time. However, to determine the pervasiveness of the LHB, scientists will need to locate many more such rocks and perhaps obtain surface samples from other planets in the inner solar system.

Which one of the following most accurately expresses the main point of the passage?

- A. The LHB is an intense meteorite bombardment that occurred about four billion years ago and is responsible for the cratering on the Moon and perhaps on other members of the inner solar system as well.
- B. Astronomers now believe that they may never collect enough evidence to determine the true nature of the LHB.
- C. If scientists continue to collect new clues at their current rate, the various LHB hypotheses can soon be evaluated and a clear picture will emerge.
- D. The Moon’s evidence shows that the LHB was linked to a small body that disintegrated while in solar orbit and sprayed the inner solar system with debris.
- E. New evidence has been found that favors the view that the LHB was widespread, but before competing theories of the LHB can be excluded, more evidence needs to be gathered.

We have seen this passage before, the author presents three theories/hypotheses on the LHB, and offers tentative evidence that seems to support the first theory.

- A. *The LHB is an intense meteorite bombardment that occurred about four billion years ago and is responsible for the cratering on the Moon and perhaps on other members of the inner solar system as well.*

Ok, this sounds like background information to me. The core of the passage is talking about the three theories and how theory #1 seems to have some evidence. This answer is too narrow in focus.

- B. *Astronomers now believe that they may never collect enough evidence to determine the true nature of the LHB.*

This is contrary to the passage, the passage tells us that there is some support for theory #1, but to be sure, we need additional evidence.

- C. *If scientists continue to collect new clues at their current rate, the various LHB hypotheses can soon be evaluated and a clear picture will emerge.*

This is a corruption of the last sentence of the passage. The passage says that in order to determine the pervasiveness of LHB, scientists will need more evidence. This answer is saying that if scientists collect new evidence, they will be able to determine the pervasiveness of LHB. Take a look at the following analogy:

To find out who the culprit is, we must conduct additional investigation. (Find culprit → Additional Investigation)

If we conduct additional investigation, we will find out who the culprit is. (Additional Investigation → Find culprit)

- D. *The Moon's evidence shows that the LHB was linked to a small body that disintegrated while in solar orbit and sprayed the inner solar system with debris.*

This is both too strong and too partial. It's talking about the third hypothesis only, and the word "show" is too strong. In the passage, we are told that this is only a view of what could have happened.

- E. *New evidence has been found that favors the view that the LHB was widespread, but before competing theories of the LHB can be excluded, more evidence needs to be gathered.*

This answer choice perfectly encapsulates what the last paragraph is telling us. I was initially weary of selecting it, however.

The majority of the passage is devoted to comparing the three different hypotheses on the LHB. The correct answer, I thought, would at least have to cover that. But then again, as we have witnessed many times on Main Point Questions, the correct answer will *only* cover the most important points in a passage, or the ideas that the author is trying to get across. For this passage, there were three points I would have liked to see in the correct answer, and in order of significance, they are:

1. New evidence seems to support theory #1. (This is most clearly an idea that the author is trying to convey)
2. But we need additional evidence. (Also clearly the author's opinion)

3. There were three theories regarding the LHB. (Even though they take up a large portion of the passage, it can be argued that this is background information, or laying the groundwork for the author's opinion in the last paragraph)

This answer only covers #1 and #2. Is there an answer that covers all three points? Unfortunately there isn't. So we have no choice but to select E.

Recall in the last passage (PT25 Passage 4) that even though there were several answers that all covered the most central issues of the passage, we picked the most **complete answer choice available**. *If no complete answer was available, we pick the best of the bunch.* This is a habit that we shall re-emphasize in the next two chapters.

Conservatively Worded Answers

Finally, let's revisit another feature of more desirable answers that are specific to According to the Passage, Inference, and Restricted Scope Questions: **Conservatively Worded Answer Choices**.

We saw earlier in the Inference Questions Chapter that the **threshold of proof** is something that we must consider when comparing answer choices. A neutral, weakly worded, ambiguous, or conservatively phrased answer is going to have a lower threshold of proof. That means it will be easier to prove given the passage.

Since the correct answer must be backed up by the text as much as possible, answers whose wording is easier to prove will be more attractive. For instance, if an answer said that the author "hated" a certain opponent's position, then we would need to find evidence of this "hatred" within the text of the passage. But if an answer said that the author "disapproved" of the opposing position, then as long as there is any evidence of aversion, no matter how mild, then this answer can possibly be proven.

Similarly, if an answer choice stated that "the majority" of legislators approved of the amendment, then we'll need evidence that >50% of all legislators approved. But if the wording was "some" legislators approved of the amendment, then all we need is for one legislator to have approved – something much easier to find from the passage.

But of course, your job is to **find the most accurate answer choice in the first place**. So if the author is actually displaying "hatred" for an opponent, as evident from the text of the passage, by all means select that answer instead. If the passage stated that 150/200 legislators voted to approve the amendment, then select the answer that said "most" legislators without further consternation.

It is when we are unclear about the exact support each answer choice has that we would want to err on the side of caution, and that means choosing the option with the lowest threshold of proof to maximize our chances.

Lastly, this rule for ranking answers only apply to questions that **derive their answers from the passage**. If we are faced with a non-restricted scope question like a Strengthen or a Weaken Question, then we would be looking for the answer with the clearest impact instead. (See Chapter 13 for additional details)

Summary

After an initial round of eliminations, if we still have several potential candidates for the correct answer choice, it's time to rank them in terms of preferability. In this chapter we looked at some of the ways in which we determine preferability, and certain things that we must remind ourselves of during this ranking phase.

We saw that in harder RC questions, more than one answer choice can ostensibly have support from the passage. Hence it is our job to identify the location of the textual support, and compare the answers again in light of the support they depend on. Is one answer only partially supported by the text, while another is fully supported? Does one answer require us to make a lengthy inference, while another answer is more explicitly backed by a specific sentence? Our job is to *choose the answer choice that is more fully and explicitly supported by the information found in the passage.*

Several additional factors to consider when ranking answer choices:

Just because an answer doesn't match what we were anticipating doesn't make it wrong. As we have seen in multiple instances, the correct answer choice to a question turned out to be very different from what we were expecting. Maybe it was worded in an unfamiliar or vague manner, or perhaps it was indirect and convoluted. But in order to maximize our chances for success, we should do our best to parse these answers, try to understand what they are saying, and see if the answer can still be matched up with what we were looking for in the first place.

Finally, for Main Point Questions, if there are multiple contenders that all happen to encapsulate the passage's central thesis, go with the answer that offers the most complete coverage of the reading's key points.

For questions that derive their answers from the passage, a general rule of thumb is that *conservatively worded answer choices* are usually safer bets. If none of the remaining answer choices contravene the content of the passage, and you can't find one specific answer that most accurately mirrors the text, pick the answer choice with the lowest threshold of proof.

These are habits that I found helpful in helping me and my students when it comes to answer choice ranking. But for the hardest questions, this may not be enough. We'll look at advanced ranking techniques reserved for the hardest RC questions in the next chapter.

