**Chapter 1**

**Preparation for MCAT Verbal Reasoning**

The MCAT verbal reasoning section is at least as important as any other section of the MCAT. It accounts for one-third of your composite score. However, many MCAT candidates are uncertain as to how to prepare for it. As a result, this area is often neglected and candidates are often disappointed when they receive their MCAT scores. This book will help prepare candidates for the verbal reasoning section.

Verbal reasoning is a skill and so requires practice to be good at it. Further, a systematic approach to developing this skill will make maximum use of a candidate’s time. This book is based on these two premises: it provides a great deal of practice and its approach is systematic. It first explains the types of questions one will encounter and the logic used to answer them. Test-taking techniques are also described. Then it provides twelve warm-up passages and seventy MCAT-like passages for extensive practice. As your skills develop, you should impose time limits for each passage so that you become faster and accustomed to the kind of pressure you will face in the MCAT exam.

The passages approximately progress from relatively easy to relatively difficult. If you find the earlier passages too easy, you can make them more challenging by giving yourself less time to complete them. This develops speed, which is crucial in the MCAT verbal reasoning sub-test.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Preparation for MCAT Verbal Reasoning |  |
|  |  |

Chapter 1 Types of Questions

The following is a list of typical questions you can expect to find on the Verbal Reasoning section of the MCAT.

Main idea questions

These test your comprehension of the theme of the article. Questions may ask you for the main idea, central idea, purpose, a possible title for the passage, and so on. You may be asked to determine which statement best expresses the author’s arguments or conclusions.

Inference questions

These require you to understand the logic of the author’s argument and then to decide what can be reasonably inferred from the article and what cannot be reasonably inferred.

Analysis of evidence questions

These ask you to identify the evidence the author uses to support his argument. You may be required to analyze relationships between given and implied information. You may be asked not only to understand the way the author uses different pieces of information but also to evaluate whether the author has built sound arguments.

Implication questions

You may be asked to make judgements about what would follow if the author is correct in his argument or what a particular discovery might lead to. You may be given new information and then asked how this affects the author’s original argument.

Tone questions

You may be asked to judge the attitude of the author towards his subject.

1.1 Main Idea Questions

To find the main idea, ask the following three questions.

What is this passage about (the topic)?

What is the most important thing the author says about the topic (the main idea)?

Do all of the other ideas in the passage support this main idea?

Read the following passage and find the main idea.

For most immigrants, the journey to America was long and often full of hardships and suffering. The immigrants often walked the entire distance from their villages to the nearest seaport. There the ships might be delayed and precious time and money lost. Sometimes ticket agents or ship captains fleeced the immigrants of all they owned.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Preparation for MCAT Verbal Reasoning |  |
|  |  |

The most important idea in this paragraph is:

A. Immigrants had to walk long distances to get to seaports. B. Ship schedules were very irregular.

C. Ship captains often stole all the possessions of immigrants.

D. The journey of immigrants to America was very difficult and often painful.

What is this passage about? This paragraph is about the immigrants’ journey to America. This is the topic of the paragraph.

What is the most important thing the author says about the topic? The author says that the immigrants’ journey “was long and often full of hardships and suffering.” This is the main idea of the paragraph.

To be absolutely sure that this is the main idea, ask yourself: Do all of the other ideas in the passage support this main idea? There are other ideas in the paragraph, but each one is an example of some kind of hardship suffered by the immigrants. Thus, the correct choice is D.

The Main Idea at the Beginning of a Passage

Did you notice that the main idea was contained in the first sentence? Often the main idea is in the first sentence.

Read the following passage and find the main idea.

Working conditions in the factories were frequently unpleasant and dangerous. A workday of 14 or 16 hours was not uncommon. The work was uncertain. When the factory completed its orders, the men were laid off. Often the pay was inadequate to feed a man’s family. This meant that often an entire family had to work in factories in order to survive.

This paragraph is most concerned with

A. dangerous and difficult working conditions in factories.

B. the passage of child-labor laws.

C. the lack of job security in early factories.

D. the low pay scale of early factories.

What is this passage about? The topic of the passage is working conditions in the factories.

What is the most important thing the author says about these working conditions? Working conditions in the factories were frequently dangerous and unpleasant.

Do all of the other ideas in the passage support this main idea? All of the other sentences give examples of dangerous or unpleasant working conditions.

The correct choice is A.

The Main Idea in the Middle of a Passage

Sometimes the main idea it is stated somewhere in the middle of a paragraph. That is why the three questions about the main idea are so helpful.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Preparation for MCAT Verbal Reasoning |  |
|  |  |

What is this passage about?—will help you focus on the main idea.

What is the most important thing the author says about the topic?—will point out the main idea.

Do all of the other ideas in the passage support this main idea?—will help you to be sure you have chosen the most important idea rather than one of the less important ideas.

If you can answer these three questions, you will find the main idea no matter where it is placed in the paragraph.

Read the following passage carefully and ask yourself the three key questions. Then answer the question following the passage.

Many who had left the Catholic Church during the Protestant upheaval eventually returned to their original faith. However, the religious struggle of the sixteenth century destroyed the unity of Western Christendom. No longer was there one Church, nor one people, or one empire.

The main point the author makes in this paragraph is that:

A. The Protestant Reformation destroyed the Catholic Church.

B. The Protestant Reformation did not affect the Catholic Church. C. Some Protestants rejoined the Catholic Church.

D. Western Christendom was never again unified after the Protestant Reformation.

The topic is the Protestant upheaval. The most important thing the author says about the Protestant upheaval is that it destroyed the unity of Western Christendom. The first sentence gives an example of unity. The second sentence points out that this example of unity was of very minor importance compared to the disunity. The third sentence expands this idea of disunity and tells how extensive the disunity was. The main idea is contained in the second sentence. All of the other ideas support that sentence. Thus, the correct choice is D.

The Main Idea in Several Sentences

The main idea is not always contained in a single sentence. Sometimes it takes more than one sentence to express a complex idea. Then you must piece together ideas from two or more sentences to find the main idea. The three questions are particularly helpful with paragraphs like this one:

Locke, of course, was no lone voice. The climate was right for him. He was a member of the Royal Society, and was thus intimately concerned with the work of the great seventeenth-century scientists. He argued that property—the possession of land and the making of money—was a rational consequence of human freedom. This promise linked him to other great developments of the period—the formation of the powerful banks, the agricultural revolution, the new science, and the Industrial Revolution.

The main idea of this paragraph is

A. John Locke believed that property was a product of human freedom.

B. John Locke was linked to the agricultural and industrial revolutions as well as to the new science and the formation of banks.

C. Property is the possession of land and the making of money.

D. John Locke’s views on property linked him to all the other great developments of the seventeenth century.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Preparation for MCAT Verbal Reasoning |  |
|  |  |

You probably took a little more time to piece together the main idea. Notice that all of the choices are true statements. All of them are found in the passage. But now you are asked to judge which is the most important.

What is the passage about? The topic is John Locke. More precisely, the passage is about how John Locke was linked to the great events of the seventeenth century.

What is the most important thing the author says about John Locke and the events of his time? Locke’s idea that property was a natural result of human freedom linked him to the great developments of his period.

Do all of the other ideas in the passage support your main idea? The first sentence says that Locke was not “a lone voice”; the second sentence says that the “climate was right for him.” These sentences support the idea that Locke was linked to the developments of his period. The third sentence states explicitly that Locke was “intimately concerned with the work of seventeenth-century scientists.” The fourth sentence states Locke’s ideas on property (part of the main idea). The last sentence links Locke with the great developments of his period (part of the main idea) and it lists those developments. Since all of the sentences in the paragraph support your statement of the main idea, you may be confident that you have the complete main idea. All of the other statements support the main idea, but they do not state it completely. Choice D is therefore correct.

The Main Idea in Several Paragraphs

So far, you have learned to find the main idea of paragraphs. To find the main idea of passages consisting of several paragraphs, first find the main idea of each paragraph. In the passage below, the main idea of each paragraph has been underlined.

Americans have long believed that George Washington died of injuries he received from a fall from a horse. We now know that his doctors killed him. Oh, it was no political assassination. They killed him by being what they were—physicians practicing good eighteenth-century medicine (which prescribed bleeding for every disease and injury). Washington, was bled of two quarts of blood in two days.

It is commonly thought that the practice of blood-letting died with the eighteenth century, but even today leeches are sold in every major city in the United States. These blood-sucking little worms are still used by ignorant people to draw off “bad blood,” the old-world treatment for every disease of body and spirit.

The cities of America are infested with an even worse kind of bloodsucker than the leech. Like the leech, he is not a cure-all, but a cure-nothing. Like the leech, he transmits diseases more dangerous than those he is supposed to cure. And like his brother, the primordial worm, he kills more often than he cures. His name is “pusher”; his treatment is not bloodletting, but addiction.

The purpose of the passage is to

A. explain how George Washington died.

B. describe the eighteenth-century practice of using leeches to treat diseases.

C. denounce the practice of blood-letting.

D. make a comparison between leeches and drug pushers.

Re-read only the underlined portions of the passage. These sentences can be used to form a summary of the passage:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Preparation for MCAT Verbal Reasoning |  |
|  |  |

George Washington died of bleeding. Leeches are still used by ignorant people for treating diseases. The cities of America are infested with an even worse kind of blood-sucker than the leech. His name is “pusher.”

Now ask yourself the same questions you used to find the main idea of a single paragraph.

What is the passage about? The topic is leeches, blood-letting, and drug pushers.

What is the most important thing the author says about this topic? Drug pushers are worse than leeches and do more harm than blood-letting.

Do all of the other ideas in the passage support this main idea? Yes, the first paragraph explains that leeches were used in the eighteenth century and could kill people. The second paragraph explains that ignorant people still use leeches. The third paragraph compares leeches and drug-pushers and stresses that drugs are the more harmful.

The answer is D.

In addition to asking the three questions, you could also ask whether each of the answer choices is too narrow or too broad. For example, in the previous question choices A, B, and C are all too narrow to be the main idea.

1. Inference Questions

Some questions ask you to make inferences. An inference is a conclusion not directly stated in the text, but implied by it. Read the following passage. The topic is not directly stated, but you can infer what the paragraph is about.

Dark clouds moved swiftly across the sky blotting out the sun. With no further warning, great cracks of thunder and flashes of lightning disturbed the morning’s calm. Fortunately, the deckhands had already tied everything securely in place and closed all portholes and hatches or we would have lost our gear to the fury of wind and water.

1. This passage most likely describes

A. a storm during an African safari. B. a storm at sea.

C. an Antarctic expedition. D. a flash flood.

1. Which of the following statements is false? A. The storm was unexpected.

B. The storm came suddenly. C. It was windy.

D. It was cloudy.

Nowhere in the paragraph are the words “sudden storm at sea” but, obviously, that is what the paragraph is about. The words dark clouds, thunder, lightning, wind, and water all suggest a storm. The word deckhands suggests a ship at sea. Several other words give you the feeling of the suddenness of the storm. You are justified in inferring that the writer was caught in a sudden and terrible storm at sea. The answer to question 1 is B.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Preparation for MCAT Verbal Reasoning |  |
|  |  |

But are you justified in concluding that the storm was unexpected. You know that things that happen suddenly are often unexpected. Was that the case with this storm? The last sentence tells you that the deckhands had already tied everything down and closed all portholes and hatches. That sentence indicates the storm was expected. The answer to question 2 is A.

Read the paragraph below. You will be asked to examine the cause-effect relationships implied by it later.

Bo went to the play-off game with several of his friends. At the stadium Bo ate four frankfurters with mustard and relish, two hamburgers with chilli, drank several bottles of soda, and ate an assortment of candy, potato chips, pretzels, and ice cream. Suddenly Bo felt dizzy, feverish, and sick. When he got home, he took something to calm his stomach and went to bed.

Bo got sick because

A. he took something to calm his stomach.

B. he went to the play-off game.

C. he felt dizzy and feverish.

D. he ate too much.

It is easy to see that Bo got sick because he ate too much – choice D. What is wrong with the other answers?

Choice A is wrong because the cause and effect are mixed up. Bo took something to calm his stomach because he was sick. He was not sick because he took something to calm his stomach.

Choice B is wrong because going to the play-off game really had nothing to do with his nausea later. If he had eaten the same food at home, he probably would have been just as sick. There is no real causal connection between the game and the sickness.

Choice C is incorrect because the feverishness and dizziness probably had the same cause as Bo’s sickness. They were signs or symptoms of his illness, but not its cause.

Read the following paragraph. The question following it is concerned with the relationships between the main idea and supporting details.

Do we live in a revolutionary age? Our television and newspapers seem to tell us that we do. The late twentieth century has seen the governments of China and Cuba, among others, overthrown. The campuses of our universities erupted into violence; above the confusion of voices could be heard slogans of social revolution. We are constantly reminded that we live in a time of scientific and technological revolution. Members of militant racial groups cry for the necessity and inevitability of violent revolution. Even a new laundry detergent is described as “revolutionary!” Many causes, many voices, all use the same word.

Revolutionary ages are generally marked by:

A. violence, slogans, science.

B. violence, television coverage, governments overthrown.

C. peace, science, technology.

D. violence, confusion, governments overthrown.

Notice that the author does not answer his own question in the first sentence (the main idea). All of the other sentences give illustrations of or examples of “revolution.” The question asks you to make a generalization about

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Preparation for MCAT Verbal Reasoning |  |
|  |  |

the nature of revolution from these examples. Choices A and B include examples from a particular revolution (if one does exist). They are not true generalizations. Choice C is patently contrary to the ideas of the passage. Choice D is correct.

1. Analysis of Evidence Questions

Some questions ask you to check back in the text to see if the passage confirms or refutes a particular detail. This is the easiest kind of question to answer. In fact, the answer may be so obvious, you may be tempted to feel that some kind of trick is involved. Relax! If you can find the answer in the passage, you are almost certainly right.

The Fertile Crescent has been called the cradle of civilization. The Fertile Crescent is that sickle-shaped area of land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The waters of these rivers changed the Asian desert into rich land with abundant crops. Many people believe that this is the land where man first settled down to farming after ages as a wandering hunter and later as a herder. Some even believe that the fabulous Garden of Eden was located somewhere in the Fertile Crescent.

1. The Fertile Crescent is located in A. Africa.

B. Europe. C. Asia.

D. the west.

1. A crescent is

A. shaped like a sickle. B. always fertile.

C. round. D. deserted.

1. The land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers

A. has good soil and abundant water for irrigation. B. is populated by hunters.

C. was extremely overpopulated. D. is shaped like a full moon.

ANSWERS

1. C is correct – 3rd sentence.

2. A – 2nd sentence.

3. A – 3rd sentence.

1. Implication Questions

Sometimes you will have to apply one of the ideas in a passage to another situation. Sometimes this type of question takes a broad generalization from the passage and asks you to apply it to a specific situation. Attempt the passage below.

In December 1946, full-scale war broke out between French soldiers and Viet Minh forces. The people tended to support the Viet Minh. Communist countries aided the rebels, especially after 1949

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Preparation for MCAT Verbal Reasoning |  |
|  |  |

communist regime came to power in China. The United States became involved in the struggle in 1950, when the United States declared support of Vietnamese independence, under Bao Dai.

Finally, in 1954, at the battle of Dien Bien Phu, the French suffered a shattering defeat and decided to withdraw. The 1954 Geneva Conference, which arranged for a cease-fire, provisionally divided Vietnam into northern and southern sectors at the 17th parallel. The unification of Vietnam was to be achieved by general elections to be held in July 1956 in both sectors under international supervision. In the north, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was led by its president, Ho Chi Minh, and was dominated by the Communist party.

In the south, Ngo Dinh Diem took over the government when Bao Dai left the country in 1954. As the result of a referendum held in 1955, a republic was established in South Vietnam, with Diem as President.

1. A good title for this passage would be (main idea question)

A. “The United States and Vietnam” B. “The Geneva Conference”

C. “The Vietnamese Fight for Independence” D. “The Career of Bao Dai”

1. In the second paragraph the word “provisionally” means (implication question) A. temporarily.

B. permanently.

C. with a large, outfitted army. D. helplessly.

1. Bao Dai was in 1950 (implication question)

A. a possible Vietnamese independence leader.

B. the leader of the French.

C. the brother of Dien Bien Phu. D. the President of South Vietnam.

1. The tone of this passage is (tone question)

A. objective.

B. partial to the French.

C. partial to the North Vietnamese. D. cynical.

1. From the passage we might assume that in 1946 the Viet Minh were (implication question) A. South Vietnamese.

B. Vietnamese rebels. C. North Vietnamese.

D. French-supporting Vietnamese.

ANSWERS

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1. | C |
| 2. | A |
| 3. | D |
| 4. | A |
| 5. | B |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Preparation for MCAT Verbal Reasoning |  |
|  |  |

1. Tone Questions

An author may express his feelings or attitudes toward a subject. This expression of emotion imparts a tone to the writing. To determine the tone of a passage, think of the emotions or attitudes that are expressed throughout the passage.

Below are some terms used to describe tone.

Term Meaning

Admiring respectful, approving

Belittling making small, depreciating

Cynical unbelieving, sneering

Denigrating blackening, defamatory

Didactic instructive, authoritarian

Ebullient exuberant, praising

Lampooning satirical, making fun of

Laudatory praising

Mendacious untruthful, lying

Objective factual

Optimistic hopeful

Praising commending, laudatory

Reverential exhalted, regarding as sacred

Ridiculing deriding, mocking, scornful

Saddened sorrowful, mournful

Sanguine confident, hopeful

Sarcastic bitter, ironic

Sardonic mocking, bitter, cynical

Satiric ridiculing, mocking

Tragic sad

A tragic tone reflects misfortune and unfulfilled hopes. A satiric tone mocks and ridicules its subject. An author may use an ironic tone to develop a contrast between (1) what is said and what is meant, (2) what actually happens and what appears to be happening, or (3) what happens and what was expected to happen. These are just a few of the emotions or attitudes that influence the tone.

Attempt the questions below.

A certain baseball team took the pennant for the first time in many years. Different people reacted differently.

1. “Wow! I can’t believe it! This is the best thing that could have happened in this city!” The tone of this remark is

A. serious.

B. excited. C. sarcastic. D. amazed.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Preparation for MCAT Verbal Reasoning |  |
|  |  |

1. “Ah! This is like it was when I was a boy. It makes my chest swell with pride again and brings tears to my eyes.”

The tone of this remark is

A. sentimental. B. excited.

C. sarcastic. D. amazed.

3. “The team’s manager and coach have had a lot of influence throughout the season. They deserve a lot of credit for this victory.”

The tone of this remark is A. serious.

B. excited. C. sarcastic. D. amazed.

1. “What!? They won!? And they started off so poorly this season. I just can’t believe it!”

The tone of this remark is

A. serious. B. excited.

C. sarcastic. D. amazed.

1. “It couldn’t have been skill since they don’t have that. It couldn’t have been bribery, since they don’t have any money. The other team must all have been sick. It’s the only way they could have won.”

The tone of this remark is

A. serious.

B. excited. C. sarcastic. D. amazed.

ANSWERS

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1. | B. |
| 2. | A. |
| 3. | A. |
| 4. | D. |
| 5. | C. |

We sat around the fire in the old house. My brothers and I and our father hadn’t all been together for a year. It was a cold November day. Only a year had passed. Mother’s shawl still hung over the back of her rocker. It had hung there that night a year ago. It hung there quietly just as her memory hung in our minds. We tried to talk, but silence kept breaking in - the silence of the rocker that creaked no more. We four shared the silence of the rocker.

1. The tone of this passage is A. humorous.

B. hopeless.

C. satiric.

D. sentimental.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Preparation for MCAT Verbal Reasoning |  |
|  |  |

ANSWER

1. D.

A student was arrested for auto theft. His friends reacted in various ways.

1. “John has been arrested? I’m afraid he is headed downhill. This is not the first time. Each time it gets worse. I’m worried about him.”

The tone of this is A. angry.

B. fearful. C. sarcastic. D. surprised.

1. “Go on, John! Soon you’ll be able to steal a cookie without your mother knowing it.”

The tone of this is A. praising.

B. happy.

C. sentimental. D. sarcastic.

1. “Damn that boy! Won’t he ever straighten up.”

The tone of this is A. depressed. B. angry.

C. sarcastic. D. serious.

1. “He’s never been arrested before. Maybe, God willing, this will teach him his lesson. I see a better day coming.”

The tone of this is A. hopeful.

B. hopeless. C. sentimental. D. saddened.

1. “I showed him just how to do it. He blew it! He could have gotten away with it if he’d just listened to me.”

The tone of this is A. disappointed.

B. hopeless. C. depressed. D. sarcastic.

ANSWERS

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 1. | B. |
| 2. | D. |
| 3. | B. |
| 4. | A. |
| 5. | A. |