

Strategy for Rhetorical Skills Questions on the ACT English

Learn strategies for answering style, strategy, and organization questions on the ACT English exam. You can use these strategies for about 50% of the questions on the ACT English.

Introduction

There are three types of **Rhetorical Skills** questions on the ACT English: style, strategy, and organization. We've learned the main differences between the question types, and in this lesson, we'll go over some strategies you can use when answering these questions. As we go through the strategies, make sure to pay attention to the structure of the question and the specific question type because some of these strategies work better for specific questions. Applying these strategies will help you boost your score, so let's get started!

Read the Question Carefully

Our first strategy sounds obvious, but students often skip this important step: **Read the question carefully**. This is so important, I'm going to say it again: read the question carefully. Not all rhetorical skills questions have an actual question, but if they do, you must read the question carefully to figure out what the question is actually asking.

Let's look at an example to see why this is so important. Read the two sentences below:

1. Frances was exhausted after a long day at school.
2. After waking up at 6 am and spending 8 hours in class, Frances was exhausted.

Do you see anything wrong with either of these sentences? I don't. Both are grammatically correct. Both could be true and make sense in an essay.

What if I asked you, 'Which sentence most efficiently describes how Frances felt at the end of the day?'

Read the question carefully. What exactly is it asking for? I see the words 'most efficiently.' This tells me that I'm looking for a concise sentence that doesn't have too much detail. I also see 'how Frances felt,' so I'm also looking for the sentence that tells me how Frances was feeling.

Which sentence is the better fit to answer that question? Both sentences tell us that Frances felt exhausted, so we can't find the correct answer yet. Let's examine the sentences for efficiency. Sentence 2 has a lot more details than sentence 1. Sentence 1 is more efficient because it tells us exactly how Frances feels without the extra detail.

But what if I asked you this question instead: 'Which sentence best explains why Frances was tired at the end of the day?'

What exactly is this question asking? It's asking 'why' Frances was tired. This question isn't asking us for an efficient sentence - it's asking for a sentence with specific reasons. Now, sentence 2 is a better choice because it tells us the specific reasons why Frances is exhausted.

Now do you see why it's so important to read the question carefully? Both sentences could have been correct - it just depends on what the question is asking.

Strategy for Rhetorical Skills Questions on the ACT English

Don't Be the Writer

This brings us to our second strategy: **Don't be the writer**. If you were writing an essay about Frances, you could choose either of those sentences. It would be up to you as a writer to decide which sentence better fits your essay. Some of you might like concise sentence 1, and some of you might prefer the more detailed sentence 2.

On the ACT, you're not the writer. When you see ACT English questions that have an actual question, you're almost like a robot just following directions. Bury your instincts about which sentence you prefer, and just read the question very carefully to figure out what it's asking. I've seen a lot of students miss answers because they overlooked the question and chose the sentence they liked better or that they thought better fit the paragraph.

Get the Right Amount of Context

Strategy and organization questions are usually about how sentences or paragraphs fit into the whole passage. You don't have to read the entire passage to answer most of these questions, but you should read surrounding sentences to **get the right amount of context** of the question. The amount you need to read depends on the question. Here's a quick guide to help you know how much context you need to get. This doesn't cover all question types, but it does cover the most common.

For questions that ask you to choose the best transition sentence, read the paragraph before the transition and the paragraph in which the transition sentence appears.

For questions that just ask about introductory or concluding sentences, you can just read the paragraph that contains the questions.

If you see a question that asks about adding a sentence to a paragraph, just read that paragraph.

Most organization questions will ask you about sentence order or paragraph order. For sentence order questions, you just need to read the paragraph.

For paragraph order questions, read the whole passage. These questions will appear at the end of the passage and will clearly state that the question is about the whole passage.

Getting the right amount of context for each question allows you to answer questions correctly without spending time reading parts of the passage that are unnecessary.

No Actual Question

The strategies we've talked about so far refer to Rhetorical Skills questions that have an actual question. There are some Rhetorical Skills questions that have **no actual question**. These are usually style questions and ask about sentence-level detail. They're actually pretty similar to usage and mechanics questions, and I like to use usage and mechanics strategies to answer them.

We learned usage and mechanics strategies in another lesson, but here's a quick list:

- Read the whole sentence
- Hear the sentence in your head

Strategy for Rhetorical Skills Questions on the ACT English

- Don't read the whole passage

For these questions, really focus on the sentence and ask yourself:

- Is this a good sentence?
- Does the word order make sense?
- Are there any unnecessary words?

Let's look at an example.

Frances was exhausted and tired after a long day at school.

We saw this sentence earlier, but I've added two extra words. Do you see what they are? Are those words necessary? Do they add important detail to the sentence? They tell us that Frances was tired, but doesn't exhausted mostly mean the same thing? We don't need two words telling us that Frances was tired. You could rewrite the sentence as 'Frances was exhausted after a long day at school.' or 'Frances was tired after a long day at school.' Both are correct and less wordy and redundant than the original.

Lesson Summary

Rhetorical skills questions can be daunting because you can't just memorize a grammar rule in order to find the correct answer. Let's review the four strategies we learned for finding the correct answer to rhetorical skills questions.

First, and most important, **read the question carefully**. Many times, all the answer choices for rhetorical skills questions could be correct - it just depends on what the question is asking. Related to that, **don't be the writer**. It doesn't matter what you would do as the writer. You should choose the answer that answers the question, even if you don't really like it.

Third, **get the right amount of context**. You don't always have to read the whole passage and can save yourself time by only reading paragraphs referenced in specific questions. Finally, adjust your strategy if there is **no actual question**. These are typically questions that ask about specific sentences and are similar to usage and mechanics questions. The most important strategy is to read the whole sentence.

Practice these strategies so that you're comfortable with them on test day!