

HOW TO ATTEMPT COMPREHENSION QUESTION

Comprehension of a passage is generally difficult for most candidates because the topics are varied.

They may be about medicine, science and technology, religion or philosophy. Some of the subjects discussed may not be familiar to you. Here speed as well as understanding of the contents of the given passage is of the essence because in every competitive examination, several such passages are given. Comprehension tests ascertain your ability to understand the passage and remember its main points. Questions on the passage are mostly fact-based. In some cases, the candidates are asked to draw inferences from what is stated or implied in the passage. Such passages are difficult and need a lot of practice.

GUIDELINES

1. Read newspapers and magazines regularly.
2. Give yourself an environment of English; converse in English with your friends and peers.
3. Read the first few lines (or the paragraph) very carefully as this part generally contains the central idea of the passage.
4. Develop a sense of urgency while reading the passage.
5. Practise at least one typical passage under test conditions every day. Give yourself five to seven minutes to read a small passage and ten to fifteen minutes in case of a long passage.
6. Take random selection book test. This means take a good book and open it randomly at any page. Select one paragraph. Give yourself five minutes to read the passage. Take a blank sheet of paper and note down all the information you can recall from what you have just read. Then, go back to the page and check what you have missed out. Do this at least twice a day. Gradually try and reduce the time to three minutes per page.
7. Have a clear and logical thought process. Do not clutter your brain with unnecessary and irrelevant thoughts and details.

IN THE EXAMINATION HALL

1. Read the passage at least twice and understand its contents well. This should not take more than five minutes for a small and ten for a long passages.
2. Do not read the questions first. This may tempt you to look for only particular information in the passage and consequently, affect full comprehension. It is important to first understand the passage before you go to the questions because if the questions are not very specific, you may commit a lot of mistakes. Generally, the passages have a mix of implied ideas and specific detail type of questions.
3. Eliminate regression, i.e., going back to the lines you have just read. This is out of habit developed over years of wrong or half-hearted reading. This must be done away with as the maximum time you should take to answer all the questions after reading a passage is about seven minutes. Regression is the result of lack of concentration and assumptions.

4. Do not let your own knowledge (or lack of it) interfere with the contents of the passage. Do not make any attempt to agree or disagree with the author.
5. Your principal task in attempting a comprehension passage should comprise:
 - i. Finding the topic. The topic must be precise. Generally the topic is found either in the first or in the last line.
 - ii. Finding the main idea. This can be a definition, a classification, a purpose or an elaboration of the topic; often the topic and the main idea are the same.
 - iii. Finding major supporting details. The supporting details modify, explain or elaborate the main idea. You should learn to recognize these supporting details that explain, illustrate, compare and contrast, show cause-effect relationship or merely restate the main idea in other words.
6. Underline the words you don't know the meaning of. Try to relate them to the given context.
7. Resort to sentence analysis and break a sentence into parts, looking for answers to who, what, whom, when, where, which, why and how.
8. Locate reference words and check what they refer to.
9. Underline signal words and look for what they indicate.
10. If the passage contains more than one paragraph, resort to paragraph analysis in the manner given above (5 to 10).

A SOLVED EXAMPLE

Long ago Emerson wrote, "A man's task is his life preserver." This seems to be remarkably correct in our modern life. The man without a task is like a ship without ballast and anchor; he is all too often merely a drifter. Very few men seem to have initiative enough to choose a task for themselves if they do not need to work. When the inevitable disappointments come, as they assuredly will, they are completely overwhelmed. But the man who has his task has no time for vain regrets; he escapes the disastrous fate which overtakes his less fortunate brothers. Work is one of the greatest safety-valves which was ever invented, and the youths especially need it.

We sometimes pity the man who is a slave to his task, and perhaps we are right; but a man who has no task is a slave to his ennui, which is very much worse. Even a disagreeable task is better than none; the man who does work which is disagreeable to him will yet live more happily, than if he had had no task at all.

And the man with the task is easier to live with, and will prove a more contented citizen, and a more valuable one, than the one who lacks such a task. Even so-called invalids are often the better for some task which is suited to their powers, and they often live all the longer if they work hard. The man who starts life with a solid task which taxes his powers had better thank God, and do his best, for this is one of humanity's greatest boons.

Questions:

- 1- What disadvantages will a man without a task suffer?
- 2- Why is even disagreeable task considered better than none?
- 3- In what ways is a man with some task the better for it?

Answers:

1- A man without a task, that is, purposeful work, will lack both will and direction. He will not be able to engage himself in any useful activity. Consequently he will neither work nor achieve anything. He will simply stagnate, suffer disappointments, and bring ruin upon himself.

2- A man without any work to do will inevitably lead a life of boredom and lethargic inactivity. Such a life will be one of unchanging monotony and misery. It is, therefore, better to be engaged in any task whatsoever, even if it be an unpleasant one, than to have nothing to do and suffer endless boredom and unhappiness.

3- A man who has some work, or who is usefully employed, will be a more contented person and also easier to live with than a man without any work. Work has a therapeutic value in the case of invalids, for if they are purposefully employed, according to their capabilities, they will add years to their life. Work is a life preserver; it helps a man to live longer and more happily than a man who has no task in life.

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