

1. *RC: COMMON PASSAGE STRUCTURES*

1 RC: Common Passage Structures

As with just about anything in a standardized test, GMAT Reading Comprehension passages follow predictable patterns. In fact, there are three general templates, and nearly every RC passage fits into one of them. I call them:

- The explanatory passage
- The competing theories passage
- The position passage

The Explanatory Passage

Some GMAT passages—particularly shorter passages—focus on explaining a concept. The author usually doesn't take a position. The passage chooses a very narrow topic and provides a couple hundred words of exposition.

Explanatory passages are common ways of presenting scientific material. They'll be packed with detail, but you don't have to worry about keeping track of multiple viewpoints or the purported problems with certain arguments. Often, if an explanatory passage has two paragraphs, the first paragraph will be somewhat general, and the second paragraph will expand on one particular detail mentioned in the first paragraph.

These passages can be tricky when the GMAT breaks out of the template. A fair number of passages look like standard explanatory passages, presenting detail after detail until the end, and then offering a final sentence in which the author takes a position. As with any passage, be extra careful with the first and last sentences in each paragraph: this is where the author relays his topic and, in the passages where there is one, his argument.

The Competing Theories Passage

In the previous chapter on science passages, you saw a competing theories passage. In that example, the first paragraph explained one type of cancer vaccine, while the second presented a description of another type of vaccine. In these passages, the author may or may not choose a side, but make sure you know whether or not she does! As in explanatory passages, sometimes the indication that the author has an opinion is limited to one sentence, and that one sentence may be the last one of the passage.

The most important aspects of a competing theories passage are the differences between the theories. It's also key to track who holds which position. That isn't relevant in a passage like the cancer vaccine discussion, but in some passages of this sort, each theory will be assigned to a scholar, or a school of thought. When the passage does that, expect nearly every question to focus on what one group or the other thinks, or the difference between the positions.

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Competing theories passages are most common for science topics and business/economics topics. The structure of the passage provides an excellent outline of the arguments, as the GMAT usually gives you very clear topic sentences. As in the cancer vaccine passage, you can understand some of the key differences between the theories without delving too far into the details of each theory.

The Position Passage

The author might argue for one position or theory in any type of GMAT passage, but in a position passage, the structure is defined by the author's argument. If you had to write argumentative essays in high school or university, you are probably familiar with this style. The author will present an argument in the first paragraph or shortly thereafter, and much of the remainder of the passage will be devoted to defending that position.

One variation of the position passage is what I call the attack passage. The typical position passage is defined by the author's argument; the attack passage is defined by a different argument that the author is trying to dismantle. In that case, the author's position might not become clear until a little later in the passage, because it takes a few sentences to fully describe the objectionable argument. There isn't a clear line of demarcation between the position passage and the attack passage; in either type, the GMAT may give you plenty of details about both the author's position and a position the author chooses to attack.

In this type of passage, details tend to be a bit more important. If the position is made clear in the first paragraph, the following paragraphs might present very different types of evidence for that position. By asking you detail-oriented questions, the GMAT is testing to see if you know what sort of evidence will support which sort of position. Once again, we're talking about structure. Regardless of the sort of passage, focus relentlessly on positions, perspectives, and topic sentences. You can skim a passage to find a detail, but you can't skim a passage to understand how it is assembled.