Reading Comprehension: primary purpose of a passage

A primary-purpose question asks what the passage as a whole is doing, not merely. . .

Lesson grev.rc.R1

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The idea

A primary-purpose question asks what the passage as a whole is doing, not merely what it mentions. Read for structure: does the passage introduce a view and then revise it, weigh two positions, explain a phenomenon, or defend a claim?

What is the passage as a whole DOING — presenting, revising, contrasting, explaining, or arguing?

Summarize the overall move in a short verb phrase in measured language. Test options against the whole, not a single sentence.

Watch every step

Critics have long debated whether the novel's abrupt ending is a flaw or a deliberate effect. Those who call it a flaw point to loose threads the author never resolves. But this objection assumes that resolution is the measure of a good ending. The novel's refusal to tie its threads may instead enact its central theme — that some losses admit no closure — and so the very feature critics fault could be the source of the book's power.

The primary purpose of the passage is to

A. compare the novel with others that end abruptly. ✗ *out-of-scope*

✓ **B.** defend a disputed feature of a work by reinterpreting its function.

C. concede that the ending is, on balance, a serious flaw. ✗ *distortion/wrong-emphasis*

D. list the plot threads that the novel leaves unresolved. ✗ *detail-as-purpose*

E. establish that the novel is the finest of its era. ✗ *too-extreme*

Why B — "defend a disputed feature of a work by reinterpreting its. . . ." Choose the option that names the whole-passage purpose.

Now a harder one

For years the wetland was managed to keep water levels constant, on the theory that stability protects wildlife. Yet the marsh's rarest birds began to disappear under this regime, while species adapted to seasonal flooding thrived elsewhere. Managers now suspect that the fluctuation they had worked to suppress was not a threat to the ecosystem but a condition of it, and they have begun to reintroduce the very cycles they once engineered away.

The primary purpose of the passage is to

- ✓ **A.** trace how evidence overturned a management practice and prompted its reversal.
- **B.** prove that stable water levels are always harmful to wetlands. ✗ *too-extreme*
- **C.** compare wetland management with forest management. ✗ *out-of-scope*
- **D.** praise managers for having designed a stable-water regime. ✗ *distortion/wrong-emphasis*
- **E.** identify which bird species are rarest in the wetland. ✗ *detail-as-purpose*

Why **A** — "trace how evidence overturned a management practice and. . . ." Choose the option that names the whole-passage purpose.

The method, in one line

Reading Comprehension: primary purpose of a passage

Summarize the overall move in a short verb phrase in measured language. Test options against the whole, not a single sentence.

Is my choice the overall purpose (not a detail)? Is its strength matched to the text? Does it keep the right emphasis and stay in scope?

Watch out: two traps to dodge

⚠ detail-as-purpose

Names a single supporting detail, example, or the superseded view as if it were the passage's overall purpose (too narrow).

⚠ too-extreme

Overstates the passage's commitment, using stronger verbs or claims (prove, condemn, refute entirely) than the measured text supports.

Name the trap before you pick — most wrong answers are one of these two.

Try it, then watch the walk-through

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