HESI A2: Reading Comprehension

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The HESI A2 examination stands for Health Education Systems Incorporated Admissions Assessment and acts as a way to test a student’s potential success in an intense nursing program. Orvis School of Nursing uses the scores from the exam toward the end of the selection process; while your GPA earns you an interview spot, ultimately, the result of your interview and your HESI score determine whether or not you get into the nursing program. Half of the points in the exam focus on English skills based around your ability to read critically and to correct grammar mistakes. This may seem daunting to STEM students, but the Writing Center is here to help.

What To Think About When Reading

a. Identifying the Main Idea
Keep the main idea in mind when you are reading passages in the Reading Comprehension section. You may be asked to identify this main idea. To clarify, the main idea of the passage is what the passage is trying to say overall; a statement about the main idea is usually included in the thesis or the argument. It might help to also think about the writer’s tone and purpose. Why is the author writing this? Are they trying to persuade, to argue, or to propose? Or maybe to advertise? What is the author trying to get from their audience? You can start by looking at their tone or how the passage is written. Are they using any rhetorical tools, like pathos or logos? How are they presenting the information? Is it purely factual, or are they calling attention to emotional facets of the information? The language an author uses can give you a lot of insight as to why they might be writing a passage. Look out for any rhetorical devices that might be present and think about why that author is using them. Once you’ve figured out the tone of the passage overall, you can begin to guess at why the author may have written that way. If you’re having trouble deciding what the tone and the main idea are, a good strategy is to summarize. Try marking important information in the passage so that you can bullet point a quick summary that most accurately describes those key points. Be careful with how general or specific the summaries are—a summary is usually somewhere in the middle.

b. Identifying Supporting Details
In addition to the main idea, try to make note of any important supporting details or evidence. Look for details that enhance, add context to, or otherwise complicate the main point of the section. Look for analogies, examples, and synthesis of outside sources. There will often be questions related to details that are found throughout the passage, and it can save time if you identify supporting details as you go rather than having to look back through the passage again.

c. Finding the Meaning of Words in Context
Some questions will ask you to define a word in context, meaning that you are defining the word relative to the rest of the information. This can be tough because the words chosen are often ones with multiple (and sometimes unrelated) definitions. Try to think of how and why the word is used in this context. For example, if you were reading about a "disease evolving," the test evaluators probably aren't talking about Darwin's specific theory of evolution but of the idea of gradually developing.
d. Making Inferences

Part of your task is to make inferences about a text. Based on the information you read, you may have to make an "educated guess" about facts not included in the passage. For instance, if you were reading about the negative effects of coffee, you might have to infer that people who drink a lot of coffee are at a higher risk of disease. When looking at test choices, think about related information from the passage to see if there is any support for your inference.

Example Passage

With these categories in mind, let's take a look at what a sample passage might look like.

Lightning and Fire

Imagine that you're watching a volcano erupt while standing at a safe distance when, suddenly, you see flashes of lightning through the immense ash cloud spreading in front of you. You're confused, as it was a nice day today with no clouds. Wouldn't it be strange to witness this phenomenon? What you would be seeing is called volcanic lightning, also referred to as dirty lightning.

Volcanic lightning rarely begins right when an explosion starts, and it doesn't always happen in volcanic eruptions. Lightning usually forms when particles separate, doing so as a result of a collision or a larger particle breaking apart. Afterwards, a difference in the aerodynamics of these particles separates positive and negative charges. When the separation between these positive and negative charges grows, the air can't resist the flow of electricity, and lightning is created. However, the cause of volcanic lightning is still debated, but many scientists have speculated the way the process starts. Instead of positive and negative charges, some scientists have indicated that electrical charges occur when debris (like rocks and ash) make static charges by crashing into each other. The amount of water released during a volcanic eruption can also spur this lightning. So if you're ever near a volcano, or even if you can see an eruption off in the distance, make sure you look for lightning bolts in the plume.

Here are some questions you might see.

What is the passage about?

Ask yourself this question when you're thinking of the main idea. What's the most prominent idea in the passage above? It probably has something to do with the formation of volcanic lightning, and how that process might be different from normal lightning. Notice we don't need all the detail in the world--all we need is what the biggest, most important idea is.

What is the author's purpose in writing this passage?

If we look at the tone of the passage overall, it's pretty informative. It's clear the author isn't trying to manipulate or persuade us--the passage lacks any emotion at all, nor does it have directly address the reader except to have them imagine the phenomenon.

What is not implied in this passage?

These questions can be really tricky because although the correct answer may be related to the passage, inference means that the passage does not directly have any information stated about it. For example, something that may not be implied in this passage is the statement “volcanoes are dangerous to humans.” While the narrative at the beginning may elicit emotions of fear and confusion, and previous knowledge may tell you that you shouldn’t get close to a volcano, nowhere does the passage talk about the effects of touching lava, the consequences of witnessing dirty lightening, or reasons why eruptions may be bad.