SHORT PAIRED PASSAGES—CROSSFIRE

PAIR A

PASSAGE 1

American writers Bret Harte (1836-1902) and Herman Melville (1819-1891) gradually approached, during their careers, a mood of total despair. Personal tragedies have been set forth to explain this development: the deaths of loved ones, the humiliation of family bankruptcies. These certainly are contributory causes, but the writings of Harte and Melville reveal that the despair is in a slow process of incubation from their earliest work, and that it is finally hatched by the growing political discord, moral conflicts, and economic problems of their age. It is not a despair of personal bereavement but of country—and ultimately of humanity—that manifests itself in their works.

PASSAGE 2

The alcoholism of Herman Melville, the death of his sons, and his chronic mistreatment of his wife are agonizing as personal history. Our interest, however, is in the works that came out of these disasters. Literary critics are usually unable to say how an author’s experience is transformed into art. In Melville’s writings from 1875 onward, however, we can watch while he repeatedly tries and fails to make something of these experiences that were so vitally important to him—and finally we can see him fuse and transform them into a culminating work of art, the book of poems (published posthumously) titled Weeds and Wildings, and a Rose or Two.

1. The author of Passage 2 would most likely view the “contributory causes” mentioned in lines 7-8, Passage 1, as personal experiences that
   a. did not influence Melville’s literary output significantly
   b. affected Melville early rather than late in his career
   c. were less important than political, moral, and economic factors
   d. were of little interest to literary critics
   e. were eventually molded by Melville into a meaningful work

2. The metaphor in lines 9-13 (“the despair ... their age”) is central to the overall argument of Passage 1 in its suggestion of
   a. literary creativity
   b. gradual development
   c. timeless artistry
   d. reluctant acknowledgement
   e. culminating achievement

3. Both authors agree that Melville
   a. deplored societal and human tendencies
   b. endured painful personal loss
   c. was deeply affected by literary critics
   d. endured hardships much like those of Harte
   e. revealed pessimism in his earliest writings

4. The author of Passage 1 would most likely regard the “personal history” (line 19, Passage 2) as
   a. essential knowledge for any reader of Melville’s work
   b. more distressing than the personal difficulties experienced by Bret Harte
   c. inconsistent with the tone and character of Melville’s literary output
   d. less important than public events as an influence on Melville’s writing
   e. instrumental in making Melville a unique American writer
PASSAGE 1

The first three years of life appear to be a crucial starting point—a period particularly sensitive to the protective mechanisms of parental and family support. For millennia, parents have recognized the newborn’s basic need for safety, nourishment, warmth, and nurturing. Now science has added stunning revelations about human development from birth to age three, confirming that parents and other adult caregivers play a critical role in influencing a child’s development. No other period of human life is as suited to learning as are a child’s first three years. Babies raised by caring, attentive adults in safe, predictable environments are better learners than those raised with less attention in less secure settings.

5. Which best expresses the relationship between Passage 1 and Passage 2?
   a. Passage 2 urges specific changes as a result of the findings described in Passage 1.
   b. Passage 2 mocks those who support the argument presented in Passage 1.
   c. Passage 2 offers a personal anecdote that casts doubt upon the beliefs espoused in Passage 1.
   d. Passage 2 questions an assumption underlying the ideas expressed in Passage 1.
   e. Passage 2 provides a scientific explanation for the examples cited in Passage 1.

6. Passage 2 as a whole suggests that its author would most likely react to lines 11-13 in Passage 1 (“No other ... years”) with
   a. indignation
   b. skepticism
   c. humor
   d. ambivalence
   e. approval

PASSAGE 2

Much early childhood literature suggests that the first three years of life are the critical years for brain development. Yet new findings in neuroscience suggest that the brain retains its ability to reorganize itself in response to experience or injury throughout life: after the loss of sensory input from an amputated limb, for example, adults are able to learn new motor skills effectively. It may be useful to question the simplistic view that the brain becomes unbendable and increasingly difficult to modify beyond the first few years of life. If so, we should also be wary of claims that parents have only a single, biologically delimited, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to help their children build better brains.

7. Both authors agree with which of the following statements?
   a. The brain becomes increasingly inflexible as a person grows older.
   b. Adults can bounce back from injuries as readily as children can.
   c. Children raised by attentive parents are generally good learners.
   d. It is widely acknowledged that the first three years are important to a child’s development.
   e. Most scientists have recently changed their views about human development prior to age three.

8. Lines 4-11 of Passage 1 (“For millennia ... development”) draw a parallel between
   a. traditional practices and contemporary critiques
   b. basic human needs and intellectual endeavors
   c. widespread beliefs and scientific findings
   d. parental anxieties and developmental advances
   e. experimental hypotheses and proven theories
Does science fiction serve a useful purpose? I cannot see much justice in the repeated claims that it sugars the pill of a scientific education: most of the science is wrong anyway, and its amount is such that one might as well be reading Westerns in the hope of finding out about ranching methods. Science fiction's most important use, I submit, is as a means of dramatizing social inquiry, of providing a fictional mode in which cultural tendencies can be isolated and judged. Many a trend hound would be surprised and perhaps mortified to discover how many of his or her cherished insights are common ground in science fiction.

Much of the science in science fiction is hokum; some of it is totally wrong. But beneath all the surface trickery of science fiction, there is a general respect for science and some appreciation of its methodology, which is probably more important than the facts that can be found in a textbook. And because science fiction combines scientific elements with stories involving people and relationships, the genre serves as a link between the culture of the humanities and arts on the one hand, and of science and technology on the other. Younger readers of science fiction, not firmly fixed in either culture, absorb both scientific and humanistic elements from their readings. Thereafter, neither culture can be quite so strange.

9. Both passages express the view that science fiction is
   a. predictably insightful
   b. chillingly realistic
   c. artistically pleasing
   d. socially useful
   e. widely understood

10. The attitude of each author toward the genre of science fiction might best be described as
    a. unabashed admiration
    b. qualified appreciation
    c. open amusement
    d. veiled distaste
    e. utter contempt
SHORT PAIRED PASSAGES—CROSSFIRE

Please keep the Paired Passages Companion handy when working through these passages. Although the passages are short, it is still best to (1) identify the common subject matter and (2) underline portions of each passage that distinguish each passage from its companion.

Reading the questions before working through the passages might or might not be helpful. It’s important that you try doing so in practice to see whether this technique works for you.

Often, questions in the Crossfire section will ask how the author of one passage would view a statement made in the other passage. When that’s the case, if our only resource is a mini-passage, mustn’t the correct answer reflect the Intention of the referenced author?

Pair A explores the effects of personal tragedy in the lives of two American writers on those writers’ literary output. Common theme: Causes of depression and despair in Herman Melville’s life, and how Melville incorporated that despair into his art.

1. E. Remember, this question asks us how the author of Passage 2 would view a statement in Passage 1. As I said above, in passages this short we really can only restate each author’s Intention. Happily, doing so leads us to right answers in “Crossfire” questions such as this one. The author of Passage 2 makes a point that Melville eventually was able to use his personal tragedy to create art. Since the writers’ common Intent is to discuss hardship in famous authors’ lives, we can eliminate answer choices, like (c) and (d), that miss the point entirely.

2. B. Even when you’re asked what a portion of a passage “suggests,” be assured that the correct answer will be a literal translation of the text. The SAT wants to know whether or not you can translate a metaphor into plain language. We’re told that “their despair is in a slow process of incubation,” which means either that it involved chickens or that it was in the process of “gradual development.” Please note how general choices (a) and (c) are—such answers should be easy to eliminate.

3. B. Answers to “both authors agree” questions tend to be very general. Since we identify the common subject matter for every set of paired passages (see Paired Passages Companion), here’s the type of question that pays off our efforts immediately. If you avoided (b) because it was “obvious” and you didn’t want to be tricked, we need to have a talk.

4. D. In a similar manner to question 1, this question asks us how the author of Passage 1 would view a statement in Passage 2. So, shouldn’t we find an answer that reflects the Intention of Passage 1? “It is not a despair of personal bereavement but of country ... that manifests itself in their works.”
**Pair B** offers differing attitudes toward human development. Common theme: **A human's first three years are very important to brain development**

5. **D.** Paired passages, as we have discussed, are written around a common theme (identified above). Note how Reasonable both passages here are; is it likely that either of the authors would take a position toward the other that is strident or belittling? No. In fact, choice (d) is a classic **right SAT answer**: Questioning an assumption (the invisible thread by which an arguer ties her conclusion to her evidence) merely suggests that the other author's offered evidence may not be fully relevant to the her conclusion. Choice (c) would be a Reasonable choice if only there **were** an anecdote (short informal story) in Passage 2.

6. **B.** Since the authors will nearly always disagree on some point (but never with malice), is it becoming evident to you how a choice like “skeptical,” which merely raises an eyebrow without overtly demeaning the other author’s point of view, will often be right? Please note that when you’re asked about an author who has taken an adversarial position, the two “attitude” answer choices most likely to be correct will be “skepticism” and “criticism.”

7. **D.** The Explanation for question 3 discusses how, if you adopt the Maine Prep methods for Paired Passages, the right answers can seem to jump out at you. If you chose (e), you might argue that it’s probably true; however, (e) is never stated, and we know that in order to be right, we have to be able to see the choice supported in the passage (and not just in our imaginations).

8. **C.** This question asks for a parallel, not a distinction. For years, people believed certain things about early childhood. Turns out they were right. If you chose (b), the needs are OK, but what on earth are the “intellectual endeavors”?

**Pair C** explores differing opinions on the literary and scientific merits of science fiction. Common theme: **Although there is much to scoff at in science fiction, the genre does provide a less threatening way for writers to examine contemporary social conditions.**

9. **D.** As we pointed out in our passages summary, above, both of these passages can be tricky, since each seems to start out with a negative attitude toward science fiction. Choice (a) is a contradiction in terms, which makes it easy to eliminate. Choice (c) clearly goes against the spirit of the passages.

10. **B.** Just as question 6 introduced us to a classic correct negative SAT choice, here we are looking for something positive but not **too** positive to be Reasonable. It’s important that you gauge how swiftly you can read passages without missing the authors’ main points. Many test takers are misled by the opening sentences in both these passages, since they assume that passage authors never change direction, those test takers choose a negative choice here. In any case, both passages appreciate science fiction because it is “socially useful.” Choices that would never be right on the SAT: (a), (c) (translated, this means “laughing at”), and (e). All are way too strong. As for “veiled distaste,” imagine acting it out….