

UPSC CSAT – Reading Comprehension Practice

5 passages · 20 questions · Answer key with explanations at the end

Directions: Read each passage and answer the questions that follow. Select the response that is best supported by the passage alone, without using outside knowledge. Suggested time: about 5–6 minutes per passage.

Passage 1

Political theorists have long distinguished between the power a state possesses and the authority it is acknowledged to hold. A government may command a large army and an elaborate bureaucracy yet find that its orders are obeyed only when an official is watching. Such compliance is brittle: it lasts exactly as long as the cost of enforcement is borne. By contrast, a state whose directives are followed because citizens regard them as rightful can govern at a fraction of the expense, for the work of policing is largely performed by the citizens themselves, through habit, social pressure and a sense of obligation. Legitimacy, in this sense, is a form of invisible infrastructure. Yet it cannot be manufactured at will. Attempts to engineer it through propaganda or spectacle tend to succeed only when they build upon something real: a perception that the state delivers security, adjudicates disputes fairly and treats like cases alike. When these perceptions erode, the state is forced to substitute coercion for consent, and coercion is both expensive and corrosive: each act of force diminishes the very legitimacy that would have made force unnecessary. The paradox of strong states, therefore, is that their strength is most secure when it is least displayed.

Q1. Which one of the following best expresses the central idea of the passage?

- (a) Large armies and bureaucracies are ineffective instruments of governance.
- (b) A state's durable strength rests more on acknowledged rightfulness than on its capacity to enforce.
- (c) Propaganda is the most efficient way for a state to build legitimacy.
- (d) Bureaucratic administration is fundamentally incompatible with citizens' consent.

Q2. The statement "compliance is brittle" implies that

- (a) citizens never obey a state's orders
- (b) obedience that depends on continuous enforcement is likely to collapse when enforcement weakens
- (c) compliance costs the state nothing
- (d) officials are generally corrupt

Q3. Consider the following inferences:

1. Legitimacy lowers the cost of governing.
2. Propaganda alone can create lasting legitimacy.
3. Use of coercion can weaken a state's legitimacy.

Which of the above can be validly inferred from the passage?

- (a) 1 and 3 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) 1 and 2 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Q4. The "paradox of strong states" mentioned in the passage refers to the fact that

- (a) states with strong armies are always internally weak
- (b) visible reliance on force signals the erosion of the very foundation that makes strength durable
- (c) weak states enjoy greater legitimacy than strong ones
- (d) the strength of a state cannot be measured

Passage 2

Groundwater is often described as an invisible resource, and the description is more than a figure of speech. Unlike a river, whose decline is visible to everyone on its banks, an aquifer can be drawn down for decades before any user notices that wells must be dug deeper. Because the water lies beneath private land in many legal systems, each landowner is permitted to extract as much as pump capacity allows, while the aquifer itself is a shared stock that no single owner controls. The outcome is a classic problem of the commons: every individual has an incentive to pump more, since restraint by one user merely leaves more water for others to take. Subsidised electricity for farm pumps has aggravated the problem by lowering the marginal cost of extraction to near zero. Proposals to price water or power at their true cost are economically sound but politically fraught, as the burden falls on cultivators already exposed to volatile crop prices. Experience from several regions suggests that community-level arrangements, in which users collectively monitor levels, agree on cropping patterns and sanction defection, can sustain aquifers without either privatisation or heavy-handed state control. Such arrangements, however, require reliable local information, which is precisely what an invisible resource denies.

Q5. According to the passage, over-extraction of groundwater often goes unnoticed because

- (a) the water lies beneath private land
- (b) the decline of an aquifer is not directly visible until wells have to be dug deeper
- (c) governments withhold data on water levels
- (d) rivers are more plentiful than aquifers

Q6. Which one of the following is NOT identified in the passage as a factor aggravating over-extraction?

- (a) Landowners' legal freedom to extract from beneath their land
- (b) The shared nature of the aquifer
- (c) Subsidised electricity for pumps
- (d) Steadily rising crop prices

Q7. The author's view of pricing water or power at true cost is that it is

- (a) economically unsound and politically unwise
- (b) economically sound but politically difficult
- (c) politically easy but economically unsound
- (d) irrelevant to the problem

Q8. The last sentence of the passage implies that

- (a) community arrangements cannot work in practice
- (b) the invisibility of groundwater makes it hard to obtain the information that community management needs
- (c) privatisation is the only workable solution
- (d) state regulation is unnecessary everywhere

Passage 3

It is tempting to regard the informal sector as a residue: a collection of enterprises that have not yet been absorbed into the modern economy and will vanish as development proceeds. The evidence does not support this view. In many developing countries, informal employment has persisted, and sometimes grown, even during periods of rapid output growth. Small firms stay informal not out of ignorance but out of calculation: registration brings taxes, inspections and compliance costs, while the benefits of formality, such as access to credit, contracts enforceable in court and public procurement, are available mainly to larger firms. For a micro-enterprise with thin margins, remaining invisible is rational. Policy that merely raises penalties for informality is therefore likely to shrink the enterprise rather than formalise it. A more promising approach is to alter the calculation itself: simplify registration, make credit and social protection contingent on formal status in ways that small firms can actually use, and reduce the cost of compliance. Formalisation, on this view, is not a switch to be flipped by edict but an outcome that emerges when the gains from joining the formal economy visibly exceed the costs.

Q9. The author's view of the informal sector is that it is

- (a) a temporary residue that will disappear with growth
- (b) a persistent feature, with firms often making rational choices to remain informal
- (c) mainly the result of ignorance of regulations
- (d) caused chiefly by high wages in the formal sector

Q10. According to the passage, raising penalties for informality is likely to

- (a) formalise small firms quickly
- (b) shrink the enterprise rather than formalise it
- (c) widen access to credit
- (d) accelerate output growth

Q11. The author's recommendations rest on which of the following assumptions?

1. Small firms respond to the costs and benefits of formality.
2. The benefits of formality can be made accessible to small firms.

- (a) 1 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) Both 1 and 2
- (d) Neither 1 nor 2

Q12. "Formalisation is not a switch to be flipped by edict" means that

- (a) formalisation is impossible
- (b) formalisation cannot be achieved by decree alone and depends on incentives that make joining worthwhile
- (c) edicts are always ignored
- (d) formalisation must be gradual in time but never incentive-driven

Passage 4

As public agencies adopt automated systems to allocate benefits, flag tax irregularities or prioritise inspections, a familiar defence is offered: machines, unlike officials, are free of whim and prejudice. The defence mistakes consistency for fairness. An algorithm trained on historical records will reproduce the patterns in those records, including patterns that reflect past neglect or discrimination. If inspections were once concentrated in certain neighbourhoods, the data will show more violations there, the system will recommend still more inspections there, and the circle closes with the appearance of objectivity. Moreover, human discretion, for all its faults, is accountable in a way that code often is not: a citizen can appeal to an official, demand reasons and expect a reply. When a decision emerges from an opaque model, the official may be unable to explain it, and the citizen has nowhere to direct a complaint. None of this implies that automation should be rejected. It implies that its adoption should be accompanied by the same safeguards demanded of any exercise of public power: a right to explanation, avenues of appeal, and periodic audit of outcomes across groups.

Q13. Which one of the following best summarises the author's argument?

- (a) Public agencies should abandon automated systems altogether.
- (b) The consistency of automated systems does not ensure fairness, so their use needs accountability safeguards.
- (c) Officials are more accurate than algorithms.
- (d) All data used by public agencies is deliberately biased.

Q14. The example of neighbourhood inspections is used to illustrate

- (a) a feedback loop in which skewed historical data produces skewed recommendations that appear objective
- (b) the slowness of automated systems
- (c) the needlessness of inspections
- (d) officials' refusal to adopt technology

Q15. With which of the following statements would the author most likely agree?

- (a) Algorithms should fully replace administrative discretion.
- (b) Automated public decision-making should carry safeguards such as explanation, appeal and audit.
- (c) Human discretion is free of faults.
- (d) Audits are unnecessary when the training dataset is large.

Q16. The tone of the passage can best be described as

- (a) dismissive of technology
- (b) cautiously critical
- (c) uncritically enthusiastic
- (d) indifferent

Passage 5

Historians of ancient societies depend heavily on sources that were never intended for them. A royal inscription was composed to proclaim the ruler's achievements to contemporaries, not to inform later scholars; a chronicle written at court records what the court wished remembered. This does not make such sources useless, but it changes the questions that can be put to them. Where an inscription asserts that a ruler pacified a region, the careful historian asks not only whether the claim is true but why it needed to be made, to whom it was addressed and what anxieties it might conceal. Silences, too, are informative: the absence of any mention of a powerful rival may reveal as much as a boast. Material remains offer a partial corrective, since a coin hoard or a ruined granary has no motive to flatter. Yet artefacts do not interpret themselves; their meaning is supplied by the questions brought to them, and those questions are themselves shaped by the concerns of the present. History is therefore neither a collection of settled facts awaiting discovery nor a free invention of each age, but a disciplined conversation between evidence and interpretation.

Q17. The central point of the passage is that

- (a) inscriptions are unreliable and should be discarded
- (b) sources must be read critically with attention to purpose and audience, and history is a disciplined dialogue between evidence and interpretation
- (c) archaeological evidence is always superior to texts
- (d) history is merely the invention of each age

Q18. The author mentions "silences" in order to suggest that

- (a) the absence of evidence is meaningless
- (b) omissions in a source can themselves yield information
- (c) rulers deliberately destroyed records
- (d) boasts are more reliable than omissions

Q19. Material remains are called a "partial corrective" because they

- (a) lack a motive to flatter, yet still require interpretation
- (b) are always accurate and complete
- (c) can wholly replace written sources
- (d) are older than inscriptions

Q20. Which one of the following is NOT supported by the passage?

- (a) Inscriptions were meant for the ruler's contemporaries.
- (b) Artefacts convey their meaning without any interpretive questions being brought to them.
- (c) Present-day concerns shape the questions historians ask.
- (d) Court chronicles reflect what the court wished to be remembered.

Answer Key

Q	Ans	Q	Ans
Q1	b	Q11	c
Q2	b	Q12	b
Q3	a	Q13	b
Q4	b	Q14	a
Q5	b	Q15	b
Q6	d	Q16	b
Q7	b	Q17	b
Q8	b	Q18	b
Q9	b	Q19	a
Q10	b	Q20	b

Explanations

Q1 (b): The passage contrasts brittle, enforcement-dependent compliance with legitimacy-based obedience and concludes that strength is most secure when least displayed. (A) and (D) are overstatements; (C) is contradicted, since propaganda works only when built on something real.

Q2 (b): Brittle compliance "lasts exactly as long as the cost of enforcement is borne".

Q3 (a): 1 follows from "govern at a fraction of the expense"; 3 from "each act of force diminishes the very legitimacy...". 2 is contradicted: engineered legitimacy succeeds only when it builds on something real.

Q4 (b): Strength is most secure when least displayed because displayed force indicates eroded consent.

Q5 (b): "An aquifer can be drawn down for decades before any user notices that wells must be dug deeper."

Q6 (d): Crop prices are mentioned only as volatile, and as a reason pricing reform is politically difficult, not as a cause of over-extraction.

Q7 (b): "Economically sound but politically fraught."

Q8 (b): Community arrangements need reliable local information, which an invisible resource denies.

Q9 (b): The author rejects the "residue" view and explains informality as calculation, not ignorance.

Q10 (b): Stated directly in the passage.

Q11 (c): The policy of altering the calculation presupposes responsiveness to costs/benefits (1), and that credit and protection can be made usable by small firms (2).

Q12 (b): It emerges when gains visibly exceed costs.

Q13 (b): The author rejects both uncritical adoption and total rejection ("None of this implies that automation should be rejected").

Q14 (a): "The circle closes with the appearance of objectivity."

Q15 (b): Stated in the final sentence.

Q16 (b): It criticises a common defence but explicitly stops short of rejecting automation.

Q17 (b): The closing sentence rejects both the "settled facts" and "free invention" views.

Q18 (b): "The absence of any mention of a powerful rival may reveal as much as a boast."

Q19 (a): No motive to flatter (corrective) but "artefacts do not interpret themselves" (partial).

Q20 (b): The passage says the opposite: artefacts do not interpret themselves.