Support/Weaken Questions

The 3-Step Strategy

THE QUESTION

- Which finding, if true, would most directly **support** the researchers' hypothesis? (About one question in six asks you to **weaken** instead.)
- Which **quotation** from a literary critic (a historian, a biography) would best support the student's claim?
- Which statement, if true, would most directly support the **underlined** claim?

If true means you accept every choice as fact: never ask whether a finding is realistic, only whether it would matter. **Most directly** means the right answer bears on the claim itself, not on its background. Circle *support* or *weaken* before you read a single choice.

1 **Claim** · Pin down the claim, name its shape, and count its parts.

The passage may hold background, older views, and a description of a study, but the question asks about one claim only: the hypothesis, the conclusion, the underlined sentence. Find it, and read everything else as its setting (the setting often holds what the right answer builds on). Almost every claim takes one of five shapes:

SHAPE	THE CLAIM SAYS	EVIDENCE THAT SUPPORTS IT
Cause and effect	X causes, changes, or is needed for Y (nearly half of all questions)	the difference (when X, then Y; no X, no Y), the middle link (X → M → Y), or the rival ruled out
Comparison	A has more (or less) of something than B	the right two groups, on the right measure, in the right direction
Origin and history	X came from Y, or happened this way	a fingerprint only the claimed story would leave (to weaken: the rival's fingerprint)
Interpretation	a scholar's reading of a person, a work, or an event	a quotation or fact that fits every part of the reading
Prediction and rule	what will happen, or what is generally true	the same change made elsewhere, with the predicted result; the mechanism at work; a pattern across many cases

Then **count its parts**. More than half the claims in official questions have two (a cause and the way it works, a choice and the reason for it), and the right answer must cover every one. Underline each part as you go.

2 **Predict** · Picture the evidence before you read the choices.

Ask the question that unlocks every support item: **If this claim were true, what would we see?** A claim that heat stunts a beetle's growth predicts that beetles raised in warmer conditions end up smaller. The best evidence is a finding you would expect if the claim is true and would not expect if it is false. For **weaken**, flip it: if the claim were true, what could *not* happen? Beetles raised in warmer conditions ending up larger.

3 **Match** · Right subject, every part, right direction. Eliminate the rest.

The right answer is about the claim's own subject, covers every part of the claim, and points the right way: toward the claim for support, against it for weaken. It rarely repeats the claim's words; the move usually runs from general to specific. When a choice sounds relevant, ask one blunt question: **would this actually change my mind about the claim?**

WRONG-ANSWER TRAPS: Outside it (a finding on the right topic that never touches the claim's point; about two in five wrong answers) · **Reverses it** (it points the wrong way, or hands the effect to the wrong group) · **Invented comparison** (the right two groups on the wrong measure, or the wrong two groups on the right measure) · **Half of it** (one part of a two-part claim). Notice who is missing: **too strong**. Every choice is a finding you accept as true, so a choice has nothing to overstate.

Two Worked Examples

Example 1 · Cause and Effect: Show the Difference

Coffee leaf rust, a fungal disease that has damaged coffee harvests across Central America, often spreads when raindrops splash its spores from one leaf to another. On many farms, coffee shrubs grow beneath taller shade trees, and agronomist Lucía Ferraro hypothesizes that this shade canopy reduces rust infections by intercepting heavy rain before it reaches the coffee leaves.

Which finding, if true, would most directly support Ferraro's hypothesis?

A) Shade trees on coffee farms provide habitat for birds that eat several insect pests known to damage coffee shrubs.

B) Coffee leaf rust can survive for several weeks on fallen leaves before it infects a new shrub.

C) After heavy rains, coffee shrubs growing under a dense shade canopy had a smaller share of infected leaves than nearby shrubs growing in full sun.

D) During heavy storms, about as much rain reached coffee leaves beneath shade trees as reached leaves in full sun, according to rain gauges placed at leaf height.

CLAIM Ferraro's hypothesis: the shade canopy (X) reduces rust infections (Y) by intercepting heavy rain before it reaches the leaves. The first sentence is background, but it explains why rain matters: raindrops splash the spores from leaf to leaf. Two parts: the effect (fewer infections) and the way it happens (the canopy blocks the rain).

PREDICT If shade really protects the shrubs, shaded shrubs should be infected less than unshaded ones, especially after heavy rain.

MATCH C. After heavy rains, shade (X) comes with fewer infected leaves (Y), and full sun (no X) with more: both sides of the difference in one finding. And "after heavy rains" ties the difference to the rain, just as the claim says the canopy works.

TRAPS A and B are outside it: birds and insect pests have nothing to do with a fungus spread by rain, and how long the fungus lasts on fallen leaves says nothing about whether shade protects living ones. D reverses it: if as much rain reaches shaded leaves as sunny ones, the canopy isn't intercepting anything.

Example 2 · Interpretation: A Quotation That Fits Every Part

Composer Ilsa Brennecke (1902–1971) wrote most of her works for amateur choirs in small towns. Music historian David Ross argues that Brennecke deliberately kept her music simple enough for untrained singers because she believed that music belonged to everyone, not only to professionals.

Which quotation from a biography of Brennecke would best support Ross's argument?

A) "Brennecke wrote melodies a baker or a schoolteacher could sing after one rehearsal, convinced that music was never meant for professionals alone."

B) "Brennecke attended rehearsals of her hometown choir every Thursday evening in the church hall, usually sitting quietly at the back."

C) "Brennecke wrote chiefly for skilled performers, believing that only singers with years of training could do justice to the subtleties of her scores."

D) "Brennecke favored simple melodies because they were easy to remember, and she wanted her pieces to stay in listeners' minds long after a concert."

CLAIM Ross's reading has three parts: Brennecke kept her music simple (1), on purpose, for untrained singers (2), because she believed music belonged to everyone (3). The quotations come from a biography: someone writing about her, as in official questions.

PREDICT A quotation showing Brennecke choosing simplicity for amateurs, and giving the everyone-reason.

MATCH A. Melodies a baker or a schoolteacher could sing after one rehearsal (parts 1 and 2), because music was never meant for professionals alone (part 3). Every part, in one quotation.

TRAPS B is outside it: the right composer and the right kind of choir, but nothing about how or why she wrote. C reverses it: writing for skilled performers is the opposite of the reading. D is half of it: simplicity, yes, but for listeners' memories, not for untrained singers, and with no word about whom music belongs to.

Your Turn

Name _____ Date _____

Practice 1

Were the animals of an ancient caravan city in Central Asia kept in town or out on the range? Archaeologists Dilnoza Rakhimova and Owen Pratley think the answer depended on the animal. Plant remains trapped in the dental calculus (hardened plaque) of horses and donkeys buried in the city tell two different stories: barley from the city's irrigated fields dominated the horses' calculus, while the donkeys' held mostly bits of wild desert shrubs. Horses, the team concluded, were probably kept in stables inside the city, while donkeys were sent out to graze beyond its fields.

Which finding, if true, would most strongly support the team's conclusion?

A) Alfalfa, which the city's farmers grew only to cut as hay, turned up in nearly every horse's calculus but in no donkey's.

B) Donkeys buried in the city's later layers had eaten slightly more barley than the donkeys buried in its earliest layers had.

C) Donkeys generally live several years longer than horses do, even when the two animals are kept in very similar conditions.

D) Both animals' diets changed noticeably in years when drought reduced the harvests in the fields around the city.

THE CLAIM: .....

SHAPE: ..... **SUPPORT OR WEAKEN?** .....

THE EVIDENCE SO FAR: .....

YOUR PREDICTION: .....

Your answer: (A) (B) (C) (D)

Practice 2

About 3,000 years ago, potters on the island of Kessa began coating their storage jars and cooking pots with a shiny green glaze, a technique that mainland potters in two separate regions, the northern coast and the eastern river valleys, had invented centuries before. Bronze pins, shell beads, carved combs, and other goods made on the northern coast turn up often at Kessa's ancient settlements and harbors, but nothing from the eastern valleys has ever been found there. <u>The islanders, then, most likely learned to glaze from potters on the northern coast.</u>

Which finding, if true, would most directly weaken the underlined claim?

A) Green-glazed pots are among the objects most often found in the island's ancient graves, usually placed near the head.

B) Glazed pottery is still made in the eastern valleys today, but it is no longer made on the northern coast.

C) The chemical makeup of Kessa's earliest glaze matches that of glazes from the eastern valleys, not the northern coast.

D) Workshops on the northern coast turned out far more glazed pottery than workshops in the eastern valleys did.

THE UNDERLINED CLAIM: .....

SHAPE: ..... **SUPPORT OR WEAKEN?** .....

WHAT THE CLAIM RESTS ON: .....

YOUR PREDICTION: .....

Your answer: (A) (B) (C) (D)