Tackling the History Passage

*Generally, this passage is a primary source document (or pair of primary source documents), dating from the 18th to 20th centuries and taking the form of speeches, letters, declarations, or editorials. Sometimes, the history passage will be an excerpt from a founding document, such as The Federalist Papers. The SAT loves to include passages about political and social movements, many of which are still current today.*

1. Know your opponent!

* Confusing or unclear argument or purpose – Due to the nature of the style of writing, it is often difficult to pinpoint the argument the author is trying to make. Strategy: Force yourself to find the main idea/argument/central claim of the passage as early as possible.
* Complex sentence structure - In earlier time periods, using more complicated sentence structure (resulting in very long sentences) showcased a writer’s educated status; therefore, some passages may feature unnecessarily long sentences, in which the main idea is interrupted by examples and asides. Strategy: Break up the longer sentences into separate sentences or underline/highlight portions of the sentence that are clear.
* Difficult vocabulary – For the same reason above, you will encounter more difficult vocabulary in this passage. Strategy: Obviously use context clues, but do not stress over not knowing the meaning of a word.
* Historical Context - Technically, the SAT gives you all the historical information you need to both understand the passage and answer the questions within the opening blurb and the passage itself; however, having a background knowledge of the topic can help. Strategy: There is no way to know if you will have knowledge of any topic that is used, so trust that all the information needed is provided for you in the passage. Do try and relate that information to some type of movement or cause.

1. Other strategies to conquer the history passage:
   * + **Use what you do know (anchors) to figure out what you don’t.** Possible anchors in the text could be the gist of the argument, a clear topic sentence, a strongly negative tone, the historical context, or the ending paragraph. Don’t waste time trying to unpack every part of the passage.

* **Avoid re-reading.** This may be the passage that you may need to spend a minute or two extra to be able to comprehend the information.
* **Read the opening blurb prior to the start of the passage.** This blurb can often contain important historical context that frames the passages and even gives you main ideas within the passage.
* **Use the main idea or central stance to eliminate wrong answers.** If you know that, for example, Mary Wollstonecraft wants women to be seen as equal to men and to have the same rights as men do, then you can eliminate any answers that counter this idea. Often you can use an answer from one question to help you answer another question. Make sure you are consistent.
* **Match the tone of the passage and the tone of the answer choices**. Let the author’s attitude within the passage assist you. For example, if an author is optimistic about a situation, then eliminate any negative answer choices that counter this positive tone.