
What Every Secondary School Teacher Needs to Know About Reading Tests

(From Someone Who Has Written Them)

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Introduction

By secondary school, students are experienced test takers. Familiar with the drill, students know that on test day, they should be well rested, must eat breakfast, should dress comfortably, need sharpened pencils and must get to school early or, at least, on time. During the test, they know to read the directions, record their answers in test booklets and keep their eyes on their own paper.

These have become standard test-taking customs.

But not all advice about preparing to take a test is as straightforward. Think about all the mixed messages students have encountered as they have become experienced test takers:

- Skip questions you don't know and come back to them.
- Don't skip questions because you'll get off track in your answer booklet.
- Work slowly to avoid making a silly mistake.
- Work steadily to avoid over-thinking things.
- Get up and sharpen your pencil during the test to give your brain a short break.
- Don't get up to sharpen your pencil during the test because it is distracting; bring extra pencils.

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And let's not forget the myriad tips about how to read while taking a test:

- Read the questions first, then the passage.
- Read the passage first, then the questions.
- Read the title first.
- Study the pictures first.
- Read the subheadings first.

These go on and on.

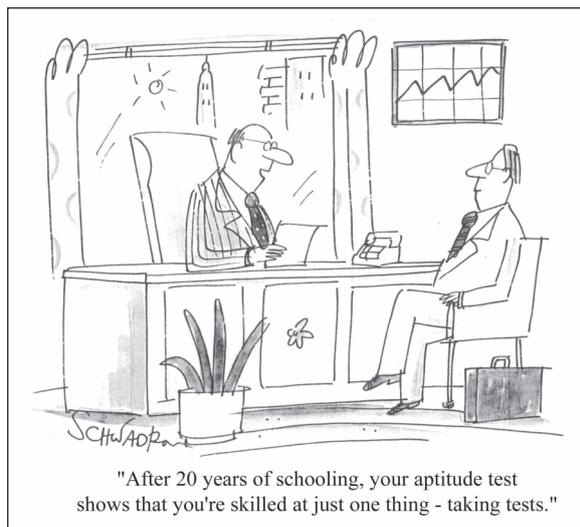
Why? Because tests are serious business – very serious – and the stakes are high for students to perform well on tests.

Today more than ever, there is a great deal of busting and upheaval over tests, which gives way to the dissemination of all kinds of lore. But do students who sharpen their pencils during the test do better or worse than students who don't? Not likely. Do students who notice the pictures before reading a passage do better than students who notice them after reading a passage? Probably not.

What matters is students' ability to make sense of the content on the test pages. And that very content is mysterious and confusing to teachers and students alike for a multitude of reasons. First, curriculum standards can be nebulous, intentionally or unintentionally. Another reason is that the lexicon of tests is not always a good match to classroom talk (Kohn 2000; Valencia and Villarreal 2003). Yet another reason is that the reading and thinking students are expected to do on tests is not always a good match with the reading work of classrooms. The list goes on.

Because testing has become pervasive on an international scale, a culture of panic is palpable in many schools and systems. All systems must select or create tests that are aligned with their curriculum standards, students are tested frequently in core subjects, and the results of the tests are used to determine whether students are making adequate yearly progress. These tests are deemed high stakes because the scores also factor into decisions about students' year-level advancement. Such pressure has led to a practice termed "teaching to the test", a departure from authentic reading instruction in favour of skill-based worksheets that are intended to help students creep toward a passing score (Firestone, Schorr and Monfils 2004).

Yet reading teachers know that a steady regimen of test practice does not foster good reading habits and a lifelong love of reading in their students. Reading teachers know that school-mandated benchmarks and daily worksheet practice cause students to loathe reading and tests. It's no wonder that adolescent literacy advocates are pointing to tests as a contributor to the growing problem of aliteracy, which means that our secondary school students *can read* but that they *aren't reading*. Tests are believed to crowd out more meaningful reading instruction and time spent truly engaged with texts, and the result is that once-avid readers in primary school are becoming nonreaders in sec-



ondary school, especially true of boys (Smith and Wilhelm 2002). Kelly Gallagher (2009) explains and explores the problem in his book *Readicide*, a term he defines as the systematic killing of the love of reading, often exacerbated by the inane, mind-numbing practices found in schools. Are we currently valuing the development of good test takers over the development of lifelong readers?

Reading teachers ultimately are finding themselves in a no-win situation: (1) they want their students to feel successful, but success is defined as a number on a score report; (2) they are not experts on testing, and they do not know where to turn for information about how reading standards are interpreted and assessed; and (3) they teach somewhere where the philosophy is to “prepare” students with repeated testing practice, which often reinforces students’ lack of understanding of tests and reading skills rather than increases their understanding.

Purpose of the Book

The reality is that the field of education is overwrought with well-meaning efforts to reframe curriculum standards so that they make more sense, are more teachable, are narrower and deeper in focus, and ultimately make students wiser. But the hang-up is that no one has figured out a way to satisfy the stakeholders in the educational enterprise with a more efficient means of reporting on students’ learning than standardised assessments. As a result, students need opportunities to learn about these assessments. Teachers recognise that ignoring the reality of testing is a disservice to their students, yet they want to find ways to prepare their students without sacrificing high-quality teaching and learning. More and more sources and resources are coming into print that chronicle teachers’ struggles and successes with rolling up their sleeves and constructing knowledge alongside their students about these unique sources of print called standardised tests, without having to give up their integrity in the process (Fuhrken and Roser 2010; Conrad et al. 2008; Greene and Melton 2007).

Teachers need better access to information about tests. Certainly the facets of test making are well documented (see, for instance, Downing and Haladyna’s *Handbook of Test Development* [2006]), and departments make their assessments as transparent as possible, which is why they release tests for teachers to study and use. But more often than not, the information about reading

Context Clues

Poetic Words

Reading poems with students chorally is a great way to get them thinking about word meaning, because poets often make painstaking decisions about rhythm and word choice. Students might be surprised that they can employ context clue strategies even with short texts like poems.

Resource Poetry book: Prelutsky, Jack. 1990. *Something Big Has Been Here*. New York: Greenwillow Books.

Procedure and Assessment

Prepare by reading the poems “I Met a Rat of Culture” and “My Mother Made a Meatloaf” from Jack Prelutsky’s book *Something Big Has Been Here*. (These poems should contain several words that are unfamiliar to students.) Choose one poem and make a transparency of it.

Share the poem a few times – with you reading the poem aloud the first time as students follow along on a transparency, and then with the students reading the poem chorally.

Make an anchor chart of the types and examples of context clues found in Chapter 3. Using the teacher’s guide that follows, lead a discussion by pointing out focus words one by one and asking students to share how they can use context clues to help them understand these words. Refer to the types/examples of context clues on your anchor chart as needed and review other strategies for determining the meanings of unfamiliar words.

Supporting Evidence

Says and Feels

Supporting evidence (or textual evidence) items on reading assessments essentially task students to support a conclusion or big idea with specific evidence from the passage. Usually the correct answer is the idea or sentence that stands out in a meaningful way rather than some insignificant detail. In this activity, students pay attention to dialogue and connect it to an appropriate character trait. Doing so provides practice with the kind of thinking they will be required to do in order to answer supporting evidence items.

Procedure Prepare by making five copies of the “Says and Feels” sheet (provided in Appendix E). Cut out the boxes on each sheet, separating the dialogue statements from the character traits. Make five sets of the dialogue statements and character traits (shuffled so it’s not obvious which statement matches which trait).

Tell students that in literary texts, authors require readers to make inferences based on what characters say and do. Provide an example by reading the following sentence from Joan Bauer’s (1998) *Rules of the Road*:

Jus wanted to see you, honey. I meant to call.

Ask students if they can infer how the character saying those words might be feeling. Elicit responses. Then explain that the lines are spoken by a father who has a distant relationship with his daughter. Help students see that the words “I meant to call” are inference clues to how the character feels, which is regretful or apologetic. Tell students that on reading assessments, they will be asked to link an inference (sometimes about how a character is feeling) to an excerpt from the passage that supports that inference.

Place students in five groups. Give each group a set of the “Says and Feels” boxes. Then tell the groups to work together to infer which lines of dialogue correspond with which feeling/trait words. Ask students to be prepared to talk about the clues that help them know that a particular feeling/trait word is supported by an excerpt.

Assessment When students have finished working, ask the groups to listen as you read the first dialogue statement. Then call on a group to provide the feeling/trait word it selected for the statement. Ask the group to discuss the clues used to connect the feeling/trait word and the excerpt. Check with the other groups to see if they agree with the match. (The statements and feeling/trait words are correctly matched on the “Says and Feels” appendix sheet that you copied in order to make the sets.)