
What Every Primary Teacher Needs to Know About Reading Tests

(From Someone Who Has
Written Them)

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Introduction

There is much that is mysterious about high-stakes testing. On a certain day, print-rich displays of student work and bulging bookshelves are covered up, rendering the classroom fairly sterile. “The test,” which arrives in heavy cardboard boxes, is taken from one room to the next and placed in a teacher’s cupboard that can be locked tightly and kept away from the human eye. When the testing period actually begins, the teacher becomes strange, reading directions in an official-sounding, test-proctor voice. Because it is test day, students, who are accustomed to collaborating with their peers and teacher, are now told that they must not look around, share their thinking or ask questions. If they do ask questions, the teacher is required to greet their inquiries with the homogenised response, “Just do your best.” Indeed, test taking is serious business, and it’s no wonder that our youngest test takers are filled with anxiety about the peculiar work that has taken over the campus in the name of testing.

But the policies and procedures are not the only mysterious aspects of testing. The content of tests can be puzzling to students and teachers alike. While a test purports to measure the curriculum, often the curriculum standards seem mysterious as well – written in code or so general in meaning that it seems impossible for teachers to know if their instruction will adequately prepare their students.

Furthermore, there seems to be a gulf between how reading skills and strategies are taught and understood in the classroom and how students are expected to apply those skills and strategies on a reading test. Test questions can be riddles for students, because the “test language” sounds very different from the ways in which students demonstrate their mastery of reading skills

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and strategies in the classroom. Students who cannot translate or access test language have a limited ability to demonstrate what they know (Kohn 2000; Valencia and Villarreal 2003).

Because testing has become pervasive, a culture of panic is palpable in many, many school systems around the world. Test scores factor in to decisions about students' year-level advancement and have become the basis for accountability. 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. And yet many of these teachers find 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 where the philosophy is to "prepare" students with repeated practices with testing, which often reinforces students' lack of understanding of tests rather than increasing their understanding.

Purpose of the Book

The reality is that high-stakes tests are not likely to go away anytime soon. As a result, students need opportunities to learn about them. In recent years, teachers have approached tests as another genre to be read, explored, pondered and questioned (Calkins, Montgomery and Santman 1998). During the genre study of tests, students construct knowledge together about these unique sources of print. Teachers have rolled up their sleeves and wondered alongside their students about this thing called "the test" – without feeling that they had to give up their integrity in the process (Greene and Melton 2007; Conrad, Matthews, Zimmerman and Allen 2008).

My belief is that 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 tests that is available to teachers is not packaged in a compact, ready-to-use, easy-to-understand form. If teachers knew more about how reading tests are made, how relevant standards are interpreted and how

students can apply their knowledge of reading to the items that appear on reading tests, then teachers could spend much less time trying to figure out these tests and could feel less like servants to the dictates of their assessment.

Making short work of informing teachers about what they need to know about reading assessments to prepare their students means giving back to them their instructional time that is often wasted on test practice instead of valuable reading instruction. It's really this simple: The more teachers know about the content of reading tests and the strategies students can use to access test items, the quicker they can deliver that information to their students, not in the form of worksheets, but through focused test preparation that involves rich, lively, engaging reading and thoughtful, meaning-making experiences with their peers. How freeing.

About the Author

I have helped write reading tests – lots of them. This is rather ironic because I remember as a youngster reading dreadfully boring passages and wondering, with furrowed brow, “Who writes this stuff?” I had no idea that one day I would. I somewhat lucked into the profession, working as a freelance writer for a test publisher while teaching and attending graduate school. Now, over a decade later, I have served as a reading content specialist for several test publishers and have contributed to the development of many assessments.

In the process, I worked with hundreds of teachers who were asked by their departments to review the tests that I helped write. Those meetings were fascinating, because there was so much information-gathering and information-sharing happening at once. The reading specialists with the departments and test publishers were interested in hearing the wisdom of the teachers who were teaching the very content that was being assessed on a test. The teachers took the opportunity to ask the burning questions they had about the assessment, and often the information that was shared influenced their perspective and instructional practices. Countless times, I heard teachers say, “I wish I had known that.” I came to realise that if teachers knew more about the construction and content of a reading test, they wouldn't be wasting their time or their students' time by having to take stabs at how to best prepare their students. Those conversations with teachers inspired this book.

Common Beliefs About Test Making: Fact or Fiction?

What's a book about testing without a test? So let's get to it – but you don't need pencils or a high level of test anxiety for this one! Below are five statements about the *test-making* process, which might or might not be true. Read each one, consider the contexts in which you may have heard each statement and decide if you think it is fact or fiction.

1. "It's anyone's guess what students are expected to master for a test."
2. "A test is the responsibility of the department of education, so teachers are essentially left out of the process."
3. "The test was harder this year than last year."
4. "All standards are assessed equally."
5. "Most multiple-choice items 'look' and 'sound' a certain way."

Now for the answers:

1. Fact or Fiction: "It's anyone's guess what students are expected to master for a test."

Answer:

On any reading test, students are expected to demonstrate their mastery of the standards that compose the curriculum for a particular year level. There can be no testing program without a curriculum. The curriculum is essentially the foundation upon which an assessment program can be built.

Therefore, the curriculum is the teacher's guide, the road map, for his or her instructional planning. In theory, then, students are expected to master the curriculum standards, so it's not "anyone's guess" and there shouldn't be any

Suffixes

In paragraph 14, the word speechless means –

- A without speaking
- B filled with thoughts
- C one who gives speeches
- D having more thoughts

Correct answer: A

Strategies

✓ *Locate important information in the item.*

The item stem tells students the following:

- What word is being tested (*speechless*)
- Where the tested word is located (paragraph 14)

Alternate versions of suffix items are presented in Figure 3.4.

✓ *Look for familiar word parts.*

In answering vocabulary items, students should first look for word parts they recognise. In this item, students are expected to recognise that the segment *-less* acts as a suffix. (A list of suffixes commonly tested on primary reading assessments is included in Section 4.)

FIGURE 3.4 Alternate Versions of Suffix Items

In which word does -less mean the same as it does in the word speechless?

- A Fearless
- B Lesser
- C Blessed
- D Nonetheless

What is the suffix in the word speechless?

- A ee
- B ch
- C le
- D less

Students will quickly find the answer to this item simply if they know that *-less* means *without*. That's because only option A uses that meaning.

Caution students not to be thrown off just because they will likely recognise other suffix meanings in the answer choices. For instance, option B uses the words *filled with*, which represent the suffix *-ful*. Option C uses the words *one who*, which is a meaning found in the suffixes *-or* and *-ist*. Option D contains the words *having more*, which is a meaning for the suffix *-er*.

✓ *Have an anchor example.*

Some students may quickly recognise that *-less* is a suffix, but they might not be able to recall the meaning that *-less* adds as a suffix in words. These students need an example word to *anchor* their understanding.

Teach these students to think of other words they know that use the suffix *-less*. If, for instance, students are able to recall the words *fearless* (for example, "I am fearless on roller-coasters") or *careless* (for example, "I broke the glass because I was being careless"), then they can figure out that *-less* means *without*.

Sometimes students can find other words in the passage that end in *-less*. Using context clues and their knowledge of these words with the same suffix can further jog their memory about the meaning of the word part.

✓ *Construct try-out sentences, a form of substitution.*

To encourage students to consider all answer choices, have them construct try-out sentences. Even though the options are phrases, the options fit into the tested sentence fairly easily:

- A She sat without speaking.
- B She sat filled with thoughts.

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1. In line 23, what does the word insisted mean?
 - A Wondered
 - B Commanded
 - C Hoped
 - D Accepted
2. What is the speaker's main problem?
 - A The speaker wants a squirrel as a pet.
 - B The speaker does not want to write a poem.
 - C The teacher does not believe the speaker's story about the squirrel.
 - D The teacher wants the speaker to write about something other than a squirrel.
3. Which line contains an example of alliteration?
 - A Line 6
 - B Line 9
 - C Line 17
 - D Line 18
4. What theme is suggested in the last stanza?
 - A People are willing to help when you need them the most.
 - B Getting used to something new takes time.
 - C Stay firm in your belief if it is important to you.
 - D Facing challenges can teach you about yourself.
5. What can the reader infer about the speaker?
 - A The speaker feels responsible for what has happened to the squirrel.
 - B The speaker has written several poems about a squirrel for the teacher in the past.
 - C The speaker wants the teacher's help to write a poem about a squirrel.
 - D The speaker has thought a great deal about the squirrel since seeing it.

Conclusion

Of the many fine and funny children's books about standardised tests, Judy Finchler's (2000) *Testing Miss Malarkey* must be my favourite. In it, teacher Miss Malarkey bites her nails as "THE TEST" approaches. The principal orders No. 2 pencils and demands that they are perfectly sharpened. The canteen serves fish because it's good for the brain. The art teacher helps students colour in circles to get them ready for marking answers. Even the narrator's mother takes on the frenzied frame of mind; after she reads the narrator a bedtime story, she assigns a worksheet to be completed before he sleeps.

But among these laugh-out-loud moments in the book is a single sentence that, for some schools, is too real to be funny: "The closer we got to 'THE TEST DAY', the weirder things got."

The fact that things get weirder as the testing window approaches actually makes sense, unfortunately. Consider this: If tests could truly mirror quality instruction and if testing conditions could replicate the collaborative atmosphere that is so important in classrooms, then teachers wouldn't actually need to address "the test" with their students at all; test day could come and go and things would not get weird. But that's not what happens with testing. Tests are different from essentially every other activity that takes place in schools. That's why things get weird.

I think this notion has to be addressed with students explicitly. After all, it must seem odd to them that for many months each school year, they engage with texts and are encouraged to share openly and think broadly about the ideas in those texts, but during test week, they are told not to look around, not to ask around, not to share and not to think divergently. They must narrow their views. They must limit possible interpretations to a correct one, as deemed by some anonymous test writer.