

Standardized Tests as a Genre

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Whether we as teachers like it or not, standardized tests are directly connected to our jobs and the resources available to our students. Funding decisions, administrative longevity, students' graduation and grade level promotions and teachers' salaries and bonuses are all closely tied to standardized test scores. Because of the "high stakes" associated with test scores, teachers need to find ways to help students make their "literate abilities visible" on these standardized measures.

When students are familiar with the tasks required by the tests, they are better able to focus their attention and energy on the content of the test and to demonstrate their abilities. Frank Smith says that a different approach may be required, employing examples rather than instruction, encouragement rather than worksheets and modeling test taking strategies and allowing for discussion rather than direct skills instruction. He further states that a person's mind cannot be *made* to act more critically any more than it can be made to act more generously or flippant. What is required is not more skills, but a different approach or strategy to addressing the requirements of standardized tests.

Some Preliminary Thoughts:

- standardized tests require students to recognize correct answers from

among a group of answers, that means we are only dealing with recall abilities

- there are certain literacy skills that students need to perform well on standardized tests and these may differ from the skills supported in the reading and writing workshop
- students must be made to feel comfortable around the test or anxiety will cause the students to score worse than they could under better circumstances
- we as teachers must place value upon the test or students will see our reluctance and perform below expectations
- preparation builds confidence and confidence will lead to better performance and self-efficacy
- there are two types of skills needed to perform well on a tests of this nature; understanding of the basic skill being measured and the ability to demonstrate the skill in a test situation to the scorers' satisfaction
- many of our students have the required skills yet are lacking the ability to demonstrate these skills on a standardized test

Traditional Test Preparation Strategies

- emphasize a good night's sleep before the test
- take the test in the morning, research has shown that students have greater concentrating abilities earlier in the day

- do easy questions first
- skim through the passage before reading through it
- practice filling in bubble sheets
- once you have filled in an answer you have a better chance at getting it right if you leave it alone, only change the answer when you have a REAL good reason or have overlooked something
- THE MOST IMPORTANT REQUIREMENT FOR SUCCESS IS CHOOSING AN ANSWER FOR EVERY QUESTION
- make sure students read the directions at least twice, and even underline key words such as true / false, or most, least etc.
- if you have difficulty with a question, try rewording it in your own words
- from time to time check your answer sheet to be sure that the answer you are marking is the correct number on the answer sheet
- try to answer multiple choice questions before you read the answers
- in multiple choice questions with reading passages read the questions first the passage, this will help to center on the needed information
- use the process of elimination (this needs to be modeled) if students can eliminate 2 choices the chances go from 25 to 50 percent
- in questions with numerical answers 80% of the time the hi and lo answers are incorrect, so if you have to guess, guess one in the middle
- long statements are usually true and short statements are usually false

Research Suggests Test Preparation should be:

1. intensive - directly before the test and should be only for short periods each day
2. cooperative - teachers and students should work together to discuss and negotiate meaning, the teacher should model problem solving ideas and listen to the students ideas
3. non-threatening - the mention of reward or punishment for test performance should never arise, this is not a competition but a chance for students to show what they know
4. short - the longer students dwell on tests and preparation the poorer the performance according to most research, students burn out and by the time the tests are there they have seen too many

Unit of Study: The Inauthentic Passage Genre

A genre is defined by the use of particular formats, literary devices and structures and the demands and expectations placed on readers reading in the genre. Standardized tests require a specific performance of specific literate abilities in a specific context with contrived (unnatural) language.

A unit of study on Standardized Tests challenges the relationship between learning to read in classrooms (reading workshop approaches) and learning to

read to do well on tests. Do we allow the requirements of the test to determine our reading curriculum or do we demonstrate the differences between the two and teach reading for a test as a separate reading process and skill?

Before Beginning the Unit of Study

1. Demystify the tests to students – explain why they are used, how they are constructed, how the results will be used and who creates them.
2. Discuss the specific requirements of the testing situation; no talking, timed exercises, different sections of the test and how we are going to prepare for the tests.
3. Allow students to share their concerns about the test.
4. Acquire test preparation materials and examples of the passages
5. help students develop stamina for reading and focusing

Launching the Unit of Study

1. Have students brainstorm what they remember about the tests and clarify any misconceptions. Make a chart about what they remember.
2. Ask students what strategies they use, keeping in mind the challenges with self-reporting data, students saying they use strategies that they don't
3. Investigate the actual test materials, what do test-makers provide for teachers and students to use to prepare

The Test Passage as a Genre

1. Have students immerse themselves in actual reading passage examples and discuss what they are finding in there
2. What elements, structures and literary devices are used to create these passages?
3. Investigate the language used in the passage and the questions
4. Make charts of terms used in the questions, question vocabulary
5. Discuss words used in directions; define, compare, contrast, explain, describe, evaluate, list, identify, summarize, interpret, review, prove, analyze, always, never, equal, main, central, usually etc.
6. Teaching students to identify the tricks that test makers use to fool students
7. Have students develop a “scavenger-hunt” mentality when reviewing the questions and the passages, look for particular things
8. Teach students to read questions first before reading passage, what will be asked of them for this question?

3 Major Issues in Preparing for Test Taking

Developing Stamina

- what is needed to get through the test
- self-efficacy

- not giving up
- resting eyes, stretching
- drinks and candy
- understanding what is expected

Analyzing Test Questions

- what language is used in the questions
- the difference between AN answer and the BEST answer
- what phrases are used; mostly, central idea, except for
- learn to paraphrase questions – what are they asking
- many questions are the same thing asked different ways
- what other questions does this one remind me of
- have students write possible questions for a passage

Choosing an Answer

- don't rely on memory – check the passage
- rereading passage
- go with your first thoughts
- don't overanalyze – making every answer seem possible

Types of Questions

1. analytical – explain causes of things
2. authorial intentions – why did the author write this
3. categorical – which best describes
4. cause-effect – explain the causes of
5. comparative – how are x & y different or the same
6. definitional – x means
7. evaluative – which is the best solution
8. identification – identify which...
9. inferential – based on the evidence, what does x mean
10. sequential – in which order did...
11. predictive – what might happen
12. synthesize – what might a good title be