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

•
 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.

•

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.

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 possibl
e

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