# The Best Ways to Prepare Students for Common Core Reading Tests

                In this article in *The Reading Teacher*, Timothy Shanahan (University of Illinois/ Chicago) says the “data-driven” approach to improving reading achievement – using item analyses to identify the skills students haven’t mastered and drilling test-aligned curriculum items – doesn’t work. Why? “Research long ago revealed an important fact about reading comprehension tests: they only measure a single factor…” says Shanahan: “reading comprehension. They don’t reveal students’ abilities to answer main idea questions, detail questions, inference questions, drawing conclusion questions, or anything else.” Having students practice answering questions on various reading subskills won’t produce better test scores. In fact, they may even depress reading achievement by wasting time that could be spent on productive activities.

Shanahan believes there are two reasons traditional standardized reading tests fail to produce useful data on subskills:

                • *First, reading is a language activity, not the execution of various subskills*. To make sense of a text, students must simultaneously use a hierarchy of language features. When a student answers a main-idea question incorrectly, it doesn’t mean the main-idea part of the student’s brain isn’t working. Here are some possible explanations:

-    The passage looked too hard and the student didn’t have the confidence to read it all the way through.

-    The student is a slow reader and didn’t read far enough to grasp the main idea.

-    The student’s decoding skills are weak and a lot of important words weren’t understood.

-    The main idea was embedded in a particularly complex sentence, and although the student understood the rest of the text, this sentence wasn’t understood.

-    The text had a lot of synonyms and pronouns and the student wasn’t able to form a coherent idea of what it was all about.

So what *does* explain students’ performance on standardized tests? Text complexity, says Shanahan: “[I]f the text is easy enough, students can answer any type of question, and if the text is complicated enough, they will struggle with even the supposedly easiest types of questions. That means reading comprehension tests measure how well students read texts, not how well they execute particular reading skills…”

            • *Second, reading tests are designed to separate proficient from struggling readers*. To achieve this and create reliable tests, psychometricians reject questions that don’t have the best properties. “Test designers are satisfied by being able to determine how well students read and by arraying students along a valid reading comprehension scale,” says Shanahan. “They know that the items collectively assess reading comprehension, but that separately – or in small sets of items aimed at particular kinds of information – the items can tell us nothing meaningful about how well students can read.”

            Won’t the innovative tests being created by PARCC and Smarter Balanced do a better job? Not at producing useful data on subskills, says Shanahan. “These new tests won’t be able to alter the nature of reading comprehension or the technical requirements for developing reliable test instruments.” The simple reason is that they can’t be long and fine-grained enough. So does that mean the PARCC and Smarter Balanced tests will be useless to educators and parents? Not at all, says Shanahan: “These tests will ask students to read extensive amounts of literary and informational text, to answer meaningful questions about these texts, and to provide explanations of their answers. These tests should do a pretty good job of showing how well students can read and comprehend challenging texts without teacher support.”

            So how should we prepare students to do well on the new tests – and be prepared for college and career success? Not by focusing instruction on question types, says Shanahan – instead, by striving to make students “sophisticated and powerful readers.” Here’s how:

            • *Have students read extensively within lessons* – not free reading, but reading that is an integral part of instruction, with students frequently held accountable for understanding and gaining knowledge. Round-robin oral reading is highly inefficient, says Shanahan. “Teachers like it because it provides control and it lets them observe how well a student is reading, but a reading comprehension lesson, except with the youngest children, should emphasize silent reading – and lots of it.” And this should also be happening in social studies, science, and math classes.

            • *Have students read increasing amounts of text without guidance and support*. Many reading lessons involve students reading a paragraph or a page followed by teacher questions and group discussion. “This model is not a bad one,” says Shanahan. “It allows teachers to focus students’ attention on key parts of the text and to sustain attention throughout. However, the stopping points need to be progressively spread out over time… Increasing student stamina and independence in this way should be a goal of every reading teacher.” It’s noteworthy that the shortest prototype that PARCC and SBAC have released so far is 550 words long.

*• Make sure the texts are rich in content and sufficiently challenging.* “Lots of reading of easy text will not adequately prepare students for dealing with difficult text,” says Shanahan. They need to be reading grade-level texts with gradually decreasing teacher scaffolding around vocabulary, sentence grammar, text structure, and concepts needed to reach target levels.

*• Have students explain their answers and provide text evidence supporting their claims.* This is an important part of increasing intellectual depth and constantly moving students toward reading more-challenging material.

*• Engage students in writing about text.* Writing does a much better job of improving reading comprehension than answering multiple-choice questions, says Shanahan: “Although writing text summaries and syntheses may not look like the tests students are being prepared for, this kind of activity should provide the most powerful and productive kind of preparation.”

“How and How Not to Prepare Students for the New Tests” by Timothy Shanahan in *The Reading Teacher,* November 2014 (Vol. 68, #3, p. 184-188), <http://bit.ly/1wr4JOa>; Shanahan can be reached at shanahan@uic.edu.

[*Back to page one*](#PageOne)