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**Sincerely,
Karen Haag**

How do I teach to students' needs when I must prepare them for on-level testing?

We must teach struggling readers at their instructional level to encourage success and motivation. However, to help these students learn how best to cope with the demanding texts they will face in testing situations we can provide additional supported opportunities for them to read at their grade level.

We also need to familiarize students with the various question formats used in their texts and understand that this does not mean spending considerable amounts of instructional time teaching to the test (International Reading Association, 1999).

Instead, test preparation should be integrated with students' everyday learning. Teachers who plan a variety of instructional activities in varying formats address both appropriate instruction and sensible test preparation.

*"Questions Teachers Ask About Struggling Readers and Writers" by Kathy Ganske, Joanne Monroe, and Dorothy Strickland, *The Reading Teacher*, October 2003**

Lesson 1 How To Read Challenging Texts

Bottom line? *Students will make reading progress if they read on their own reading level most of the time.* It seems logical at first that if students need to read on grade level materials at the end of the year, they should practice with grade-level texts. Research shows that not to be true. Students who are asked to read texts that are too difficult as a steady diet actually regress.



However, these same students need to be taught how to read hard texts if they are to take an end of grade test. How to read a difficult text without a dictionary has to be modeled in a small group. Some students can become more confident if you teach them how. Show them how to rely on their street smarts to figure out the answers to questions even when they don't understand the whole text. At the very least, they need to know that they can get some answers right.

Lesson 2 It's The Questions That Are Tricky

Often times, we find on tests that the passages are not that difficult. It's the questions that are tricky. The kids just don't know what they're looking for. Getting practice in rephrasing the question seems to help over time.

Calkins explains,

"Very often when I asked students to explain their answers, they responded by reading parts of the passage. They found it difficult to explain what they were thinking or what they might be doing. I might assist them by saying, 'I have a couple of guesses at what you were trying to do/what you might be thinking right now. Are any of these similar to what you really are trying/thinking?' Over time, students will internalize your expectation that they have chosen their answers for a reason."

How might a child reword a question so it is in his own words? I found focusing on one or 2 questions a day and interpreting what the question is asking to be very helpful.

Put just 1 or 2 these questions on the board each day. Ask children to rewrite the question in words they understand. Discuss the possibilities and reach consensus with your small group. I took these questions

from the first few pages of a COACH book. At Calkins' schools in New York, students do these mini-exercises every day. Over time, doing and checking this thinking exercise will help prepare readers to understand what the question is asking them to find.

Question from COACH book	Possible rewording	Optional Kind of Question
What word is used in the same way that the word <i>clear</i> is used in line 10?	Find the synonym for <i>clear</i> . It's in the poem, too.	Search and think
How would you characterize the poet?	What makes this poet different?	On my own
Where does the poem take place?	What is the setting?	Right there
The story is mostly about a woman who	What's the main idea?	Author and me
Why did Strong Wind test the girls?	What's Strong Winds reason?	Author and me
At what point does Strong Wind know that Nagomi is telling the truth?	Understand the sequence of the story.	Search and think
An antonym of <i>truthful</i> is	What is the opposite of <i>truthful</i> ?	On my own
Based on the information in this story, you can conclude that	Conclude means infer- take a guess based on all the facts.	Search and think
Something that is <i>invisible</i> is	Go back and reference the text for the word <i>invisible</i> .	Right there
In what way did Nogami take a chance?	What action is risky?	Search and think
What is the main theme of this story?	What is the moral? the lesson? What's the author trying to teach?	Search and think
Which is Strong Wind's point of view?	Which idea would Strong Wind believe?	Author and me
What tells you that this story is a legend and not real?	What detail is not true?	Search and think

Further evidence to support this practice comes from a book study group I attended where we read and discussed *Understanding Poverty*. Here are some issues all students of poverty deal with. Sound familiar?

- Students have a blurred or sweeping perception. (My parents saw the tooth fairy; therefore all fairies in all stories are real.)
- Students have a lack of a systematic method of exploration. (A couple years ago we found that students thought "checking your test" meant going back and redoing every question! Our students didn't understand that "check your test" meant create a system for marking answers you need to go back and check.)
- Students do not have the language for asking questions, especially why questions.
- Spoken and written language is in present tense. Endings are practically non-existent.
- Students do not use vocabulary that indicates the special orientation of things. (Wow! True in writing. I finally told a group this week that you cannot "overtell" where things are happening in the story.)

Studying question stems and what they mean can go a long way towards helping students get better at taking tests. At first, it takes a long time to discuss what a test question means, but after a while readers get the hang of what you're asking them to do. They improve. With practice, students can read the question and know what they're supposed to find out.

Lesson 3: There's More Than One Way To Talk About Concepts

Ask kids to look through the tests for language that is different and highlight those words in your discussions. In reading, we might talk about the main idea of a text, for example. The test may call that the subject, the theme or the main message. Or, we may talk about line 7 and 8 of the poem in class. But, what does the test-maker mean if he phrases the question this way: In lines 7 and 8, the poet says "*Or hear the grown-up people's feet/Still going past me on the street/*" What does this mean? Will the students understand the use of the / /?

Take a look for a minute at questions stems in test prep books used for asking about main idea.

- What is the main idea of the first paragraph?
- What is the *main* purpose of this selection?
- What is the main idea of the selection?
- What is the selection mainly about?
- What would be a new title that explains the main idea?
- Which details supports the main idea?
- The topic of this selection is ---?
- What is the best summary of this selection?
- Based on the information in both passages, what generalization applies to both?

If students are to be prepared to answer main idea questions, what can you conclude about teaching by looking at these question stems? Try not to limit yourself to asking about any concept in only one way. Word questions in a variety of ways. Don't use the same vocabulary over and over again. Make a conscious effort to use synonyms when talking with your students. Think of as many different ways of phrasing questions as you can.

Lesson 4: More Fun With Hyper-Standard English

Calkins suggests having kids model a conversation using the kind of talk they think test makers would use. Or, I was thinking that the students could write test questions in this "hyper English" using the test stems you get from your test prep books or the questions in the chart above. It might be fun to think like a test-maker instead of a test-taker for a change.

Lesson 5: Share This Tip

The biggest test-taking tip to explain to students is that they do not have to prepare by memorizing any thing for this test. Their job is to find clues! They must locate references to help them make decisions about answers. Often this is news to students: everything you need is on the test somewhere! Your job is to find it!