

A STUDY GUIDE

What Every Elementary Teacher Needs to Know About Reading Tests

(From Someone Who Has
Written Them)



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About the Book

Tests require a special kind of savvy, a kind of critical thinking and knowledge application that is not always a natural part of authentic reading experiences in the classroom. If students are to feel prepared and confident on test day, they need sound, specific information about reading tests.

What Every Elementary Teacher Needs to Know About Reading Tests (From Someone Who Has Written Them) is intended to take the mystery out of reading tests. This resource explains how reading tests are made, how standards are interpreted and assessed, and how students can learn and apply item-specific strategies to help them access the items that appear most frequently on reading tests.

The book has four major sections:

- Section 1: A look at the myths and realities of test making and test taking
- Section 2: Thorough coverage of the most commonly assessed reading standards, complete with sample items and strategies for students
- Section 3: High-quality test preparation materials for teacher modeling and student discovery
- Section 4: More than thirty engaging activities that help sharpen students' understandings of core reading skills

Using the Study Guide

This study guide is divided into four sessions so that you and your colleagues can read and discuss one section of the book at a time; a short fifth session for closure and reflection is included as well.

The study sessions are flexible, so different arrangements of sessions are possible. For instance, each study session's activities can be repeated if your study group can commit to meeting more than four or five times and wants to read the book at a slower pace. Also, the sessions can easily be condensed for use in a one-day inservice workshop or adapted across a weeklong workshop.

Each of the study group sessions has a particular process for reading and discussing the material. The suggested activities describe what you can do before you read each section of the book, how to prepare for an upcoming study session, what to do during a study session with your colleagues, and how to extend the study sessions by implementing new ideas in your classroom.

More than anything else, the main goal of this study guide is to invite conversation.

Participants should strive to tie the discussions to their own teaching, their own students, and their own philosophies about how to best prepare students for the tasks they will encounter at test time.

Getting Ready to Read and Discuss

Before you attend the first study group session, complete the Getting Ready for Study Group inventory (Figure 1). Take this with you to refer to during each study group session.

Section 1: Building Understandings About Tests

Chapter 1: Common Beliefs About Test Making—Fact or Fiction?

Chapter 2: Common Beliefs About Test Taking—Fact or Fiction?

Synopsis

Because there is much about testing that seems secretive and elusive, myths about what to do and what not to do abound. These chapters seek to set the record straight by debunking popular myths about important considerations of test making and test taking. As readers think about the fact-or-fiction statements presented and read the explanations that follow each, they will learn about a

range of topics, from how tests are constructed to which popular test-taking strategies really do help students.

BEFORE READING SECTION 1

Complete the Fact-or-Fiction Quiz (Figure 2).

PREPARING FOR STUDY GROUP

- (1) Read Section 1—and read the book’s introduction, if you haven’t already done so. As you read Chapters 1 and 2, the answers to the Fact-or-Fiction Quiz will be revealed. Compare your responses to the quiz with those indicated in the book, and highlight each statement for which your response was different. Those differences should lead to interesting discussions during study group.
- (2) Conduct the following activity with students: Ask small groups of students to list every single thing they have learned about taking a reading test. Provide students with examples before they begin working, such as “The questions ask about the passages” and “For summary questions, you should see if the passage title gives you a hint.” Distribute a sampling of released test items to help spark their understanding. After sufficient time, have students share their lists as you record their ideas on chart paper. (Write all of the students’ ideas on the chart paper, regardless of whether they are “right.”) Also have students share their thinking on some of the fact-or-fiction statements about test taking presented in Chapter 2, and record their comments. Bring the chart paper to the study group.

AT STUDY GROUP

- (1) Display the pieces of chart paper that feature students’ understandings of tests. In small groups, read the ideas and take notes about your impressions. For example, some of their ideas might seem on target and well thought out, whereas others might seem ill-formed, difficult to make sense of, or even surprisingly unexpected. After sufficient time, discuss the notes you have taken. Consider the ways in which students’ understandings and misunderstand-

ings about reading tests can help and hurt their performance.

(2) Share and discuss the results of the fact-or-fiction quizzes. Refer to the text's explanations of whether the statements are fact or fiction. Share experiences that relate to the myths and truths of testing. Consider:

- Which fact-or-fiction statements and explanations confirmed something you already knew?
- Which statements and explanations provided information that was new to you?
- Which statements and explanations are most important for you to discuss with your students? Explain.
- Which statements and explanations do you want to know more about?
- What questions about test making and test taking do you still have? Can your study group members help address these queries?

AFTER STUDY GROUP

Decide what information from Chapters 1 and 2 is important to share with students. Find opportunities to deliver this information to them, and report the results to the group at the next study group session.

Section 2: Exploring Strategies for Reading Tests

Chapter 3: Vocabulary Development

Chapter 4: Important Ideas

Chapter 5: Literary Elements

Chapter 6: Literary Techniques

Chapter 7: Interpretations

Chapter 8: Text Matters

Synopsis

Chapters 3–8 present more than thirty of the most commonly assessed reading standards, sample items for those standards, and strategies that can be taught to

students to access those item types.

BEFORE READING SECTION 2

Read the sample passage on pages 25 and 26 and answer the questions in Sample Items for the Passage “Searching for an Idea” (Figure 3).

Next to each item, try to record your thought processes and strategies for determining the answers.

PREPARING FOR STUDY GROUP

Read all of Section 2, which includes Chapters 3–8. (If you decide to divide Section 2 into several study sessions, perhaps reading only one or two chapters at a time, you can adjust the following suggested exercises as needed.)

Find and photocopy several pages of one of your state’s released reading test forms for the grade level you teach. Take these sample items with you to the study session.

AT STUDY GROUP

- (1) Using the notes you made while answering the items in Figure 3, discuss these questions:
 - What were your processes/strategies for answering the items in Figure 3?
 - What are the strategies you teach your students for answering the kinds of items featured in Figure 3?
 - What does the text say are the strategies that students can use to answer the items in Figure 3? (You should have come across all of the sample items while reading Chapters 3–8.)
- (2) Settle on several more standards/sample items in Chapters 3–8 that you would like to discuss. Refer to your Getting Ready for Study Group inventory (Figure 1) to select the standards/sample items that your students are trying to master. (For instance, you may have written that, collectively, your students’ summary skills need more development, whereas identifying setting or alliteration is effortless for them.) For the standards/skills you select, reread the sample items and strategy explanations in Chapters 3–8. Discuss these questions:

- What information and strategies presented by the author do you tell your students?
- What information and strategies presented by the author caused you to think of something new or interesting to take back to your students? Explain.
- Of the information and strategies presented by the author that you think will benefit your students, how will you present them (for example, with anchor charts, through questioning during read-alouds, by using the materials in Section 3, and so forth)?

(3) Use the information you learned in Chapters 3–8 to identify the type of each sample item from your state’s released test. Then employ the strategies suggested by the author for each item type. Decide which strategies work well, and discuss how you would model these for your students.

AFTER STUDY GROUP

Find opportunities to present some of the strategies you think will benefit your students when they approach various types of items on reading tests.

One suggestion is to copy a page from a released test and ask students to highlight the words in item stems that help them understand what is being asked. Next, assess by allowing students to identify those key words and explain the strategies they would use to determine the correct answer. Increase students’ knowledge by correcting any misapprehensions, pointing out other focus words, and introducing new strategies.

Report the results to the group at the next study group session. Bring along any artifacts (such as anchor charts or strategy lessons you create).

Section 3: Putting Strategies to Work

Synopsis

Section 3 provides the materials that teachers can use to teach students the strategies that help unlock the most commonly assessed reading standards. A variety of passages and sample items are presented. Teacher guides help show how to put into action the strategies offered in Chapters 3–8.

BEFORE READING SECTION 3

Gather two things:

- (1) Sample items from one of your state’s released reading tests
- (2) A page or two from a commercially prepared reading workbook designed to give students practice with test taking (Actually, selecting pages from a workbook that you really don’t like will contribute to an interesting discussion during the study session! Look for an old, dusty workbook shoved in a box at the bottom of your storage closet.)

Study both of these sources and make notes about the similarities and differences you notice.

PREPARING FOR STUDY GROUP

Read all of Section 3—the introduction, the passages and items, and the teacher guides (the strategy/explanation charts) for each sample item.

AT STUDY GROUP

- (1) Share with study group members the two sources of test preparation materials that you gathered and studied, and discuss the similarities and differences. Consider why it is important to present to students test preparation materials that are a close match to your state’s reading test.
- (2) Discuss the test preparation passages and items presented in Section 3. Select at least one of the four passages and its associated items, and talk about and/or highlight the strategies that could help students unlock a particular test item and lead them to the correct answer.
- (3) Plan how you can use the materials offered in Section 3 to provide students with multiple strategies for approaching particular types of test items. Consider how you might use the materials in the following arrangements:
 - Whole-class instruction
 - Small-group instruction
 - During-school or after-school tutoring or enrichment periods

AFTER STUDY GROUP

Find opportunities to present the test preparation materials from Section 3 to your students. Take notes about how you incorporate them—especially if they are used in conjunction with other reading methods/lessons—and report the results to the group at the next study group session.

Section 4: Demonstrating Understandings with Reading Activities

Synopsis

Worksheets squash students' love of reading, but activities that are engaging, thought-provoking, and interactive offer students the opportunity to explore the most commonly assessed reading skills in a positive learning environment. This section offers more than thirty easy-to-implement activities that teachers can use to equip students with the skills they need to succeed on reading tests.

BEFORE READING SECTION 4

Pick five standards/skills covered in Chapters 3–8. There's no criteria, so don't give them too much thought. In fact, if you want, I'll pick them for you: context clues, summary, figurative language, inference, and author's organization.

Now prepare to travel to a deserted island with your students. What lessons and activities for the five standards/skills you (or I) selected would you take with you?

Okay, forget the deserted island, because now you're preoccupied with building a shelter for your students and feeding them. The real question is this: What tried-and-true lessons and activities for these standards/skills do you teach your students and never want to part with? Gather the materials you will need to do a brief talk about them with your study group.

PREPARING FOR STUDY GROUP

Read through the activities in Section 4.

Consult your Getting Ready for Study Group inventory (Figure 1), and recall the skills you are working with your students to improve. Reread the activities designed around these skills. Select several of these activities to try out with students. Bring student samples (or anecdotal notes, if students do not produce any artifacts in the process of completing an activity) with you to the study group session.

AT STUDY GROUP

- (1) Share the lessons and activities you gathered for the five standards/skills you (or I) selected. Discuss the resources and procedure, as well as any assessment component, for each of the lessons and activities. Talk about the strengths of each for developing students' understandings of the targeted standards/skills.
- (2) Share your thoughts about the activities from Section 4 that you tried with your students. Discuss how you incorporated them (for instance, on their own or in conjunction with other reading methods/lessons) as well as any modifications, enhancements, or extensions you did. Talk about the effectiveness of the activities for developing students' understandings of the targeted standards/skills.
- (3) Consider how you might use the materials in the following arrangements:
 - Whole-class instruction
 - Small-group instruction
 - During-school or after-school tutoring or enrichment periods

AFTER STUDY GROUP

Find opportunities to engage your students in the activities from Section 4 that most interest you. If desired, collaborate with a colleague to combine classes and have all students participate in the activities.

Closure and Reflection

Use these activities to conclude the study group's discussion of *What Every Elementary Teacher Needs to Know About Reading Tests (From Someone Who Has Written Them)*.

- (1) Read aloud Judy Finchler's (2000) *Testing Miss Malarky*. Distribute Questions for Discussion (Figure 4). Answer the questions individually or in pairs and, after sufficient time, share your thoughts with the larger group.

- (2) Distribute the Post-Study Group Reflections page (Figure 5). In pairs, read a question and discuss it. Then, take a moment to record your main thoughts and answers to the question before moving on to another question. Continue until answers to each of the questions have been recorded. After sufficient time, share your thoughts with the larger group.

Figure 1:

GETTING READY FOR STUDY GROUP

You and your colleagues will be reading and discussing the book *What Every Elementary Teacher Needs to Know About Reading Tests (From Someone Who Has Written Them)*. To get the most from your study group experience, take a few minutes to address these questions.

About the Featured Book

Have you had an opportunity to read any of the book? If so, what parts (sections, chapters, activities)? What information has appealed to you?

If not, by looking at the table of contents or perusing the book's pages for a few moments, what information appeals to you?

Before you go to your first study group session . . .

What questions do you have about how (reading) tests are made?

What questions do you have about how to help your students master certain reading standards?

Student Inventory

What has been the most recent assessment of your students' reading skills as predictors of their success on a future reading test (for example, a benchmark using your state's released tests, informal notes or formal reports written during and after reading workshop, a combination of methods/assessments, and so forth)?

Collectively, with what reading standards/skills do your students show the greatest competence?

Collectively, what reading standards/skills are you working with students to improve?

By the end of the study group . . .

What standards/skills would you like to learn more about from colleagues or the featured book?

Figure 2

FACT-OR-FICTION QUIZ

Following are statements about test making and test taking that may or may not be true. Consider each statement and decide if it is fact or fiction.

Test Making

- _____ 1. "It's anyone's guess what students are expected to master for a state test."
- _____ 2. "A state test is the responsibility of the state 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."

Test Taking

- _____ 1. "In a test question, there are two options that are correct, and students have to choose the best one."
- _____ 2. "Process of elimination is a good test-taking strategy that all students can understand and use."
- _____ 3. "Some items provide clues about the answers to other items."
- _____ 4. "Many times, the longest option is the correct answer."
- _____ 5. "When running out of time, choose C."
- _____ 6. "When in doubt about the answer, choose C."
- _____ 7. "Do not choose an option that contains the word 'all,' 'always,' or 'never,' because that option will never be the correct answer."
- _____ 8. "Your first instinct is the right answer."
- _____ 9. "Even people who don't consider themselves to be good test takers can get better at taking tests."

Figure 3: Sample Items for the Passage “Searching for an Idea”

| Items | Notes on Processes/Strategies |
|---|-------------------------------|
| <p>1. What does the word <i>suggestions</i> mean in paragraph 12?</p> <p>A Problems B Questions C Ideas D Reasons</p> <p>2. Which of these is the best summary of the passage?</p> <p>A When trying to do her assignment, Monica remembers that her teacher says a poem can be written about anything. B After struggling and seeking help, Monica is finally able to write a poem. C Monica’s class has been reading poems, and now Monica has to write one. D Although Monica sees many things on the way to the store, she doesn’t know what to say about them in a poem.</p> <p>3. What is a theme of the passage?</p> <p>A Making a change in your life can be frightening at first. B Helping others is often rewarding. C Don’t give up trying something that is hard for you. D Families teach us about ourselves.</p> <p>4. In paragraph 2, the sentence “Monica felt a knot twist tightly in her stomach” means that she is —</p> <p>A strong B surprised C confused D worried</p> <p>5. Which of these will likely happen next?</p> <p>A Monica will receive an award from her teacher. B Monica will plant grass and flowers in the empty field. C Monica will enjoy sharing her poem with the class. D Monica will rewrite her poem.</p> <p>6. How is the passage mostly organized?</p> <p>A Comparison and contrast B Problem and solution C Cause and effect D Step-by-step instructions</p> | |

Figure 4: Post-Study Group Text for Reflection: Testing Miss Malarky

Questions for Discussion

1. What can be said about Judy Finchler's take on testing, and how is that perspective conveyed? (Consider discussing the main character's name, Malarky. Consider that the test's acronym, IPTU, sounds a great deal like "I pity you.")

2. What aspects of the picture book are pure exaggeration and laugh-out-loud funny, and what aspects are realistic and hit close to home?

3. Consider this sentence from the story:

"The closer we got to 'THE TEST DAY,' the weirder things got."

In what ways does testing cause things to get weird on your campus? How can you protect students from that weirdness?

4. What is your philosophy with regard to preparing students for reading tests? How has the study group's featured book confirmed, cultivated, or challenged your philosophy?

Figure 5: Post-Study Group Reflections

Having had the opportunity to discuss with your colleagues important content and issues related to reading tests, take a few minutes to reflect on your experience.

What questions about how tests are made, how standards are assessed, and how skills can be taught to students were answered by reading the featured book and/or during the study group?

What questions do you still have? What colleague, resource, or additional text might help you find the answers?

What ideas/methods/strategies in your repertoire were you able to share with colleagues about teaching reading/standards/skills?

What aspects of reading the featured book and participating in the study group did you find the most helpful?

In the near future . . .

What, if anything, do you plan to do differently or additionally with your students as a result of this study group experience? (In other words, do you have specific instructional plans that you want to institute soon? Describe them briefly, if so.)

What specific information/strategies/tips did you find helpful and important to share with your students in order to ensure their success on future reading tests?

What parts of the study group's featured book do you intend to study on your own time?