



On Target:

Strategies to Improve Student Test Scores

Grades 3 - 12



Dear Educator:

As educators, we seem to struggle with various ethical dilemmas when it comes to testing and school improvement. Is it right to teach to the test? Should we give students tricks and tips designed simply to improve test scores? Should state tests influence our teaching, or student learning, for that matter?

The collective answer to these questions is quite simple: We should do all we can to ensure that a student's test scores reflect the sum of that student's learning. Sadly, too often test scores reflect how well students test rather than what they actually know. Consider the bright and over-achieving student who freezes on test day. He does not sleep the night before the test day. Breakfast seems unappealing. When the standardized test appears on his desk or computer screen, he becomes nervous and jittery. How about the struggling student who has come so far in her learning, but who seems to lose sight of all she has learned when test day comes around?

Actually, the only ethical thing for an educator to do is to prepare a student to wisely and explicitly approach a test—any test—with all of the strategies, skills, and yes, even tips and tricks, that he or she needs to be successful. This little booklet won't tell you what content to teach your students. It won't reveal any secrets about the tests. Hopefully, it will help you give students the confidence and security they need to approach the test in a comfortable and self-assured manner.

This booklet is the second in a series of *On Target* strategy booklets developed by Technology and Innovation (TIE), a division of Black Hills Special Services, with support from the South Dakota Department of Education.

On Target booklets include the following titles:

- *On Target: Reading Strategies to Guide Learning*
- *On Target: Strategies to Improve Student Test Scores*
- *On Target: Strategies to Help Struggling Readers*
- *On Target: Strategies to Help Readers Make Meaning through Inferences*
- *On Target: Strategies to Build Student Vocabularies*
- *On Target: More Strategies to Guide Learning*
- *On Target: Bringing Writing into Content Area Classrooms*
- *On Target: Strategies That Differentiate Instruction, Grades K-4*
- *On Target: Strategies That Differentiate Instruction, Grades 4-12*

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Table of Contents

No Child Left Behind and Student Success	3
Testing Strategies for Teachers	4
Test Conditions That Foster Student Achievement	5
Test Taking Strategies and Testwiseness	6
SCORER	7, 8
Multiple Choice Basics	9
True/False Tests	10
Writing to the Prompt and Splashdown	11, 12
Getting Ready for Test Day: Final Preparations	13
Question – Answer Relationships	14, 15, 16
Vocabulary and Test Success.....	17
Stress Busters	18
Yea or Nay/Why? Strategy	19
Tried and True Math Tactics & Solving Word Problems.....	20
More Test Taking Strategies	21
Websites to Explore.....	22

No Child Left Behind and Student Success

The *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) signed into law by President George W. Bush on January 8, 2002, is recognized as one of the most aggressive reform acts to face the education profession in history. While there are many components to the act that affect teachers and students, the ultimate goal is that all students will be proficient by 2014. The proficiency will be based on state assessments.



In South Dakota, a new test was developed and introduced in the spring of 2003. This test is called the Dakota State Test of Educational Development or Dakota STEP. The Dakota STEP measures student success in Reading and Mathematics as required by NCLB. Students in Grades 3 through 8 and students in Grade 11 participate in the test. The number of students tested each spring is over 70,000. The test is a multiple choice test that has additional items added to ensure alignment to the South Dakota Content Standards in Reading and Math. A new Science assessment will be added in 2007 but will not be used for accountability.

Research has shown that testwiseness and test-taking strategies help students perform better when taking year-end summative tests. Simple things like adding horizontal numbers versus vertical numbers can throw some students off. Providing students a reading passage with multiple choice answers that simulate an actual assessment can prove helpful. Teaching students to know what a distracter is in a set of answers is important. There are also commercial materials that can be purchased that simulate major achievement tests. In the end, however, we must not overlook good teaching of the standards measured by Dakota STEP for student success.

Hopefully, you will find the *On Target* guide a useful resource in better preparing students to take tests like the Dakota STEP.

Gary Skoglund
Assessment Director
South Dakota Department of Education

Testing Strategies for Teachers

By setting the stage for successful testing situations, teachers can effectively improve student experiences with standardized tests. San Diego's Office of the Superintendent for its public school system suggests that teachers need to prepare themselves to give tests. The idea is that by following certain guidelines and formats regarding testing situations, teachers will be better able to set the stage for successful test-taking situations for their students.

1. Prepare Yourself

- ☐ Review the examiner's manual.
- ☐ Make sure you have enough test booklets, answer sheets, scratch paper, and pencils.
- ☐ Develop a plan for handling students who arrive late.
- ☐ Provide quiet activities for students who complete the test early.
- ☐ Regardless of how you feel, appear positive about the testing situations.

2. Prepare the Place

- ☐ If possible, give students the tests in their regular classroom.
- ☐ Provide students with comfortable seats and desks large enough to accommodate testing materials.
- ☐ Decide ahead of time if you will need classroom helpers on testing day.
- ☐ Make sure the testing room has good lighting and ventilation.
- ☐ Make sure the room will be free of noise and interruptions during testing time.
- ☐ Test in classroom-size groups.

3. Setting the Time

- ☐ Try to avoid testing on Monday morning and Friday afternoon.
- ☐ If a test is not timed, make sure you provide enough time for ALL students to complete the test.
- ☐ Avoid student test fatigue by keeping sessions as short as possible. In general, elementary students should not test more than one hour per day. Older students can usually handle two testing sessions a day, especially if one is in the morning and the other is in the afternoon.
- ☐ Get "chores" out of the way before the test begins. For example, make sure you take care of bathroom and drink breaks before beginning the exam.

4. Before Testing

- ☐ Make sure students understand the purpose of the testing. Tests are to identify classroom and school needs rather than to grade individual students.
- ☐ Encourage students to try to complete all items but to avoid spending too much time on any one item.
- ☐ Remind students that they aren't expected to know everything on a standardized test.
- ☐ Practice taking tests in formal testing conditions before the actual testing day.

5. During the Testing

- ☐ Move about the room. Watch to make sure students are following directions and have all of the needed materials.
- ☐ Clarify test directions, if needed.
- ☐ Post remaining time on the chalkboard or overhead.
- ☐ Note behavior that may invalidate results (distractions, illness, tardiness).

Source

From the Office of the Superintendent, San Diego City Schools, Testing Unit

Test Conditions That Foster Student Achievement

Environmental Conditions	Physical Conditions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriate lighting • Optimal thermal conditions • Familiar surroundings in a normal classroom environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Well-hydrated students • Well-nourished students • Well-rested students
Time	Other Factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No more than 60 minutes at a session • No more than one session per day for elementary students, two sessions for secondary students • Extra time at the end of each test before moving on to the next test 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimal amount of noise distractions • Lack of disruptions • Appropriate seating that avoids crowding • Positive attitude of the testing administrator • Follow-up discussions that include conversations about test results

Test-Taking Strategies and Testwiseness

While test-taking strategies are skills students can use during testing, testwiseness focuses on commonly used semantic and structural patterns utilized by test developers. For example, a test-taking strategy is to always make a calculated guess. Testwise students, on the other hand, understand patterns commonly found in most assessments. They recognize that test designers use words such as “never” to indicate that an answer is probably incorrect.

Researcher Stuart Katz, University of Georgia, conducted an experiment with students to see how well they could perform on reading comprehension questions even if they did not read the passage. The study showed that students were able to correctly answer nearly 40 percent of the comprehension questions without reading the passages. “Theoretically, if you eliminate the passage, you should not be able to perform better than chance. But people are doing much better than chance. They’re test wise—they’re able to use tricks of various sorts to find the correct answer. This can’t be due to reading comprehension skills because the passage is not there.”

Teachers can help students get the best possible scores by teaching students the following strategies and testwiseness techniques.

Test-Taking Strategies

- Read and carefully follow all of the direction for the test.
- Read each question. Try to decide whether the question is an In the Book question or an In My Head question (see QAR, page 15).
- Before looking at the options in a multiple choice question, ask yourself if you already know the answer. If so, look to find that answer among the choices.
- Before marking your answer, read all of the options.
- Read the question again, this time with the answer you selected to see if it sounds correct.
- Try to use your time well, so that you have the time to finish the entire test and then go back over it to check your answers.
- Learn strategies that you can apply to testing situations—QAR, SCORE, Splashdown.
- When taking a multiple choice test omit questions that you are unsure of and return to them if time permits.
- Unless there is a penalty for an incorrect answer, make a calculated guess even if you are unsure of the answer.
- Try to eliminate any options that obviously cannot be correct.
- Look for options that do not grammatically match the question stem since they are usually incorrect answers.
- Pay attention to questions that seem related. Sometimes the answer to one multiple choice question can be found in the stem of another.

Testwiseness

- When two options are similar, neither one is likely to be correct.
- The most general option is likely to be the correct option.
- The longest or most complete option is likely to be the correct option.
- The option containing technical language is likely to be the correct one.
- When two of the options are opposite, one of them is always incorrect, and the other is usually, but not always, correct.
- As a last resort, select an option that is neither the first nor the last choice. Options B and C are somewhat more likely to be correct than options A or D.
- Options with qualifiers such as *most* are usually correct.
- Options with absolute statements such as *all* or *none* are usually incorrect.

Test-taking strategies and testwiseness suggestions adapted from Josephine Hartmann, Reading Specialist and TIE Consultant.

SCORER

SCORER is a strategy that helps students do better on tests and quizzes by preparing them to effectively use test time and teaching them test-taking skills for better scores.

Tests generally check for two things:

1. What a student actually knows about a content area.
2. How well a student can take tests.

SCORER helps students develop their test-taking skills.

Steps:

1. Introduce students to the SCORER process by providing them with a handout. Consider converting the handout into a bookmark form that students can keep with them.
2. Introduce and practice the strategy with students on a daily assignment.
3. Direct students to work in pairs and practice the strategy.
4. Incorporate the strategy into the routine of classroom assignments until students are familiar with the strategy and its use becomes a habit.
5. Practice the strategy by applying it to classroom tests and quizzes. The practice prepares students for standardized testing situations.
6. Remind students to use the SCORER strategy in all testing situations.

SCORER

S = Schedule
time

C = Clue
words
help

O = Omit
difficult
questions

R = Read
directions

E = Estimate
answers

R = Review
test

SCORER

S = Schedule your time.

- Look over the whole test.
- Decide how much time you have for each question.
- Use all the time given.

C = Clue words give you help.

- Sometimes a word in the question will help you think of the answer.
- Clue words include *explain, factor, solve, compare, and contrast*.

O = Omit difficult questions.

- Stay calm.
- Mark questions you don't know with a star (*).
- Keep going and then come back to skipped questions when you are finished with the other questions.

R = Read directions carefully.

- Understand the question before you answer test questions.
- Highlight or circle key words in the directions.
- Visualize the steps in your mind.

E = Estimate your answers.

- Read a difficult question through three times.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, make a best guess and ask yourself, "Does this make sense?"
- Check the value of the question. If it is worth three points, make sure you have three points in your answer.
- Try not to leave any blanks or unanswered questions.

R = Review the test.

- Make sure each question is answered.
- Check over the bubble sheet.
- Make sure your name is on the test.

Sources

Moore, A. Roger. Nine Quick Learning Strategies for Success. "Strategy 6: SCORER for Tests." NorQuest College: 2005. 12 June 2005 student.norquest.ca/onlinecourses/strategies/strategies/scorer.htm.
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Multiple Choice Basics

Multiple choice tests often follow a basic format. When students understand the format, they increase their chances of doing well. Model and practice the following strategies with students.

1. Before beginning a test, make sure you know if you will be penalized for guessing. Many tests record correct answers, but some exams subtract points for incorrect answers. Standardized tests in South Dakota **DO NOT** penalize students for guessing.
2. Read each question and try to answer it in your mind **BEFORE** looking at the answers.
 1. The capital of South Dakota is—
 - a. Rapid City.
 - b. Sioux Falls.
 - c. Aberdeen.
 - d. Pierre.

You may know that the answer is Pierre, so look for that answer among the choices. By thinking of the correct answer first, you are less likely to be fooled by incorrect options.
 3. **However**, be sure to look at all of the answers before actually marking your choice. Sometimes there can be more than one correct answer among the options provided.
 2. A popular Black Hills tourist attraction is
 - a. Mount Rushmore.
 - b. Crazy Horse National Monument.
 - c. the historic town of Deadwood.
 - d. all of the above.

Even though Mount Rushmore may be the most well-known attraction in the Black Hills, the other sites also attract visitors each year; therefore, d is the best answer to this question.
4. Do not spend too much time on any one question. If none of the answers seems correct, you should make a guess and mark the question to return to it later.
5. Use strategies to help with difficult questions:
 - Eliminate options that you know are too difficult.
 - Question options that grammatically don't fit with the stem (the first part of the question).
 - Question options that seem completely unfamiliar.
 - “All of the above” is the likely choice if you **KNOW** at least two options are correct.
 - When unsure about number answers, toss out high and low options.
 - Look alike options test your level of understanding. One of the options is probably correct, so choose the best one. Eliminate choices that basically mean the same thing—they actually cancel each other out.
 - Double negatives present problems for many students. Try to create a positive statement and then consider your choices.
 - Remember that information relevant to one question is sometimes given away in another test item.
 - Learn how to eliminate unlikely options. Many questions really have only two logical choices—the other options are throwaways.
 - Options that include broad terms such as *always, never, necessarily, only, must, completely*, and *totally* tend to be incorrect. Options that include qualifiers tend to be correct. These options include words *often, sometimes, perhaps, may*, and *generally*.

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True/False Tests

Guidelines for answering true and false questions are similar to those for answering multiple choice questions. However, students can still benefit from reviewing the following tips for responding to true/false questions.

1. When in doubt, answer TRUE.
 - Usually, there are more true answers than false answers on a test.
2. Look for any single factor that will make a question FALSE.
 - Don't stop reading when you see one true thing; the false portion may appear at the end of the question.
3. Look for extreme modifiers; they tend to make the question FALSE.
 - Extreme modifiers include *all, none, absolutely, never, worst, nobody, everybody*.
4. Look for qualifying words; they tend to make a question true.
 - Qualifiers include *usually, frequently, often, sometimes, probably, few*.
5. Pay attention to words that change the meaning of a statement.
 - Prefixes change the meaning of words (see prefix list below).
 - Double negatives make a positive. For example, *not unusually* really means *usually*.
6. Questions that state a reason or justify a statement tend to be false.
 - The reason portion of the statement tends to make the statement false. Reason or justifying words include *since, because, when, and if*.
 - The reason or justification is often incorrect or incomplete.

Common Prefixes

- a** – not/without (aside - to one side or out of the way)
- anti** – against (antifreeze - a chemical substance that keeps a liquid from freezing)
- audio** – to hear (audiovisual - combines sound and pictures)
- auto** – self (autograph - a person's signature)
- bi** – two (bilingual - a bilingual person speaks two languages)
- co** – together (cooperate - to work together)
- de** – from (decapitate - to remove the head of a person or creature)
- dis** – not (disbelief - refusal to believe something)
- en/em** – in/within (enroll - to join a club or group)
- en** – to cause or provide (enable - to make it possible for someone to do something)
- ex** – out of, away from (exile - to send someone away or out of the country)
- extra** – outside, beyond (extraordinary - unusual or remarkable)
- fore** – previous, in front (forehead - the top part of the head, foreleg - one of the front legs of an animal, forerunner - someone who has come before)
- il/im/in/ir** not (illegal - not legal, impossible - not possible, inadequate - not good enough, irresistible - can't be resisted)
- mal** – bad (maltreat - to badly or meanly treat a person or animal)
- micro** – small (microorganism - a small living thing that can't be seen without a microscope)
- mid** – middle (midseason - in the middle of the season)
- non** – not (nonfiction - a true story, not a fictional one)
- post** – later, after (postwar - events that occur after a war ends)
- pre** – earlier, before (preschool - before elementary school, premature - happening too soon)
- re** – back, again (rearrange - to arrange things differently)
- sub** – under, less than (subdivide - to divide or separate into small groups)

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Writing to the Prompt

Although students don't need to study a particular writing content in order to prepare for a standardized writing test, it is helpful for students to know what readers are looking for when they score written essays.

Glencoe/McGraw-Hill Companies and ACT provide the following suggestions for teachers and students:

Pre-Write

- Teach students to read prompts critically. Critical reading helps students discover the purpose and audience of the writing assignment. Students need to write to different kinds of prompts. Prompts can ask them to persuade, argue, explain, give an opinion or describe.
- Teach students to use pre-writing tools to organize information:
 - Outlines
 - Clusters
 - Graphic Organizers
- Throughout the year, provide students with opportunities to practice writing to prompts. Give students sample prompts that mimic those which frequently appear on high-stakes tests. Incorporate the prompts into your class activities so students get used to writing responses in testing situations.
- Remember that responding to a prompt is not the same as writing to a content essay question. A prompt is going to encourage students to draw on their personal experiences.
- Let students know that if they have a 30 minute test writing window, they should plan to use no more than 10 minutes for pre-writing activities.
- Define pre-writing activities for students. Ideas, examples, reasons, and arguments can be used to pre-write.
- Provide students with rubrics like those used in testing situations.

Introduction

- Make sure students practice writing strong opening paragraphs. Strong introductions clearly state what the essay will be and attract the reader's attention.
- Questions, definitions, anecdotes and examples are options for making strong introductions.
- Remind students that they should restate the prompt but not repeat it. In other words, they need to express their thesis statement in their own words—not the words of the original question:
 - Prompt: Describe your idea of a perfect day.
 - Thesis Restated: A perfect day for me would be one more day that I could spend fishing with my brother in our favorite pond behind our grandparents' house.
- Make sure students understand that the introduction should be brief and to the point. If the students will be writing a timed test, writing the introduction shouldn't steal time from the development of the essay's body.
- Make sure students understand that the importance of a thesis statement. The statement provides a focus for the rest of the essay. Practice writing thesis statements.

The Body

- Remind students that the body develops the introduction's thoughts and ideas.
- Teach students to write essay bodies using a pattern. Compare/contrast, advantages/disadvantages, logical arguments, points of description are options for organizing an essay.
- Require students to use examples, evidence and ideas that support the thesis.
- Require students to vary sentence structure and sentence length when they write in class.
- Provide students with practice using transitional words.

The Conclusion

- The conclusion is often the forgotten portion of a student's response to a writing prompt. Too often the essay just ends—either because the student ran out of time or because the student ran out of ideas.
- Expose students to strong and weak endings. Ask them to identify the differences. Give students practice time to change weak endings into strong conclusions.
- Teach your students to refer to the purpose of the essay again before attempting to write a conclusion. After carefully considering the purpose, students can then determine how to approach the final paragraph. A final, forceful point? A summary of an opinion? A description of the impact of an event? An effective conclusion responds to the purpose of the essay with clarity and power.
- Teach students that effective conclusions bring an essay full circle by taking the reader back to the introduction and reinforcing the writer's purpose.
- If all else fails, show students how to turn introductions into conclusions by restating opening paragraphs.

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"Splashdown" or "Braindrain" Strategy

What is a "Splashdown" or "Braindrain" Strategy?

Splashdown is a strategy to use with students prior to beginning a longer assessment task. Students are encouraged to take two minutes, using a scrap paper or the bottom of the test paper to jot down keywords, memory triggers such as dates, names, formulas, and other special information they can use in completing the assessment task.

This information will serve as their outline. Some students may find it helpful to take "splashdown" information and organize it into a web or list.

Source

Walker, Catherine and Edgar Schmidt. *Smart Tests: Teacher-Made Tests that Help Students*. Ontario, Canada: Pembroke, 2004.

Getting Ready for Test Day: Final Preparations

You've taught the content; you've covered the curriculum. Still, you're not sure. You wonder, "Will my students be ready come testing day?" A few strategies remain that you can cover with your students just prior to taking an exam which will better prepare them for the big day. *Teaching Today* from Glencoe Online suggests that teachers can pave the way for a successful exam day when they set aside time during the weeks prior to the exam and focus on specific skills students will need.

- Discuss the format of the standardized tests with students.
 - Review the test format—how will the test be set up and what areas will be covered. Make sure students know what to expect.
 - Review the types of questions that will appear on the exam—multiple choice, true or false, essay.
 - Conduct individual conferences with students to point out areas where they are strong and specific points they should review. Such conferences have yielded positive results in several South Dakota schools.
- Practice standardized tests. Practicing with the format of the test can dramatically affect student test results.
 - Practice with sample tests and questions.
 - Study questions as a class or in small groups.
 - Focus on finding clues to answers and testing formats rather than identifying the right/correct answer.
- Review the test-taking strategies you've covered earlier in the year.
- Review content covered on the standardized test.
 - Review specific standards covered on the exam with students.
 - Make a game or activity out of the review time to keep the stress level at a minimum.
- Set the stage for test day.
 - Prepare students the day before the test with a few teacher-made test questions that mimic the kinds and styles of questions they will be faced with on test day.
 - Don't underestimate your power as the teacher. Be your students' cheering section and reinforce their confidence.

Question-Answer Relationships (QAR)

(Raphael and Au)

Question-Answer Relationships (QAR) is a reading strategy that is widely used to aid student comprehension. However, a side benefit of the strategy is that it provides a valuable approach to test preparation, according to Dr. Taffy Raphael, originator of the strategy.

Although the strategy can be used throughout the reading process, when used specifically to improve test-taking skills, it is important to make the connection between the types of questions asked and how a student goes about finding the best answer to those questions. Frequently, students approach comprehension tests without a method for conquering the test format. In particular, they either run out of time or get frustrated because they are spending too much time searching needlessly for answers within the text. Therefore, it is helpful for students to understand that answers to some questions will not be found in the text.

Basically, questions can be answered by finding the answer “in the book” or “in my head.”

In the Book questions can be divided into two categories:

- **Right There:** The answer is usually found in a single sentence within the text. Often the words in the question are also in the text.

Examples:

- How many free throws did Shaquille O’Neal make in Thursday night’s game?
- What does the Q in QAR stand for?

- **Think and Search:** The answer is in the text, but might need to be combined with information found in more than one place.

Examples:

- Summarize the QAR reading strategy.
- Give the names of the two top scoring players in the basketball game.

In My Head questions can also be further subdivided into two categories:

- **On My Own:** These questions are less common on a standardized test because they do not require the student to use information from the text itself. On My Own questions are questions that can be answered without reading the text.

Examples:

- What makes a good basketball player?
- What’s the best strategy you have for improving student test scores?

- **Author and Me:** The answer can’t be found in the text, but you need to combine what you know with what you learned from the author.

Examples:

- Describe some advantages that might occur when students become familiar with the QAR strategy.
- In what ways is your high school basketball team similar to a professional basketball team?

QAR

B = Right There Questions

- The answer is right there in the text.
- The answer is found in one sentence within the text.

B+ = Think and Search

- The answer is in the text but probably not in one single place.
- In order to find the answer, students need to think and search in several parts of the article or text for the answer.
- Examples of think and search questions:
 - The details needed to solve a math story problem
 - Questions that state “according to the article...”
 - Questions that ask “what was NOT true according to the article...”

H = On My Own

- Answer is found in the reader’s own background knowledge.
- Reader did not even have to read the information in order to answer the question.

H+ = Author and Me

- The answer is found using the reader’s background knowledge combined with thinking skills and information gained from the text.
- While the answer is implied in the text, it won’t be found in a statement from the text. Students can’t find an Author and Me answer by going back and searching through the material or reading passage.
- Examples of author and me questions:
 - Author’s feeling, tone, purpose, reason for writing, etc.
 - Fact and opinion questions
 - Conclusion questions
 - Main idea questions
 - Vocabulary questions

Adapted from information provided by the Minnesota Reading Best Practice Network, 2001.

Steps for Teaching QAR

1. Select or create a short text to use as a model for introducing the strategy. Newspaper articles work well. Create a series of questions regarding the article. Make sure you use all types of questions: Right There, Think and Search, On My Own, Author and Me.
2. Go over the questions with the students before reading the text. If the questions are multiple choice, ask student to cover up the answers.
3. Students label each question. Easy labels include B (In the Book, Right There), B+ (In the Book, Think and Search), H (In My Head, On My Own), H+ (In My Head, Author and Me).
4. Before reading the article, discuss the labels the students created for the questions. Sometimes the categories may not be clear cut. It is not essential that all students come up with the same category. Sometimes a student will say he or she knew the answer; therefore, it’s an In My Head question, while another student may have labeled the question Think and Search.
5. Read the article and answer the questions.
6. Model the process several times with students before asking them to work in pairs or independently.
7. Encourage students to label questions on teacher-made tests and standardized tests.

QAR

While QAR is a strategy in and of itself, it requires students to utilize a variety of other strategies in order to find or come up with the best answers to questions.

QAR	Comprehensive Strategy
Right There	1. Scanning
Think & Search	1. Identifying important information 2. Summarizing 3. Comparing/contrasting 4. Skimming 5. Clarifying
On My Own	1. Connecting to the topic 2. Activating prior knowledge
Author & Me	1. Predicting 2. Visualizing 3. Making inferences 4. Making text to self connections 5. Making text to text connections

Why Use QAR?

Unfortunately, too often students approach tests with a handful of strategies that don't work well for them in a testing situation. Some of the strategies are inappropriate; others are poor coping habits that they've developed over the years:

1. Many students will think that they can guess their way through a multiple choice test. These students sometimes wonder, "How difficult could it be to pick the best one out of four?"
2. Students look for the words in the question that match the text. Sometimes it works; frequently this plan doesn't pay off.
3. Students assume that questions follow the order of the text. They think once they've found the first answer, the second will appear in the text chronologically, and so on.
4. While some test takers neglect to search the text for answers, others will go back to the text no matter what the question is. These students can be helped by the QAR process because the students will learn that not all answers can be found in one place.

If a student can figure out how to answer a question prior to reading the article, then the student can approach each question deliberately and with a plan in mind to achieve the answer.

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Vocabulary and Test Success

Standardized tests have as much to do with vocabulary as they do with content understanding. According to Kendra Wagner, Seattle Pacific University, vocabulary makes up 75 percent of comprehension. Wagner says if a student doesn't understand three to five words on any given page, comprehension is inhibited. If students don't understand the vocabulary of the question, they are unable to solve the problems. E.D. Hirsch contends that students need to know 90 percent of the words in any given format in order to comprehend the text.

Steps:

1. Instructors can help students conquer test vocabulary by preparing them for the words which frequently appear on tests. Several academic word lists are available, including the following:
 - The Academic Word List, compiled by Averil Coxhead in 2000, contains 10 subsets of commonly used academic words. The subsets are available at her website:
vuw.ac.nz/lals/research/awl/index.html
 - Jim Burke's Academic Vocabulary List is a listing of words which commonly appear in textbook (and test) directions. As Burke says, "You can't expect to succeed in assignments if you don't understand the directions":
englishcompanion.com/pdfDocs/acvocabulary2.pdf
2. Teach students the word associations and synonyms behind the words of Bloom's Taxonomy. These words frequently appear in standardized tests.
 - **Knowledge:** arrange, define, duplicate, label, list, memorize, name, order, recognize, relate, recall, repeat, reproduce, state
 - **Comprehension:** classify, describe, discuss, explain, express, identify, indicate, locate, recognize, report, restate, review, select, translate
 - **Application:** apply, choose, demonstrate, dramatize, employ, illustrate, interpret, operate, practice, schedule, sketch, solve, use, write
 - **Analysis:** analyze, appraise, calculate, categorize, compare, contrast, criticize, differentiate, discriminate, distinguish, examine, experiment, question, test
 - **Synthesis:** arrange, assemble, collect, compose, construct, create, design, develop, formulate, manage, organize, plan, prepare, propose, set up, write
 - **Evaluation:** appraise, argue, assess, attach, choose, compare, defend, estimate, judge, predict, rate, core, select, support, value, evaluate

Sources

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Teaching Today's Stress Buster's Guide

Glencoe's *Teaching Today* from Glencoe Online provides advice for breaking out of the clutches caused by test stress. The guide reminds readers that the body can experience good stress from positive situations. Positive stress can occur in an athlete participating in an exciting basketball game or flutist preparing to begin a music solo at a concert. Good stress causes the release of the hormone epinephrine. This hormone increases attention. However, when bad stress—during an argument with a close friend or getting ready to begin a test for which a student is unprepared—the hormone cortisol is released. This hormone causes negative emotions.

Teaching Today suggests that wise teachers help students feel good stress when approaching the challenges presented by testing situations.

Students can “harness the power of positive stress” by following these suggestions:

- **Be optimistic.** Imaging positive outcomes will allow you to see solutions you might have otherwise missed. For example: visualize the testing situation and see yourself acing the test.
- **Keep things in perspective.** Sometimes we overemphasize situations when we feel stressed. Remember, a test is just one indicator of learning.
- **Keep a sense of humor.** If approaching a task you would rather not do, try to make a game out of it. If the task is a test, be prepared with the test-taking strategies outlined in the booklet. In this case, the game would be using the strategies and skills you've learned to help you do your best on the test.
- **Make studying and school a priority.** When you feel confident in your learning, negative stress levels decrease.
- **Prepare for the day of the test.** Getting a good night's sleep, eating a nutritious breakfast, and even completing a few warm-up questions the day of the test will get you in the test-taking mindset.

Source

“High Stakes Testing.” *Teaching Today Online*. Glencoe/McGraw-Hill. 03 June 2005
glencoe.com/sec/teachingtoday/tiparchive.phtml/5

Yea or Nay/Why? Strategy

The Yea or Nay/Why reading strategy helps students develop a deeper understanding of the vocabulary words presented in their texts and/or lessons. The process requires students to create synonyms and to explain why the synonym is or is not an adequate definition for the word. By sharing synonyms with other classmates, students develop a deeper understanding of the vocabulary word.

While helpful in the presentation of content vocabulary, the strategy also helps students prepare for testing situations if teachers expose students to words which commonly appear on standardized tests (see Vocabulary and Test Success, page 18).

Steps:

1. Select content vocabulary and/or vocabulary words that frequently appear on tests.
2. Model strategy by writing questions or statements that use the selected vocabulary words.
3. Read the statements to the students and ask the students to answer Yea or Nay as to whether or not the words are being used correctly.
4. Select students to explain why the word is or isn't used correctly.
5. Practice with students working in pairs.
6. Practice with students working independently.

Example:

- If something is **significant**, is it **essential**?
- When the author **foreshadowed** the climax, she **summarized** the story.

Source

Bavis, Peter A. and Susan A. Lofton, "Instructional Strategies to Prepare Students for Standardized Tests."
ASCD Spring Conference: Orlando, April, 2005.

Tried and True Math Tactics

Standardized mathematics test items usually focus on the following areas:

- Computation and measurement skills
- Reasoning ability
- Number sense
- Problem solving

In preparing students for tests, it is helpful to emphasize higher-order thinking, investigations, and conceptual development. Scholastic provides the following tactics for teachers to follow while preparing students for standardized mathematics tests.

Steps:

1. **Make word problems a priority.**
 - Weave word problems into daily class routines.
 - Seek opportunities to present word problems in all class content areas.
 - Provide students with chances to create their own word problems.
 - Provide students with word problems presented in a format similar to those that they will find in testing formats.
2. **Stress number sense.**
 - Number sense provides students with the ability to judge whether or not their answers are reasonable within the context of the questions.
 - Build number sense by focusing on context, visualizing skills, and finding relationships.
3. **Focus on estimation.**
 - Students sometimes struggle with estimating because it feels like they are guessing; students want to find the right numbers so they will first work the problem for the correct answer and then round the answer.
4. **Emphasize mental math.**
 - Tap into a student's natural way of solving problems.
 - Personal strategies can help students tackle complex math problems.

Source

From "Tried and True Math Tactics" by Nell K. Duke and Ron Ritchhart. Published in NO PAIN, NO GAIN in teacher.scholastic.com. Copyright 2005 by Scholastic Inc. All rights reserved. Reproduced by permission.

Solving Word Problems

Austin Community College Library Services in Austin, Texas, suggests that test-takers ask themselves three questions when solving word problems:

1. What am I being asked to find?
2. What information do I need in order to find the answer?
3. What clues or information is given within the problem to help me solve it?

After working the problem, students should make sure they have covered all of the information that they were asked to find. The college test-taking center also says the following are characteristics of good problem solvers:

- **Positive attitude.** Good problem solvers believe problems can be resolved through careful analysis rather than fast answers.
- **Concern for accuracy.** Good problem solvers read a problem several times. They review judgments and conclusions, avoid guessing, and check their work.
- **Methodical planning.** Good problem solvers break work into small, manageable sections. They solve step-by-step, usually beginning with the simplest step.
- **Concentration.** Good problem solvers talk to themselves about what they are doing, create mental pictures, relate problems to familiar experiences, and sometimes draw pictures.

Source

"Solving Problems." *ABC Study Guides: Austin Community College Library Services*. 2002. 12 June 2005 library.austincc.edu/help/strategies/stratgy3.htm

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Wilde, Sandra. *Testing and Standards: A Brief Encyclopedia*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2002.

Websites to Explore

ACT Test Prep

www.actstudent.org/testprep/

“Assessment.” *Scholastic: Teachers’ Timely Topics*

teacher.scholastic.com/professional/assessment/indexbk.htm

***Brains Are Not Enough: A Guide to Effective Study Skills*, Harvard-Westlake School, Los Angeles, CA**

harvardwestlake.com/students/studyskills/index.html

***Communication Station*, Waunakee Community School District, Waunakee, WI**

waunakee.k12.wi.us/intermediate/test-taking.htm

***Learning Strategies*, Doug Bell, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT**

byu.edu/ccs/learning/strategy.php

***Nine Quick Learning Strategies for Success*, Roger A. Moore, NorQuest College, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada**

student.norquest.ca/onlinecourses/strategies/

***Standardized Test Prep*, Chicago Public Schools, Chicago, IL**

intranet.cps.k12.il.us/Assessments/Preparation/preparation.html

***Study Guides and Strategies* by Joe Landsberger, University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN**

studygs.net/

***Study Skills Help Page: Learning Strategies for Success*, Carolyn Hopper, Middle Tennessee State University, Mufreesboro, TN**

mtsu.edu/~studskl/teststrat.html

***Teaching Today*, Glencoe-McGraw Hill**

glencoe.com/sec/teachingtoday/weeklytips.phtml/62

***Test-Taking Skills*, Austin Community College, Austin, TX**

library.austincc.edu/help/testtake/



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