

Series: Powerful Best Reading Practices for Struggling Readers

Part 9: Preparing Struggling Readers for Achievement Tests

by Marie Carbo, EdD

With reading ranked as our top educational priority, it is important that our struggling readers improve quickly in reading, and also perform well on reading tests. For maximum reading gains, struggling readers need to spend most of their reading time listening to, reading, sharing, enjoying, and discussing stories and books—not preparing for reading tests (Allington, 2001; Anderson, 1996; Carbo, 2007; Krashen, 1993). Any test preparation, therefore, should be focused, brief and effective.

Strategies to Use at the Beginning of the School Year

Determine which reading objectives to teach. Analyze prior test results to determine your students' weakest areas. Look at the test objectives on which your students scored lowest. Should those objectives be re-taught? If the answer is yes, then those are the objectives that should be taught through the students' strengths, which for many struggling readers (and young children too) will be tactile and kinesthetic (Caine et al., 2005).

Teach with hands-on materials. Hands-on materials are a student-friendly way to teach test objectives. Tactile learners derive great benefit from practicing a specific skill with a tactile resource (see Figures 1, 2, and 3). After students master a skill with hands-on resources, they can work on the skill in the more difficult format of a worksheet or test booklet.

Simple response cards can also be an effective way to involve

students tactilely and kinesthetically. Suppose, for example, that students need to respond to test items with either a yes or no. Students could write a "Y" on one card with a marker and an "N" on another. When the teacher or a student answers a question about a story or passage, each student could hold up a "Y" or an "N" depending on whether they agree or disagree with the answer. A more complex version of this strategy is to divide a class into teams. Each team receives cards with numbered reading questions. The team then decides on the answer to the first question, with one team member responsible for holding up the answer. (The teams all show their answer to the first question at the same time.) The teams with the correct answer score a point. Next, the second question is discussed by each team, and the game continues.

Strategies to Use About One to Two Months Before Testing

Many struggling readers need to learn *how* to take tests. Here are some effective strategies to use.

Use Carbo recordings to familiarize students with reading passages. With permission from copyright holders, record passages from past tests, using a slightly slow pace so students can easily listen and follow along in the text a few times if needed. (Note: To hear and practice the correct pace for Carbo recordings, visit www.nrsi.com and click on "Sample Stories.") After students listen to a passage, they can choral read the passage

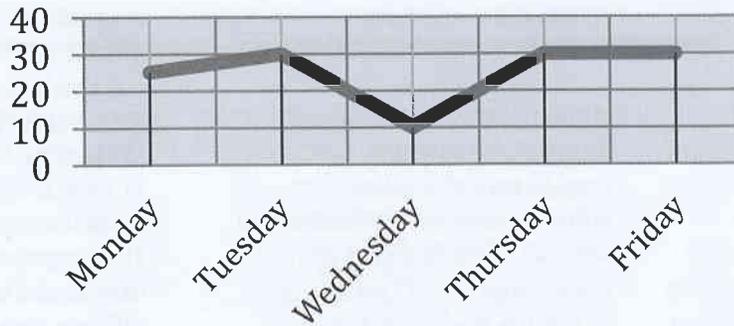
back in groups or read portions of the passage to a volunteer, teacher or peer. Use this strategy two to three times per week, for about 10 minutes each day. Begin with easy stories and move up to more difficult ones. This practice will help to familiarize students with the types of stories on the test, the language and vocabulary of the stories, the story lengths, and the levels of difficulty that they can expect.

Allow students to work in pairs.

To reduce stress, allow students to work in pairs as they answer the questions that follow the stories. Student pairs can discuss their answers, with teacher help provided along the way for items that they find difficult or confusing. (Note: It is *not recommended* to provide this kind of practice throughout the school year, unless students want to read these materials. Remember that struggling readers have made unusually high reading gains when they can read books and stories that they *want to read*.)

Use highlighters to increase comprehension. Begin by asking each student pair to read a sample passage. Then have each pair highlight the first question and the answer with the same color highlighting marker. The second question would be highlighted with a different color and the same procedure followed, and so on. If the answer to the question is not directly stated, the students do not highlight the answer. In this way, students can see that inferential questions do not have definite answers within the

Figure 1

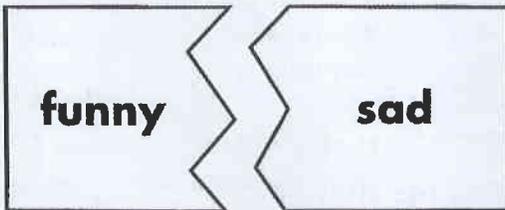


The fewest number of students were in class on:

- Monday
- Tuesday
- Wednesday
- Thursday
- Friday

Many functional questions involve interpreting graphs and charts.

Figure 2



Task cards can be used to provide practice with antonyms. Simple 5" x 8" cards can be cut to make the materials.

Figure 3

A woman in a spacesuit looked at the control board.

Board means:

- a wide, thin piece of wood
- to get on
- breakfast, lunch and dinner
- a place in a car, ship or plane used for a special purpose

The student pokes through the hole next to the answer with a pencil and self-checks on the back of the card.

passage. This strategy serves as an excellent reinforcement, because the highlighted answers seem to pop off the page.

About four weeks before testing, remove the highlighters and have students complete the activity without highlighters. Finally, about two weeks before the test, have students complete this work alone.

Prepare Students as Testing Time Nears

Introduce and use the language of the test. Skim through previous tests, reviewing with students any words they may not understand. Read directions to the students and discuss what the directions mean. Do this activity for about 10-15 minutes each day, if needed.

Practice sample test items. As the test approaches, provide students with worksheets that closely resemble the actual test. This type of practice does help students to become familiar with a particular test format, but it has little effect on how students perform on tests that are dissimilar to the one being practiced. This strategy should be used for very brief periods during the school day for a few weeks before the test.

Make students aware of the time allotted. Many students do not know how to use their time well. As the test nears, have students practice several test items within the confines of a specific amount of time. Place the time allotted on the board, and keep changing the amount of time remaining. Make students comfortable on testing days. Establish the environment and procedures that accommodate the reading styles

of struggling readers. If you are able, administer the test during the time of day when student energy is highest. Allow students healthy snacks, and pillows on their chairs, and seat students with high mobility needs in the back of the room so that they can stand and stretch as needed.

If you use these strategies, it is important to establish clear guidelines and rehearse routines. Students are likely to feel better, test better and appreciate the thoughtful accommodations.

Be Strategic When Preparing Struggling Readers for Tests

If time is used strategically, educators can prepare students to do well on reading tests *without* taking an inordinate amount of teaching time. Test preparation should be enjoyable and educationally sound. Some strategies are best used at the beginning of the school year; others can begin one or two months before the actual testing; and some are appropriate just a week or so prior to a test. When done well, the process of preparing students to take tests can improve voluntary reading and reading achievement.

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Dr. Marie Carbo is Founder and Executive Director of the National Reading Styles Institute (NRSI). Learn more at www.nrsi.com.

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