

Preparing Students in Writing Responses to Open-Ended Questions

The new 2015–2016 assessments written by Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium and the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers both heavily feature questions that require students to provide evidence for their reply. This is a dramatic departure from simple multiple-choice questions where student can guess the best response if they are unsure of the answer. What can teachers do to prepare students for this more rigorous form of testing? How can teachers help students pinpoint the heart of open-ended questions to give the best response?

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Suppose you are a student taking one of the new assessments that have been developed to measure attainment of the Common Core State Standards for the English Language Arts (CCSS/ELA). After reading a text about a baseball-loving girl and her grandmother, you look at the questions you are to answer. Here is what you see:

What does Naomi learn about Grandma Ruth? Use details from the text to support your answer. (*Grandma Ruth*, Smarter Balanced test sample)

This task is an example of the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium's (SBAC) tasks for grades 3–5. It is illustrative of a task format thousands of students will encounter when they take that assessment in the fall of 2014. It is also similar to a format found on the end-of-year assessment tasks used by the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC).

These tasks, open-ended questions as well as research simulations (often described as performance assessments), require students to construct their own responses rather than select them from a set of given possibilities. And, if you are a typical student, this assessment may be the first time that you have been required to respond to a task by doing little more than filling in a bubble. Needless to say, if you are a typical student, responding successfully to such a task might prove daunting.

A great deal has been written—and continues to be written almost daily—about implementing classroom instruction that promotes the

skills and knowledge called for in the CCSS/ELA. Less focus has been given, however, to addressing the additional skills and different kinds of knowledge that are called for to complete some of the tasks found on the new CCSS/ELA-related assessments.

The skills and knowledge that underlie understanding the expectations of and writing responses to higher-level questions are not simply test-taking abilities. Rather they are skills and dispositions that apply to both demonstrating achievement on the assessments and, more importantly, to effective information processing in the 21st century.

Focusing on open-ended tasks (future issues of *Text Matters* will address other types of tasks, such as research simulations), this issue of *Text Matters* identifies the skills and knowledge that students will need if they are to achieve success on the new CCSS/ELA-related assessments and offers ideas for ways that teachers can develop these skills and understandings. The three main goals of this article are:

- to describe how students need to approach the close reading of the questions, or tasks on the assessments;
- to identify the kinds of skills and knowledge students need in writing clear, comprehensible responses; and
- to examine issues related to fluency in writing and stamina that arise as students work with extended texts.

Applying Close Reading to Open-Ended Assessment Tasks

As of early 2014, most American students are not accustomed to writing extended responses for assessment questions. Rarely do state assessments (and even more rarely commercial publishers' norm-referenced tests) require students to write even a phrase or a sentence or two in response to questions, much less an entire paragraph. They might write answers to some questions in core reading materials. However, these answers are seldom extended and the questions do not yet reflect the "close reading" intent of the CCSS/ELA, which involves inspecting a text closely for evidence that supports responses. In many classrooms, students do little writing in response to their reading. Most often, they construct responses, usually orally, for an immediate audience (e.g., a small group or the entire class in a classroom setting). If a response misses the point of a text, the student gets immediate clarification and correction from the teacher or a peer.

On the CCSS/ELA-related assessment tasks, however, students will be reading texts on their own and writing responses for an audience that is remote. And, whereas students in a classroom setting get a second chance for a correct response as the teacher repeats a question in a class discussion or asks for greater clarification on a written report or essay, there is no such fallback for students who miss the intent of an open-ended test task. The lack of immediate feed-

back and guidance creates a major impediment to the ability of students to write responses that demonstrate what they comprehend from the text and provide support from the text for these responses.

In addition, when one examines student responses to open-ended tasks, it becomes apparent that many students also do not read the *questions* carefully, and their responses are off target or not sufficient.

Consider this example of a constructed-response question and what specifically it requires students to do:

What could you conclude about the author's bias? Provide two pieces of evidence from the text that support your conclusion.

Mistakes students are likely to make in answering this question have nothing to do with their comprehension of the stimulus text. Often these mistakes reflect lack of attention to the specifics of the task and lack of completeness in responding. Common mistakes that students make in their responses include the following:

- They provide only one piece of evidence from the text.
- They provide their own ideas, but no evidence from the text.
- They provide adequate evidence but no clearly stated conclusion.
- They fail to pay attention to the verbs in the questions.
- They do not make a clear connection between their conclusion and the evidence.
- They respond in an incomplete matter that is often difficult to understand.

The first three problems indicate that close reading is a skill applicable not only to how students must read the stimulus text, but also to how they must read a question and think about what it requires them to do.

Another mistake students often make as they read assessment tasks is the failure to pay attention to the verbs in the questions. For these open-ended tasks, the scoring guides are closely aligned with the verbs, and teachers must make sure students understand that there are differences among *explain*, *describe*, *list*, *summarize*, and *identify*. For example, a student response that *describes* a situation will not receive a full score if the assessment task asks the student to *explain* it. Some lessons on these verb differences and on how to respond to questions that contain each can help students in their careful reading of tasks and successful construction of responses. Students also need practice responding to questions with different verbs and discussing how their responses reflect the verbs' intent. This attention to understanding the verbs of questions is useful for almost all students, but it is critical for English language learners. The final two mistakes made by students in their responses, as noted above, are largely conceptual shortcomings that will be discussed in the following section.

One important note: It is crucial that teachers *directly* teach close reading of tasks. Students might be able to perform an assessment task but fail to demonstrate their ability because they misread the task. Moreover, attention to the specific requirements of tasks is not only

a skill but a critical disposition for success at school, at work, and even in personal pursuits such as sports and hobbies. Helping students recognize the importance of attention to task requirements in all aspects of their lives promotes the development of this disposition. Teachers can use games such as Simon Says to develop this ability with very young students. Keeping classroom discussions on topic or work groups on task can promote this disposition as students move across grades.

The new CCSS/ELA-related assessments contain a variety of open-ended tasks, in addition to the ones that have already been described. Table 1 lists ways in which students may fall short in their responses to particular kinds of tasks.

Students' faulty responses reflect a lack of experience with the types of tasks—tasks that require students to read closely and attend to the evidence in the text. To become competent at these tasks requires experience with such tasks and deliberate instruction of strategies and close reading of tasks. Three actions on the part of teachers will support students in developing the competence that will keep them on the road to college and career readiness:

1. Provide students with opportunities to respond to open-ended questions with connected discourse.
2. Read responses to open-ended questions as a class and discuss whether the responses actually describe, explain, support, etc. or are off task. This demonstrates the importance of close reading of questions and lays the founda-

tion for students' self-checking their own responses.

- Help students to develop the habit of checking answers, similar to checking an answer in math. Is this the type of answer the question requires? Does it make sense? Are all the required pieces here?

Writing Complete, Comprehensible Responses

Look again at the typical mistakes students make, such as those listed in Table 1. The related mistakes that students are likely to make in responding to the tasks reflect two major problems:

- Students write in an incomplete, difficult-to-understand manner, as if they were speaking to someone familiar rather than writing for a stranger or remote reader.
- Students do not make clear connections between their conclusions and the text evidence.

Teachers can help students avoid these problems by helping them to understand who their readers will

be and by demonstrating for them how to frame the responses in ways that make explicit connections between their ideas and information from the text.

Writing for Remote Readers

Writing for "remote readers" is a new experience for young students who are accustomed to sharing their writing with teachers and peers who can give feedback about clarity on the spot. Teachers need to help their students understand that as they write responses on a large-scale assessment, they are writing for readers who are unfamiliar with them personally and who will not available to ask for clarifications or to point out shortcomings of their writing. Indeed, students need to know that their responses might even be "read" and scored by a computer.

In addition, students, especially younger students, are not aware of the importance of providing clear indications of their thinking in their writing. During class discussions of text-related questions, students can ask for clarifications and have incomplete or vague responses cor-

rected. When writing answers for a stranger to read, clarity is essential. Showing students some unclear responses to questions and discussing how to fix them is one step in developing both their awareness of the need for clarity and their skill in providing it. Having them work in groups to improve the clarity of their own responses and those of peers is another approach that can help focus student attention on how to apply this skill.

Finally, prompting students to self-monitor by asking questions is an especially effective way to help them keep in mind the need for clarity as they write. A guiding checklist can provide them with hints such as the following:

- Can someone who is not sitting next to me understand my response without asking for clarification?
- Would the evidence from the text that I've chosen to support my response convince me?
- Is my response thorough and complete? Can I add details from the text to make it stronger?
- Does my response answer the question?

Table 1

Examples of Open-Ended Tasks and Mistakes Students Make with Them

Example of Task	Examples of Frequent Mistakes Made by Students
Give three reasons, based on details in the text, that Wolfgang thought he was doing the right thing.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students only give one or two text-based reasons without connecting them to Wolfgang's thinking. Students give their own ideas and do not use details from the text.
What is the main point the author is making in this article? Provide three details that make that point.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students provide details but do not state the main point. Students provide the main point but do not give details or give fewer than three details.
Tell which character you believe was the bravest and give evidence from the story that shows that the character was brave.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students name the character but give a vague rationale that is not based on text information. Students name a character and give details from the text, but the details do not support the choice.

Making Explicit Connections

Making connections between ideas in writing is a key aspect of clarity. As in the examples above, most CCSS/ELA-related assessment tasks ask students to give evidence from the text to support their responses. Examination of student work shows that those who are unfamiliar with this kind of test question commonly provide just a conclusion and list two details from the text. They seldom offer any information as to how these details support their conclusion.

Direct instruction and practice with both written and oral responses can develop students' skill in making connections explicit. The following are some practices and activities that teachers can use both to help students develop a model for thorough, complete answers and to learn about the aspects of their writing that trigger confusion in readers:

1. Provide opportunities for students to share feedback with each other on the quality of their responses. (This is a handy habit to develop for both college and career readiness.)
2. Encourage students to use applications such as Box or Dropbox set up for the classroom to provide responses to each others' written responses, compositions, and thoughts about class work. Students should reflect on the clarity of their own writing as well as provide peers with feedback.
3. Constantly provide opportunities for students to self-monitor their oral and written writing responses.

4. Conduct a bull's eye activity to guide student discussions about the quality of sample responses to questions (Kapinus, 2002). Using a target chart such as the one in Figure 1, teachers can explain that just as the target has different rings of difficulty, responses have different levels of completeness.

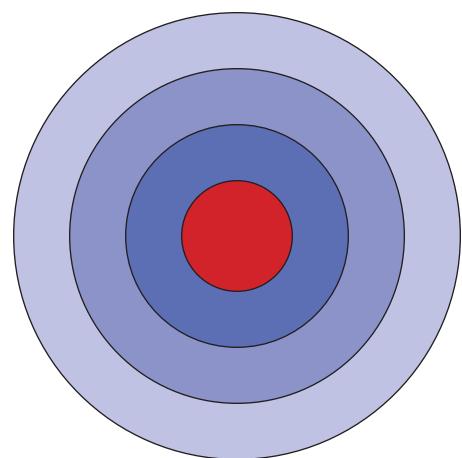
Developing Fluency and Stamina in Reading and Writing Extended Text

The constructed-response questions on the new assessments require students to produce thorough responses quickly. Although the assessments are not timed, the capacity of students to focus and stay on task automatically limits the time that they can spend responding. This means students need to be able to respond relatively quickly while being thoughtful and clear. This is a tall order. The importance of being clear has been addressed above. The ability to respond quickly with thorough writing requires separate attention on developing the required "cognitive muscles" involved in fluent writing.

One approach to accomplish this is simply to have students write frequently in response to classroom activities, including reading sessions, media presentations, and discussions. Teachers should lead students to examine such writing and to discuss it in terms of clarity, focus on task, and use of information from the connected activity.

Teachers also need to make the criteria for acceptable written re-

Figure 1
Bull's Eye Chart



- Response contains some ideas from the passage related to the question but not really an answer.
- Response contains ideas that barely answer the question.
- Response contains ideas that answer the question and give support from the passage.
- Response is a very thoughtful, thorough answer with complete ideas and support.

sponses clear and apply them often to student writing, as well as having students use the criteria to monitor their own writing. Remember, the goal is not just to have students write but to have them write clearly and fluently. Here is one possible rubric that can be used to gauge how well students manage this:

- Did this response answer the question or focus on the task?
- Is the response complete? Is there anything else that could be added to make it stronger?
- Are there specific references to parts of the text or classroom activity?

For self-monitoring, teachers might provide these questions for

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students to answer as they evaluate their own work:

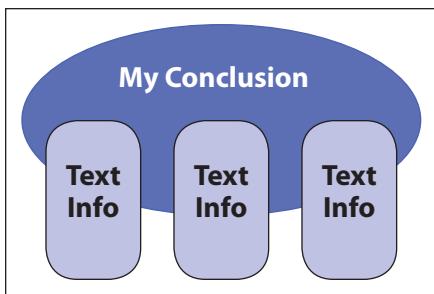
- What strategies did I use to develop my answer?
- How easy or hard was it for me to complete this task/response? Why?

Again, it is important to give students time to evaluate their own responses, those of other students, and work as a class on sample responses. Conversations about the content of the writing pieces as well as the strategies used to produce them can provide students with crucial insights into the unique genre of open-ended question responses.

Another way teachers can help students to develop fluency in writing responses is the use of response logs for literature and learning logs with textbooks and classroom activities. The use of logs or journals has been around for many years, but the strategy needs to be adapted to prepare students for the new assessments. For example, students should be prompted to focus closely on identifying and including specific details from texts read, class presentations, and discussions to support their ideas in responses.

Figure 2

Example of a Simple Graphic Organizer for Main Point and Supporting Ideas



Some possible questions teachers might ask to keep their students focused as they prepare their logs include:

- What is the author's main point and how does he/she support it?
- How does the information you gained today connect with what you knew/learned before?
- What is confusing about the information you covered? Why is it confusing?
- What is your opinion of this author, character, text? Give specific support from the text.
- What do you predict will come next? Provide support from the text for your prediction.
- What was especially noteworthy or important in what you read, saw, heard today? Why? Give specific details.

Students can use highlighters to indicate where in their journals they provide support for their responses. This also will help them develop the habit of rereading what they have written for completeness.

Helping Students to Organize Ideas Quickly

Some constructed-response tasks require students to gather and organize information from more than one source and to present that information clearly. Very simple graphic organizers can help students with this strategy (Figures 2 and 3 show some basic examples). Teachers should discuss with students which types of organizers work for which tasks and why, explaining that the organizers function like training wheels on a bicycle, and that students will not need them once they develop proficiency and facility with the thinking un-

Figure 3

Example of a Simple Graphic Organizer for Comparisons

How Are Characters, Ideas, Problems, etc. Alike?

Heidi's Reactions

George's Reactions

derlying the organizers. As specific organizers are taught and applied, students can keep models in their logs or on a set of index cards for easy referral when performing their classroom writing tasks.

Older students who compose on computers and tablets can find graphic organizers in their word-processing programs. Taking time to point them out and encouraging students to use them is sound preparation not just for completing the open-ended tasks on the new assessments, but also for their everyday writing.

Helping Students to Develop Stamina

To respond to items on both the summative assessments and performance tasks, students need to maintain focus as they read long, complex texts and write extended responses and compositions. This means that they must develop stamina, or staying power (see Hiebert, 2014, for a full discussion of stamina). To achieve this, they must participate in many classroom activities that demand focus and maintenance of effort over time. A class in which students read or write for an entire half hour is not wasted time but time spent build-

ing students' cognitive muscles. Teachers can use this time to serve as coaches and monitors, helping students stay on task, maneuver over rough places, or get moving again after stalling. For these activities, guiding questions that help students monitor their efforts and self-correct especially need to be part of teachers' tool kits.

Encouraging students to read more outside of class and to keep response logs can also help them develop stamina. Younger students might benefit from keeping a chart of how long they read at home at least three nights a week.

Conclusion: Turning Response Skills into Habits

The skills and knowledge discussed in this issue of *Text Matters* are essential for success in college, career, and everyday life (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2006). Anyone given an assignment, whether at school or at work, will not succeed if she or he does not comprehend the task and complete it as instructed. These proficiencies involve the critical thinking and management skills that allow individuals to be successful in college, careers, and communities.

In addition, the pervasive use of electronic media by students to participate in online college courses and to interact socially, and by business people to communicate with remote colleagues and clients, makes the use of clear, easy-to-understand writing crucial. And, faced with the glut of information—and misinformation—available

through the Internet, it is equally crucial to be able to back up claims with specific information from reliable sources—and to recognize when others have not done so.

Consequently, providing students with the skills and knowledge needed for success on the CCSS/ELA-related assessments also provides them with key tools they will need for success throughout their lives.^T^M

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Other Resources

