

The Importance of Vocabulary on 3rd and 4th Grade Standardized Tests

Words are our tools to communicate with others, as well as explore and analyze the world around us. Therefore, it stands to reason that children with a limited vocabulary will be handicapped in their educational progress. The most obvious effect of an underdeveloped vocabulary will be seen in **poor reading comprehension**, as children struggle to extract meaning from reading passages.

Well-developed vocabulary and reading comprehension skills are **central to success on the standardized tests** used in most states, with—in many cases—students' promotion to higher grades directly at stake. Vocabulary appears in two main ways:

- 1) Reading questions that directly test vocabulary
- 2) Comprehension questions that require strong vocabulary knowledge.

This document gives an overview of the importance of vocabulary to some of the most widely used standardized tests of reading, including:

- National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)
- California Standards Test – English-Language Arts
- Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT3)
- New York English Language Arts
- Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT)
- Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS)

The following pages include excerpts from publicly available samples of test passages. While not a comprehensive overview of all state tests, these examples clearly show the importance of vocabulary skills to success on 3rd and 4th grade standardized tests of reading.



NAEP Reading Assessment and Vocabulary

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) measures the achievement of students nationwide in reading, based on the latest scientific research. From the table below, we can see the **critical importance of vocabulary** to many different elements of text knowledge and comprehension tested by NAEP:

Aspect of Reading				
Element of Literary Text	Forming a General Understanding	Developing Interpretation	Making Reader/Text Connections	Examining Content and Structure
	Which words describe what the story is mostly about? Use evidence from the text to support your response.	Which words let you know that time has gone by? Explain with evidence from the story.	Explain the double meaning of _____. Tell which meaning better explains the major ideas in the passage.	Why does the author use the words _____ to describe how _____ feels?
		Which words do you think mean the same as the title? Tell why you think so.		Why did the author give a definition of _____ in paragraph 2?
		Use the context to tell the meaning of _____.	Explain why the phrase _____ is useful in these directions.	Why does the author use the words _____ to present the last step of the directions?

The following page gives a specific example from a Grade 4 NAEP reading passage.



Sample Reading Passage From The NAEP Reading Assessment

Grade 4 Sample Reading Passage: Literary

HUNGRY SPIDER AND THE TURTLE

(Description of Story)*

"Hungry Spider and the Turtle" is a West African folktale that humorously depicts hunger and the custom of hospitality through the actions and conversations of the title characters.

Spider and Turtle live in different countries. They first meet when Turtle, famished from traveling a long way from home, comes upon Spider's house. While Spider is well known among his neighbors for his great appetite and his greediness, Turtle, being a stranger, believes Spider's offer of a meal to be sincere. It becomes clear that Spider wants all the food for himself and that his gesture of hospitality is merely show so that people will not speak badly of him. Turtle realizes that he has been tricked out of having any food but doesn't let on that he knows. He suavely concurs with Spider that it was a fine meal; and as Turtle leaves, he assures Spider of similar hospitality if Spider ever visits in his country.

In time, the gluttonous Spider finds himself a long way from home in Turtle's country. Now it is Turtle's turn to use local custom as a camouflage for true intent. He repays Spider's gesture of hospitality, and Spider gets the meal that he deserves.

* We did not receive copyright approval to put the actual text from the student booklet on the Web site. The full text can be found in Harold Courlander, "Hungry Spider and the Turtle," from *The Cow-Tail Switch & Other West African Stories*. Copyright © 1987 by Henry Holt and Company, Inc.

Questions for "Hungry Spider and the Turtle"

1. Why did Spider invite Turtle to share his food?

- a. To amuse himself
- b. To be kind and helpful
- c. To have company at dinner
- d. To appear generous

Appears in Text Talk, Level A

Appears in Text Talk, Level C

3. Which best describes Spider's character?

- a. Patient
- b. Friendly
- c. Selfish
- d. Angry

Appears in Text Talk, Level K



California Standards Test and Vocabulary

The English-Language Arts Standards Test is administered as part of the Standardized Testing and Reporting (STAR) Program under policies set by the California State Board of Education. California uses the CAT/6, which is the latest edition of the Terra Nova. From the table below, we can see the **critical importance of vocabulary** to the strands/reporting clusters administered on the Grade 3 exam:

Strand/Reporting Cluster	Number of Questions on Exam
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Word Analysis • Reading Comprehension • Literary Response & Analysis • Writing Strategies • Written Conventions 	20 (30% of total) 15 8 9 13 Total = 65

The vocabulary and comprehension skills tested in Grade 3 include:

- **3RW1.4 Vocabulary and Concept Development:** Use knowledge of antonyms, synonyms, homophones, and homographs to determine the meanings of words.
- **3RW1.5 Vocabulary and Concept Development:** Demonstrate knowledge of levels of specificity among grade-appropriate words and explain the importance of these relations (e.g., dog/mammal, animal/living things).
- **3RW1.6 Vocabulary and Concept Development:** Use sentence and word context to find the meaning of unknown words.
- **3RW1.7 Vocabulary and Concept Development:** Use a dictionary to learn the meaning and other features of unknown words.
- **3RW1.8 Vocabulary and Concept Development:** Use knowledge of prefixes (e.g., un-, re-, pre-, bi-, mis-, dis-) and suffixes (e.g., -er, -est, -ful) to determine the meaning of words.



**Sample Reading Passage
From California Standards Test**

CALIFORNIA STANDARDS TEST GRADE

Released Test Questions English-Language Arts **3**


Monkey Looks for Trouble

1 One fine day in Trinidad, an island in the West Indies, a woman walked along the road. From high in his treetop, Monkey watched her. He saw the large clay pot she was carrying. How alarmed he was when she tripped over a stone and dropped the pot! It broke into many pieces. It had been full of fluffy white cakes that scattered on the road.

2 "Oh, boy, have I ever got trouble now! I have so much trouble!" exclaimed the lady. She tried to gather the cakes in her colorful skirts, but they kept spilling out. Soon she gave up and left.

3 Monkey scurried down the tree trunk to the ground. "These are trouble!" he muttered to himself. "I will taste this trouble, for it looks quite delicious." The cakes were coconut cakes, and they were indeed delicious. Monkey ate every one of them.

4 "I must find more trouble! I must find more trouble!" said Monkey. Off to the market he went, skittering down the road on his quick little feet.



This is a sample of California Standards Test questions. This is NOT an operational test form. Test scores cannot be projected based on performance on released test questions. Copyright © 2004 California Department of Education.

1 Read this sentence from the story.

Off to the market he went, **skittering** down the road on his quick little feet.

What does the word **skittering** mean in this sentence?

- A running
- B dragging
- C driving
- D crawling

In addition, this test includes vocabulary items that are NOT related to reading passages, such as the following:

12. Which word is an ANTONYM for slow?

- A noisy
- B dull
- C easy
- D quick



Illinois Standards Achievement Test (ISAT3) and Vocabulary

Illinois tests reading using the ISAT3 beginning in grade 3. The breakdown of questions shows that vocabulary skills are essential to succeeding on this standardized reading test:

	Grade 3	Grade 4
State Goal 1—Reading	70%	70%
Standard 1A—Vocabulary Development	14%	14%
Words in Isolation	7%	7%
Words in Context	7%	7%

The following pages include samples from the ISAT3 released items.



Sample Vocabulary Items From ISAT3

The following sample questions are typical of those that follow a reading comprehension passage. In this example, the passage provided was a nonfiction passage about a veterinarian:

Q. What is the name for a doctor that helps sick animals?

- A gardener
- An architect
- A fisherman
- A veterinarian

Q. Dr. Keller often heals sores. Which is most like a sore?

- A bruise
- A bandage
- A tooth
- A muscle

The following sample questions test vocabulary knowledge in isolation. These questions are typical of those that do not follow a reading passage:

Q. What does unable mean?

- very able
- too able
- not able
- almost able

Q. What is the root of the word shortage?

- or
- age
- short
- tag



New York State Testing Program and Vocabulary

The Grade 4 English Language Arts test contains multiple-choice questions based on brief reading passages and performance assessment items. They measure students' attainment of skills such as:

- understanding story events
- drawing conclusions
- making predictions
- identifying the main idea
- using vocabulary strategies
- identifying supporting details
- identifying point of view
- evaluating ideas
- understanding features that distinguish genres
- using figurative language to interpret text.



Sample Reading Passage
From New York English Language Arts Test

Directions
Read this article about bears. Then do Numbers 6 through 11.

THE BEAR ESSENTIALS

by Mary Quigley

essentials = basic facts

Daryl Ratajczak works at the Appalachian Bear Center in the Great Smoky Mountains of Tennessee. In this interview, he talks about how he got interested in bears and how the center helps bears.

Interviewer: You know bears. What are they really like?


ferocious = fierce, like a wild beast

Daryl: Black bears are not the ferocious animals that many people portray them to be. In fact, a wild bear is almost always more afraid of you than you are of it. However, bears are very strong and can hurt you if you get too close to them, so never approach a bear at any time, especially if it is a cub or a mother with cubs!

Interviewer: How did you decide to help bears?

Daryl: As I was growing up, my dad used to take me camping every summer and fall. We saw lots of animals, from the tiniest mouse to the biggest bear. It was then that I discovered that I truly love animals.

The Appalachian Bear Center rescues bears and helps return them to the wild. But, as Daryl points out, until the bears go home, the center has to feed them.



Go On

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Session 1

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10 According to the definition given in the article, which of the following words is the opposite of ferocious?

- F** gentle
- G** strong
- H** hungry
- J** dangerous



Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) and Vocabulary

The FCAT incorporates questions from the SAT 9 test. The following sample items show that the standards and items tested require a strong base in vocabulary:

Passage 1: Fiction

1. Identifying synonyms

Passage 2: Nonfiction

9. Using context to identify word or phrase meaning

13. Using context to identify word or phrase meaning

Passage 5: Nonfiction

30. Understanding phrases

Passage 6: Poem

34. Using context to derive word meaning

The vocabulary items on the FCAT include synonyms, multiple meaning words, and words in context. The multiple meaning words items are unusual in that the student has to read a sentence with an underlined word and then choose which of four other sentences uses the word in the same way.

See the next page for sample items from the publicly-available FCAT Reading Sample Test Book for Grade 3.



Sample Reading Passage
From FCAT



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FCAT Reading Sample Test Book

SAMPLE **3**

"That's what my brother always says," Jamaica said. She started to repair the castle. Then she thought, but I don't like my brother to say that. It hurts my feelings.

Jamaica **smoothed** the wall. "See, Berto, like that. You can help me make a bigger castle if you're very careful."

The word smooth is covered in Text Talk Level A



- 6 How does Jamaica show that she has changed her mind about letting Berto play with her?
- Ⓐ Jamaica looks to see if Berto is still nearby.
 - Ⓑ Jamaica tells Berto not to mess up the castle.
 - Ⓒ Jamaica shows Berto how to **smooth** a wet wall of sand.
 - Ⓓ Jamaica stops swinging when Berto walks in front of her.

Robust word that could cause problems for children without explicit vocabulary instruction in their curriculum

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Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) and Vocabulary

The TAKS assessment maps items on the reading test to state standards. The vocabulary and comprehension skills tested include the following objective which is linked to the corresponding state standard:

(3.8) Reading/vocabulary development.

The student develops an extensive vocabulary.

(C) use resources and references such as beginners' dictionaries, glossaries, available technology, and context to build word meanings and to confirm pronunciations of words

(D) demonstrate knowledge of synonyms, antonyms, and multi-meaning words (for example, by sorting, classifying, and identifying related words)

On the FCAT, only vocabulary words that appear in a passage are tested. Students are expected to use context as well as other strategies like synonyms, antonyms, prefix, root, or suffix identification to derive word meaning. Students may also be asked to use a dictionary entry or explain the context clues they used to derive the meaning of a word.



Sample Reading Passage From TAKS 2004

Excerpts from the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, Grade 3, 2003
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Excerpt 1

Little Helpers

5. Mr. and Mrs. Burleson got the idea for guide horses during a trip to New York City. While riding in a carriage pulled by large horses, they saw how calm the horses were in the noisy city traffic. The horses stayed quiet and calm even when everything around them was noisy and **chaotic**. The horses also knew where to go without much direction from the driver. The horses seemed to be natural guide animals.

21. Which word from paragraph 5 means the opposite of chaotic?

- calm
 knew
 large
 natural

Knowledge of this robust word is essential to answer the above question

Excerpt 2

Lucy and the Chickens

3. The next morning Dad went to town to get a part to fix the tractor. Mom was talking on the phone to Grandma. All by herself Lucy swept the front porch. She put water in the dog's bowl. By noon the bright sun was shining overhead. Lucy felt thirsty after doing her chores outside.
4. Lucy went inside the house. She heard her mother still talking to Grandma. Lucy got a cool drink of water. Then she went back outside and **admired** the flower garden. "I'd better water the flowers," Lucy said to herself. "They're probably thirsty."
5. After watering the flowers, Lucy glanced toward the henhouse. "I should give the chickens some water. They're probably thirsty, too."
6. Lucy filled a big bucket with water. She could barely lift it. She tried dragging the bucket, but the water **sloshed** out.

Robust words that could cause serious problems for children without explicit vocabulary instruction in their curriculum



Sample Vocabulary Questions From TAKS 2004

S-1 In paragraph 1, which word helps the reader know what the word drooped means?

- proud
- floppy
- young
- different

1. Which word best describes St. Martin?

- --Strong
- --Worried
- --Caring
- --Upset

7. In paragraph 16, the word matted means—

- --curled
- --long
- --tangled
- --soft

33. Which words from paragraph 2 help the reader know what layer means?

- --top part of the ground
- --for so long
- --decided to go
- --the rain finally stopped

