5 Ways to Help Your Students Succeed on the PARCC and SBAC ELA Assessments

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Introduction

This school year (2014-15) is the first year of full implementation of the new PARCC and SBAC English language arts assessments (and the states not participating in one of those consortia will have their own, similar test.) To get students ready, teachers can of course give practice tests. However, there are also some things that teachers can do throughout the year to give students the necessary skills to succeed. Here are five recommendations:

1. Always require students to cite evidence from a text, not only in writing but also in discussions.
2. Revamp your reading check quizzes and unit tests to teach comprehension rather than recall.
3. Use performance tasks regularly instead of isolated or opinion-based prompts.
4. Stress and model academic vocabulary throughout your lessons.
5. Teach students to be thorough and follow directions.

When you incorporate those five things into your teaching, you will be preparing students for the exam in a more meaningful way, rather than having to cram in test-prep for test-prep’s sake.

Always require students to cite evidence from a text, not only in writing but also in discussions

The Common Core heavily emphasizes text-based evidence, and that is reflected in the PARCC and SBAC test items. On those assessments, when students are asked questions about a passage, they are asked to use details from the text to support their answer. Sometimes they’re asked to click sentences from a paragraph that support their answer. Sometimes they’re asked to highlight the sentences or drag them into a box. Students might be asked to show evidence in different ways, but the fact of the matter is that they’re always required to show it.

So how do you teach students to get better at this? In addition to requiring evidence in your writing assignments and tests, you should also make it part of your class discussions. If students are discussing an article or story, you could have them number the paragraphs so that when it’s their turn to answer a question, they can easily tell you and their classmates where they got their evidence. If you’re teaching a novel, use page numbers. Make it so that it becomes automatic for students to cite, cite, cite.

Also teach students to read closely and annotate the text so that they become readers who spot details and can more easily point to the evidence when asked. In Close Reading in Elementary School, Sisson and Sisson remind us that it doesn’t always come naturally to students to notice evidence. For example, if you’re teaching students to describe a character using details from the text, they will find the obvious clues, such as if a character is described as a bully, but they might not pay attention to the more subtle details. You have to train students to notice the clues. Sisson and Sisson suggest having students annotate the text using different codes. For example, students could use a star for what a character thinks of another character, a heart for what a character feels, an eye for how a character looks, and so on. This will train students to notice...
evidence that they will then be able to point to when asked questions about characters (Sisson and Sisson, p. 79).

Another way the assessments require text-based evidence is by asking about the meaning of unknown words. They ask students to state what clues in the text helped them figure out a word’s meaning. However, as Lori Wilfong points out in *Vocabulary Strategies That Work*, telling students to “use context” can be meaningless (p. 57). We need to explicitly teach different kinds of context clues such as synonyms, antonyms, definition/explanation, and so on. This will help students understand what the context is telling them about the word’s meaning.

Revamp your reading check quizzes and unit tests to teach comprehension rather than recall

A common teaching practice is to teach a novel, give some quizzes on it along the way, and then give a test on it. As Amy Benjamin points out in *Focus on Text*, the problem with this approach is that students usually have notes and study guides, so all they’re showing back on the test is if they can spit back what the teacher gave them, not if they have developed comprehension skills (p. 33). A more effective approach is to ask questions that check how well students understood the characters and themes, not how well they memorized minor details. This will help prepare students for the Common Core assessments, where they will be presented with new passages that they haven’t seen before and will have to apply their comprehension skills to these new texts. Following are some recommendations from Benjamin on revamping your quizzes.

### Guidelines for Creating Reading Check Assessments Aligned to the Common Core

1. Do not ask questions that could be answered by reading a synopsis rather than the text.
2. Do ask questions that involve recall of a detail that is mentioned more than once, or that is described in vivid detail.
3. Do not ask questions that require recall of a single detail that was mentioned only once.
4. Do ask questions that involve dialogue and exact quotations by a character. Attentive readers can identify what characters said and did not say.
5. Do ask questions about what characters say about each other.
6. Do ask questions about physical things, especially hand-held items, referred to in the text.

(Benjamin, *Focus on Text*, p. 33)
In addition to quizzing students along the way, you may want to consider doing cold reading tests. As Benjamin points out, reading check quizzes and unit tests assess how well you know a novel but not whether you’re growing as a reader. For the latter, you need students to do a cold reading to see if they can apply what they’ve learned. “The only way to determine if students have become better readers is to measure their growth in comprehension on comparable text, not on the same text that has already been sliced and diced for them” (Benjamin, p. 36).

When you assess reading throughout the year, make sure you’re helping students grow so that they’re prepared to handle whatever passages are thrown their way on the Common Core assessments.

**Use performance tasks regularly rather than isolated or opinion-based prompts**

Performance-based tasks were widely used years ago, and now they are popular once again since they’re considered an effective way to measure the high-level thinking required by the standards. The authors of the Common Core include performance task examples in Appendix B, www.corestandards.org/assets/Appendix_B.pdf

Simply defined, performance-based tasks are prompts that ask students to write a response (or, less often, give a presentation) in which they synthesize information and demonstrate understanding of multiple standards. Here is further explanation from SBAC:

**Performance tasks** measure a student’s ability to integrate knowledge and skills across multiple standards—a key component of college and career readiness. Performance tasks will be used to better measure capacities such as depth of understanding, research skills, and complex analysis, which cannot be adequately assessed with selected- or constructed-response items. (www.smarterbalanced.org/sample-items-and-performance-tasks)

As touched on in that definition, a performance task is different from a typical constructed-response item in which students are asked a more isolated question about a passage. Constructed-response items are fine to use, but it’s important to know how they differ from performance tasks and make sure you’re using both in your teaching. Constructed-response items usually ask students about one target skill. With performance tasks, students have to integrate information and skills to create new knowledge. (Note that PARCC, unlike SBAC, doesn’t seem to differentiate between the terms; they refer to their performance tasks as constructed-response items. But regardless of what they are called, the items are written like high-level performance tasks.)

Here are some examples of performance tasks from the spring practice test releases. Notice how they ask students to integrate skills and information.

From the SBAC 7th grade practice test released in May 2014:

[Students read three articles and answer questions.] Now that you have completed research on the topic of sleep, the journalism club advisor has asked you to write an explanatory article about sleep and naps for the next issue of
the school newspaper. The audience for your article will be other students, teachers, and parents.

Using more than one source, develop a thesis/controlling idea to explain about sleep and naps. Once you have a thesis/controlling idea, select the most relevant information from more than one source to support your thesis/controlling idea. Then, write a multi-paragraph explanatory article explaining your thesis/controlling idea. Clearly organize your article and elaborate your ideas. Be sure to reference the source title or number when quoting or paraphrasing details or facts from the sources.

From the PARCC 7th grade practice test released in spring 2014:

You have learned about electricity by reading two articles, “Energy Story” and “Conducting Solutions,” and viewing a video clip titled “Hands-on Science with Squishy Circuits.”

In an essay, compare the purposes of the three sources. Then analyze how each source uses explanations, demonstrations, or descriptions of experiments to help accomplish its purpose. Be sure to discuss important differences and similarities between the information gained from the video and the information provided in the articles. Support your response with evidence from each source.

These performance tasks require high-level thinking and shouldn’t come as a surprise to students at the end of a unit or the end of a year. Try asking questions like this more often as students read literary and informational texts in your class, so that it becomes more natural for students to synthesize, integrate, and create information.

Stress and model academic vocabulary throughout your lessons

If performance tasks and other test items are asking students to compare, synthesize, cite, etc., we need to make sure students actually understand what those words mean. It’s important not to assume knowledge just because those are high-frequency words. We need to explicitly teach academic vocabulary. For example, have students look at shades of meanings of words such as cite and quote. They can discuss the differences and draw a sketch for each or even use the words to write their own test questions.

Besides explicitly teaching academic words, teachers can become more aware of their own classroom talk and whether it uses precise academic language. For example, instead of asking students “What do you think?” ask “What conclusions do you come to?” (Wilfong, p. 119).
Teach students to be thorough and follow directions

The *Education Week* article, “4th Graders Struggle with Icons, Directions on Computer-Based Tests,” reports the results of a study by the National Center for Education Statistics. According to that study, students who took a computer-based writing assessment “did well with adjusting the volume, pressing the ‘play’ button, scrolling, and understanding the timer.” However, “most students skipped the directions telling them how to adjust their computer screens. They did not spend time reading the general instructions, either. One in six students could not figure out how to use the zoom.” The more obvious conclusion we can draw from that is that students need practice with computer-based icons. However, the fact that students simply did not read the directions is also noteworthy. Help students learn why it is so important to follow directions, and help them learn to be thorough. Make it a requirement on everything you teach. Show them examples of how not following directions exactly could cause them to completely misunderstand how to take a test, follow a recipe, and so on.

Conclusion

By requiring students to use text-based evidence, revamping your quizzes, using performance-based tasks more often, teaching academic vocabulary, and teaching students to follow directions, you will be preparing them for the kind of work they will need to do on the PARCC and SBAC assessments. You’ll naturally be weaving those skills into your lessons rather than having to focus on practice test after practice test. After all, our goal is to teach and assess comprehension and critical thinking, not how well students can pass a test.

References

Benjamin, Amy (2014). *Focus on text: Tackling the Common Core Reading Standards, Grades 4-8*. New York: Routledge.


PARCC website and practice test release: http://www.parcconline.org/practice-tests

SBAC website and spring practice test release: www.smarterbalanced.org/sample-items-and-performance-tasks
