

## 3-8 Testing Program Questions and Answers

### General Questions about the State Tests

**1. Do the tests measure the Common Core Learning Standards?**

Yes. All Grade 3-8 testing questions measure the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS). To guide test developers and help educators understand the Common Core, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) released all Grade 3-8 English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics test design specifications, passage-selection criteria, and item review criteria. Each of these documents was developed with direct guidance from New York State educators, the authors of the Common Core, and other national Common Core experts.

NYSED is confident that the questions on the 2014 tests measure the Common Core according to published New York test design specifications and national consensus. New York measures the Common Core in ways comparable to the two national test consortia, Partnership for Assessment of Readiness of College and Careers (PARCC) and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortia (SBAC) and consistent with the guidance from Achieve, Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), Council of Great City Schools, National Association of State Boards of Education, National Governors Association, and other national organizations. All of New York's 2014 Grades 3-8 ELA and Mathematics test questions have been thoroughly evaluated by independent reviewers. These content and measurement experts, including New York State educators, nationally recognized content experts and professional evaluators (HumRRO) have consistently found that the items on the tests measure the Common Core with fidelity and are fair measures of student achievement.

For more information about how questions are designed and reviewed to ensure accurate and fair measurement of the Common Core, please see <http://www.engageny.org/resource/common-core-assessment-design>

**2. Do Common Core tests require excessive or rote standardized test preparation?**

No. NYSED discourages rote standardized test preparation, which takes time away from learning. The best preparation for testing is good teaching.

**3. Did NYSED take feedback from last year to change this year's tests?**

Yes. In response to last year's feedback, NYSED changed the ELA Day 2 book structure, reduced the number of questions, and reduced test time.

NYSED provides opportunities for anyone to share feedback on state tests through our department email mailbox ([EMSCASSESSINFO@MAIL.NYSED.GOV](mailto:EMSCASSESSINFO@MAIL.NYSED.GOV)) and phone lines (<http://www.p12.nysed.gov/assessment/contact-osa.html>).

**4. Why can't all the items be released? Why do New York State educators need to maintain test security?**

In 2013, 25% of the actual test questions were released in the summer. This summer, we plan to release significantly more questions from the 2014 tests. Questions remain secure for most testing programs (SAT, AP, LSAT, MCAT, K12 state tests, certification tests, etc.). This is to ensure fairness. The test scores would not mean the same for all students if some students received narrow test prep on test questions ahead of time and others did not receive such test prep. In addition, effective teachers focus not on individual questions and the way a particular question happens to measure a standard, but rather on the learning standards that the questions measure. Questions measure the standards in a variety of ways; a focus on specific questions is an artificial and unnecessary narrowing of what we value in student learning, and prepares students to think about a standard in one small way.

It takes about two years to write, review many times, field test and review again a question before it is used on a test for scoring purposes. NYSED's request of the legislature for additional funds to increase the number of test forms and support the release of more test questions was not funded in this year's budget. New York is unique among all states in that we print and distribute all of our own testing forms. Due to our capacity constraints, we can only have four versions of a test. Most states our size have 25 – 40 versions. The more versions of a test, the more flexibility the state has in administering field test questions and linking questions, and releasing questions after the test.

**5. Since questions must be kept confidential, how do educators and parents know what the test will be like?**

NYSED has been transparent about the Common Core assessments. Starting in June 2012, we posted sample questions to show how the standards would be measured (<http://www.engageny.org/resource/new-york-state-common-core-sample-questions>).

In Fall 2012, we provided grade-specific test guides that articulated specifically how the shifts in instruction would be assessed (<http://www.engageny.org/resource/test-guides-for-english-language-arts-and-mathematics>).

That same school year, we provided the exact criteria used to select passages for the test and writing questions (<http://www.engageny.org/resource/common-core-assessment-design>). We have released 25% of the questions used on the actual test.

For every released question, we provided an explanation for how the question measures the intended standard, an explanation of why the right answer is right and why the wrong answers are plausible (because they are based on common misconceptions) but incorrect, and for constructed response questions, we release several examples of student work, with explanations of why the response got the score it did.

We have also provided detailed descriptions of the specific knowledge and skills measured at each of the four performance levels on the test (<http://www.engageny.org/resource/performance-level-descriptions-for-ela-and-mathematics>).

Additionally, through their Regional Information Centers (RIC), schools have secure access to the data for every item that contributes to a student's score. RICs provide reports that indicate the percent of students that scored each test question correct and, for the released items, the percent of students that selected each incorrect response. For each question, we also provide the standard it measures. This information allows educators to answer questions such as, "How did the students in my class and school perform on the questions that measure each standard? How can I teach a standard differently next year if my student struggled?" For the released test questions, educators can identify the most common mistake their students made on each question, and determine what they can do next year to help students resolve that misconception.

These resources are testament that the results of the state assessments provide a valid and rich source of information about student performance that complements what educators and parents know from classroom-based work.

**6. What information is provided to parents and families about student performance on the tests?**

State assessment results are provided by NYSED and by the local district or BOCES. The state provides the Individual Score Report (ISR). The state provides extensive guidance for parents to help understand the ISR and how to use the report as a basis of discussion with the child's teachers. This guidance can be found at <http://www.engageny.org/resource/interpreting-3-8-ela-mathematics-tests-results-score-reports>.

In addition to state-level feedback, Regional Information Centers (RICs) have access to the data and resources necessary to generate more detailed parent feedback reports (for suggested data analyses, see <http://www.engageny.org/resource/suggested-data-analyses-for-3-8-ela-and-mathematics-state-tests>) that best meet local needs and requests.

**7. It doesn't seem like students have enough time to complete the test; will that affect test scores?**

We will continue to collect feedback on any difficulties students may have had completing specific sections of the tests. After we receive statewide results from regional scanning and scoring centers, we investigate whether the length of the testing sessions affected student performance. Based on the results of the analyses, we determine if changes to the number of items or the amount of time allowed are warranted for future tests. Following the 2013 Grade 3-8 test administration NYSED

conducted in-depth analyses of student responses to determine what effect, if any, time had on performance. The results of those analyses indicated that time was not a factor in determining student performance.

**8. How long are the grades 3-8 tests?**

In grades 3-4, the typical time for completion is about 50 minutes per day for 3 days each for ELA and math. In grades 5-8, the typical time for completion is 50-60 minutes per day for 3 days each for ELA and math. Additional time is provided in case some students need more time to complete their work. The overall length of the grades 3-8 state tests has been reduced for this year's administration and was also reduced in 2012-13 compared to 2011-12. Since New York State adopted the Common Core in 2010, we have not added any new tests -- and total testing time accounts for less than one percent of class time each year.

### Questions and Answers about English Language Arts (ELA)

**9. Do the ELA tests accurately and adequately measure a student's reading comprehension?**

Yes. ELA tests measure the Common Core ELA Learning Standards. The Common Core Learning Standards define reading comprehension as the ability to read and make meaning of text. To make sense of any text, students must be able to understand the main ideas and detail within the text, understand how an author builds and shapes meaning through their craft and structure (e.g., how an author tells their story or conveys information through specific choices of words, characters, events, chronology, etc.), and ultimately be able to integrate what they learn from the text into a greater body of knowledge.

One of the fundamental ideas in the Common Core Learning Standards is that students must be able to read and make sense of text before as they truly learn to love reading.

**10. Do the ELA tests measure understanding of small details rather than overall comprehension?**

No, the test measures students' ability to both identify key details and comprehend overall meaning. When students struggle to understand and identify details within a text, they will have difficulty understanding a text as a whole. Small details in text change meaning, color emotion, reveal point of view, define characters, and ultimately reveal meaning. Each of the Reading standards require understanding details -- whether it is the explicit identification of character traits, context, or ideas (Standard R3), using context to define unknown words (Standard R4), or using details as evidence to justify any inference (all Standards).

Below are questions taken directly from the 2013 ELA Common Core tests that illustrate how students are required to demonstrate both overall comprehension of a passage as well as the ability to identify key details:

**Grade 3, page 17**

[http://www.engageny.org/sites/default/files/resource/attachments/grade\\_3\\_ela\\_released\\_questions.pdf](http://www.engageny.org/sites/default/files/resource/attachments/grade_3_ela_released_questions.pdf)

As she waits her turn, how does Taylor feel about jumping off the diving board? Use two details from the story to support your answer.

**Grade 3, page 12**

[http://www.engageny.org/sites/default/files/resource/attachments/grade\\_3\\_ela\\_released\\_questions.pdf](http://www.engageny.org/sites/default/files/resource/attachments/grade_3_ela_released_questions.pdf)

Which detail best supports the article's main idea?

- A Parrots copy human sounds.
- B People copy sounds and noises.
- C Mlaika is one of the elephants that copy sounds.
- D Dr. Joyce H. Poole studies mammals that copy sounds.

**Grade 4, page 10**

[http://www.engageny.org/sites/default/files/resource/attachments/grade\\_4\\_ela\\_released\\_questions.pdf](http://www.engageny.org/sites/default/files/resource/attachments/grade_4_ela_released_questions.pdf)

The Sun gets angry with the Wampanoag people because he thinks they are being

- A ungrateful
- B childish
- C unfair
- D cruel

**Grade 6, page 3**

[http://www.engageny.org/sites/default/files/resource/attachments/grade\\_6\\_ela\\_released\\_questions.pdf](http://www.engageny.org/sites/default/files/resource/attachments/grade_6_ela_released_questions.pdf)

How does the author show that the Ross Ice Shelf is dangerous?

- A by explaining that some crevasses are hidden
- B by giving the locations of the worst crevasses
- C by telling about a truck getting stuck in the snow
- D by describing how the crew used bulldozers

**11. Did the ELA Tests have strong emphasis on questions addressing structure rather than the author's intentional meaning?**

No. In no grade are more than 10% of points derived from questions about structure (e.g., how an author tells their story or conveys information through specific choices of

words, characters, events, chronology, etc.). As originally stated in the test guides released in Fall 2012, the vast majority of questions on the Common Core ELA tests require students to identify key ideas and details from texts (approximately 60-65% of points). This was reiterated in the test guides released in Fall 2013 (<http://www.engageny.org/resource/test-guides-for-english-language-arts-and-mathematics>). The remaining points come from questions that ask students to define words and phrases as they are used in text, identify or analyze the structure of texts, identify point of view, show how illustrations contribute to understanding of text, evaluate which evidence supports different points/claims made in a text, or compare and contrast how different passages address similar themes and topics.

**12. Why do some of the ELA questions require students to go back and re-read sentences or paragraphs?**

Students must be able to compare and synthesize ideas within and across multiple texts, if they are to make meaning of the text(s). This often requires re-reading and looking back at what has been read. Students will need this skill set in order to participate in informed civic discourse, conduct inquiry based research, and argue intelligently and persuasively. In other words, this is a desirable and fundamental reading skill.

**13. Will high quality Common Core aligned instruction adequately prepare students for the ELA tests?**

Yes. The assessments measure the instructional shifts demanded by the Common Core (see <http://www.engageny.org/resource/common-core-assessment-design>). When teachers teach what is required by the standards – using grade-level texts, close reading, writing from sources, citing evidence to support claims – then students will grow in their ability to perform well on the tests.

Great teachers have always challenged students to recognize key details, but also look beneath the surface level to find out what an author really meant and how that relates to the world at large. All students, including those who are struggling readers, English Language Learners, and students with disabilities can recognize key details and look for meaning.

**14. Why do some passages and questions from the 2013 tests appear on the 2014 test?**

Some passages and questions that appeared on the 2013 Common Core tests also appeared on the 2014 tests. To ensure that same scores mean the same thing year after year, a small percentage of questions from previous tests must be used on current test; this process is best practice and addressed in the Joint Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing published by National Council of Measurement in Education, American Psychological Association, and the American Educational Research Association (<http://teststandards.org>). Questions that were field tested in one year will likely appear on the test in a future year.

**15. Why do passages occasionally contain the use of brand names?**

One of the main shifts of the Common Core Learning Standards is to help students analyze authentic literary and informational documents. Brand names are occasionally referenced in many non-fiction and informational passages that have previously been published for other purposes (e.g., consider any article you would read in the newspaper or a magazine; whether it is fiction or a news article, sometimes brand names are used by the author). Brand names are not purposely selected for inclusion on the test; rather they exist as part of the previously published passages due to choices made by authors.

**16. Why do the tests include passages with grammatical inaccuracies?**

Using authentic passages on state tests allows for the inclusion of literary and informational texts that are worthy of reading outside an assessment context. The use of authentic, meaningful texts may mean that some passages include the intentional and unintentional use of incorrect grammar and spelling. Eliminating passages for their use of non-standard grammar would exclude many authors and texts that are capable of supporting the rigorous analysis called for by the Common Core.

For example, selections from Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* or Richard Wright’s *Native Son* may appear on a Common Core test, even though selections from these authors would likely include writing that contains incorrect grammar and spelling. Both Twain and Wright intentionally use incorrect grammar and spelling to develop characters, themes and settings. Both of these texts are potential foundational texts for the grade-band. While passages from these examples do not appear on this year’s test, passages drawn from similarly great works will be taught across the state, and some of them may end up on the test.

**17. Why do the tests include passages and/or questions that use slang, technical jargon or archaic terms?**

The use of authentic texts may mean that some passages include the intentional and unintentional use of slang, technical jargon or archaic vocabulary. Questions may ask students to use context clues to define slang or technical jargon as it is used by the author in the text. Like all passages and questions, material including slang or technical jargon goes through thorough review. Passages and questions on the test that include slang and technical jargon are reviewed multiple times by New York State teachers to ensure they are correct and free from bias or sensitivity issues. Definitions for words or phrases are provided for ELA passages when off-grade level words or words that are not defined (either explicitly or through context) are necessary to comprehend major points or large portions of the text.

**18. Why are there potentially controversial passages in the ELA Test?**

The transition to authentic passages and the CCLS for English Language Arts means that Common Core English Language Arts Tests will be experienced differently than pre-Common Core state tests. Many of the Common Core Reading Standards require students to recognize how authors support their opinions, to understand the author’s

point of view and purpose, and to be able to discern well-supported arguments from those that are not. In order to assess these standards on the test, we must include text passages that express opinions and theories with which not all readers may agree. Students must demonstrate their ability to determine point of view, purpose, and success of argumentation with supporting evidence in subjects that they will encounter both in academic coursework and in their daily lives.

For example, a selection from Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* may appear on Common Core tests, although the complete work from which it was drawn may include controversial ideas and language. Likewise, a passage from Richard Wright’s *Native Son* may appear on a Common Core test, even though some may find the ideas and incidents present in the rest of the text (that does not appear on the test) to be provocative. Both of these texts are potential foundational texts for the grade-band. While passages from these examples do not appear on this year’s test, passages drawn from similarly great works will be taught across the state, and some of them may end up on the test.

**19. Are the passages in the tests developmentally appropriate for students?**

Yes. Central to the Common Core Learning Standards (CCLS) for English Language Arts & Literacy is reading, writing, speaking and listening grounded in text. Common Core instruction and assessment requires texts be of quality—that is, worth reading and re-reading, and capable of supporting rigorous questions grounded in evidence from the text. Inherent in the standards is the need to engage students in texts of appropriate complexity for their grade level and to direct student attention to the complexity of the texts. Students may find passages on the test challenging because the Common Core Learning Standards define grade-level text complexity differently than many vendors of curricular material. While students may find the passages in the test more challenging than those in non-Common Core tests, careful attention was paid by test developers and reviewers, including New York State educators, to ensure that the passages met the grade-level text complexity characteristics defined by the Common Core Learning Standards and were also developmentally appropriate for the grade. See here for the passage selection guidelines used for NY state tests:

<http://www.engageny.org/resource/new-york-state-passage-selection-resources-for-grade-3-8-assessments>.

The definition of grade-level complexity used in the Common Core Learning Standards reflects current research and practitioner understanding about cognitive development and developmental appropriateness. The authors of the Standards worked with educators across the country to ensure the developmental appropriateness of this work. By building on widely respected high standards in states such as Massachusetts and California, international benchmarks such as PISA, and the research and judgments of educators across the country, there was very careful attention paid to an international consensus on what students can handle at various ages. Grade-level complexity as defined in the Common Core Learning Standards is used to select passages for New

York's Common Core tests. The complexity of any given passage may differ from the complexity of the full text; see ELA test guides for more information (<http://www.engageny.org/resource/test-guides-for-english-language-arts-and-mathematics>).

**20. Are the ELA questions on the tests developmentally appropriate for students?**

Yes. The content tested by the questions is developmentally appropriate. Each question is designed specifically to measure the skills called for by the grade-level Common Core Learning Standards for ELA. To understand and correctly answer the questions, students must first read and comprehend the entire passage. Students who read at grade level will have the vocabulary and comprehension skills to both understand the passage and the questions that follow. Before appearing on the test, each question is reviewed and edited by multiple panels of educators and professionals in assessment to ensure that the questions have a single correct answer, are fair, and appropriately measure the standards.

### Questions and Answers about Multiple Choice Questions

**21. Why do multiple-choice questions have plausible distractors?**

The questions on the Common Core English Language Arts test are more complex than those found on previous tests that measured previous grade-level standards. Correct answers will not "jump out"; rather, students will need to make a thoughtful distinction between the fully-correct option and the plausible but incorrect options. These multiple-choice questions are specifically designed to determine whether students have comprehended the entire passage and are proficient with the comprehension and analyses specified by the standards.

To answer ELA questions correctly, students will need to closely read each entire passage, and be prepared to carefully consider their responses to multiple-choice questions. In many cases, if the student has not read and comprehended the entire passage, the answer options may not make sense. As such, it is unlikely that even adults could answer the questions correctly without closely reading the entire passage.

All questions on these tests have been developed with extreme care and thoroughly reviewed. Nonetheless, NYSED reviews all questions that are brought to our attention during test administration or scoring to ensure that it is fair and has a single correct answer.

### Questions and Answers about Mathematics

**22. Which of the CCLS standards does the Mathematics test Measure (Sept-April or May-June)?**

The August 2012 memorandum Grades 3–8 Mathematics Testing Program Guidance:

September-to-April / May-to-June Common Core Learning Standards provides guidance on aligning standards to each time period. The tests measure the standards designated as September-to-April for each specific grade level, as well as the May-to-June standards from the previous grade. For example, the Grade 4 Mathematics Test could include any of the May-to-June content standards in Grade 3 and any of the September-to-April content standards in Grade 4.

**23. Were the NYS Common Core Mathematics tests more rigorous than past NYS tests?**

Yes. The NYS Common Core Mathematics tests were designed to measure the Common Core Learning Standards. The NYS Common Core Mathematics tests include questions that require students to show understanding of Mathematics procedures, as well as problems that require students to demonstrate their conceptual understanding as well as their ability to apply Mathematics. For examples of instructional and assessment expectations for Common Core Mathematics please visit the following pages on EngageNY.org:

<http://www.engageny.org/resource/new-york-state-common-core-sample-questions>  
<http://www.engageny.org/common-core-curriculum>

**24. Are math concepts previously assessed at later grades now on tests taken by students at earlier grades?**

Yes. With the adoption of The Common Core Learning Standards for Mathematics, expectations for student learning has changed. The CCLS identifies some content for instruction at earlier grades than past standards. As such, younger students will now see test questions that measure material previously tested at higher grades. For example, the NYS Grade 8 CCLS Mathematics Test does include questions that measure standards previously encountered by students at higher grades. For more information about what is expected at each grade level, please review the CCLS for Mathematics and the optional Curricular Modules. These can be found at:

<http://www.engageny.org/resource/new-york-state-p-12-common-core-learning-standards-for-mathematics>

<http://www.engageny.org/common-core-curriculum>

**25. Why do some questions on the tests look similar to those on past tests? Why do some look different?**

The Common Core Learning Standards for Mathematics include procedural, conceptual and applied mathematical expectations. In some cases, questions on the Common Core Mathematics tests that measured procedural understanding are reminiscent of past test questions. However, to measure proficiency on the Common Core, the tests now also include questions that measure conceptual and applied understanding. Questions measuring conceptual and applied mathematical understanding often look different than questions found on past state tests. For more information about the questions and how they measure the standards, please refer to:

<http://www.engageny.org/resource/new-york-state-p-12-common-core-learning-standards-for-mathematics>

<http://www.engageny.org/resource/new-york-state-common-core-sample-questions>

**26. Why do some questions on the NYS Common Core Mathematics tests require reading?**

Mathematics instruction and measurement require reading because mathematics is a language and a tool which we use to understand and communicate details about the world. As such, mathematics questions, especially questions that measure conceptual and applied mathematical understandings, require reading to set the context for where and why math is used. While some Mathematics questions do involve comprehension of a written description, each question is checked for grade-level appropriate reading load.