

SCOTT MANDEL

IMPROVING TEST SCORES

REVIEW ONLY

Teacher Issues & Concerns

School
Datebooks

or

How Do I Teach and Still Maintain

My Professional Credibility?

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FOR PRINT**

TEACHER

ACTION AGENDA TEACHER EDITION

HOW TO USE THE STUDENT AGENDA WITH YOUR CLASSES

READ OVER AND DISCUSS THE TEST-TAKING SKILLS SUPPLEMENT WITH YOUR STUDENTS.

Read each section on a separate day:

- ◆ *Why are study and test-taking skills so important?*
- ◆ *How to study better and get higher test scores*
- ◆ *How to succeed on a multiple choice test*
- ◆ *How to succeed on a short or long essay test*
- ◆ *Getting into the studying place*
- ◆ *Making your body help your test scores*
- ◆ *A studying checklist*

THE KEY IS TO RELATE/ADAPT THE MATERIAL TO SPECIFIC ITEMS IN YOUR CURRICULUM.

Use your textbook, class notes, tests, etc., as examples of how to implement these concepts into your students' study and test-taking habits.

RELATE THE MATERIAL TO THE STUDENTS' LIVES WHENEVER POSSIBLE.

Ask questions such as:

- ◆ *"How have you felt in this situation . . .?"*
- ◆ *"Have you ever experienced this at home . . .?"*
- ◆ *"What is it like when you . . .?"*

HOW CAN I ENSURE THAT MY CLASSROOM CURRICULA COVER

THE MATERIAL THAT WILL BE TESTED, WHILE MAINTAINING MY TEACHING INDEPENDENCE?

Advance Planning

Advance planning allows you to see and plan your curriculum holistically over the course of the year. With advanced planning, you can manipulate your teaching time so as to fit in all of the required (i.e. "tested") components of the curricula, simultaneously locating slots in which to teach additional material that you personally and professionally feel is important for the students. This can be accomplished through creating a Personal Pacing Plan and prioritizing concepts that will be

Prioritize Concepts and Standards

It is critical for the teacher to accept the fact that it is virtually impossible to cover everything to be tested at a level in which you achieve student proficiency. It's just not practical. Either you will cover *all* topics superficially and the students will have familiarity, but little proficiency, or you will go into depth on some topics and skip others, leaving your students scores to chance in those neglected areas.

The key to planning success is to list all of the basic topics on the standardized test and then prioritize them. Priority goes to the areas which count the most. (All standardized tests' teachers' or administrators' editions offer percentages of how much each topic is covered). Those that count the most have the greater priority.

For example, the grammar portion of the test involves these topics and percentages:

Sentence structure	35%
Clauses	10%
Parts of speech	25%
Punctuation	20%
Phrases	10%

Based on this analysis, you should ensure that sentence structure is taught very well sometime during the year, and that you cover parts of speech and punctuation at some point. Clauses and phrases, the least tested pieces, are covered only if you have time.

All untested topics in your plan should be marked with an A, B or C:

- A = students must be exposed to;**
- B = students must be exposed to mastery level if time allows**
- C = students to only if time allows**

In this fashion, you will prioritize your teaching so that your students have the greatest chance of succeeding on the standardized tests.

See page 4-5 in *Improving Test Scores* for a model and detailed description of how to prioritize concepts and standards.

Creating a Personal Pacing Plan

Have you ever found yourself in May with about three months of curriculum left to cover, wondering how the year got away from you? A Personal Pacing Plan can help here, even the most experienced teacher on track—a rather important feat in today's testing environment.

You can create a Personal Pacing Plan by simply taking a calendar and a list of all of the topics that need to be covered during the school year, along with those additional areas you want to have covered. Map out the year, assigning perceived amounts of time for each subject. However, remember the following:

- This is only a guide!** Some subjects will take less time than you originally planned, some will take more.
- The standardized tests will most likely fall within the ninth month of school.** Therefore, if you must be-tested topics need to be covered before that time within your plan.
- Plan by the week, not the day.** Plans that change happen that change your plans daily by week, by the week, versus the day, will lead to greater flexibility and less frustration.

See page 3 in *Improving Test Scores* for a model and detailed description of a Personal Pacing Plan.

The material in this supplement is directly adapted from the book, IMPROVING TEST SCORES: A PRACTICAL APPROACH FOR TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS, Scott Mandel, Corwin Press, 2006. For detailed explanations and additional material in the areas covered, please refer to that book.

HOW CAN I ENSURE THAT I COVER THE CURRICULAR MATERIAL

FOUND ON THE STANDARDIZED TESTS EVEN IF MY CLASSROOM TEXTBOOKS ARE INADEQUATE?

Textbook publishers and test makers are usually not related. Although, theoretically, both should be following state educational standards exactly, such is not always the case. Very often, your textbook may not cover material which is to be tested.

How do you supplement your curricula without expending too much time, energy and money? By using the Ultimate Teacher Resource Center—the Internet.

Advance planning is once again the key. You need to study the topics to be tested, and ensure that your textbook covers each of them adequately. Three possibilities may arise:

YOUR TEACHING SITUATION	YOUR SOLUTION
Your textbook covers all of the material to be tested, and provides adequate practice material for mastery.	Nothing—use what you have and enjoy!
Your textbook covers all of the material to be tested, but is lacking in providing adequate practice material for mastery.	Use the Internet to supplement your textbook in locating practice material for your students.
Your textbook is missing some of the material to be tested.	Use the Internet for locating supplemental material to substitute for the textbook in the areas which are lacking.

For example, say you wanted to locate the primary source document Thomas Payne's *Common Sense* for your American History class. This critically important Revolutionary War document is sure to be asked about on the test—but is usually not included in your textbook. You can quickly and efficiently locate it by following these steps:

1. Go to the Educational Resources Page of Teachers Helping Teachers
2. Scroll down to the History/Social Studies Resources Online section.
3. Scan for pertinent sites listed in this section. Pinpoint a listing for a site titled *The Historical Text Archive*.
4. Click on the link to this site.
5. Follow the trail to your document: click on *Links*, then on *United States*, then on *Revolution*, then on *Thomas Payne, Common Sense*.
6. Print the appropriate parts of the document and make copies for your students.

taken from *Improving Test Scores*, page 18

This process works for any area, in any subject. Curricular material is all over the Internet, and using a general education portal such as Teachers Helping Teachers is just a few fingertips within minutes.

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How can you locate this material quickly and efficiently? The easiest way is to bookmark a general education portal where you can turn to immediately when you need additional curricular material.

An easy-to-use, teacher-created general education site is the Educational Resources page of Teachers Helping Teachers (teachershelpingteachers.info/educational-resources/). This site lists dozens of general sites in every major subject area. Each site is subsequently linked to hundreds of specific sites. Within a few clicks, you can locate anything you need. Within just minutes, you can have supplemental curricular material in every area.

HOW TO HELP YOUR STUDENTS SUCCEED WITH

THE NEW COMMON CORE TESTS?

The Common Core may seem scary to most teachers, based on the way school districts and the media are presenting it. But in reality, it takes us back to the days before No Child Left Behind. How so? The following are central to the system:

- Teachers have academic freedom—the standards tell what students should learn, not how teachers should teach.
- The focus is on higher order critical thinking, not memorization of facts.

Prioritize Concepts and Standards

The more opportunities you provide for your students to practice their critical thinking skills, the better they will do. Students need to learn how to “think out of the box” especially after having lived during the drill/memorize and test years of No Child Left Behind. There are many exercises that they can do to practice this skill (and they do need to practice), many of which can be found online. However, here is an easy one you can use at the beginning of the year to “set the mood”:

DIRECTIONS: Using FOUR STRAIGHT CONNECTED LINES, never letting your pen leave the paper, connect all 9 dots:



The answer will be found at the end of this document—look ahead until you've tried solving it!

HOW CAN YOU PREPARE YOUR STUDENTS FOR COMMON CORE SUCCESS?

1. ENSURE THAT YOU USE HIGHER ORDER CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

This is the most important aspect of the Common Core—thinking at a high level. Most questions that a teacher asks are of this sort:

who, what, why, when, where, which, choose, find, how, define, match, recall, compare, contrast, demonstrate, explain, summarize.

These are all considered lower level critical thinking questions. They do not involve a lot of thought to answer them—to answer them you mostly just have to remember what you read. To prepare for Common Core success, you should start thinking with higher level questions such as these:

analyze, categorize, classify, compare, contrast, examine, simplify, infer, conclude, develop, estimate, formulate, invent, originate, predict, identify, organize, elaborate, criticize, determine, evaluate, justify, try, test.

This does not mean that you no longer use low-level thinking questions. Quite the contrary. Those types of questions are critical to ensuring basic comprehension of the material. However, higher-level thinking questions should become a regular part of all discussions. An easy way to ensure their use is to keep a list of these “question words” with you as you conduct classroom discussions. Continually refer to the list, asking at least two for every one low-level question that you use. You can find excellent resources and examples of higher order critical thinking questions and techniques at the Internet site: www.bloomstaxonomy.org

2. ENSURE YOUR STUDENTS BASE THEIR ANSWERS ON EVIDENCE THEY LOCATE

The easiest way to practice this is twofold:

- Require that your students list the page number next to their answers on written comprehension assignments, when they locate the information.
- Conduct discussions with open textbooks, insisting the students “prove” their answers by referring to specific sections of the text used in asking your questions.

3. MAKE SURE YOUR STUDENTS UNDERSTAND THE MATERIAL BEFORE YOU GO ON

Plan on reteaching areas in which students demonstrate difficulty. If it's a minority of students with a particular concept, peer-teaching or cooperative learning groups can bring them up to a proficient level. If it's a half or more of your students, reteach that particular material. The strict pacing-plan mentality of the No Child Left Behind years is no more. Make sure your students learn the material before you go on (within reason, of course). Another way to ensure proficiency of material is to allow students to correct incorrect answers on comprehension assignments (other than tests) and give them the new grade. This ensures that they learn the material that they missed, and are motivated to get a better score.

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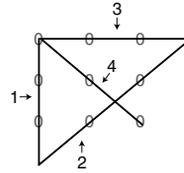
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4. ADD NON-FICTION TO YOUR CURRICULUM

This is mostly applicable to Language Arts classes, 50% of your material should come from works of non-fiction. It doesn't matter if they are in paper form or online—have your students read more non-fiction. The majority of the end-of-the-year test will be based on this form of literature, so it's best to have your students practice working with as many of its forms as possible.

ANSWER FOR CRITICAL THINKING PUZZLE:



HOW CAN I MOTIVATE MY STUDENTS TO DO THEIR BEST

ON THE STANDARDIZED TESTS?

When it comes to the relationship between student motivation and their test-taking success, students may be grouped into three categories:

- **Those that do poorly because they are stressed out as a result of the pressure to do well**
- **Those that do poorly because they consider the test irrelevant or unimportant, and put little effort into it as a result**
- **Those that do well because they see the importance of the test and seriously attempt to do their best.**

Improving Test Scores, page 52

Unfortunately, too many students fall into the first two categories. The following are some ideas to address these students and help them improve their test scores.

Motivating Students

Intrinsic motivation works with some students; some need extrinsic. What works for a middle school student will not likely work for a high school student.

Consider the following:

Buying into the importance of the test—Discuss with your students the repercussions of good and poor efforts on the test. These include getting into special high-level classes if they do well, or double-period/after-school remedial classes if they do poorly. For students in their last year at the school, this is especially important to comprehend. They need to understand that their performance on the test will directly affect their placements in their next school.

Perfect attendance incentives, special prizes can be given to those students who are present every day. It can be a class/school-wide raffle for a store-bought item or something as simple as a free pass from running one day during P.E. Whatever motivates your particular students. Friendly competitions between homerooms is also a great peer-driven motivator.

Student Stress Reduction

Often students who want to do well are stressed by either the pressure that they place on themselves, or the pressurized atmosphere of the school during testing. Therefore, helping them reduce their stress will directly help them perform better. Here are a couple of ideas:

Encourage test preparation—Test taking is a skill. The more it is practiced, the better they will do. The student section of this agenda provides them with many tips which you can review with them. As a teacher, give them similar types of standardized tests throughout the year. Even if you despise these, even if they are difficult for you to use, do not give them a disservice if the first time they see standardized tests is during the end-of-the-year testing period.

Reduce extraneous test worries—Providing students with simple techniques to reduce mental and physical strain will directly assist these students with reducing their stress. The direct result is higher test scores. (See *Improving Test Scores*, page 58, for a couple of these easy-to-use techniques).

Discover what works for your particular students and use that method! There is no one correct answer or solution.