5 Preparing for Standardized Testing

The prompts that students face on standardized tests are the antithesis of effective writing assignments. They rarely include any true choice for students, who are clearly not engaged as equals in the writing task. There is little in the way of scaffolding, and the usual writing process that students use is essentially ignored. Correct form may be preferred over any attempt at critical thinking. Indeed, students may not have the time to engage in any kind of deep thought as they hurriedly rush to beat the clock. Any sense of audience is left for students to discover (or, more accurately, completely invent). There's no feedback and no discussion of the grading criteria. At the end of the test period, the work disappears to be replaced weeks later with a number that gives students no sense of how the piece was evaluated or what they did well. In short, the writing prompts on standardized tests poorly define the task, do not explain that task or the related expectations, and do not provide any support for students.

Standardized writing prompts clearly do not match the characteristics of effective writing assignments. Given that well-developed writing assignments result in good writing, it's not surprising that the less-developed prompts typically used in standardized writing assignments result in weaker writing. Further, the curricular focus on test preparation can result in ineffective writing instruction throughout the year. Gregory Shafer describes the effects of standardized essay tests on the students who take them: "In this high-stakes and decidedly daunting environment, students abandon certain ideas about writing and embrace more reductive and less active approaches. If schools value linear, product-based steps, then students are going to see writing as an act that is quick, devoid of stages, impersonal, and predicated upon the values of a single authority. They are going to cease to see it as a social activity that is read by an authentic audience, and they are going to stop seeing writing as an act of artistic creation" (241). It's not hard to understand why students draw these conclusions. If the only writing that counts is composed in a frantic twenty-five to thirty minutes, why would students value freewriting, structural revision, or rough drafts that take days to develop?

It's a frustrating situation. Everything that goes into designing effective writing assignments seems unrelated to the assignments students encounter on standardized writing tests. I know that I cannot magically turn a standardized test prompt into an effective assignment, but I *can* apply the three aspects of effective design to one by working through activities that help students learn to define the task, explore the expectations for that task, and provide supportive materials for completing the task.

Defining the Task

I don't know the exact question students will see on a standardized test in advance, but I do know a great deal about the different ways that people write. Further, the general task for test essays is already defined—students will write a timed essay in response to an unknown prompt. They will not have any prewriting notes to draw on. They can usually make some quick notes in the test booklet, but because of the time crunch, they need to work on a complete draft of their response as soon as possible.

Depending upon the test, there are sample responses, rubrics, and sample prompts that I can use to prepare the class. Even more important, by the time students come to my classroom for this preparation, they have already had many experiences with in-class or timed writing, such as papers written during a class period, essays for other standardized tests, or short-answer questions on tests. I can tap this prior experience as I shape a standardized test prompt into a more effective writing assignment by asking students to identify what they do when they compose responses during timed writing situations and then challenge them to determine which strategies work best for them in which situations.

Scaffolding the Process

To write effectively on standardized tests, students need to be conscious of how they write under pressure. I ask students to recall their previous in-class writing experiences by brainstorming a list of times they have had to write quickly in class (e.g., on unit tests or semester exams). Once they have a list to draw on, I ask students to think about what they recall from these timed writing experiences, encouraging them to explore both the concrete facts about their writing and the feelings they had while they were writing. As students share their memories, I try to

draw particular attention to similarities and differences among their memories as well as the reasons that the memories have stayed with them.

To tie test writing situations to other composing that they have done, I next have students brainstorm a list of all the things they write. If they have difficulty getting started on their personal lists, I offer some suggestions—journal writing, tests, email messages, letters, blog entries, shopping lists, and so forth (refer to Figure 4.5 for more genres). Once students have compiled personal lists, they work in small groups to examine what they've identified. As they compare their lists, I ask them to think about what these different kinds of writing have in common with one another and with test writing. When we turn to full class discussion, I highlight the similarities that tie directly to writing and the writing process.

Focusing on the writing process in this way is key. Standardized writing tests draw on different processes than those that students typically use for composing, but these tests still involve a writing process. Once students recognize the range of options available, it's simpler to ask them to identify the writing strategies they can use in test situations.

I next ask students to choose three different kinds of writing from the lists that they have created and write a paragraph or so in their journals that narrates how they compose in each circumstance as well as a paragraph on writing essays on standardized tests. When they finish writing about each of these processes, I arrange students in groups again and ask them to compare the different processes that they all follow. I ask students to draw conclusions about the different processes and how they relate to the different genres, audiences, and situations explored in their writing. Throughout their discussion, I try to encourage students to recognize that while the different aspects of the writing process change, writers always have a process to compose their texts.

Exploring the Task and Expectations

I also need to focus directly on the task and the expectations for students' work—beginning by unpacking the meaning behind the prompts on standardized tests. Learning to read the writing prompts on these tests is essential to success. Standardized writing tests generally use the language of academic discourse and in some cases begin with literary quotations. I spend time in class analyzing example test prompts by focusing on the following activities:

- asking students to identify the audience and purpose behind the prompts (going beyond the simplistic answer of the testing company, of course)
- having students identify what readers will look for and how they can present themselves as experts on the issue
- demonstrating how to search through each writing prompt for significant words—both those that give clues to the content expected in response and those that suggest the structure and genre required
- showing students how to find clues to the content and scope required by each prompt as well as to the organization and development that will be necessary for the response

As part of this analysis, I pass out copies of the Prompt Analysis Chart in Figure 5.1, which students complete to explore the task in a structured way. As is appropriate for the different kinds of test prompts, I talk in more detail about how the audience can be defined for the activity. If an audience is mentioned or implied, it's important to show students how to locate the information in the prompt, just as they would with any other writing assignment. In instances where there is no mention of the readers, we spend time defining the audience by examining the content and purpose of the test and the writing task. Additionally, I always discuss how using personal knowledge about the topic will strengthen their work by positioning them as experts.

With the prompt discussed, I turn to the expectations for the test by exploring available rubrics and sample essays. The class reads through the model answers, applying the rubrics that we have available. As they analyze these texts, I ask students both to identify the successful features of the models and to suggest ways to improve the sample responses.

Once this analysis is complete, I ask students to write their own essays in response to the prompt. While they are crafting these sample answers for a timed writing test, I do not ask them to write those texts in a timed setting. Instead, I allow time for prewriting, collaboration, and revision, so that students have an opportunity to explore what could go into these test responses under the best writing conditions. This technique allows students to concentrate on learning how to analyze and respond to the prompt, instead of worrying about the time frame. Essentially, I am narrowing the challenges of the assignment so that I can break down the requirements of responding to the test prompt. When they finish their texts, students return to the outlines of their writing processes and make any revisions necessary to better represent the ways that they compose.

Prompt Analysis Chart	
Audience ■ Who are you writing for? ■ What does your reader know about the topic? ■ What opinions does your reader already have about the issue?	
Purpose & Content ■ What are you communicating? ■ What does the prompt ask you to do? ■ What key information should be included?	
Organization & Genre ■ What organizational words does the prompt use? ■ What structure do the words indicate you should use? ■ What genre will your essay use?	
Personal Expertise ■ What do you know about the topic or issue? ■ What personal expertise can you share with your reader? ■ What do you know about the topic that your reader doesn't know?	
Designing Writing Assignments by Traci Gardner ©2008 National Council of Teachers of English.	

Figure 5.1. Students can fill out this prompt and explore a task in a structured way.

Providing Support and Explanatory Materials

Designing supporting materials for an unknown assignment is quite a challenge. My solution has been to focus on supporting students' processes and writing strategies, since I cannot provide specific resources for the actual prompt. I ask students to review all their notes on test writing and choose an image that represents their own writing abilities, providing this prompt:

> Describe yourself as a test writer by using an analogy. Begin by completing this sentence: "When I write a timed essay, I am like a _____." For example, you might complete the sentence this way: "When I write a timed essay, I am like a gardener." After you've come up with your analogy, explore your choice in a journal entry. If I were comparing myself to a gardener, I'd talk about the way that I get started on a paper and the way that I start work on a garden—gathering seeds and tools is like gathering ideas and basic information about the writing prompt. Your response should do two things: show how you write a timed essay and make comparisons that clarify for your readers the way that you write.

Once they've written their analogies, I have students share their ideas in small groups or with the whole class, asking them to note things that they have discovered about themselves as writers as a result of this self-analysis. Additionally, I encourage students to compare the strategies they use during timed essays with those they use during other writing situations.

As time draws closer to the date of the actual timed test, I set aside a class period for students to draw conclusions about strategies to ensure they do their best work on the test. Students look over all the work we've completed on timed writing—journal entries, notes, their responses to samples, and so on—and then choose five tips for writing an essay for a standardized test. Additionally, students explain briefly why they've chosen each tip. Working in small groups once they finish, students share their tips and create a group list of the eight to ten best pieces of advice. Groups then share their lists and the justification for their choices with the whole class. These group lists go up in the classroom for students to refer to in the days leading up to the test.

Finally, I ask students to construct a mental writing kit. I cannot send them to take standardized tests with notes and analysis charts, but I can outfit them with mental tools that they can rely on as they write.

Using all the information that they have gathered, students create their own writing kit composed of tips, plans, and key structures that they can tap as they work, as described in the following prompt:

> Think about the things that come in a kit that you're familiar with (for instance, a first aid kit, a sewing kit, a bicycle repair kit, or a starter kit for DSL). The kit includes supplies, tools, and instructions. Your task is to design your own kit for standardized test writing. Since you cannot take any tools into the test itself, your writing kit must consist of mental tools, such as tips, plans, and organizational structures. Think about the process that you use when you write on standardized tests and what you know about the kind of writing that is required and then create your own personal list of supplies that you'll plan to use on test day. In your journal, list the items you'd include and then compose the instruction booklet that would accompany the items.

I emphasize that everyone's writing kit will include different items, since the tools that each person needs are different. One student's test writing kit included the following items:

- Prompt Analysis Questions: Who? Why? Expertise?
- Read—Circle Words—Jot Notes—Write—Edit
- Close eyes and refocus when distracted
- *A/an* for count and *the* for noncount
- Begin with attention-getter and end with "So what?"

In her writing kit, this student included several different kinds of tools. The first and second items are essentially prewriting tools that she used to define the task she was to complete and plan the writing she would do in response. Worried about running out of time, she added the third item, "Close eyes and refocus when distracted," which is a simple strategy to ensure that she stays on task as she writes her test essay. As a student who spoke Chinese as her first language, she noted in her fourth item a reminder for the pesky article rules that English uses. Finally, she included a note on the desired structure for her essay.

If there are any special features of the test that students are preparing for, I talk about how those aspects might influence the items in the writers' kits. For instance, if the test includes a page for notes, I talk about how students can jot the items from their kits on that sheet when they begin work on the timed essays. As another example, if students

are allowed to write in the test booklets, I might suggest circling key words in the essay prompt as an analysis tool they can include in their kits.

Because students need to remember the items in their kits, I have them present their tools to one another orally and without notes. As part of their discussion, I ask students to examine how the tools might change if they were doing a different kind of writing. When the kits are ready, I have students test them out by completing another sample response to a test prompt, this one in a timed setting. After they've finished writing, I ask them to reevaluate their kits to assess how well the tools worked.