

ASSESSING READING



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It's often said that nowadays people don't read so much. But this isn't actually true. People often read from Kindles or tablets instead of books, and they might get information from computers or tablets or phone screens, rather than from encyclopaedias. But even if it's not the same type of reading our parents did, we still do a lot of reading everyday.

Regardless of what we read from, we use the same basic processes to create meaning. We set goals depending on our purpose for reading. We recognize individual words and use our understanding of the grammar of the language to build up and check the meaning of the text; the more we read, the more we understand. Eventually we reach an almost complete understanding of the text.

When we read longer texts, we read in different ways, depending on our purpose for reading. We might read quickly, in order to get a general idea of the topic, or to find specific information we need. Alternatively, we might read very carefully to get a thorough understanding of the topic. Whichever way we read, our brains work very hard to make sense of the words we see.

When designing a test of reading comprehension, we should make our tests as relevant and meaningful as possible. For example, if we want to test whether someone can read a bus timetable to find a suitable time to travel somewhere, we should give them a task that requires them to do exactly that. Reading tests should always aim to be as authentic as possible, in order to fit the purpose for which they are designed.

Reading tests may be completed using traditional pencil and paper methods, or the tests may be delivered and responded to on a computer. Either way, good reading tests will consist of an efficient and suitable combination of texts and tasks.

Let's think about what test takers read. These texts should be at the right level of difficulty, and be long enough to contain enough specific details. Test-takers should get information from the text to answer the questions, rather than being able to do so based on their background knowledge. It's also essential that the text is not culturally biased and won't cause offense to any group of test-takers.

Lots of different tasks are used in reading tests. Test-takers might read a text, then be given a series of questions and asked to choose the correct answer from several alternatives, or they may have to choose a sentence that best summarizes different paragraphs in a text.

Sometimes, test-takers are asked to complete a text that has had words removed. Other times, they might be asked to give short written answers to questions. They may have to understand information presented in graphic form, and respond by labelling a chart or completing a table. An increasingly popular task these days is a 'reading into writing' task where test-takers read one or more texts and then summarize them in their own words. All these tasks have advantages and disadvantages. For this reason we try to include a range of task types in our reading tests.

Once the texts and tasks have been decided on, there are a few other things to check on before the test is given to test-takers. The instructions to the test-takers must be clear, so they know exactly what they have to do for each task. They must be given enough time to complete the tasks satisfactorily. And, most importantly, they should know exactly how their answers will be scored.

When we score a test, we must make sure that there is only one clear answer to each question. Or, if the test-taker is expected to write a short answer, that the number of possible correct answers is limited, and that markers have agreed upon acceptable responses. If the tasks require longer written answers, markers also have to agree whether marks should be deducted for grammar, spelling and punctuation mistakes.

A reading test will only provide useful information about a test-taker's reading ability if the assessment is done in a meaningful way. This means choosing the right texts, deciding on the most appropriate tasks, and scoring everything efficiently. All this takes time, effort, experience and, above all, a lot of common sense.