

The Reading Framework for the National Assessment of Educational Progress Feedback

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While lots of worthy information is provided in the reading framework, there are five main areas to consider for revision: (a) background knowledge, (b) percentages of literary and informational texts, (c) representation of cognitive targets, (d) the texts matrices, and (e) overall presentation of the framework.

Background Knowledge

The first area to consider for revision is the role that background knowledge plays in reading comprehension and thus its role in NAEP. Some of the information presented in the framework around background knowledge is contradictory. On page 3 of the framework, it clearly states that background knowledge is essential for comprehension: “Comprehension is also affected by readers’ background knowledge and by the context of the reading experience.” However, the framework then goes on to state: “Passages that might require specific background or experiential knowledge for comprehension are not included in the assessment” (p. 13). This statement establishes that the passages for reading are purposefully selected to exclude students’ need for background knowledge. However, later in the framework, when discussing vocabulary, it states: “Words that are appropriate for inclusion denote concepts or things that readers already know. That is, the word denotes an object, idea, feeling, or action that has been experienced or has been seen by the readers” and, “Thus, test items will not target technical terms or words identifying the central idea(s) of the passage because those words often represent new

knowledge, concepts, or conceptualizations for readers.¹ Passage comprehension items will measure readers' learning from text; vocabulary items will measure readers' knowledge of certain important words the author uses to impart this meaning" (p. 35). Thus, while the passages for reading are purposefully selected to exclude students' need for background knowledge, the vocabulary to be assessed is purposefully selected based on background knowledge. This approach to assessing vocabulary seems to contradict the approach to reading comprehension stated earlier in the framework. In other words, if the assessment is not testing new knowledge in vocabulary, then it is making assumptions about background knowledge, despite the earlier statement that the need for background knowledge is intentionally excluded from the design.

There are other issues with the way background knowledge is excluded from consideration in text selection. According to the statements above that indicate passages are selected to rule out the need for background knowledge, the assessment is attempting to provide "cold reads" of texts—ones that students haven't read before and about which they would have no incoming knowledge. This is difficult to accomplish because, as the framework states, students have such varied experiences, and we can't rule out that some students won't benefit from some experience they have had and be given a boost in their comprehension as a result. This is further evidenced by a 1988 study by Recht and Leslie concluding that background knowledge played a significant role in a reader's ability to comprehend a text. They took two groups: one group of "weak readers" who were knowledgeable about baseball and one group of "strong readers" who were not knowledgeable. Then they gave each the same passage about baseball, and the weak readers outperformed the strong readers. Background knowledge superseded reading skill. Students will always come to a text with knowledge. We never read texts in a vacuum. As readers, we draw on

¹ It is unclear why the assessment wouldn't ask about a word related to the central idea of a text if that word is key to understanding the central ideas of a text.

our prior knowledge and experiences and the thoughts, ideas, and interpretations of others to make meaning of the texts we are reading. No matter how carefully the texts are selected for NAEP, the students with greater exposure will have a “leg up” when it comes to comprehending the texts. That is, unless all students are given equal opportunity to access the same background knowledge prior to reading an assessment text.

Since background knowledge plays a role in comprehension, the framework should reconsider background knowledge as part of the assessment design rather than trying to exclude passages that require “specific background or experiential knowledge for comprehension” (p. 13). Some possible approaches to consider: (a) Provide a list of topics or knowledge domains aligned with the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards (C3 Framework) and Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS). When students take NAEP, the texts will likely be new to students, but they will be based on topics and concepts in which students have some background knowledge. Instead of “cold reads,” students engage in “warm reads” (i.e., texts students likely haven’t encountered before but are about topics and/or concepts for which they have built some knowledge through reading related texts in class). (b) Take an approach similar to the AP English Literature exam which assesses a finite set of literature, asking students to read a good number of those texts in preparation for that assessment. (c) Present a short text or video that isn’t assessed and provides knowledge that would be important for understanding a complex text. Prompt students to read that text or view that video and then assess them on their reading an analysis of the related complex text. This way, we guarantee that every student taking the assessment has the background knowledge necessary to engage with the complex text.

Percentages of Literary and Informational Texts

The second area to consider for revision is the distribution of percentages of literary and informational texts presented on page 11 of the framework. Is the reading framework focused on reading in English language arts or does it include reading in other disciplines as well? Is the reading framework focused on the work of the ELA teacher or the ELA teacher, science teacher, and social studies teacher? Should we acknowledge that the distributions in high school are or should be reflective of reading in other courses, such as science and social studies? This isn't clear in the framework, so it is often interpreted differently by different users. It would be helpful to emphasize whether this assessment is focused on reading in ELA or reading in all disciplines.

Representation of Cognitive Targets

The third area to consider is the cognitive targets, which need to be presented with more clarity. Do the three categories presented—locate/recall, integrate/interpret, and critique/evaluate—represent a continuum of thinking from less to more complex? How does that play out in actually making meaning of a text? For example, as a reader, you sometimes have to critique and/or evaluate what an author is doing to understand a theme of a text. Is there a way to reframe how this is presented to focus on the thinking process necessary to understand the meaning, purpose, and perspective of texts? For example, “evaluating a character’s motivations and decisions” leads a reader to understand a theme. The way these are presented below in *Appendix A. Recent Research Reports Related to Reading Comprehension* (with evaluation happening after determining theme) is a non-sequitur.

The Text Matrices

The fourth area to consider are the text matrices. While the matrices are helpful for identifying specific content for the text and item types, I have some suggested edits on the specific content. See the attached list in the section *Suggested Edits on Text Matrices* at the end of this paper.

Overall Presentation of the Framework

The last area to consider is what “sticks” with the reader. The framework presents a lot of rich information about the research behind reading comprehension and how best to show this understanding in students through assessments. The definition of reading on pages iv and 2 of the framework is good to ground the reader. From there, though, there is a lot to read and parse through. The executive summary that starts on page iii is an attempt to frame the purpose of the document, but the messages are lost and the summary reads more like a table of contents. One suggestion is to ensure that the two to three key points that distinguish the crux of the assessment are highlighted in the executive summary in a way that sticks with the reader (e.g., use stories or visuals or an analogy that helps readers understand quickly what should be remembered about *The Reading Framework*). That way, if readers are not able to read the rest of the document, they walk away from the framework with a clear sense of what the reading framework is about and what assumptions are made about reading and kids.

Another suggestion is to consider reorganizing the framework around the definition of reading to place greater emphasis on the parts presented in that definition. For example, how do all the parts of the assessment directly assess how well students develop and interpret meaning? What about using meaning as appropriate to type of text, purpose, and situation? These ideas are buried and lost in the document because emphasis is placed on “text selection” and “item types.” If the goal of the

assessment is to help show how students are reading, then the framework should illustrate how the assessment is built to reflect what NAEP defines as “reading.”

Lastly, there are instances where quotations are presented following a fairly compelling statement; however, the quotation feels superfluous (e.g., the quotation from Barzun on p. 34 and one from Pressley and Afflerbach on p. 39 of the framework). Often, what is stated in the quotation is disconnected or introducing a new idea. While the idea is often as compelling as the previous paragraph, it doesn’t serve its purpose as evidence and should likely be removed and/or included as a citation or endnote to support the paraphrases and summaries in the previous paragraphs.

Suggested Edits on Text Matrices

- **Exhibit 3. Literary text matrix: Fiction.** Symbolism (see grade 4 Author’s Craft) seems difficult for grade 4; likewise parallel plots (see grade 8 Text Structures and Features) seems more appropriate for high school. Additionally, what is significant about parallel and circular plots to be called out on the matrix? What does “Differentiation of plot structures for different purposes and audiences” (see grade 12 Text Structures and Features) mean? Dramatic irony (see grade 12 Author’s Craft) is a standard at grade 8, so it might fit better there than at grade 12. Also, “character foils” is not a typically taught literary term, and “comic relief” might be better worded as “effects of irony” or similar (see grade 12 Author’s Craft).
- **Exhibit 3. Literary text matrix: Literary nonfiction.** Diction and word choice (see grade 4 Author’s Craft) seems more appropriate in grade 8 or 12. Understanding word choice is contingent on understanding connotation and denotation (see grade 12 Author’s

Craft). It seems more appropriate to have “connotation” and “denotation” in grade 4 and “diction and word choice” in grade 12. Again, symbolism (see grade 4 Author’s Craft) seems too difficult for grade 4. For this particular matrix, why is there no acknowledgement of speech structures, such as purpose, perspective, and audience?

- **Exhibit 3: Literary text matrix: Poetry.** Diction and word choice (see grade 4 Author’s Craft) seem too complex for grade 4. Rhyme scheme (see grade 4 Text Structures and Features) doesn’t seem important to assess, particularly at grade 4. Does the inclusion of different types of poetry (e.g., ode, song, ballad, epic) necessitate the need to ask questions about the specific characteristics of each type of structure? If so, how necessary is that?
- **Exhibit 4. Informational text matrix: Exposition.** Rhetorical structures and parallel structures (see grade 4 Author’s Craft) seem too difficult for grade 4. Logic (see grade 4 Author’s Craft) isn’t typically introduced as a concept until after grade 4. Asking students to analyze whether an argument is logical in grade 4 seems too complex. Evaluating an author’s stance (see grade 4 Text Structures and Features) also seems like a skill that doesn’t happen until high school and evaluating for this in grade 4 seems too complex.
- **Exhibit 4. Informational text matrix: Procedural texts and documents.** The listed genres seem too low level for grade 8. Also, there needs to be some acknowledgement of the different types of genres that have developed since 2009. The example below the matrix about the VCR clock is extremely outdated.