Strategies and Practice for State and Standardized Tests

The test items in this section are modeled after test formats that are used on many state and standardized tests. The strategies presented here will help you prepare for these tests. This section offers general test-taking strategies and tips for answering multiple-choice items, as well as short-response and extended-response questions in critical reading and writing. It also includes guidelines and samples for essay writing. For each test, read the tips in the margin. Then apply the tips to the practice items. You can also apply the tips to Assessment Practice Tests in this book.

1 General Test-Taking Strategies

• Arrive on time and be prepared. Be sure to bring either sharpened pencils with erasers or pens—whichever you are told to bring.

• If you have any questions, ask them before the test begins. Make sure you understand the test procedures, the timing, and the rules.

• Read the test directions carefully. Look at the passages and questions to get an overview of what is expected.

• Tackle the questions one at a time rather than thinking about the whole test.

• Look for main ideas as you read passages. They are often stated at the beginning or the end of a paragraph. Sometimes the main idea is implied.

• Refer back to the reading selections as needed. For example, if a question asks about an author’s attitude, you might have to reread a passage for clues.

• If you are not sure of your answer, make a logical guess. You can often arrive at the correct answer by reasoning and eliminating wrong answers.

• As you fill in answers on your answer sheet, make sure you match each test item to its numbered space on the answer sheet.

• Don’t look for patterns in the positions of correct choices.

• Only change an answer if you are sure your original choice is incorrect. If you do change an answer, erase your original choice neatly and thoroughly.

• Check your answers and reread your essay.
2 Critical Reading

As you advance through middle school and into high school, you will be exposed to different types of writing, both fiction and nonfiction. You will read novels, persuasive essays, poems, historical documents, and scientific or technical information. Tests will measure your ability to read and analyze these kinds of writings. Test selections can range in length from 100 words to 500 or 600 words.

Directions: Read the selection and then answer the questions on the following page.

Selection

On Friday I had my last day at Happy Valley Elementary School. On Saturday the moving truck came and took all our stuff to Hoboken, New Jersey, and we left our house in Happy Valley forever. On Sunday, our first day in the new house, the temperature was one hundred degrees Fahrenheit—the beginning of the hottest heat wave ever recorded in Hoboken in the month of June for 120 years.

One hundred and twenty years ago was when our Hoboken house had been built. This is what my parents did. They gave up a modern house in Happy Valley, New Jersey—a house with a front yard, a backyard, and trees, on a street with similar houses and similar trees—to move to a brick house with no front yard, practically no backyard, and no trees, on a street with guys sitting on the steps and spitting on the sidewalk, and cars and buses running right past our door. And the Hoboken house was in rotten condition and cost three times as much as we got for our Happy Valley house.

My parents said we were going to fix up the house and have an “urban lifestyle.” This is what an urban lifestyle is: My bike was stolen the first hour we were in town. And it was one hundred degrees Fahrenheit. My mother said she didn’t want me growing up in a suburb. She said life was real in cities. I went upstairs to sit in my crummy 120-year-old room.

My father climbed the stairs to my room. “Egad! It’s hot as an oven in here, old pal,” he said.

My father says things like “egad” and “odds bodkin.” They have no meaning. I simply tolerate these weirdnesses, along with so many things my parents do.

“Sorry about your bike, old man,” my father said.

He calls me old man, also old chap. There is no explanation for this.

“We’ll get you another bike, I promise,” he said. “But could you possibly wait until your birthday? There are a lot of expenses fixing up the new house.”

This was great. I could have a bike for my birthday, instead of some other present, which I would have gotten if I was not to get a bike, which I would not be getting if the one I already had hadn’t been stolen, which it probably would not have been if we had not moved to Hoboken, which was not my idea in the first place. . . .

Tips: Reading Text

1. Before you begin reading a passage, skim the questions that follow it to focus your reading.

2. Look for key ideas as you read. Change is a key idea in this passage. It is expressed in the opening lines.

3. Pay attention to the connotation of words. The examples that the narrator uses to define an “urban lifestyle” give the expression a negative connotation.

4. Draw conclusions. The narrator isn’t happy with the move, but he tells his father that everything is fine. He probably doesn’t want to hurt his father’s feelings.
“That will be fine, Dad,” I said.
“Good show, old man,” my father said. “Now about this room. I don’t see how you can stand it. Maybe you’d like us to drag your mattress into our room, where it’s nice and cool.”

My parents’ bedroom had a little dinky air conditioner that puffed air about three degrees cooler than what was outside. It was pathetic.
“I’ll be fine here, Dad,” I said.
“Good lad. Now do you want to help us scrape paint off the woodwork or just explore around?”
“I think I’ll do some exploring,” I said.

—from Looking for Bobowicz
Daniel Pinkwater

Directions: Answer these questions about the selection from Looking for Bobowicz.

1. What can you infer about the narrator from his description of the two houses in lines 8–19?
   A He is unhappy about moving.
   B He wants to run away.
   C He is spoiled.
   D He likes city life.

2. Which statement best describes the theme of this passage?
   A Suburban life is better than city life.
   B Parents don’t listen to their children.
   C Crime is a big part of urban life.
   D Change is difficult to accept.

3. In this passage, the narrator and his parents have different feelings about
   A household chores
   B the benefits of city life
   C the importance of honesty
   D family finances

4. The summer heat wave in this passage symbolizes the
   A danger of the city
   B narrator’s intense feelings
   C run-down house
   D father’s enthusiasm

3 Vocabulary

Most standardized tests include items that ask about the meanings of words. Some questions might refer to a passage you just read, while others might provide a sentence or paragraph of context followed by the answer choices.

1. Which of the following words from the passage on pages R94–R95 has a negative connotation?
   A stuff (line 2)
   B modern (line 8)
   C egad (line 20)
   D dinky (line 37)

2. Which word from the passage comes from the Latin root meaning “city”?
   A house (line 3)
   B street (line 10)
   C sidewalk (line 12)
   D urban (line 15)

3. Which line from the passage contains a simile?
   A “She said life was real in cities.” (lines 18–19)
   B “It’s hot as an oven in here, old pal” (lines 20–21)
   C “Good show, old man” (line 34)
   D “It was pathetic.” (line 38)

4. Read this dictionary entry for the word chap. Which noun definition represents the meaning of chap as used in line 25 of the passage?

   **DEFINITION**
   
   n. 1. The roughening of the skin caused especially by cold. 2. (Chiefly Brit.) fellow. 3. The face.

   A n. meaning 1
   B n. meaning 2
   C n. meaning 3
   D n. meaning 1

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**Tips: Word Meaning**

1. Connotation is the suggestion or feeling a word carries beyond its literal meaning. Small is a neutral word. Compact is a more positive word for small, but the word dinky has a negative connotation.

2. If you don’t know the exact meaning of a word, look for clues in nearby sentences. For the word urban in line 15, read the description in the preceding paragraph and ask yourself where you will find houses with small yards and busy streets with buses. Urban, choice C, is the best answer to that question. Urban means “relating to the city.”

3. A simile is a figure of speech. The words like and as are clues that a comparison is a simile.

4. Eliminate any answers that are not the same part of speech as the meaning of the word in the passage. Chap is used as a noun in the passage, so you can rule out answer choice D.

**Writing and Grammar**

You will be asked to write essays and even research papers in middle school. When it comes to writing, good ideas aren’t enough. You need to know how to express them. That requires knowledge of English grammar, sentence structure, and usage. To measure that skill, many standardized tests ask you to identify errors or to improve sentences and paragraphs.

**Directions:** Read this passage and then answer the questions.

**PASSAGE**

(1) On May 1 and October 1 you might see two or three moving trucks on a single city block. (2) These are the busiest moving days of the year. (3) The longest trucks are usually from companies that supply movers and sturdy packing boxes. (4) You have to reserve these trucks weeks in advance. (5) They won’t be available. (6) Professional movers use thick pads for furniture protection from scratches. (7) Sometimes people try to save money by renting a truck and moving himself. (8) Their things often get broken because they aren’t packed properly.

1. The correct coordinating conjunction to join sentences 4 and 5 is
   A but  
   B for  
   C or  
   D while

2. What is the best way to rewrite the underlined part of sentence 6?
   A to protect furniture from scratches  
   B for scratch protection on furniture  
   C for the protection of furniture from scratches  
   D in order to protect from scratches on furniture

3. What change, if any, should be made to sentence 7?
   A Change try to trying  
   B Change renting to getting  
   C Change himself to themselves  
   D Make no change

4. What change, if any, should be made to sentence 8?
   A Change their to there  
   B Change broken to broke  
   C Change aren’t to are’t  
   D Make no change

**Tips: Grammar**

1. Read the entire passage to grasp its overall meaning. Pay particular attention to any underlined parts.

2. Before choosing a revision, read through all of the choices to decide which one is best. Your selection should produce a sentence that is grammatically correct.

3. If you are asked to combine sentences, think about how the ideas relate to each other. When you understand the connection between the thoughts, you will know how to join them. The word but (choice A) can be used to show how two different ideas are related, but it is not the right word to use to join sentences 4 and 5.

4. Some items will test your knowledge of language conventions. Make sure that pronouns agree with antecedents and that verbs agree with subjects.

5. Some items will also test your knowledge of commonly confused words. In test item 4, choice A is a possible revision. Read sentences carefully to determine how each word is used before deciding which choice is best.

6. In test items 3 and 4, choice D says, “Make no change.” Choose this answer only if the sentence is correct as it is originally written.

Responding to Writing Prompts

Not all tests are multiple choice. Sometimes you have to develop your ideas into a paragraph or a short essay. You might be asked to interpret, summarize, or react to a reading selection.

Directions: Reread the selection from Looking for Bobowicz on pages R94–R95 and follow the directions for the short and extended responses.

SHORT RESPONSE

Write a well-organized paragraph comparing and contrasting the narrator’s old and new homes.

Sample Short Response

The narrator’s two homes are very different. In Happy Valley he lived on a tree-lined street in a quiet suburb. In Hoboken he lives in a noisy urban neighborhood where bicycles get stolen. The house in Happy Valley was modern and was surrounded by greenery. The house in Hoboken is an old, run-down building surrounded by busy streets. The name Happy Valley suggests a cool, rural locale that is free from the stifling heat and close quarters of Hoboken.

EXTENDED RESPONSE

Discuss in two or three paragraphs what the narrator’s mother means when she says life is “real” in cities.

Sample Extended Response

When the narrator’s mother says life is real in cities, she probably means that the city is a reflection of life itself.

Variety is what makes a city real. As you travel through a big city you can hear many languages being spoken, and you can sample foods from different parts of the world. You can rub shoulders with executives on one street and panhandlers on the next. You find people living in penthouses, modest homes, and public housing. You see mosques, churches, and synagogues.

The challenges of urban life are also very real. People in cities, including children, learn to cope with overcrowding, noise, air pollution, traffic, and crime.

Tips: Responding to Writing Prompts

1. Short-response prompts are often fact based rather than interpretive. Get right to the point in your answer, and stick to the facts.

2. Make sure that you write about the assigned topic. Support your answer with details from the passage, such as a quotation, a paraphrase, or an example.

3. When you are writing an extended response, build your paragraphs around clear topic sentences that will pull your ideas together.

4. If you are asked to interpret a passage, don’t just copy the author’s words. Try to express the ideas in your own words. Express your ideas clearly so that the reader understands your viewpoint.

5. Proofread your response for errors in capitalization, punctuation, spelling, or grammar.


6 Writing an Essay

Many tests will ask you to read a prompt and write an essay in response to it. You might be asked to write a narrative, persuasive, or expository essay. You might be asked to write a story, summarize an article, or respond to a piece of writing. It is important to read the prompt carefully and look for direction words that tell you what to write about. Because of the time constraints, an impromptu essay will not be polished. It will represent a first draft. Even so, it should be complete. Essays are scored on the following criteria:

- **Focus** Establish a point of view in the opening paragraph. Stay with that topic throughout the essay.
- **Organization** Maintain a logical progression of ideas.
- **Support for ideas** Use details and examples to develop an argument or line of thinking.
- **Style/word choice** Use words accurately and vary sentences.
- **Grammar** Use standard English and proofread for errors.

Writing Prompt

In 2004, a bill was introduced to the California legislature that proposed lowering the voting age to 14. Under the “Training Wheels for Citizenship” concept, votes cast by 14- and 15-year-olds would be counted as one-fourth of a full vote, and those cast by 16- and 17-year-olds would be counted as one-half. Write a persuasive essay of four or five paragraphs supporting or rejecting this idea.

**SAMPLE PERSUASIVE ESSAY**

Lowering the voting age is not a good idea, especially if our votes wouldn’t count as full votes. A lot of high school students aren’t interested in politics. It seems that many adults aren’t either, because less than half of them vote in most elections. Teenagers are focused on getting into college. Events on Capitol Hill seem a long way off. Most of us probably wouldn’t vote even if we could.

Voter independence is another issue. I generally listen to my parents, but sometimes they have their ideas and I have mine. If I were allowed to vote, I’m afraid they would try to influence my decision. Voting is supposed to be private, but my mom can always get the truth out of me.

As for counting our votes as fractions of a vote, that is an insult. For teenagers to have an impact on an election, four times as many of us would have to vote. It’s almost un-American, because our nation was founded on the idea that everyone’s vote has the same weight, whether we are rich or poor.

A lot of political issues affect young people. Most of the people living in poverty, for example, are kids. And of course the government pays more attention to the needs of people who vote. But money also influences government policies, and money is one thing young people don’t have.

In conclusion, young people lack the interest, the independence, and the economic power to make a difference in the voting booth.