



Welcome

By Marguerite Jackson, Chief Executive Officer

Finally, spring seems to have arrived which marks the time of year when we are busy with the administration of the Assessments of Reading, Writing and Mathematics, Primary and Junior Division, and the spring administration of the Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics.

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Making Connections Makes Sense: Helping Students Use What They Know to Understand What They Read?

By Carol Ricker-Wilson

Students struggle particularly with the skill of making relevant and specific connections between what they read and their own ideas. But this skill, which requires students to infer, interpret, analyze, evaluate and integrate information, is essential to full reading comprehension and critical thinking.

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How Would You Score This?

Try Your Hand at Scoring a Student Response!

Take a look at the following student response to a Grade 6 reading question. How would you score it?

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FEEDBACK

Your comments matter!
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Finally, spring seems to have arrived, which marks the time of year when we are busy with the administration of the Assessments of Reading, Writing and Mathematics, Primary and Junior Division, and the spring administration of the Grade 9 Assessment of Mathematics. We are also administering an alternative version of the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test, because a large number of students were affected by inclement weather on the administration date in April. We are pleased to offer all students who were absent on the date of the April administration, whether due to inclement weather or other reasons, the opportunity to write the test in May.

As always, past EQAO tests and the scoring guides, which include samples of student responses, are available on the EQAO Web site to help students, parents and educators get a sense of what to expect, what the assessments look like and how to identify samples of student responses at each level of performance.

Each year, EQAO's education officers, along with teams of educators and trained scorers, review thousands of

student booklets from across the province to identify and describe the range of performance levels. Based on their review of the assessments of reading over the years, scorers maintain that students continue to experience challenges with making connections from what they read to what they know.

Helping students make these types of connections promotes a deeper level of engagement and understanding of the material. Making connections is one of many fundamental life skills that will serve our young people well in the 21st century. As educators, we know that our role is not only to help students develop these critical thinking skills but also to spark curiosity and encourage enjoyable reading experiences that will promote a continuous love of learning and an enrichment of life.

The feature article in this issue of *EQAO Connects* focuses on the knowledge we have gained from reviewing thousands of student booklets and the value of helping students make text-to-text, text-to-self and text-to-world connections.

I trust you will find the insights and recommendations put forward by your colleagues to be helpful to you as you engage and inspire students along their journey of learning.



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Making Connections Makes Sense: Helping Students Use What They Know to Understand What They Read

By Carol Ricker-Wilson

Before working with EQAO, Carol Ricker-Wilson was an English/Literacy Consultant for the Toronto District School Board and former course director at York University's Faculty of Education.

“As an EQAO education officer, I am involved in every aspect of the assessment cycle, from development, administration, scoring to the final reporting of results. During the scoring phase, I work closely with educators from across the province on the language component of the Grade 3 and Grade 6 assessments, and on the Grade 10 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT).”

These assessments require students to demonstrate three reading skills: reading for explicit information, or *reading on the lines*; making inferences, or *reading between the lines*; and making connections, or *reading beyond the lines*. A key observation gained from examining student responses, and scoring data related to all three assessments is that students struggle particularly with the skill of making relevant and specific connections between what they read and their own ideas. But this skill, which requires students to infer, interpret, analyze, evaluate and integrate information, is essential to full reading comprehension and critical thinking.

WHAT ARE READING CONNECTIONS?

EQAO *connections* questions assess students' ability to integrate knowledge from *outside* a reading selection

with information provided by the selection. Where does this knowledge come from? Certainly from personal knowledge and experience, but also from the subject, or content areas, of the *Ontario Curriculum*. For example, from science, students gain an understanding of such concepts as “habitat” (Grade 4) and “sustainable ecosystems” (Grade 9). From social studies, they acquire knowledge of First Nations life and history (Grade 6). From physical and health education (Grades 1–8), they learn about the value of regular exercise.

It's important to note that EQAO does not assess students on their content-area knowledge per se. EQAO's assessments are informed by and aligned with the *Ontario Curriculum* expectations up to the appropriate grade level of the assessment. Consequently, for both reading selections and writing prompts, EQAO assessments draw on the knowledge base students are developing from the *Ontario Curriculum*. See EQAO's *Curriculum Connections in Language: Reading and Writing* and *OSSLT Curriculum Connections* for examples of this alignment. In addition, assessments draw from common experiences, such as writing an announcement about a fun fair or explaining the value of learning a second language.



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Citing Colleen Buddy in *Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader's Workshop* (1997), authors Keene and Zimmermann identify three types of reading connections: text-to-self connections, text-to-text connections and text-to-world connections.

① Text-to-self connections

In these types of connections, the text acts as a springboard for students to articulate a personal experience with a subject or issue. A typical text-to-self connection might begin with the phrase "This reminds me of a time when I . . ." While such connections can deepen engagement with the subject of a reading text, they can also encourage students to *extend* ideas or *move away* from a text itself. Scorers of EQAO assessments have observed such drift. They have additionally observed that students attempt text-to-self connections when not prompted to provide them. For example, on the 2012 primary (Grade 3) assessment, after reading the poem "That Was Summer," students were prompted to "Describe how the speaker feels about summer. Use details from the text to support your answer." A partially correct answer looked like this:

"I think the speaker feels happy about summer. I am happy about summer, too."

The first sentence indicates that the student understood a main idea of the poem, but the response lacks details from the poem and fails to connect any details from the poem to the student's personal experience of summer. In short, adequate *textual evidence* in this text-to-self connection is missing.

② Text-to-text connections

In this type of reading connection, students draw on knowledge from one text to better understand another. Prompted with "What is the relation between these texts?" a student might begin by responding

"The article explained what a virus is, and the film about the first smallpox inoculations showed what a virus can do to the body and to a whole city. I now know that . . ."

While EQAO questions do not ask for text-to-text connections, in *Classroom Instruction That Works: Research-Based Strategies for Increasing Student Achievement*, educational researcher Robert Marzano stresses the importance of such connections. Marzano found that identifying similarities and differences between texts is a high-yield learning strategy that greatly benefits students across all grade and subject levels. And it helps build content-area knowledge.

③ Text-to-world connections

Text-to-world connections require students to apply their knowledge and experience to a text. Let's look at three examples of how EQAO *connections* draw on and invite students to use their content-area, or academic, knowledge.

Example 1 (see page 5) comes from a 2011 Grade 3 open-response reading prompt for the reading selection "[An Underwater Apartment Building](#)" and is an example of a thorough response.



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EXAMPLE 1:

Explain what makes a coral reef an “active, living community.” Use details from the text and your own ideas to support your answer.

I know a coral reef is a living community because it's a community made by fish so fish have holes to live in to hide from sea creatures that like fish. From the text a underwater community is made like an underwater apartment built by fish so they can live, eat, hide and to have a home.

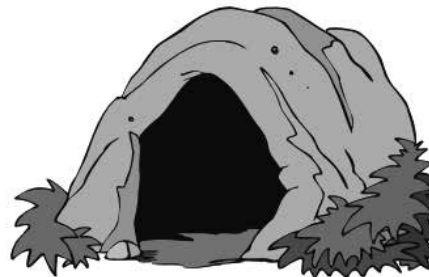
The students' own *relevant* ideas (as per EQAO open-response reading rubric) could have been drawn from prior knowledge about human communities from the social studies curriculum and/or habitats and animal communities based on previous learning from the science curriculum. The student directly connected the title to the several purposes of a community and provided sufficient and relevant support from the text to draw a conclusion. The student integrated knowledge from outside the reading with the text itself.

EQAO short- and long-writing prompts also might direct students to draw upon and apply their knowledge about a subject. In example 2, a 2011 [Grade 6 writing prompt](#) asked students to imagine themselves as explorers.

There were many ways of responding to this question (e.g., describing the adventure of trekking to the cave,

EXAMPLE 2:

You are an explorer who has discovered the opening of the cave used by an ancient civilization. Write a story describing your adventure.



Ideas for My Story

the cave itself or what was found in it). Students could draw on—or make connections to—their viewing and reading knowledge of the adventure-story genre and its elements, based on knowledge from the language

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curriculum. For content, they could highlight the work of explorers, studied in the social studies curriculum. The question also invited students to use their knowledge of early civilizations, drawn from social studies. But whatever their approach, in order to provide content with relevant and sufficient detail, students benefitted if they had internalized these questions: "What do I know about adventure stories? What do I know about ancient civilizations? Where did I learn this? Ah—I can write about discovering Aboriginal-Canadian or Mayan objects. So where I set my story is also important." See the [2011 scoring guide](#) for the range of responses to this question.

In example 3, a 2012 OSSLT open-response reading prompt for a dialogue about rap artist [Roland Pemberton's](#) appointment as Edmonton Poet Laureate asked "Why is Pemberton's appointment newsworthy?" Students benefitted if they applied their understanding of journalism and the role of newspapers in society,

knowledge drawn from the media studies strand of the Grades 1–8 language and Grades 9–12 English curricula.

The student combines relevant information from the text with a personal understanding of what makes for newsworthiness. Again, the student integrated knowledge from outside the reading with the text itself. See the [2012 scoring guide](#) for the range of responses to this question.

Ultimately, the larger the student's prior knowledge base, and the more he or she is taught to activate it, the more likely it is that he or she will be able to make substantial text-to-world connections. And research indicates that reading extensively provides students with the vocabulary, concepts and knowledge base (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998) to do so. Additionally, reading extensively offers vicarious experiences, such as riding a horse or visiting Ottawa, to students who have not had these opportunities.

EXAMPLE 3

Why is Pemberton's appointment newsworthy? Use specific details from the selection to support your answer.

Roland Pemberton's appointment is newsworthy because he's not the conventional candidate. Pemberton is a fairly young, rapper, "replacing someone you would expect in the job — a 74 year-old professor who's published 29 books and won the Governor General's award for poetry" as stated in the selection.



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Useful questions that students should internalize during and after reading—or viewing—in order to make text-to-world connections are “What is this text about? What do I already know about the subject? How does that help me understand what I’m reading? What knowledge do I have that relates to the questions I’m being asked about this reading?”

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR HELPING STUDENTS MAKE CONNECTIONS

- Apply a reciprocal teaching framework to help students ask questions, clarify their understanding, summarize text components and extend their vocabulary. This approach has been successful in improving reading comprehension and, consequently, students’ knowledge bases.
- Consult the Ministry of Education’s *Guide to Effective Literacy Instruction, Grades 4–6, Volume One* for tips on activating prior knowledge. Research indicates that this strategy is highly effective in helping students with both reading comprehension and generating ideas for writing.
- Use integrated learning to introduce and highlight related ideas and information across subject areas. Introduce and explore a subject or big idea that can be explored through several lenses.

For example, the [science and technology curriculum](#) suggests “the impact of science and technology on different peoples and the environment” (p. 30) as one big idea with an interdisciplinary focus. For research and additional information on the value of integration, please refer to [Integrated Curriculum: Increasing Relevance While Maintaining Accountability](#).

- Teach students to identify the types of questions that are being asked in their textbooks and from other sources and provide the appropriate kind of response. Provide frequent opportunities for students to practise generating their own questions and presenting these for peer responses. Through this activity students demonstrate a form of procedural knowledge. Most students do not think about *how* to answer a question. But if they learn how to generate questions, they are simultaneously learning how questions work and how to proceed at finding what is important in a text.



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CONCLUSION

A key concern for scorers of EQAO assessments is that students sometimes neglect or forget their content-area knowledge base when they are attempting to relate a text to “their own ideas”—even though drawing on this knowledge could help them provide more robust responses. But this is not simply an “EQAO” skill. It is a cross-curricular skill that is crucial for academic success at all levels. Additionally, this process leads to a more engaged experience in which students develop deeper understanding and enjoyment of texts, which is one of the fundamental purposes of literacy.



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To find out more

EQAO's Web site provides additional information on the *Curriculum Connections in Language: Reading and Writing* and *OSSLT Curriculum Connections*.

You can also find student assessment booklets containing actual questions from the *Primary and Junior Division, Grade 9* and *OSSLT* assessments, and scoring guides containing examples of student answers taken from past years' assessments.



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Item Specific Rubric

Code	Description
10	Response attempts to answer why Dave Williams continues to track the Moon Trees. The response either: • <u>answers an aspect of the question</u> OR • <u>does not refer to the reading selection</u> OR • <u>provides inaccurate support.</u>
20	Response indicates a partial understanding of the question by answering why Dave Williams continues to track the Moon Trees. The response provides: • <u>irrelevant support</u> from the reading selection OR • <u>vague support</u> from the reading selection OR • <u>limited support</u> from the reading selection The response usually requires the reader to connect the support to what it is intended to prove.
30	Response indicates an understanding by explaining why Dave Williams continues to track the Moon Trees. The response includes: • <u>some accurate and relevant support</u> and • <u>some vague or underdeveloped support.</u> The response requires the reader to make some connections between the support and what it is intended to prove.
40	Response indicates an understanding by providing <u>specific and relevant support</u> from the reading selection to <u>explain fully</u> why Dave Williams continues to track the Moon Trees.



How Would You Score This?

Try your hand at scoring a student response!

1. Read this [reading passage](#) from the 2011–2012 Assessment of Reading, Writing and Mathematics, Junior Division.
2. Read the student response to the question below.

Why does Dave Williams continue to track the Moon Trees? Use information from the text and your own ideas to support your answer.

I think Dave Williams continues to track the moon trees to see if there is any different effects on the trees after there seeds were put into space. To look for anything a normal tree didn't have.

3. Use the item-specific rubric to determine how you would score the student response.
4. Click the score codes to find out whether you are right and to see examples of student work at each of the codes.

Check out [additional examples](#) from past years' assessments.