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Article

Top 10 Terms Students Need to Know to Be Successful on Standardized Tests

Mastering these key words will help students prep for open-ended test questions.

By [Kechia Williams](#)

- Grades: 3–5, 6–8

Standardized testing is a stressful time for everyone involved: students, teachers, and parents. Preparing students for standardized testing is a challenging task. Students in South Carolina take the PACT (Palmetto Achievement Challenge Test) in English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies in grades 3-8. Multiple choice, open-response, open-ended, and extended response questions are all included on the test and the test is not timed.

Each year, my students seem to have difficulty with open-ended and extended response questions. I think the problem stems from not being able to understand the key words in the questions. For example, directions for a writing prompt might read, "Choose a TV character that you think is funny. Describe the character, and tell why this character is so funny or summarize what happened at the end of the story." Students need to recognize the key words describe and summarize to know that they are being asked to write a descriptive essay and summarize correctly.

To prepare students to recognize important directional words, I introduce a series of terms throughout the year and review their meaning in mini-lessons. Words commonly used on standardized tests will appear in directions that I give them or in daily assignments/activities. In this way, my students see, hear, and learn to correctly respond to the terms so that they won't have a problem when they come in contact with it on a test.

Here's a list of the 10 words I find most critical for test prep and their student-friendly explanations.

1. **Analyze**

Explain how each part functions or fits into the whole. Write the obvious as well as the hidden characteristics or meanings. This can be very difficult for 6th graders; they tend to respond on the surface without digging deep. I tell my students when you analyze something, pretend you are a detective and break the material into parts. Poetry gives students a great opportunity to analyze. For example, during my poetry unit, I have my students analyze poems by identifying the theme, figurative language, inferences and their meanings, and clarifying words/phrases.

2. **Persuade** (variations: Argue, Convince)

Give a point of view! Take a stand and defend one side of an issue. Give facts, statistics, beliefs, opinions, and your personal view. Show passion when you are defending your side. I teach my students to argue through persuasive writing and debate. I share persuasive pieces with my students such as editorials from the newspaper or a magazine and we analyze the piece using the following questions:

- Is the author's viewpoint clear? Is the author's opinion presented logically?
- Did the author use facts, observations, comparisons, or data to support his/her view? Did the author present an opposing argument?
- Did the author sway your opinion? How could the author's arguments be improved?

Graphic Organizers and Strategy Sheets That Scaffold Writing from Paragraphs to Essays by Anina Robb is a great resource to use when teaching persuasion and other forms of writing.

My students also write persuasive letters, and I give them persuasive prompts to complete for their journals. I love to teach persuasion, because you can make it so personal with the students. Examples: Should students be required to tuck in their shirts at school? Convince your parents to buy you a gift you want.

3. Compare

I've noticed that students sometimes confuse comparing and contrasting. I remind them that comparing provides common characteristics, identifying how things are alike or similar. As a class, we orally compare and contrast the good and bad points of watching television. I draw a chart on the board, the left side contains the good points and examples about television, and the right side contains the bad points and examples about television. Once their ideas are written down, then they are developed into paragraphs. Analyzing differences and similarities helps students gain a greater understanding of the material.

4. Contrast

Contrasts provide the characteristics that are not alike. How are people, events, or objects different? My students compare and contrast all the time using [graphic organizers](#). They compare characters in novels and short stories. For example, my students just finished a writing assignment on comparing and contrasting the book, *Tuck Everlasting*, and the movie. My honors students compared and contrasted two of the characters, John and Lorraine in *The Pigman*. To help my students compare and contrast the two characters, they first identified John and Lorraine's [traits](#). They also found examples to support those traits.

5. Summarize

Sum it up! Give the meaning in a concise way using as few words as possible. My students really have trouble with this, they have problems deciding what is most important in the piece of literature, and they end up writing entirely too much. Summarizing requires students to synthesize and restate key points from text in a sentence or short paragraph. I always tell my students to ask themselves, "What is the author saying?" I explain to them to retell the most important facts.

I introduce summarizing by teaching a lesson using the novel, *Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes* by Eleanor Coerr and a graphic organizer titled "Puzzling" (from *Graphic Organizers and Activities for Differentiated Instruction in Reading* by Nancy L. Witherell and Mary C. McMackin). We read two chapters as a class, and important ideas about the main character, setting, problem, big events, and solution are recorded on the graphic organizer. We then decide as a class which information is really needed to write a good summary.

6. Demonstrate

When they see this word, students need to know that they must provide a step-by-step procedure to show how to do something. I have my students explain how to do or to make something. For example, I have my students write directions/instructions from their home to school, how to complete their favorite recipe, or do a certain dance. When students are writing instructions, make sure they include the following:

- Statement indicating what the instructions are for
- Description of the kinds and amounts of materials needed to perform the indicated task
- Explanation of each step in detail
- Personal flavor or voice
- Title
- Bulleted list or paragraph format

7. Describe

Present a clear picture of a person, place, thing or idea. I constantly remind my students that the reader should be able to visualize a picture or movie in his head from the material read. I teach the importance of sensory words to my students by:

- Sharing a great example of sensory words (an excerpt from a book or a poem).
- Having students complete a sensory activity about their favorite food or animal
- Having them complete the following information in a chart format: size, shape, color, taste, texture, odor, unusual feature.

I also supply my students with a list of sensory words. Students then take their information from the graphic organizer, and write it in paragraph format.

8. Explain

Sixth graders do not always take ample time to give clear descriptions of an event, object, or idea. My favorite words are "tell me more." I tell them to make sure it is crystal clear. Think about the five W's (Who, What, When, Where, Why) and H (How).

- Who is the story about?
- When did it take place? What happened in the story?

- Where did it take place? Why is this event or topic important?
- How did it happen?

I tell them to add to their explanation by providing details based on answers to these questions.

9. **Interpret**

I tell my students to write their understanding of the passage in their own words. They should start by asking themselves, "What does the _____ mean?" I instruct them to give a view from their experiences and the information they find. I recommend that you start off by teaching this skill with interesting reading passages that apply to the students.

10. **Infer**

Read between the lines; the answer is not in the passage. The reader derives meaning from information or clues the author provides. This can be very hard for reluctant readers and even poses a problem for fairly good readers sometimes. Students have to be able to figure out the author's clues. If the student does not understand the material, he will not be able to answer an inferential type question. I tell them it is an educated guess like a hypothesis in science. I ask the following questions to check for inferential comprehension:

- How did this person or writer feel?
- What do you think the next step will be?
- How does this event affect your life today?

A number of these key vocabulary words are interrelated. For example, if a student can analyze, interpreting should not be a problem. Also comparing and contrasting go hand in hand, but they are not always connected. The terms are also cross-curricular, and that makes them extremely useful in all classes.

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