



## High Progress Literacy & the ACT

HPLA's courses and seminars are designed to familiarize teachers and students with the ACT and to support teachers in teaching their students the reading and test-taking skills necessary to succeed on long and challenging (and rather grueling) standardized tests.

### Overview of the ACT

The ACT has four sections. Each section is scored on a scale from 1 - 36. The four scores are added together and averaged to give Composite ACT score as follows:

1. English: 1 - 36
2. Math: 1 - 36
3. Reading: 1 - 36
4. Science: 1 - 36

$$\text{Composite Score (1 - 36)} = \frac{E+M+R+S}{4}$$

With the exception of the writing section (which is required by many colleges), and the math section, each timed section on the ACT involves passage reading with multiple choice questions.

<b>English</b>	5 passages, 45 minutes, 75 questions, 4 answer choices per question
<b>Math</b>	60 minutes; 60 questions; questions arranged from easier to harder, 5 answer choices per question
<b>Reading</b>	4 passages, 35 minutes, 40 questions, 3000 words (~750 words per passage), 4 answer choices per question
<b>Science</b>	6 passages; 35 minutes; 40 questions, 4 answer choices per question

## Rationale

The ACT is extremely heavy on passage reading with an emphasis on speed and comprehension. For example, in the reading section, students have only about 8.75 minutes to read each ~750-word passage and to answer 10 fairly long multiple-choice questions. The Math section requires that students read and answer 60 often wordy-problems with wordy-answers in 60 minutes.

Why? Because the ability to understand and synthesize large amount of information is required for college success. It is not unusual for students to have to read several hundred pages a week for a single course.

[The ACT Study of 2006](#) revealed that a student's ability to read complex text is the most predictive factor in determining college success. Students who meet or exceed the ACT benchmark of 21, are more likely to be able to do the work demanded in college courses as freshmen, while students who enter college below the benchmark are more likely to drop out because they are unable keep up with the work required in their courses.

For these reasons, the ACT tests the key skills required for college success: the ability to read and draw together large amounts of information quickly. The content knowledge necessary to reach the benchmark score on each subject test is more basic.

## The ACT Study Implications

The ACT Study (2006) states that

*"All courses in high school, not just English and social studies but mathematics and science as well, must challenge students to read and understand complex texts. In most cases, a complex text will contain multiple layers of meaning, not all of which will be immediately apparent to students upon a single superficial reading. Rather, such texts require students to work at unlocking meaning by calling upon sophisticated reading comprehension skills and strategies.*

*"In a nation where 13- and 17-year-olds have increasingly less exposure to or interaction with books outside of the classroom, high schools must still play the primary role in providing students with the kinds of complex reading materials and experiences they need in order to be college and work ready and must continue to teach and reinforce reading strategies that deal with increasingly more complex reading tasks" (ACT, 2006, p. 7).*

## Backward Design: Creating College and Career Oriented Learning Communities with HPL

Preparing students for college and career success requires that we take seriously the findings of the ACT and other studies that consistently find that

- engaged reading—how much students engage with reading across the curriculum—is most predictive of reading ability,
- reading ability is most predictive of college readiness, and
- the tests students are required to take to get into college test reading ability.

College and career readiness, then, begin with the decisions we make daily in our classrooms. For learning to change, our teaching, our assignments, and our expectations about how students spend their time in our classrooms must change.

Rather than solely teaching content, we must engage students with complex disciplinary texts and teach them how to quickly construct their own understandings in every subject. This will probably mean that as teachers, we must learn different ways to preview, locate information, and closely read what we need so that we can make sense of large amounts of material—and so we can teach our students to do all of this as well.

### Students must learn how to independently

- **Preview texts** to quickly determine what texts are about, how they are organized, and where information is located;
- **Annotate texts and questions** so they can return quickly to important parts of a text to closely read;
- **Use information gathered through previewing to read closely whenever necessary**, which means learning to use the logic of language together with their own questions and internal logic and reasoning processes to construct understandings;
- **Use logic and reasoning to eliminate unlikely alternatives**—both during reading and when choosing answers on multiple-choice tests; and
- **Write well, and write a lot.**

## Our Assumptions

In High Progress Literacy, we recognize reading as an ill-structured domain. That is, there is no way possible to pre-teach or predetermine what an individual reader will need to work on when reading a particular piece. There are multiple paths to successful reading depending on what the reader already knows and knows how to do with what s/he knows.

Reading is thinking. It is bringing together information in the reader's head (which may or may not match what the author is writing about) with information in the text. It is a highly individualized collection of processes that require continuous decision-making, self-regulation, and self-monitoring. We can teach kids what to do and how to make these decisions. And as teachers, we can help them draw the lines between what they do (and don't do) and the results of their decisions, efforts and actions. But we cannot directly teach students how to read. Students develop dynamic reading processing systems through practice—by reading.

When we support students in learning how to do these things routinely in our classrooms, we put them in a better position to succeed on these incredibly challenging tests. These test-prep materials are specifically intended to help children prepare for the ACT. However, the skills they learn on one test can be applied to another, and we must help bridge that gap to help students understand that when they are preparing for the ACT they are also preparing for EOC, ASVAB, Work Keys, and SAT. While these tests are unique in their own ways, the core skills of reading, and logical reasoning, and time management are ones that we want our students to carry with them for the rest of their lives.