

Easy Does It

Grade 6 students should be able to ace the sample passage for Ontario's grade 10 test of literacy.

Sample Passage and Questions from the EQAO's Forthcoming Literacy Test

The 60-metre West Montrose covered bridge across the Grand River is recognized by Ontario's Historic Sites Board. It is our last covered bridge, and visitors come from all over the world to see this site. Covered bridges were built for safety and for economic reasons. A roof over the bridge served to protect the timbers and trusses from the weather. This is the reason the bridge is still standing after more than 100 years.

Uncovered wooden bridges have a lifespan of only 10 to 15 years because rain causes joints to rot in summer and freeze in winter. Oil and tar applied to preserve the wood floor make the surface slippery when wet. Horses fear rushing water and become spooked as they approach uncovered bridges. But a horse will trot up to the entrance of a covered bridge and will clip-clop through, reassured by the side walls and the light at the end of the tunnel. Light traffic still crosses the bridge daily and many horse-and-buggies cross on Sundays. The bridge is often referred to as "The Kissing Bridge." The soft light provides a feeling of intimacy for the romantic.

Ontario's much-ballyhooed grade 10 Test of Reading and Writing is designed to ensure that a grade 12 graduation diploma, even from the "workplace" stream, will guarantee a literate young adult. All students will have to pass this test in order to receive a secondary school diploma.

Of course, this begs the question of how literate is literate? I think it is fair to say that most people would agree that reading skills at a tenth or eleventh grade level would be the bare minimum to survive in today's world.

If this is the case, then the EQAO's sample passage is cause for concern. While it is an interesting bit of factual material, it is nowhere near the level we should expect high school graduates to handle with ease.

The passage is primarily a very simple piece of expository prose, with limited vocabulary and very restricted sentence structure. Most sentences are short, declarative sentences, and all begin with the subject. The vocabulary is very limited, the only word not easily within the recognition vocabulary of the average grade 5 student being "trusses," a word whose meaning is easily deduced from context.

According to this paragraph, why do uncovered wooden bridges have such a short lifespan?

- (a) too much traffic
 - (b) use of oil and tar
 - (c) weather conditions
 - (d) rushing river water
1. Which of the following best explains "timbers and trusses?"
 - (a) uncovered bridges
 - (b) framework of the bridge
 - (c) floorboard of the bridge
 - (d) decorations on the bridge
 3. According to this paragraph, why are horses more comfortable crossing a covered bridge?
 4. According to this paragraph, why were covered bridges economical?
 5. In your opinion, should we invest time and money in preserving historic sites such as the West Montrose covered bridge? Explain why you think we should or why you think we shouldn't?

This passage is less complex than much of the writing found in grade 6 and 7 classroom texts, and much less demanding than textbook material in grades 9 and 10.

There are a variety of "readability" formulas that calculate the grade level of a piece of text, based on factors such as word length, sentence length, number of syllables in words, use of the passive voice, use of subordinate clauses, and so forth. When checked on several of these formulas, "The Kissing Bridge" scores at somewhere between early grade 6 and late grade 7 in readability.

It is also worth noting that it is possible for students to successfully answer some of the questions without having actually read the passage.

As well, before coming to grips with the meaningfulness of the test, it will be necessary to discover what level of proficiency will be required to earn a passing grade. If, as I suspect, the bar will be set very low, students who can write their names will pass.

If, on the other hand, students will be required to actually read at a grade 6 or 7 level as well as write down their

answers with a corresponding degree of literacy, then I estimate that about 30% of grade 10 students will in fact fail the test the first time around.

This translates into about 50,000 souls. Can we be assured they will receive effective remedial teaching — or merely more of what didn't work for them before? What are their life prospects, given the well-established correlation between low reading ability and incarceration?

That we are checking whether Ontario students can read and write is admittedly a step in the right direction. I think it is, however, legitimate to ask whether leaving such testing until the students have turned 15 may be waiting a bit too long.

It is also important to be clear about the significance of passing the test. While it may be reassuring to some that our grade 10 students can read and respond to the literal meaning of very simple material, it is a long way from the promised "higher standards and accountability" that we have been led to expect.

(The author is an Ontario teacher who prefers to remain anonymous.)