

# How to Address Common Core's Reading Standards Licensure Tests for K-6 Teachers

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*by Sandra Stotsky*





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# How to Address Common Core's Reading Standards Licensure Tests for K-6 Teachers\*

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Sandra Stotsky

## Contents

Executive Summary	1
I. Introduction	1
II. Background Knowledge	2
III. Rationale for a Comprehensive Stand-Alone Licensure Test of Beginning Reading Instructional Knowledge for Prospective Teachers of Elementary-Age or Pre-Elementary-Age Children	3
IV. Recommended Content and Weights in a Comprehensive Stand-Alone Licensure Test of Beginning Reading Instructional Knowledge for Prospective Teachers of Elementary- and Pre-Elementary-Age Children	3
V. Criteria for a Stand-Alone Licensure Test of Beginning Reading Instructional Knowledge	4
VI. Stand-Alone Licensure Tests of Beginning Reading Instructional Knowledge Used in More than One State	4
VII. Who Should Take a Comprehensive Stand-Alone Licensure Test of Beginning Reading Instructional Knowledge and Why	5
VIII. How and Why Licensure Tests for Reading Specialists Are Different	6
IX. Cut Score Issues	7
X. Concluding Remarks	7
About the Author	8
References	10

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\* The original version of this essay was co-authored with Margie Gillis (Haskins Laboratories and Literacy How) and is posted on the Literate Nation website.

### Executive Summary

Licensure tests—which typically assess the basic content knowledge needed for professional practice—are a key measure of quality control for entry into most professions, such as engineering, medicine, social work, or law. There are two major reasons for teacher licensure tests: (a) to protect the public (as with most licensure tests) and (b) to make teacher training programs accountable for the initial academic competence of those who complete their programs. Over 46 states have adopted Common Core's English language arts standards, and at present their teachers are to be held accountable for student achievement by means of tests based on these standards. It is in these states' best interest to ensure that all prospective teachers of elementary-age (K-6) students are prepared to address Common Core's reading standards at the beginning of their teaching careers, not after several years of professional development.

The purpose of this report is to provide information to state legislators, boards of education, and departments of education on why they should adopt a stand-alone and comprehensive reading licensure test addressing Common Core's reading standards. We do not tell states what test to adopt. Rather, we describe the features they should consider before they decide on a test that these prospective teachers should be required to pass if the state does not already require a reading test adequately addressing all of Common Core's reading standards.

### I. Introduction

Licensure tests—which typically assess the basic content knowledge needed for professional practice—are a key measure of quality control for entry into most

professions (think engineering, medicine, social work, or law). It is important to note at the outset that licensure tests for prospective teachers are NOT designed to predict later student achievement (Stotsky, 2007). They are constructed to determine if prospective teachers in a particular field have the entry-level knowledge that peers and teaching faculty in a particular field deem necessary for beginning teachers of record in that field. (ETS, 2004). More precisely, subject matter tests are constructed to discriminate between those test-takers who are and are not “just acceptably qualified individuals” (i.e., just at the level of subject matter knowledge required for entry-level teaching in the field). Raw scores on a licensure test might have a loose relationship with student achievement, but those who don't pass a pass/fail test don't get a license to teach.

There are two major reasons for teacher licensure tests: (a) to protect the public (as with most licenses) and (b) to make teacher training programs accountable for the initial academic competence of those who complete their programs. Over 46 states have adopted Common Core's English language arts standards, and their teachers will be held accountable for student achievement on tests based on these standards. It is in these states' best interest to ensure that all prospective teachers of elementary-age (K-6) students are prepared to address Common Core's reading standards at the beginning of their teaching careers.

The purpose of this essay is to provide information to state legislators, boards of education, and departments of education on why they should adopt a stand-alone and comprehensive reading licensure test addressing Common Core's reading

standards. We do not tell states what test to adopt. Rather, we describe the features they should consider before they decide on a test that these prospective teachers should be required to pass if the state does not already require a reading test adequately addressing all of Common Core’s reading standards.

## **II. Background Knowledge**

Most states began to require the passing of a licensure test for entry into the teaching profession only about two decades ago, even though passing a licensure test has been required for admission to most other professions for many decades. A provision in Title II in the 1998 reauthorization of the Higher Education Act compelled all states to require licensure tests for new teachers (Stotsky, 2006). Each state henceforth had to report annually on the pass rates for each cohort of prospective teachers completing training programs in the state’s teacher training institutions. Title II allowed each state to decide what licensure tests it would require, what the passing scores would be, and when any of the licensure tests could be taken, e.g., after or before completion of student teaching or admission to a training program (Rigden, 2006).

By 2005, all states had a test of prospective teachers’ basic reading and writing skills in place. Most also required a second (or sometimes third) test for licensure – specifically, a test of subject matter knowledge or the field of the license. Most states chose to use either one or more of the PRAXIS II tests already developed by Educational Testing Service (ETS) or the tests developed by National Evaluation Systems (NES), now owned by an educational publishing company (Pearson), tailored to a state’s own licensing regulations, K-12 standards,

and professional teaching standards. Tests of reading instructional knowledge are considered subject tests.

Title II did not specify whether the reading instructional knowledge of a prospective teacher of elementary-age children should be assessed on a test of its own or as part of a more comprehensive subject test, or to what depth a test should go. In many states, the knowledge base for reading instruction was assessed on a general elementary curriculum test along with topics in mathematics, history, geography and science, and possibly arts and physical education, resulting in skimpy attention to each component of reading instruction (i.e., phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension).

Nor were formats specified. A test could consist only of multiple-choice questions, of essay questions, or of a mixture of both. Even the grade levels a test covered were left up to only the state. A test of reading instructional knowledge could stress the major components of reading instruction in only the elementary grades (K-3 or K-5), in a larger span of grades (K-12), or in only the secondary grades.

In April 2000, the National Reading Panel (NRP) issued its report *Teaching Children to Read*, describing the major elements supported by high-quality research for improving beginning reading instruction (NICHD, 2000). The analysis conducted by the NRP found that most children can benefit from systematic instruction in the following areas: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and text comprehension. Despite the research support for this body of reading instructional knowledge, two studies that examined syllabi for reading methods courses



## ■ How to Address Common Core's Reading Standards

in a sample of education schools after 2000 (National Council on Teacher Quality, 2006; Steiner & Rozen, 2004) found that few schools of education expected an understanding of the above-mentioned body of knowledge in their reading methods courses.

### III. Rationale for a Comprehensive Stand-Alone Licensure Test of Beginning Reading Instructional Knowledge for Prospective Teachers of Elementary-Age or Pre-Elementary-Age Children

The major reason for states to require a licensure test of beginning reading instructional knowledge for prospective teachers of pre-elementary- or elementary-age children is that most education schools do not offer the reading methods courses these teachers need before they begin their teaching careers. Instead, they offer reading methods coursework that may undermine if not deliberately contradict what is known from almost 100 years of reading research (Stotsky, 2005).

Another reason for states to require a dedicated, or stand-alone, reading licensure test is that a multi-subject test cannot offer many items on reading instruction and test-takers can miss all those items and still pass the test. But even a stand-alone test (i.e., a test with its own pass score) isn't a strong assessment of a test-taker's beginning reading instructional knowledge if the test contains only 60 or so multiple-choice items and no questions requiring test-takers to write short essays diagnosing children's reading errors. For example, ETS's new PRAXIS II test titled Elementary Education: Multiple Subjects (5031) contains four separately-scorable sections, one of which

is on Reading and Language. This section contains 60 test items, 32 of which assess reading instructional knowledge. Even if all 32 test items focus on *research-based* reading instructional knowledge, this test is not an adequate assessment of reading instructional knowledge.

### IV. Recommended Content and Weights in a Comprehensive Stand-Alone Licensure Test of Beginning Reading Instructional Knowledge for Prospective Teachers of Elementary-Age and Pre-Elementary-Age Children

State legislators and boards and departments of education need to consider content **and** weights for major strands in comprehensive stand-alone reading licensure tests for prospective teachers of elementary- and pre-elementary-age children. Both need to be considered because teacher licensure tests use compensatory scoring (total number right across all sections) to arrive at the total score. Weights are typically based on the number of test items in a particular category and a heavy weight for an important category will ensure that all test-takers must earn some points in it. Overall, there should be about 100 multiple-choice (or selected response) items on a test (worth about 80% of the test) to allow for piloting some items for future tests that don't count for test-takers' scores, as well as two open or constructed response (OR or CR) items accounting for about 20% of the test.

We recommend the following weights or percentages:

- 35% for a strand on phonological and phonemic awareness, understanding of the alphabetic principle and concepts

- of print, the role of phonics, and word analysis skills and strategies;
- 30% for a strand on the development of vocabulary/concepts as well as comprehension strategies for imaginative and informational texts. Vocabulary study can be integrated with reading comprehension because it is the major component in it but it should be about 15% of the weight of this strand;
- 15% for a strand on reading assessment and instruction;
- 20% for OR or CR questions requiring the integration of knowledge (such as diagnosing children’s reading errors).

## **V. Criteria for a Stand-Alone Licensure Test of Beginning Reading Instructional Knowledge**

A dedicated reading test should meet the following four criteria:

1. A minimum of 90 items to ensure adequate assessment of research-based beginning reading instructional knowledge.
2. At least 50% of the items assess research-based beginning reading instructional knowledge.
3. At least one OR or CR question so that test-takers can indicate how well they can demonstrate in writing their diagnostic interpretation of student reading errors.
4. A clear distinction between characteristic reading elements in, and skills needed for, imaginative/literary texts and characteristic reading elements in, and skills needed for, informational/expository texts in order to address Common Core’s division of reading standards.

## **VI. Stand-Alone Licensure Tests of Beginning Reading Instructional Knowledge Used in More than One State**

1. *The Massachusetts Foundations of Reading Test (90)*. Developed in 2001 by NES/Pearson with reading researchers, reading specialists, and reading faculty in Massachusetts and later adopted by Connecticut (2009), Wisconsin (2012), North Carolina (2012), and New Hampshire (2013), the test contains 100 multiple-choice test items (85 of which count for the score), plus two essay questions requiring analysis of children’s reading errors. The test makes a clear distinction between informational and literary texts. NES/Pearson shares the copyright with Massachusetts for this test. States that adopt this test set their own cut score. However, they are advised to set the cut score close to the one established by Massachusetts so that comparisons can be made on pass/fail rates and reciprocity is possible for teachers who move from one state to the other. A 100-item practice test reflecting the kinds of test items on the test is available at [http://www.mtel.nesinc.com/PDFs/MA\\_FLD090\\_PRACTICE\\_TEST.pdf](http://www.mtel.nesinc.com/PDFs/MA_FLD090_PRACTICE_TEST.pdf).

2. *The PRAXIS II Teaching Reading (0204/5204)*. This test was copyrighted in 2013 and is used in about 13 states, according to ETS. It consists of 90 multiple-choice items and three essay questions. It is described as reflecting the five essential components of effective reading instruction identified by the National Reading Panel and as designed for “licensing an entry-level reading teacher” or “adding a reading endorsement to an existing license.” It is further described as designed for “individuals whose preparatory program has included intensive training

## ■ How to Address Common Core's Reading Standards

in the teaching of reading.” About 36% of the test addresses “emergent literacy (oral language, concepts of print), phonological awareness, alphabetical principle/phonics, and word analysis.” Vocabulary is worth another 14%. Comprehension and fluency are another 25%. “Instructional practices” are covered by three essay questions worth another 25%. However, test objectives do not make a clear distinction between imaginative/literary texts and informational/expository texts and the different elements in, and skills needed for, each major type of text, as indicated by the section of this test titled “Reading Comprehension Strategies across Text Types.”

3. *The PRAXIS II Teaching Reading: Elementary Education (5203)*. Copyrighted October 2013 and used in three states (Maryland, Tennessee, and Virgin Islands), according to ETS, this test is like the PRAXIS II reading test 0204/5204; it has 90 multiple-choice questions and three essay questions. But it is not clear from the ETS website for whom this test is designed or how its reading test items differ from those in 0204/5204; it appears different chiefly because it has a section on how writing supports reading instead of a section on instructional practices. Like 0204/5204, the test is described as reflecting the five essential components of effective reading instruction identified by the National Reading Panel, but, also like 0204/5204, the test does not make a clear distinction between imaginative/literary texts and informational/expository texts and the different elements in, and skills needed for, each major type of text, as indicated in the section of this test titled “Reading Comprehension Strategies across Text Types.”

4. *Reading Teacher (177)*. American Board Certification for Teacher Excellence (ABCTE) offers a stand-alone reading test that may be allowed in some states as an alternative to the required reading test for initial licensure of an elementary or special education teacher. However, the test at present seems to be used most frequently as an endorsement in reading for an already-licensed elementary teacher. It is a relatively strong test of the basic elements of beginning reading instructional knowledge.

### VII. Who Should Take a Comprehensive Stand-Alone Licensure Test of Beginning Reading Instructional Knowledge and Why

All prospective teachers of pre-elementary-age and elementary-age children should be required to pass a comprehensive stand-alone licensure test of reading instructional knowledge: early childhood teachers licensed to teach grades K, 1, 2, and 3; elementary teachers licensed up to grade 6; and most special education teachers. It is obvious why the prospective elementary teacher licensed for K-6 needs to take a test addressing beginning reading instructional knowledge no matter what grade level that teacher teaches. But it may be less obvious why special education and early childhood teachers should as well.

Today, most special education teachers work side by side in the elementary classroom with the elementary teacher. Accordingly, they should know as much about the teaching of beginning reading as the elementary teacher does (Stotsky, 2009). The only group of prospective special education teachers who would benefit from being prepared for a



different test, if it existed, are those planning to teach the deaf or hearing-impaired child. They need a test (preceded by the right reading coursework) that does NOT emphasize phonics—or sounding out. But, no such test has yet been developed, even at Gallaudet University, and it is completely unclear what the content of reading methods coursework is for prospective teachers of deaf children.

Prospective teachers of pre-school children also needs to know about the full scope of beginning reading through the elementary grades, even though most of the children they teach are not yet readers, because they are responsible for developing basic academic habits and attention spans for formal schooling. Education faculty in Massachusetts agreed that these prospective teachers should be required to take the same stand-alone reading test that elementary and special education teachers take.

### **VIII. How and Why Licensure Tests for Reading Specialists Are Different**

Teachers of record in self-contained elementary classrooms (Early Childhood or Elementary teachers, now often accompanied by Special Education teachers) are typically not equipped by their professional preparation programs to work one-on-one with children who are struggling to learn how to read. That is the work of a reading specialist (whether called a dyslexia specialist or a Title I Reading Teacher). In Massachusetts, there was general agreement that a reading specialist should know more than a classroom teacher and pass a different stand-alone test of reading instructional knowledge.

The distinction between these two stand-alone tests (and between the preparation programs leading to licensure as an elementary teacher who teaches reading as well as other subjects, or as a reading specialist) remains important even if the distinction is not observed in many state frameworks for teacher and specialist licensure or even in the tests they take. This distinction should affect the weights and content on the licensure test a specialist should be expected to pass (as well as the student teaching or practicum experience). The reading specialist (like a doctor boarded in a specialized area of medicine) is not a semi-administrator (e.g., a director of reading). The reading specialist is, and should be trained as, a clinician (e.g., a diagnostician plus) who can do one-on-one work with struggling readers. They need to know the material assessed on a test of beginning reading instructional knowledge. But they need to know a lot more about the kinds of diagnostic tests that are available and have a firm grounding in the neurological aspects of reading.

The licensure test for a reading specialist is an advanced test (like a medical board exam) that requires a firm base in neurology and should culminate a master's degree program for those wanting a license as a reading specialist. The preparation program for a reading or dyslexia specialist should be under the joint auspices of a medical school and an education school. Given the advanced nature of a licensure test for such a specialist, we recommend that about 20% of the test address principles of test construction and interpretation of test results, understanding of formal and informal reading and writing assessments, and understanding of screening and diagnosis of reading difficulties. Another 15% should address the neurological

## ■ **How to Address Common Core's Reading Standards**

aspects of reading and writing (with test items developed and vetted by neurologists and neuropsychologists).

ETS provides two tests for Reading Specialist. One test (0300), re-issued in 2008, provides minimal coverage of foundational reading skills. The other, 0301/5301, is a new test with 80 multiple-choice questions and two open response questions. It appears to cover basic reading skills far more extensively than 0300, and in its overall categories and weights bears a close resemblance to the Massachusetts Reading Specialist test (08). None of these tests, however, contains test items on the neurological aspects of reading and writing. Thus, all current licensure tests lack coverage of some of the areas that these prospective specialists should address in coursework for a master's degree.

### **IX. Cut Score Issues**

A cut score is the pass/fail cut-off. Where it is placed reflects both professional and political judgment. It determines what percentage of test-takers pass or fail the licensure test. A low cut score means that most test-takers pass. A very high cut score means that few do. The cut score is not intended to reflect how many test items a test-taker SHOULD get right, but the level of entry-level knowledge those setting the cut score deem acceptable for a beginning teacher of record. For that reason, those selected to be on the cut-score setting committee should reflect the range of institutions that prepare and hire teachers with this license.

For states using the Massachusetts Foundations of Reading Test (90), the raw score should be identical to the one used in Massachusetts—for reciprocity and comparison of results. At present, the

Connecticut test has a cut score that is very close to the one used in Massachusetts. By September 2014, the cut score in Wisconsin will be identical to the one used in Massachusetts.

### **X. Concluding Remarks**

Over 46 states have adopted Common Core's English language arts and reading standards, and teachers in these states will be held accountable for student achievement on tests based on Common Core's standards. It is in these states' best interest to ensure that all prospective teachers of preK to 6 students are prepared to address Common Core's reading standards at the beginning of their teaching careers, not afterwards.

Contrary to the thinking of many education researchers, licensure tests for prospective teachers are NOT designed to predict later student achievement. They are constructed to determine if prospective teachers in a particular field have the entry-level knowledge that peers and teaching faculty in a particular field deem necessary for beginning teachers of record in that field.

In choosing a dedicated reading licensure test for prospective teachers of young children (early childhood, elementary, and special education teachers), states should make sure that there is:

1. A minimum of 90 items to ensure adequate assessment of research-based beginning reading instructional knowledge, with at least 50% of the items assessing research-based beginning reading instructional knowledge.
2. At least one Open or Constructed Response question so that test-takers can indicate how well they can demonstrate in writing their

diagnostic interpretation of student reading errors.

3. A clear distinction between the features of literary texts and the features of informational texts in order to address Common Core's division of reading standards.

***About the Author:***

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## ■ How to Address Common Core's Reading Standards

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Pioneer Institute is an independent, non-partisan, privately funded research organization that seeks to change the intellectual climate in the Commonwealth by supporting scholarship that challenges the “conventional wisdom” on Massachusetts public policy issues.

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