Six Characteristics of a Great Prompt

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Below are six very concrete criteria for prompts to help students gain the maximum benefit of the testing effect, new standards, and formative assessment.

1. *Include a number or range of numbers in the prompt to make the response quantifiable*
2. *Use general academic vocabulary in the prompt*
3. *Require the student to use higher-order thinking skills, whenever possible*
4. *Complete quickly, 2–8 minutes*
5. *Grade quickly, 10–20 seconds*
6. *Grade for content only, not for conventions*

1. *Include a number or range of numbers in the prompt to make the response quantifiable*
Vague questions encourage vague answers, and vague answers are difficult and time consuming to evaluate. Because Type Two assignments include a number in the prompt, a well-constructed Type Two prompt tells the student exactly what to do to be successful; the number becomes the rubric. For example, asking students to list in their own words three central ideas from an article is better than asking them to summarize the article because the task is clearer. Asking for three causes of World War II is better than asking for the causes. An even better approach is to determine a minimum number that you find acceptable and add a higher option. In the World War II example, the prompt might change from three causes to three to five causes. When answering this question, students have to effortfully retrieve the causes. If more than three causes come to mind, have students write them down. A note of caution: Tell students you will grade the responses in order so if one is incorrect, it will be marked down, not skipped. You want to discourage students from writing wild guesses that they hope are correct.

2. *Use general academic vocabulary in the prompt*
Common Core State Standards place a special emphasis on general academic vocabulary, that is, words that are “far more likely to appear in written texts than in speech” (CCSS, Appendix A, p. 33). General academic vocabulary words "are not unique to a particular discipline and as a result are not the clear responsibility of a particular content area teacher. What is more, many Tier Two words [general academic vocabulary] are far less well defined by contextual clues in the texts in which they appear" (CCSS, Appendix A, p. 33).

The Common Core argues that one of the main reasons students are not career or college ready is that they do not understand general academic vocabulary words like *textual evidence*, *cite*, *analyze*, and *relevant*. The new generation of tests designed by the national testing groups Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) feature questions that are loaded with general academic vocabulary, making the prompts more challenging to read and understand than the passages. For example, a model seventh-grade question from PARCC asks:

> Based on the information in the text "Biography of Amelia Earhart," write an essay that summarizes and explains the challenges Earhart faced throughout her life. Remember to use textual evidence to support your ideas (Sample Item, Student Directions).

SBAC lists general academic vocabulary (Tier Two words) likely to be in the test. Some grade 3–5 words include exactly, explain, declare, establish, construct, and interpret. Grade 6–8 words include assume, distinct, evident, complicate, and exaggerate. Grade 9–11 words include arbitrary, specify, formulate, benevolent, malign, empirical, and entity. How often do you include words at this level of difficulty in your prompts?

Giving students Type Two assignments that include general academic vocabulary will help them master the diction of scholarship and be better prepared to understand and respond to test prompts. For example, *analyze* is not a synonym for *write about*. *Analyze* means to break apart and examine each part closely. Now, the rather benign, unintimidating question "Yesterday in class we talked about the causes of World War II. Write three to four causes" becomes "List and succinctly describe three to four of the most significant causes of World War II." This prompt gives students exposure to *list*, *succinctly*, *describe*, and *significant*—all words a middle or high school student should know but may not have the opportunity to learn unless they see these words in print, have them explained, and, finally, see an example of a *list* that *succinctly describes* the *significant causes*. Including general academic vocabulary in prompts is not an easy practice to remember to do, and students may feel we are trying to fail them by using this level of language, but Type Two questions should include general academic vocabulary. The first time students see vocabulary this difficult should not be on a high-stakes test.[1]

3. *Require the student to use higher-order thinking skills, whenever possible*

When information about almost any subject is just a Google search away, remembering information is less important than being able to do something with that information. As Wiliam (2014) states, "If the questions are not causing the students to struggle and think, they are probably not worth asking" (p. 18). Questions that use Bloom's Taxonomy or Webb's Depth of Knowledge (DOK) to move students from remembering to understanding to analyzing to evaluating to creating not only require higher-order thinking skills but also motivate students. But students can't analyze or evaluate unless they have content to analyze or evaluate, so remembering or knowing is always important. There is a place for Type Two prompts that ask students to remember important information, but if we can combine remembering and higher-order thinking into one prompt, we have the best of both worlds.

Sometimes using a two-part Type Two question is the easiest way to create this combination. For example, after reading an informational article, a teacher might ask students to list four precise facts from the article (remembering), reflect on which fact they think is the most important and explain why they feel this way (evaluating). An easy way to grade this response would be based on 100 points: 20 points for each of the four facts and 20 points for the quality of the evaluation. Or a teacher might ask students to list and succinctly describe three to four of the most significant causes of World War II and briefly reflect on which cause was the most significant. This prompt adds a level of analysis, gives students an opportunity to think more deeply about the information, and gives teachers a way to assess students' level of understanding and involvement with the topic. As Kuhrt and Farris (1990) state, "The

[1] In *The Collins Writing Program: Improving Student Performance,* there is an assignment instructing students how to create vocabulary cards with illustrations and sentences that convey the meaning of each word. This is a terrific help for students who are trying to learn new vocabulary.

upper reaches of Bloom's Taxonomy could not be reached without the use of some form of writing" (p. 437).

4. *Complete quickly, 2–8 minutes*

Type Two assignments must be done frequently to achieve maximum benefit; therefore, they must not take up too much class time. If the prompts only required remembering (Bloom's lowest level) or recall (Webb's lowest level), this requirement would be easy. In fact, one key to determine how well you know something is how fast you can recall it. But with the added dimension of higher-order thinking, crafting a short prompt is a challenge. Analyzing, evaluating, and creating all take time. If done too quickly, the effect is superficial. But if the prompt is specific, students do not have to spend extra time figuring out what to do or filling the page with extraneous information in the hope they will eventually say what the teacher wants. Remember, the goal is to cause students to retrieve information and, if possible, do something with it. For example, if students read a chapter of a novel for homework, a question might be "Briefly describe three to four events in sequence that happened in the chapter and create a title for the chapter." This prompt requires effortful retrieval (remembering the sequence of events) and has a dimension of high-order thinking (creating) in the creation of a title. Or in math, students might be asked to identify and define four math vocabulary terms in a word problem (remembering) and give the formula they would use to solve the problem (applying).

Beware of student complaints that they do not have enough time to complete the prompt. If they need lots of time to recall information, they do not know the content well enough. With the exception of students with significant learning disabilities, most students do not need more time they need to study harder or read more carefully. In addition to the obvious benefit of not taking too much class time because the expectation is that they will be done quickly, students need to practice getting to the task, focusing on the questions, and not obsessing about perfection—all important test-taking skills.

5. *Grade quickly, 10–20 seconds*

In addition to being completed quickly, Type Two prompts need to be structured so that they can be graded quickly. There are a number of ways to do this. The most obvious is including a number in the prompt (the first criteria). With the number as a focus, teachers can quickly scan and calculate. But be careful that the number you assign is reasonable for the time allowed; Type Two prompts are designed to require effortful retrieval but not be impossible. For example, "Reflect back on last night's reading assignment. List and number three to four significant facts about the respiratory system, and write one question you still have about how the system functions. Underline the question." Even if the reading has 10 or more significant facts, this prompt is demanding enough to determine if students thoughtfully read the assignment, particularly because the question a student writes should not have been answered in the reading.

A second strategy to speed up the evaluation process and aid grading is to add student annotations; for example, "list and number" instead of "write" or "circle five vocabulary words" instead of "use vocabulary." Circle, number, bullet, and underline are all helpful grading aids and have the extra benefit of requiring students to show what they know. "Compose a paragraph about photosynthesis that correctly uses five of our eight science vocabulary words. Circle the words." In this example, the student has to consciously identify and circle five domain-specific vocabulary words. If you add student annotations, remember to ask students to quickly look to see if they completed the directions before they hand in their papers. Taking an extra 10 seconds to remind students to *circle* the vocabulary,

number the facts, or *underline* the prediction will pay for itself in the amount of time saved grading and will give students a last chance to remember to follow the directions.

A third time-saving technique is to grade random samples rather than the total class. If you give two Type Two quizzes per week and grade only a quarter of the students each time, you will have four quiz grades per eight week quarter per student—a reasonable sample. But students will have had the benefit of sixteen quizzes (effortful retrieval) and frequent formative assessment to self-evaluate how they are doing.

Warning: I find that some students and parents have difficulty with the random collection. For these classes, collect all quizzes until students get used to frequent quizzing, and then explain that you will be collecting samples for the rest of the year. Also, remind students that these quizzes account for a small part of the grade. You might also add that if you find a quiz question is too difficult, you will throw out the whole set. Stress that by quizzing frequently, you are not trying to punish students but are encouraging regular, frequent study, not infrequent or inefficient, stressful cramming. Also, I recommend that you include some of the quiz prompts on future tests so that students will have a preview of test questions and two opportunities to succeed: one on the quiz and one on the test. Occasionally, rather than a sample (say a row or group, by a roll of the dice, or some other random selection technique), I ask, "Everyone who wants to, pass in a quiz" which tells students that I want them to be successful. Just by the number of papers you receive, you can tell how well you've taught.

Finally, if you decide to collect random samples—it is important to read the best answers so that students who were not evaluated can hear the correct answer and learn what content is expected.

6. *Grade for content only, not for conventions*

If Type Two assignments are to be completed and graded quickly, something has to give and that something is conventions. To be clear, conventions are important, but to take advantage of the testing effect; to create a culture of frequent, low-stakes quizzes; to provide quick feedback; and to collect data about students' learning, most teachers will not have the time to copyedit or proofread. The fact that you are not assessing for conventions should be crystal clear to students: "If you receive a high or perfect grade on a Type Two, do not assume it is a perfect paper." In some cases, Type Two papers with a grade of 100 will be far from perfect, with spelling, punctuation, or usage errors, but to receive a 100, the content will be correct. For example, in the prompt "Briefly describe three to four events in sequence that happened in the chapter and create a title for the chapter," students may misspell character names, write run-on sentences, or forget to use quotes around the chapter title. But, if they recall three events and come up with a reasonable title that reflects a sense of what actually happened in the chapter, then the paper gets full credit. Given limited class time to complete the task, these assignments are not edited or proofread and certainly not peer reviewed. They are rough, first drafts and can provide great formative data about student mastery of conventions. If many students write run-on sentences or forget to put the title in quotes, use this information to inform your teaching. Under the pressure of a short quiz, if students have not mastered a particular writing skill to the point where it is automatic, more practice is needed. A perfect next step would be to do a short mini-lesson on the skill in question and ask students to self- or peer-edit their quiz for that skill. "We know to capitalize the words in a chapter title and put it in quotes like the example on the board. Please look at your quiz to see if you did so. If not, fix it and when you are done, show it to your partner to check it over."

For readers who are concerned about the lack of feedback on conventions, one technique may include grading quizzes and selecting some samples to be reviewed in a writing conference with the student author, reviewing the answer not only for content but also conventions and requiring that the answer be rewritten so that it is error free. This error-free answer is then shared so all students have a correct, well-written answer in their notebooks.

Finally, realize that Type Two quizzes are only one of the Five Types of Writing in the Collins Writing Program. Type One and Type Two are the writing-to-learn components; Type Three, Type Four, and Type Five are the learning-to-write components. The ultimate goal is error-free, content-rich writing—Type Five. Because learning to write is a process, there are many steps toward mastery. Frequent Type Two quizzes will help students move toward mastery. The actual skills of conventions, sentence variety, strong introductions and conclusions, etc. are best developed using focus correction areas (FCAs) in Type Three and Type Four assignments.

Implementing This Strategy

A key strategy in school improvement is to give frequent low-stakes quizzes using Type Two writing in all classes. One might ask, "How many is frequent?" The simple answer is two per week: Type Two Tuesdays and Thursdays! In reality, school weeks are rarely the same (special classes, holidays, etc.) so that a specific recommendation is almost impossible. Nevertheless, **the goal is to make frequent quizzes so expected that students do not see them as "gotcha" experiences but as ongoing formative assessment**.

In *Switch*, Chip and Dan Heath (2010) review research on positive illusion. "We're all lousy self-evaluators. . . . Only 2% of high school seniors believe their leadership skills are below average. A full 25% of people believe they're in the top 1% in their ability to get along with others" (p. 114). Most students predict that they are better prepared for tests than they actually are. Frequent quizzes give teachers a way to see if students understand their lessons and give students a chance to test their belief that they know and understand the content. Frequent Type Twos can destroy positive illusions. If a quick, five minute activity can dispel positive illusions, then it is worth the effort. But what if it also helps to embed content, teach general academic vocabulary, encourage higher-order thinking skills, and is reasonable test prep? How could we not be doing it? The answer is simple: It is not how most of us currently teach, it is not how we were taught, and it requires skill and practice to develop prompts that meet the six characteristics.

Practice Makes Perfect

How to make the change? First, give yourself permission to learn. If you are like me, you will find that your third-period prompts are better than your first-period prompts. Prompts will become clearer because students will ask clarifying questions. You will remember to ask students to underline or circle elements of the answer because you'll discover how much harder the prompts are to grade when students do not. You'll teach general academic vocabulary when you discover that students think *summarizing* is to string quotes together and not to put central ideas into their own words.

As you get better, the students will help you. If you forget to tell them, students will ask if they should circle the vocabulary. They will ask if they should define words in the prompt if they are not sure if you want them to do so. But they will only do it if they have had sufficient practice and know that their work may be graded.

Turn the Table

Ultimately, here is the dream: Twice a week, class periods will end with this assignment: Write a fair but challenging prompt that I could use at the beginning of the next class. In *Make Just One Change*, Rothstein and Santana (2011) make a strong case for teaching students to ask questions. They feel it is the single most important skill to teach. In *Embedded Formative Assessment*, Wiliam (2011) states:

> For older students (say, fourth grade and up), one technique that is particularly useful both for getting students to clarify, share, and understand learning intentions and for informing the teacher about the students' level of understanding is to have the students design test items, with correct answers, about what they have been learning. In a study involving several experiments with 260 college students, this was shown to be more effective than administering practice tests, giving students study guides, or leaving them to prepare for tests in their own way. ... This can be a particularly effective strategy with disaffected older students, who often feel threatened by tests. Writing a test for the topic they have completed, and knowing that the teacher is going to grade the questions rather than the answers, can be a hugely liberating experience for many students. (p. 68)

By taking a few minutes at the end of class to have students create a prompt, you are giving them a chance to reflect on what went on during class. By reviewing the prompts, you gain insight into what they understand and think is important. Prompt generation also actively engages students so they are not spending the last five minutes packing up or thinking about their next class. After students have had experience answering two teacher generated questions each week for the first few months of the school year, they will have had approximately 16 quizzes. That is a lot of examples of precise and clear prompts that include general academic vocabulary and encourage higher-order thinking that they can use as models for their own questions. Additionally, they will have developed a sense of how long a prompt takes to answer, so they can develop prompts that are not too time consuming.

Imagine a mid-November scenario where students have lists of general academic vocabulary in their notebooks and have been seeing these words in prompts for eight weeks. A teacher asks students to write a prompt and then share it with a partner. The pair then determines the best of the two or combines prompts to create a better one. In the last minute or two of class, the teacher calls on random pairs to share their best prompt. Listening to a few, the teacher announces one or two prompts that are candidates for next class's quiz—no surprises. The next class begins with the prompt generated by the students. Maybe the teacher gives the team who generated the question an automatic 100 on the quiz for creating such a good prompt, encouraging students to generate demanding and challenging prompts, not softball questions. Students keep the prompts and answers as a study guide. Occasionally, these prompts are recycled as quizzes, especially prompts that demand students recall critically important information. Significant parts of major tests are made up of these past prompts, giving students incentive to keep and review past prompts. Tests become more predictable, students feel they have had an influence in the design of summative assessments, and teachers get a steady stream of information about how they are teaching and what students are learning—a winning situation for both teachers and students.

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