

# Readability

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**A Special Interest Group of the International Literacy Association**

## **SIG MEMBERSHIP IS NOW FREE!**

This newsletter is being sent to current members. Because there are no dues to pay, we assume that you want to continue your membership. If that is not the case, please let us know. We would also be grateful if you would encourage your friends and colleagues to join. **To sign up, try this link:**

<http://fs6.formsite.com/intnlreading/readability/index.html>

We are always looking for new members. ILA only counts you as a member of the SIG if you're also a member of ILA, so please consider joining ILA or renewing your membership if you haven't already done so. Online membership is only \$35.00. We would like to increase the size of our membership because SIGs with more members can have a longer session at the annual convention. Now that the newsletter is electronic, we can manage without membership dues. When we need funds, generally to order AV equipment for presentations, we will ask for donations. Be sure to tell us if you or your colleagues have questions or technical problems with the membership form. **All newsletters are now electronic, so let us know if you change your e-mail address.**

## **Semantic Reasoning**

Here's a thought experiment for you. Imagine these scenarios:

- a steep, rocky cliff
- a person stepping into a row of theater seats
- children in a playground
- a hand putting a letter in an envelope

The scenarios don't seem related, at first. But then you see the word "slide," and they all come together: a landslide, a person sliding into a theater row, a child on a sliding board, and a letter sliding into an envelope. Isn't amazing how that word triggered a level of understanding that didn't exist before?

The thought experiment is an example of semantic reasoning, a relatively new construct that describes the subtleties of understanding how the various meanings and uses of a word are intertwined. It is, of course, related to a more familiar notion, the multiple meanings associated with some words. But it looks at multiple meanings in a way that is more inferential, hence the near parallel term, inferential vocabulary.

My introduction to semantic reasoning occurred at an LDA conference when I met Beth Lawrence, who along with Deena Seifert, developed the idea. Beth showed me a demo from their website, InferCabulary.com, and I was captivated. Although I will attempt to describe what they have done, it will be well worth your time to visit their site.

The process that they use for vocabulary learning is straightforward. Six to ten related pictures are shown on the screen, along with a word they represent. The user figures out the meaning of the word from the pictures, then there is a bit of explanation. (My description is hardly adequate; really, check it out.)

After the learning experience comes the challenge. To practice the newly learned words, the user is presented with four pictures and four words. The pictures at first seem unrelated. One of the words, however, ties them all together. The task is to choose the one word that goes with all the pictures. If you try the demo, you will be fascinated at the fluid reasoning that you use to come up with the correct answer.

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Although the method that Seifert and Lawrence developed was initially designed for vocabulary learning and is undergoing efficacy research, it appears to have much more potential. The processes involved in semantic reasoning might provide insights into such varied applications as accelerating the learning of Tier 2 and 3 vocabulary, improving second-language learning by tapping into first-language expertise, measuring the cognitive abilities that might be masked by dyslexia, measuring cognitive growth after head trauma, screening and treating cognitive decline associated with aging, and understanding better the linguistic abilities of children and adults on the autism spectrum. There is a new norm-referenced measure, the Test of Semantic Reasoning, that has just been published. Because it is relatively simple to administer, the authors hope that it will be used to explore these and other applications of the construct.

My interest in semantic reasoning, of course, was prompted in part because of its relationship to readability. Understanding complex text requires the application of semantic reasoning in many ways, both literal and inferential. A sprinkle of rain and a few meteoroids crossing the night sky might not bring to mind the word "shower" immediately, unless you apply semantic reasoning. The phrase "a spot of tea" means one thing in a Victorian novel and quite another in a contemporary novel where a crime scene investigator notices a discoloration on a victim's shirt.

Take a few minutes to check out the website InferCabulary.com. If you have any thoughts about semantic reasoning or inferential vocabulary, drop me a line. And if you have a research interest relating to the construct, I'm sure Beth and Deena would love to hear from you.

## Left Dislocation

My mailbox occasionally receives a missive from Academia.edu. A recent topic title caught my attention: *These hands, they are apt enough to dislocate and tear thy flesh*. Being unable to resist pursuing this bit of click-bait, I discovered a new linguistic construct, left dislocation. Its opposite, right dislocation, serves a similar function.

The term refers to a construction that is used relatively often in speech but rarely in writing, at least these days. It describes the circumstance in which a noun or noun phrase is set off, sometimes awkwardly, from the sentence to which it relates. You have undoubtedly said something like, "My friend Jodi, she will meet us in front of the train station."

Although I was unfamiliar with the term, I recognized its use in American Sign Language as soon as I read about it. An introductory statement is often used to establish the context of the communication. I didn't realize that it was an actual linguistic "thing" until I came upon the Academia piece. As an interpreter, I found the use of left dislocation invaluable in maintaining accuracy of communication in both directions.

Left dislocation in English has a long history, and it is a feature of a number of other languages. Its frequency in written text has diminished greatly over time, which is a bit surprising, given its relatively high occurrence in spoken, informal English. It would be interesting to see how today's young readers, particularly those who are having comprehension difficulties for whatever reason, would respond to text containing this feature.

You can read more about left dislocation in an excellent piece by Mark Lieberman at the link below. The piece, it's relatively short and very informative. (Get it?)

<http://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=629>

## Texts and Tasks

One of our distinguished chairpersons, Tom Gunning, is preparing next year's SIG proposal for the ILA annual convention. His topic is an examination of the readability characteristics of the texts and tasks used in state mandated tests. In addition to discovering more about the tests that have a great impact on themselves and their students, teachers will learn techniques that will benefit students in all the meaningful reading they will do.

To give you a taste of things to come, here are a few tidbits from the 2017 Texas released items. You may find it interesting to delve more deeply into the information provided by the Texas Education Agency's website.

Below and on the following pages are samples of the percent correct on each item and the item stem for grades 3, 5, and 8. Also included is an estimate of the grade readability level for the passage associated with the items. It's pretty fascinating stuff. The hardest item in each grade is on the last page.

### Grade 3

Item	%Corr	Question
<b>ATOS 4.8 Fiction: Jake Drake, Teacher's Pet</b>		
1	85	Which of Mrs. Snavin's actions helps the reader visualize why Jake is embarrassed?
2	75	Paragraph 6 is important to the development of the plot because it is where —
3	68	Jake's interaction with his teacher shows that he —
4	53	What does Jake learn in this story?
5	71	Read paragraph 8 from the story. Why does Jake think he's made a mistake?
6	65	What does Jake mean when he says he is "saved by the bell"?
7	55	What is the best summary of the story?
8	80	8 As it is used in paragraph 9, the word <i>expert</i> means a person who —
<b>ATOS: 6.0 Non-fiction: Lost and Found</b>		
9	75	Which sentence best states the main idea of the selection?
10	65	The diagram of a microchip is included to show —
11	51	Why is it surprising that Roxy was found?
12	70	The purpose of the questions in paragraph 2 is to —
13	54	To learn when pets can be microchipped, the reader should refer to the —
14	63	Look at the diagram below. Which of these completes the diagram?
15	71	Read this sentence from paragraph 2. This sentence helps the reader infer —
<b>ATOS: 5.9 Non-fiction: Fresh Bread</b>		
16	70	In paragraph 6, the word <i>permitted</i> means —
17	52	How did Mrs. Baird begin selling baked goods?
18	50	The subheadings in the selection support the main idea that Mrs. Baird —
19	53	Mrs. Baird purchased an oven because the wood-burning stove she was using —
20	72	Which statement describes one of Mrs. Baird's business challenges?
21	76	What is the theme of the selection?
22	73	The author included the section titled "A Family Affair" to describe how Mrs. Baird's children —
23	69	Read this dictionary entry. Which meaning of the word <i>sign</i> is used in paragraph 8?
24	56	At first, Mrs. Baird's sons delivered her bread —
25	69	One likely reason Mrs. Baird became a successful business owner is that —
<b>ATOS: 5.6 Non-fiction: Teddy Bear, Teddy Bear</b>		
26	70	The caption under the first photograph in the selection explains —
27	77	The author wrote this selection most likely to —
28	67	What does the word <i>craze</i> mean in paragraph 3?
29	67	The reader can tell from the selection that nurses may use teddy bears to —
30	73	What does paragraph 1 help the reader understand about the first teddy bear?
31	61	Read the diagram below. Which sentence best completes the diagram?
32	34	What is the best summary of the section titled "Popular Toys"?
33	85	In paragraph 1, the word <i>honor</i> means to —
34	80	Details in the selection support the idea that teddy bears —

## Grade 5

Item	%Corr	Question
<b>ATOS 8.9 Non-fiction: R2, Robot Astronaut</b>		
1	84	The author wrote this article most likely to —
2	85	The details in paragraph 5 support the main idea that R2's design —
3	73	Read this quotation from paragraph 9 of the article. Which detail from the article supports this idea?
4	67	Which text feature provides information about R2's abilities?
5	63	What is the best summary of paragraphs 4 through 6?
6	83	What is the most likely reason the author included the information in paragraph 10?
<b>ATOS 9.4 Non-fiction: Pucker-up Time in Eau Claire</b>		
7	78	According to the article, the annual event began when —
8	73	The sentence in paragraph 8 reads, "Teichman said he's expecting Rick Krause, who lives in Arizona, to return Saturday for another shot at the title." Which definition best matches the way the word <i>shot</i> is used in paragraph 8?
9	69	Which sentence best states the main idea of the article?
10	65	Based on the information in the article, what can the reader infer about the contest?
<b>ATOS 2.0 Poem: Cherry Very</b>		
11	66	The reader can tell that the speaker is experienced at spitting cherry pits because she —
12	67	What is one important effect of the rhyme scheme of the poem?
13	74	The word "launch" is in line 15 and reads, "To launch it without a hitch" Which line from the poem best helps the reader understand the meaning of <i>launch</i> ?
14	67	What is most likely the reason the poet compares spitting cherry pits to playing baseball?
<b>Both Pucker-up Time in Eau Claire and Cherry Very</b>		
15	64	Which message is expressed by both the article and the poem?
16	62	What is one main difference between the event the author describes in the article and the event the speaker describes in the poem?
17	64	Which of the following describes a difference between the article and the poem?
18	69	Which idea is expressed in both the article and the poem?
<b>ATOS 8.0 Non-fiction: An All-Star Inspiration</b>		
19	79	Which sentence from the selection best shows that Catchings cares about other people?
20	75	The sentence in paragraph 2 reads, "Soon, even without her hearing aids, she surpassed her schoolmates and her teammates." This information helps the reader understand that the word <i>surpassed</i> in paragraph 2 means —
21	59	What event in Catchings's life has most influenced her charity work?
22	68	Catchings's actions throughout her school years suggest that she —
23	61	What is a theme in the selection?
24	72	The author organized the selection with subheadings most likely to —
25	57	What was an unexpected result of Catchings's relationship with Pat Summitt?
<b>ATOS 3.9 Fiction: Lewis and Clark and Me: A Dog's Tale</b>		
26	78	Read this sentence from paragraph 12. What can the reader conclude about the dog from this sentence?
27	60	Which idea is developed throughout the story?
28	68	The questions in paragraph 4 are, "Why was he attaching himself to Lewis? Did he think he was going to stay with Lewis permanently?" The questions in paragraph 7 are, "Could it be that Lewis wanted the calf to stay with us? What was Lewis thinking?" The question in paragraph 10 is, How could I have missed that? What do the dog's questions in paragraphs 4, 7, and 10 suggest?
29	58	What is the best summary of paragraphs 1 through 5?
30	69	In paragraph 14, the dog wants to explain —
31	74	In paragraph 9, the author uses a simile to help the reader understand that the dog suddenly —
32	75	Which sentence best reveals the dog's view of his relationship with Lewis?
<b>ATOS 7.5 Non-fiction: The Making of a Baseball Bat</b>		
33	66	The reader can conclude that when Hillerich first asked his father to make wood bats,
34	60	In paragraph 6, the details about Ted Williams's experience with Louisville Slugger bats support the idea that —
35	57	Which sentence best states the main idea of the section titled "Old and New"?
36	56	The sentence in paragraph 7 reads, "Professional athletes have grown accustomed to using the same equipment in games and in practice." What is the meaning of <i>accustomed</i> in paragraph 7?
37	59	The reader can infer that one of the main reasons the production of Louisville Sluggers began was because of Hillerich's —
38	61	Based on information in the selection, what is one similarity between Pete Browning and Honus Wagner?

**Grade 8**

Item	%Corr	Question
<b>ATOS 5.9 Fiction: Dark Water Rising</b>		
1	80	Which words from paragraph 9 help the reader understand the meaning of <i>instinctive</i> ?
2	84	The description of the father's return in paragraphs 1 through 4 is important to the excerpt because it —
3	70	Which sentence best illustrates the narrator's conflict?
4	59	Through the narrator's experience, the author explores the idea of —
5	70	The narrator's keen awareness of his father's behavior leads him to —
6	83	The last two paragraphs of the excerpt convey that the narrator is —
7	64	What is the best summary of paragraphs 5 through 9?
8	60	Read this sentence from paragraph. What does the imagery in this sentence suggest about the narrator?
9	78	The historical context of this excerpt emphasizes the idea that people in the early 1900s often relied on —
<b>ATOS 9.1 Poem: Dog-Walk</b>		
10	76	Which words from the poem show that the speaker is unsympathetic to the dog's wish?
11	57	In the first stanza, the poet uses the words "Over the years" and "From thousands of walks" to —
12	81	The imagery in line 11 helps the reader —
13	62	In contrast to line 10, the last line of the poem shows that the dog now feels —
14	78	In lines 20 through 22, the speaker observes that the dog wants to —
<b>ATOS 8.0 Non-fiction: The Power of Young People to Change the World</b>		
15	82	The author wrote this selection most likely to —
16	53	Read the origin of the word <i>superficial</i> . Based on this information, what is the meaning of the word <i>superficial</i> in paragraph 8?
17	76	The author organizes paragraph 8 by —
18	68	How does the author support his claim that every young person has the potential to be a hero?
19	62	Read this sentence about heroes from paragraph The author includes this sentence most likely to emphasize that —
20	51	The author included the information in paragraphs 8 through 11 probably to —
<b>ATOS 10.0 Non-fiction: Breaking Out of the Box</b>		
21	79	The title of the selection highlights the idea that shipping containers —
22	78	What is the main idea of paragraph 5?
23	67	Which sentence from the selection supports the idea that creating structures from shipping containers is cost-efficient?
<b>ATOS 8.7 Non-fiction: A Bountiful Billboard</b>		
24	78	Which words from paragraph 2 help the reader understand what <i>scant</i> means?
25	63	Which sentence from the selection explains why the water produced by the billboard is significant?
26	59	The organizational pattern of the selection allows the author to —
27	51	The author wrote this selection most likely to —
<b>Both Breaking Out of the Box and A Bountiful Billboard</b>		
28	73	One difference between the selections "Breaking Out of the Box" and "A Bountiful Billboard" is that "A Bountiful Billboard" —
29	82	What is one important benefit of shipping container apartment buildings and the billboard in Lima?
30	67	Read this sentence from "Breaking Out of the Box." Which sentence from "A Bountiful Billboard" is related to this idea?
31	67	Both selections explore ideas that involve —
<b>ATOS 7.0 Fiction: The Photograph</b>		
32	72	Through his experiences at the Navajo reservation, the author gained —
33	43	Read this sentence from the selection. This comparison helps the reader understand that the author thinks the location —
34	76	Read this sentence from the selection. Which of these is the author suggesting in this sentence?
35	66	Which sentence best demonstrates that the author and his father depended on the people of the reservation?
36	66	The organization of the selection allows the author to —
37	54	Why does the author compare his experience to that of "a hawk or an eagle" in paragraph 7?

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**ATOS 8.9 Non-fiction: A Winning Culture**

- 38 81 The author suggests that Cook had frustrating moments while coaching at Gallaudet largely because he —
- 39 59 In paragraph 5, the phrase *privy to* means —
- 40 82 Which of these best describes why some of the Gallaudet players lacked confidence in Cook when he first became coach of the team?
- 41 50 The author presents the events that led to the team's winning record in chronological order to emphasize that —
- 42 59 The title of the selection emphasizes the idea that Cook —
- 43 69 What is the best summary of the selection?
- 44 82 Which sentence suggests that Cook benefited from his experience as a coach?

	Grade 3	Grade 5	Grade 8
The data display on the right shows the percent correct for each item in each grade arranged in order from easiest to most difficult. It can be a little confusing, so pay attention. The percentages are arranged in order from easiest to most difficult, NOT IN THE ORDER THE ITEMS APPEARED ON THE TEST. In grade 3, two items were answered correctly by 85% of the students, item 1 and item 33. These two percentages are shown on the chart on the right in positions 1 and 2. Got it?	1 85%	1 85%	1 84%
	2 85%	2 84%	2 83%
	3 80%	3 83%	3 82%
	4 80%	4 79%	4 82%
	5 77%	5 78%	5 82%
	6 76%	6 78%	6 82%
	7 75%	7 75%	7 81%
	8 75%	8 75%	8 81%
	9 73%	9 74%	9 80%
	10 73%	10 74%	10 79%
	11 72%	11 73%	11 78%
	12 71%	12 73%	12 78%
	13 71%	13 72%	13 78%
	14 70%	14 69%	14 78%
	15 70%	15 69%	15 76%
	16 70%	16 69%	16 76%
	17 69%	17 68%	17 76%
	18 69%	18 68%	18 73%
	19 68%	19 67%	19 72%
	20 67%	20 67%	20 70%
	21 67%	21 67%	21 70%
	22 65%	22 66%	22 69%
	23 65%	23 66%	23 68%
	24 63%	24 65%	24 67%
	25 61%	25 64%	25 67%
	<b>26</b> 56%	26 64%	26 67%
	27 55%	27 63%	27 66%
	28 54%	28 62%	28 66%
	29 53%	<b>29</b> 61%	29 64%
	30 53%	30 61%	30 63%
	31 52%	31 60%	31 62%
	32 51%	32 60%	32 62%
	33 50%	33 59%	<b>33</b> 60%
	34 34%	34 59%	34 59%
		35 58%	35 59%
		36 57%	36 59%
		37 57%	37 59%
		38 56%	38 57%
			39 54%
			40 53%
			41 51%
			42 51%
			43 50%
			44 43%

The first number in bold shows the minimum number of correct items needed for a student to be classified as “meets proficiency standard.” For example, in Grade 3, a student would have to answer at least 26 items correctly to be classified as proficient.

It appears as if the cut score for “meeting proficiency” in these grades is approximately 75%. To reach this cut score, students would have to answer some questions that are relatively challenging, as represented by the percent of students responding correctly. (This sounds a little awkward, but I’m trying to avoid psychometric language in order to prevent large-scale eyes glazing over.)

The items are equally weighted, as are the passages, although it is clear that the passages and items vary in difficulty. For a more thorough discussion of the complexity of the STAAR reading passages and results of past texts, visit the link below.

[http://www.texasreaders.org/uploads/4/4/9/0/44902393/ch\\_14\\_lopez\\_pilgrim\\_2016.pdf](http://www.texasreaders.org/uploads/4/4/9/0/44902393/ch_14_lopez_pilgrim_2016.pdf)

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The hardest items in each grade are shown below. The percentage of students who chose each answer is in parentheses. An asterisk indicates the correct answer.

**G3**

**32** What is the best summary of the section titled “Popular Toys”?

Answer Choice F (28%)

F Many toy companies started making teddy bears. Everyone wanted their own teddy bear. Children everywhere held their teddy bears while sleeping. They also enjoyed having their picture taken with their toy bears and reading to their teddy bears.

Answer Choice G (25%)

G Everyone loved the teddy bears. They were so popular that other toy companies started making their own teddy bears. While they were wanted by everyone, children were especially fond of the teddy bears. Parents often bought teddy bears for their children.

Answer Choice H (13%)

H At one time everyone wanted to have a teddy bear. Children played with them. Soon writers were writing songs and stories about them. Children enjoyed reading the books about teddy bears. They also sang songs about teddy bears.

Answer Choice J (34%)\*

J Teddy bears quickly became a popular toy, and several toy companies started making their own teddy bears. Children wanted to play and snuggle with the bears. Songs and stories were written about the bears. Soon they were seen on all sorts of items, including books and clothing.

**G5**

**36** The sentence in paragraph 7 reads, “Professional athletes have grown accustomed to using the same equipment in games and in practice.” What is the meaning of *accustomed* in paragraph 7?

Answer Choice F (12%)

F Managed by

Answer Choice G (13%)

G Different from

Answer Choice H (18%)

H Changed by

Answer Choice J (56%)\*

J In the habit of

**G8**

**33** Read this sentence from the selection.

**It is like Kayenta was in my earliest time on the reservation, so remote as to be almost legendary in the mind.**

**This comparison helps the reader understand that the author thinks the location –**

Answer Choice A (15%)

A seems to have a profound effect on the lives of the residents

Answer Choice B (43%)\*

B has a mystical quality because of its isolation from society

Answer Choice C (15%)

C has a tendency to be remembered more vividly than others

Answer Choice D (26%)

D is so beautiful it can exist only in the imagination

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