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## Mastering the Tricks and Avoiding the Traps

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I walked into a fifth-grade classroom recently to find the class going over the answers to a practice reading test. From the front of the room, the teacher read off the question and the answer: "Number thirteen. Something that is a 'sight for sore eyes' is (A) refreshing." Then, as an explanation, she added, "See, up in the passage it says, 'I was very thirsty. The glass of water was a *sight for sore eyes*. That's what 'a sight for sore eyes' means."

Jennifer leaned over and whispered in Sean's ear, "I can't remember all these words. I'll *never* pass this test." Many students believe that in order to do well on standardized reading tests, they need to memorize the definitions of a lot of words and to learn the answers to a lot of questions. Many teachers seem to believe this as well. Kids in classrooms across the nation do one thing, above all else, in the name of test preparation: they follow along while their teacher goes over the correct answers on practice tests they have just taken.

This is a sure-fire way for a child to make the answers on today's practice reading test match those on the answer sheet, but it's unclear whether any child learns anything that can be useful on another day on another test. The questions won't be the same on tomorrow's test. Even if Jennifer could retain the meaning of *a sight for sore eyes*, it wouldn't help her on tomorrow's test.

In their writing workshops, we advise teachers to teach the writer, not the writing. We say, "If you intervene in such a way that the writing gets better but the writer learns nothing that he can use on another day, on another piece, you've gained little. We need to teach the writer strategies that he can use on future days, in future writing."