

# Preface

*Winners have simply formed the habit of doing things losers don't like to do.*

—Albert Gray, Official of  
the Prudential Insurance Company of America

**I**n this age of high-stakes testing, teachers feel pressured to spend more and more valuable time preparing students to take tests and less and less time preparing students for life beyond school and tests. The problem is kids don't really care about tests! Today's students want to be inspired, challenged—they want to see a connection between what they are learning and their lives. When we focus on rote memorization of information over meaningful learning, more and more students do not see school as a place where they are learning information relevant to their lives. And we are losing them. According to Klem and Connell (2004), “By high school, as many as 40–60% of all students—urban, suburban and rural, are chronically disengaged from school” (p. 263). Clearly, teaching to a test or focusing a majority of teaching time on test taking is not working for students (or for teachers for that matter). But tests do have their place in the world of education. So how do we strike a balance between preparing students to be effective test takers with preparing them for the world of the 21st century?

We decided to write this book to help teachers find that balance. In our many years as educators, we've discovered that the methods teachers apply to test preparation make all the difference. So we designed this book to help teachers prepare students for tests *and* for life using methods that are engaging and meaningful for students in Grades 3 through 8. The goals of the book are to (1) inspire students by helping them see themselves as competent learners and confident test takers, (2) show teachers and students the important life skills that are inherent in learning to take tests, and (3) create an efficient three-week unit of study on test taking that

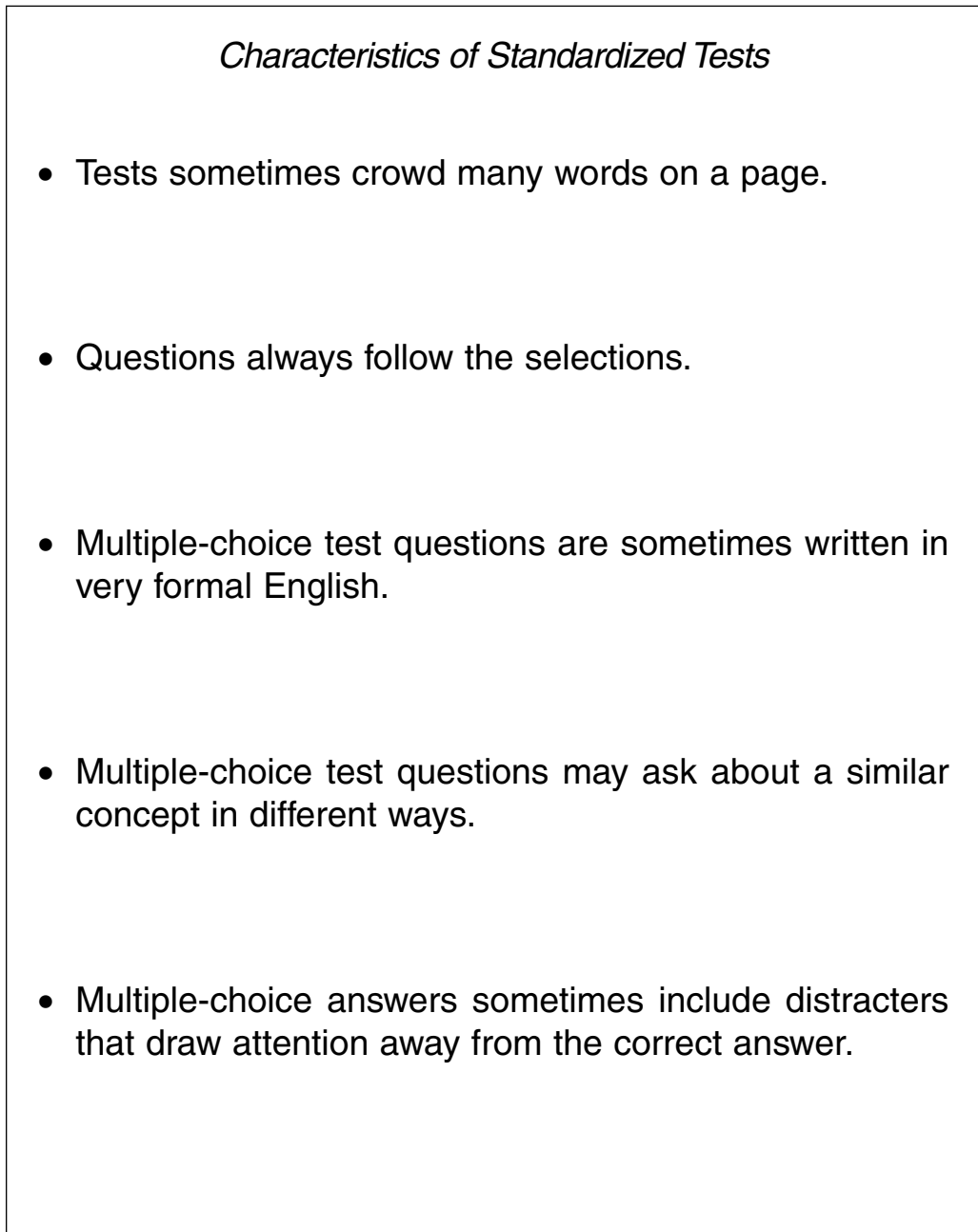
allows teachers and students to deeply learn the skills and strategies needed for test taking so they can spend the rest of the year on other necessary and meaningful learning.

To inspire students to become confident test takers *and* lifelong learners, we teach them skills that they own, skills that genuinely transfer out of the classroom and skills that make a difference in their lives. “A key finding in the learning and transfer literature is that organizing information into a conceptual framework allows for greater ‘transfer’; that is, it allows the student to apply what was learned in new situations and to learn related information more quickly” (National Research Council, 2000, p. 78). Transfer from school to everyday environments is the ultimate purpose of school-based learning.

Throughout the book, we ask teachers and students to reframe test taking by thinking about it as a sport or a game. Like sports and games, test taking requires learning a set of skills and employing a set of strategies to reach a final goal. These skills and strategies can be learned through practice, just as skills and strategies needed to play a sport or game are learned. When students see the connection between sports or games and test taking, it not only raises the appeal of test taking, but also helps connect the skills they are learning to their lives outside of school. Therefore, teaching test taking within the sport or game analogy creates a powerful conceptual framework to help students acquire and transfer the skills they need to succeed in and out of school.

To show students and teachers the important life skills that are inherent in learning to take tests, we studied and researched state tests from around the country. We analyzed the kind of thinking and responding that learners are expected to do on these tests. (See Figure P.1, “Characteristics of Standardized Tests.”) Then we extrapolated the key metacognitive skills students need to acquire this kind of thinking and responding.

This allowed us to show students that learning important metacognitive skills will prepare them to be both good test takers and lifelong learners. For example, when teaching students to write to a prompt (a type of writing they probably will not use once they are done with school), teachers can suggest that there are powerful metacognitive skills embedded in learning to write to prompts. The ability to quickly and effectively frame, organize, and communicate thoughts is indeed a skill students will continue to use throughout life (in job interviews, at social events, even convincing their parents to let them stay overnight with their friend). Now students can see the connection between what we are asking them to do for the short term and how it will benefit them in the long term. Learning to take tests includes valuable life skills such as metacognitive self-talk, decision making, and formulating effective responses.

**Figure P.1** Characteristics of Standardized Tests

Finally, we designed the book as a unit of study—a practical step-by-step guide to make it easy and enjoyable for both students and teachers to prepare for taking tests. Each chapter begins with a game target that highlights what students will *understand*, *know*, and be *able to do* once they complete each part of the unit. This serves as a guide and a focus for the teacher and the students. Each chapter also includes detailed instructional steps for explicitly teaching, modeling, and scaffolding instruction of the outlined understandings and skills so that students actually own them and can transfer them into practical use after they leave school. The book contains many strategies, samples, and forms in easy-to-use table formats. Additional reproducible forms can be downloaded from our website, [www.kathleenkryza.com](http://www.kathleenkryza.com).

The clear message we want to impart in this book is that preparing students to take tests is important, but testing should not be a teacher's primary means of assessing and learning in the classroom. We designed our book to allow teachers to do a deep two- to three-week study on test taking and then be free the rest of the year to engage and inspire students with learning that is essential to their lives. If teachers have deeply taught students test-taking skills and strategies, then prior to taking tests, they can remind students to apply the skills they know to the test-taking situation. It's important to note that traditional assessments such as tests should be balanced with performance-based assessments. These alternative assessments allow for student choice, for creativity, and for building the critical thinking and social skills they will need to compete in today's global workforce.

Can preparing students to take tests be a rich, meaningful, and professionally sound use of teachers' and students' valuable time? We think it all depends on how you decide to play the game!

The game's on—come join us!