# Navigating the New Terrain: Preparing Texas Teacher Candidates for the Science of Teaching Reading Constructed Response

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## Abstract

*The Texas State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC) has implemented new certification requirements, significantly affecting the path for aspiring Pre-K through 8th-grade educators. As of 2022, candidates must pass three exams: the pedagogy and professional responsibility (PPR) exam, a Core Subjects exam, and the newly mandated Science of Teaching Reading (STR) exam. Effective January 1, 2021, the STR exam includes a constructed response component alongside traditional multiple-choice questions, raising proficiency standards by assessing both content knowledge and writing skills. This heightened focus on writing proficiency may pose a distinct challenge for prospective teachers. The current article offers guidance on preparing for the STR exam's constructed response segment, analyzing its requirements, and providing recommendations to develop the necessary skills. The goal is to equip teacher candidates to navigate this demanding aspect of the certification process successfully.*

*Keywords:* teacher certification, science of teaching reading, undergraduate writing, teacher candidates

A pivotal shift has emerged for teacher certification in the State of Texas, and it is reshaping the journey for those aspiring to educate students in grades Pre-K through 8. Mandated by the Texas State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC) in 2022, prospective Pre-K-6th and 4th-8th educators are now required to pass three certification exams: the pedagogy and professional responsibility (PPR) exam, a Core Subjects exam for their specific certification area, and the most recently mandated Science of Teaching Reading (STR) exam. Implemented January 1, 2021, the STR places priority on different theoretical models than previously tested, such as the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Turnmer, 1986) and Scarborough's Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001), thus placing a larger focus on explicit systematic phonics instruction. Notably, this exam also heightens the proficiency standards for aspiring teachers by introducing a constructed response component alongside the conventional multiple-choice format, or selected-response format (TEA, 2022b), thereby amplifying not only the assessment of candidates' content knowledge but also the assessment of candidates' writing skills. This heightened focus on writing proficiency may pose a distinct challenge for prospective teachers. In this article, our primary objective is to offer guidance on preparing teacher candidates for the constructed response segment of the STR exam. Initially, we examine the specific requirements of the constructed response, shedding light on the essential content knowledge and writing skills necessary for success. Subsequently, we present recommendations for fostering the requisite content knowledge and writing skills, aiming to empower teacher candidates to navigate this challenging aspect of the certification process.

## Literature Review

This section provides insights into the constructed response requirements of the TExES STR exam. The information was extracted from TEA's (2022a) online preparation manual for the exam. According to that document, "The TExES [STR] (293) exam is designed to assess whether an examinee has the requisite knowledge and skills that an entry-level educator in this field in Texas public schools must possess" (TEA, 2022a, p. 2). The exam consists of 90 selected-response questions and one constructed-response question, and TEA shares that those questions are based on the STR Exam Framework. Furthermore, the content of the exam is organized into four broad areas of content called domains. Those domains are reading pedagogy (Domain 1), reading development/foundational skills (Domain 2), reading development/comprehension (Domain 3), and analysis and response (Domain 4). Within each domain, the content is further defined by a set of competencies consisting of two parts. The first part is the competency statement that "broadly defines what an entry-level educator in this field in Texas public schools should know and be able to do" and the second part is "the descriptive statements, which describe in greater detail the knowledge and skills eligible for testing" (p. 3 & 4). Domains 1 through 3 are assessed by the selected-response and clustered questions, while Domain 4 is assessed with the constructed response—the primary focus of this article.

### The Constructed Response

The constructed response offers candidates an avenue to demonstrate their expertise in analysis and response. Other certification exams, such as Praxis, include written responses as well. On the STR exam, this is specifically within Domain 4, by providing a detailed written response. Final responses are evaluated for how well candidates address the exam prompt, with

scores ranging from 1 to 4 and designations of "B" for missing responses and "U" for unscorable. The exam, administered on a computer, incorporates four simulated exhibits of assessment data derived from a fictional student. These exhibits include a range of assessments, such as word list readings, short passage readings, and fluency assessments, each providing insights into the student's abilities (see TEA, 2002a).

The task requires candidates to identify key reading skill needs, both in foundational reading skills and comprehension, evidenced by the student's performance in the provided exhibits. Subsequently, candidates must propose instructional strategies to address these needs, ensuring alignment with grade-level standards outlined in the TEKS for ELAR. The importance of integrating knowledge of reading pedagogy and understanding the developmental progress of foundational reading skills is emphasized, highlighting the comprehensive nature of the assessment.

Completing the constructed response requires candidates to be proficient in both content knowledge and effective writing skills. This dual proficiency is crucial for identifying, addressing, and justifying instructional strategies aligned with grade-level standards, showcasing a comprehensive understanding of reading pedagogy with the TEKS for ELAR. The subsequent sections delve into the necessary content knowledge and writing skills.

## Content Knowledge

TEA (2022a) emphasizes that to excel in the constructed response section of the STR exam, candidates must possess specialized content knowledge. A strong response demonstrates a precise application of relevant content knowledge and skills, including a nuanced understanding of data interpretation and tailored instructional strategies. Conversely, a weak response reveals a partially accurate and limited application of such knowledge. The candidate may overlook crucial elements, repeat information without completing data interpretations, and demonstrate a weak grasp of reading pedagogy and TEKS alignment.

To identify the necessary specialized content knowledge, we consulted TEA's preparation manual for the STR exam (TEA, 2022a) to review the specific requirements outlined for successful performance. According to the manual (TEA, 2022a), a score of "4" is indicative of a candidate's comprehensive understanding of the relevant content and skills. Such a response should address all facets of the assignment cohesively, showcasing a highly effective application of knowledge with robust evidence, concrete examples, and well-reasoned explanations. Conversely, a score of "2" denotes a limited understanding and application of relevant content knowledge and skills. This weaker response may only partially address the assignment, providing scant evidence and offering explanations that are either vague, unsupported or grounded more in general pedagogy than specific reading principles.

In navigating the requirements for a strong response, candidates need to focus on meticulous completion of all tasks, addressing foundational reading skills and comprehension needs. This includes adeptly using developmentally appropriate instructional strategies and demonstrating professional knowledge and evidence-based support. A precise application of content knowledge is crucial, reflecting a nuanced understanding of data interpretation and the crafting of tailored instructional strategies. Therefore, as candidates prepare for the STR exam, a thorough review of TEA's guidelines and an emphasis on the comprehensive application of specialized content knowledge will be key to achieving success in the constructed response section.

TEA (2022a) outlines that the STR exam assesses candidates' knowledge of reading development across ten areas: oral language development, print awareness and alphabetic knowledge, phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics (decoding and encoding), reading fluency, vocabulary development, syllabication and morphemic analysis, comprehension of literary text, and comprehension of informational text. Another item, beginning strategies and reading comprehension skills, is included in this list in the STR Exam Preparation Manual; however, we do not include this in our discussion because it is already addressed under several other items. Regarding reading pedagogy, TEA (2022a) specifies that candidates are tested on their knowledge of providing explicit, systematic instruction; implementing both formal and informal assessments; designing and implementing standards-driven instruction reflecting evidence-based best practices; and analyzing and using background information to engage all students, including those with exceptional needs and emergent multilingual learners. Further insights into preparing candidates with this specialized knowledge are in our *recommended supports* subsection that follows later.

### Writing Skills

To succeed in the constructed response section of the STR exam, candidates must also demonstrate effective writing skills. A strong written response goes beyond mere regurgitation of facts; it requires the ability to articulate ideas clearly, coherently, and persuasively. The candidate's writing should reflect a command of language, an organized structure, and an ability to convey complex concepts in a reader-friendly manner.

TEA (2022a) emphasizes that in a strong response, candidates showcase their writing skills by presenting a precise application of relevant content knowledge. This involves not only conveying accurate information but also expressing it in a way that is engaging and comprehensible. Additionally, a nuanced understanding of data interpretation and the incorporation of tailored instructional strategies should be communicated with clarity. This requires the skill of translating technical information into accessible language, making the response more impactful.

Conversely, a weak written response may need more clarity and coherence. It might exhibit a limited ability to convey ideas effectively, resulting in a response that is disjointed or difficult to follow. Poor writing skills can hinder the candidate's ability to present a well-structured argument, leading to vague or unsupported explanations. Mason and Atkin (2021) found, in their study, that adult writers struggled with academic writing conventions, merging theory and practice, and using a writing style that conveyed authority. Hodges and colleagues (2021) specifically point to the need for extensive writing practice in order for preservice teachers to enhance their writing skills.

In preparation for the STR exam, candidates should focus not only on content knowledge but also on developing their writing skills. Practice in crafting well-organized, articulate responses is crucial. Understanding the nuances of language and effective communication will enhance the candidate's ability to clearly express complex ideas. Additionally, educator preparation programs (EPPs) should emphasize the importance of constructing responses that are not only accurate but also compelling, showcasing the candidate's proficiency in both content knowledge and effective written communication. In essence, effective writing skills are integral to success in the STR exam's constructed response section. Candidates should strive to present their knowledge in a manner that is not only accurate but also engaging, clear, and well-

structured. Through diligent preparation and practice, candidates can enhance their ability to articulate their understanding of foundational reading skills, comprehension needs, and evidence-based reading strategies in written form. In light of the importance of effective writing skills, we provide recommendations in our *recommended supports* subsection. Through these recommended supports, we seek to reinforce the connection between strong writing skills and success in the STR exam's constructed response section, emphasizing the significance of both content knowledge and effective written communication.

## Recommended Supports

This section is structured to include two subsections: content knowledge support and writing support. The selected supports in both subsections were derived from the reviewed literature, as well as the practices of the four authors—two of which are faculty members in university-based EPPs and two who are practicing classroom teachers, one in elementary and one in high school.

### Content Knowledge Support

The research on preservice teacher knowledge of foundational reading concepts is discouraging. According to several studies, preservice teachers have difficulty identifying and segmenting phonemes in words (Cheesman et al., 2009), answering questions about language structure items (Bos et al., 2001), understanding the purpose of phonological awareness instruction (Cheesman et al., 2009), confusing phonological awareness and phonics instruction (Cheesman et al., 2009), counting morphemes in words (Spear-Swerling et al., 2005), and understanding the importance of reading fluency to later reading development (Spear-Swerling et al., 2005). To support preservice teachers' content knowledge of foundational literacy concepts, Hindman et al. (2020) suggest not only introducing these concepts during coursework but also providing "connected field experiences" (p. S203) where preservice teachers practice instructional strategies under the tutelage of a more experienced other. These professional learning opportunities can increase future teachers' knowledge of concepts (Brady et al., 2009; Hudson et al., 2021).

As mentioned earlier, the STR exam assesses candidates' expertise in reading development across ten key areas: oral language development, print awareness and alphabetic knowledge, phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics (decoding and encoding), reading fluency, vocabulary development, syllabication and morphemic analysis, comprehension of literary text, comprehension of informational text, and beginning strategies and reading comprehension skills (TEA, 2022a). The evaluation also considers candidates' proficiency in delivering clear, systematic instruction using sequential and multimodal approaches. It involves the application of both formal and informal assessment methods to gauge student progress. Additionally, candidates are assessed on their ability to design and implement developmentally appropriate, standards-driven instruction that aligns with evidence-based best practices. Furthermore, the evaluation takes into account candidates' skills in utilizing background information to effectively engage students, including those with exceptional needs and emergent multilingual learners.

To demonstrate proficiency in the knowledge mentioned in the previous paragraph, the constructed response requires candidates to analyze the provided assessment data to identify student needs. Once these needs are identified and justified using the data, candidates must pinpoint scientifically based instructional practices to address those needs. Candidates enter the exam not knowing which of the ten skills will be addressed, so they must be prepared to define all ten terms, articulate how each skill contributes to overall reading success, recognize the grade-level expectations for each skill, and identify explicit strategies grounded in the science of reading for proficiency in each of the ten areas.

To support candidates in acquiring and retaining this knowledge, we recommend integrating processes and instructional activities that prompt candidates to synthesize information from various literacy coursework. An illustrative example is the use of a graphic organizer, as outlined in Figure 1. As candidates explore the ten topics and delve into associated instructional practices during their coursework, they can fill in the corresponding rows in Figure 1. The graphic organizer is flexible and can be modified to include additional literacy skills or categories of knowledge relevant to each skill, as the current version in Figure 1 may not cover all the content knowledge essential for teaching grade-school literacy skills comprehensively. Consequently, as candidates prepare for the constructed response, they can review and study the information recorded in their completed graphic organizer.

**Figure 1**

*Graphic Organizer for Documenting Content Across Literacy Coursework*

| **Skill** | **Definition** | **Contribution to Reading Success** | **Grade-Level Expectations** (e.g., alignment to TEKS and developmental continuums) | **Explicit Strategies** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Oral Language Development | | | | |
| Print Awareness and Alphabetic Knowledge | | | | |
| Phonological and Phonemic Awareness | | | | |
| Phonics (Decoding and Encoding) | | | | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Reading Fluency | | | | |
| Vocabulary | | | | |
| Syllabication and Morphemic Analysis | | | | |
| Comprehension of Literary Text | | | | |
| Comprehension of Informational Text | | | | |

The following subsections align with Figure 1 and provide brief context into the type of information candidates might document. It is crucial to emphasize that the information provided is not exhaustive; rather, it acts as a starting point.

### *Oral Language Development*

Oral language development (e.g., TEKS 110.3[b][1]) involves the gradual acquisition of spoken language skills such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and communication strategies, enabling a child to understand, produce, and effectively use spoken language (Konza, 2014). This development, influenced by language-rich environments, social interactions, cultural context, and individual experiences, begins in infancy and evolves through adolescence. According to Gough and Tunmer's (1986) Simple View of Reading, reading comprehension relies on both decoding and language comprehension skills, with strong oral language providing a crucial foundation for reading. Children with advanced oral language abilities often exhibit higher reading readiness and success (Scarborough, 1998; Dickinson et al., 2010; Lepola, 2016).

Reading experiences contribute to the enhancement of oral language skills. Through exposure to written language in texts, children expand their vocabulary, internalize grammatical structures, and develop a deeper understanding of language conventions. Researchers assert that reading aloud and engaging in discussions about texts further reinforce oral language development by providing opportunities for expressive language use, comprehension, and critical thinking (Cabell et al., 2019). Therefore, one effective strategy to increase oral language development is interactive read-alouds. In this approach, educators or caregivers read aloud to children while actively engaging children in discussions that help them think deeply about and beyond both fiction and informational text. Interactive read-alouds foster active engagement, stimulate language development, cultivate critical thinking skills, and promote a love of reading (McClure & Fullerton, 2017). By integrating this strategy into early childhood and elementary literacy instruction, educators can support children's oral language development and lay a solid foundation for reading success.

### *Print Awareness and Alphabetic Knowledge*

Print awareness and alphabetic knowledge (e.g., TEKS 110.3[D, F]) are fundamental skills closely tied to reading development. Print awareness involves understanding the conventions and basic features of written language, such as recognizing that print carries meaning and understanding how a book works (Clay, 1991). It also includes awareness of print directionality and recognition of letters, words, and sentences (Bialystock et al., 2000). Alphabetic knowledge, on the other hand, focuses on understanding letters of the alphabet and their corresponding sounds, which lays the groundwork for phonics instruction and decoding skills essential for reading (Ehri, 2015; Georgiou et al., 2012).

One effective strategy to foster print awareness and alphabetic knowledge is interactive writing (Hall, 2019; Jones et al., 2010; Williams, 2018). Interactive writing is a dynamic collaborative literacy activity in which the teacher and students collectively compose and construct a piece of writing. Throughout this process, students actively engage in brainstorming ideas, organizing thoughts, selecting vocabulary, and crafting writing under the guidance of the teacher. By participating in interactive writing, students not only develop their writing skills but also enhance their print awareness and alphabetic knowledge. As they contribute to the creation of the text, students are prompted to identify letters, words, and sounds within the context of meaningful writing tasks. Moreover, the teacher's facilitation offers opportunities for explicit instruction on spelling, grammar, punctuation, and other conventions of writing, reinforcing students' understanding of alphabetic principles (Roth & Dabrowski, 2014). Through interactive writing, students gain a deeper understanding of how written language works, ultimately fostering their literacy development and confidence in their writing abilities.

### *Phonological and Phonemic Awareness*

Phonological awareness (e.g., TEKS 110.3[2][A][i-vii]) involves the ability to recognize and manipulate sounds in spoken words (Lindsey et al., 2020). The most difficult skill that follows under phonological awareness is phonemic awareness, or the ability to recognize and manipulate phonemes (e.g., smallest sounds in spoken words) (Ehri, 2022). Ehri (2022) reminds us that phoneme segmentation enables students to break down unfamiliar words into smaller sound units, facilitating the encoding and spelling processes. Additionally, phoneme blending aids in seamlessly combining phonemes to form spoken words, impacting students' decoding skills. In the educational landscape of Texas, there is an expectation that children master phonemic awareness by the conclusion of first grade (TEA, 2017). Also, dyslexia screeners begin to measure this skill as early as kindergarten (TEA, 2021).

According to Brown et al. (2021), using Elkonin boxes is an effective strategy for enhancing phonemic awareness (Clay, 2016; Elkonin, 1963). In this approach, children articulate a word and manipulate tokens into boxes, with each token representing a phoneme, helping them segment the sounds in words like "cat" (/k/ /ă/ /t/). Engaging in phoneme segmentation activities improves the ability to recognize individual sounds within words, which strengthens decoding and comprehension skills, leading to better reading fluency and comprehension (Ehri, 2020; Sargiani et al., 2022). Mastering phoneme segmentation fosters smoother reading and allows students to focus on understanding and critical thinking, while a solid grasp of phonological awareness equips them to comprehend and utilize the alphabetic principle in reading and writing.

### *Phonics (Decoding and Encoding)*

Phonics (e.g., TEKS 110.3[2][B)][i-v]) is a foundational method used in teaching reading, focusing on the relationship between letters and the sounds they represent. Phonics instruction equips learners with the ability to decode and encode words by recognizing letter-sound correspondences. This skill is pivotal for reading fluency and comprehension as it enables learners to sound out unfamiliar words and recognize familiar ones more efficiently. Phonics instruction also cultivates phonemic awareness, which is crucial for understanding and manipulating individual sounds within words, thereby enhancing reading and spelling proficiency.

An effective phonics teaching activity is an extension of Elkonin boxes, known as letter or spelling boxes, which requires orthographic mapping (Ehri, 2020; 2022; Miles et al., 2018). In this activity, learners map phonemes to graphemes by connecting sounds in words to the corresponding letters. They are given orally spoken words with target letter-sound correspondences, such as 'ai' in "rain" or 'oa' in "boat." The teacher guides learners in decoding each word by segmenting the sounds using Elkonin boxes and replacing tokens with corresponding letters or combinations. This process enhances decoding and encoding skills, promoting literacy development. For instance, first graders are expected to decode words by applying common letter-sound correspondences (TEKS 110.3[2][B][i]), and this activity helps build the foundational skills necessary for reading success.

### *Reading Fluency*

Reading fluency (e.g., TEKS 110.3[4]) is the ability to read text accurately, smoothly, and with appropriate expression (Samuels, 2006). It is a crucial component of reading development as it enables readers to efficiently and successfully comprehend text. Fluent readers can recognize words automatically, allowing them to focus their cognitive resources on understanding the meaning of the text rather than decoding individual words. Fluent reading is essential for proficient reading comprehension and academic success (Benjamin et al., 2010; Hiebert et al., 2012).

An explicit strategy for teaching reading fluency is the repeated reading technique (Paige et al., 2021; Young et al., 2018). In this approach, students repeatedly read a passage aloud until they can read it accurately and with ease. Initially, the teacher models fluent reading of the passage, emphasizing phrasing, expression, and pacing. Then, students read the passage aloud several times, receiving feedback and guidance from the teacher as needed. Over multiple readings, students gradually improve their fluency, becoming more confident and proficient readers. Repeated reading can be done individually, in pairs, or small groups, and can be tailored to meet the needs of diverse learners. By providing opportunities for repeated practice, explicit modeling, and targeted feedback, the repeated reading strategy effectively enhances reading fluency and promotes overall reading development (Paige et al., 2021).

### *Vocabulary*

Vocabulary (e.g., TEKS 110.3[3][A-D]) refers to the set of words known and understood by an individual or within a particular language or context. It encompasses a wide range of words, including both everyday words and specialized terms. Ricketts et al. (2007) and Sénéchal

et al. (2006) assert that vocabulary knowledge plays a crucial role in reading development as it directly impacts reading comprehension. The more extensive a reader's vocabulary, the better equipped they are to understand and interpret written text. Strong vocabulary skills enable readers to recognize words in context, infer meanings from context clues, and make connections between words and concepts. Additionally, vocabulary knowledge enhances writing skills and overall communication proficiency (DeGroff, 1987; Olinghouse, 2009).

An explicit vocabulary teaching strategy, described by Schwartz and Raphael (1985) and Stahl et al. (1991), involves using word or semantic maps. Students visually organize new words by including definitions, synonyms, antonyms, examples, and related concepts. Teachers introduce the target word with its definition and context, prompting students to consider its meaning and relevance. Students then create word maps by drawing a central bubble for the word, branching out with bubbles for various aspects of its meaning and usage. These maps should include definitions, synonyms, antonyms, contextual examples, and related concepts. Students share and discuss their maps with peers to deepen understanding. Finally, teachers encourage students to use the new vocabulary in writing and discussions, reinforcing learning. This strategy helps students internalize new vocabulary, build connections between words, and expand their vocabulary knowledge, promoting vocabulary acquisition, comprehension, and overall reading development (Mouchrif et al., 2023; Udaya, 2022).

### *Syllabication and Morphemic Analysis*

Syllabication (e.g., TEKS 110.3[2][C]), the process of dividing words into syllables, is crucial for reading development as it aids in accurate decoding and pronunciation (Goodwin & Ahn, 2013). Each syllable contains a vowel sound and may include consonants before or after it. Breaking words into smaller units helps readers blend sounds, improving word recognition and fluency. Advanced syllabication involves morphemic analysis, which breaks down words into morphemes—the smallest units of meaning. Morphemes can be free (stand-alone words) or bound (prefixes, suffixes, roots that modify word meanings).

To facilitate understanding, educators can engage students in interactive activities like word sorting, where students categorize words based on shared morphemes, create word families to explore how morphemes can change the meaning of words, or construct new words using known morphemes. Through these activities, students not only develop their morphemic analysis skills but also strengthen their vocabulary and decoding abilities. Understanding morphemic analysis is pivotal for reading development as it equips readers with the tools to decode and comprehend complex words. By recognizing and analyzing familiar morphemes within unfamiliar words, readers can deduce meanings, expand their vocabulary, and enhance overall reading comprehension (Carlisle, 2010; Ganske, 2020).

### *Comprehension of Literary Text*

A literary text (e.g., TEKS 110.3[8][A-D]) refers to any written work that is considered to have artistic merit and can be a novel, short story, poem, play, or essay. Authors of literary texts often employ language in creative and imaginative ways, aiming to evoke emotions, provoke thought, or convey complex ideas. They frequently explore themes, character development, symbolism, and narrative techniques, inviting readers to engage with the text on multiple levels

beyond the surface. Literary texts are valued not only for their entertainment but also for their ability to provide insight into the human condition and the world around us.

A research-backed approach to bolster comprehension of literary texts involves visualization (Pressley, 1976). Encouraging students to construct mental images while reading can enrich their grasp of the material. Visualization fosters connections, promotes engagement, and enhances comprehension abilities (Staal, 2000). While reading, teachers can prompt students to visualize pivotal events, characters, or concepts depicted in the text. This can be facilitated through queries like "What does this scene evoke in your mind?" and “Can you envisage the main character's emotions in this scenario?".

Making inferences is another critical skill for comprehension. It involves using clues from the text to draw conclusions or make educated guesses about information that is not explicitly stated. Research suggests that teaching students to make inferences improves their comprehension and analytical thinking abilities. One effective strategy used to teach inferencing is the "Think-Aloud" method (Beck & McKeown, 2001; Kucan, 1997). In this approach, the teacher models the process of making inferences by verbalizing their own thoughts while reading a selection aloud. Next, the teacher encourages students to search for evidence, analyze context, and draw logical conclusions while reading. They also provide guided practice with inferential questions and activities that require students to think critically and infer meaning from the text. By refining their abilities to make inferences, students enhance their proficiency in understanding complex texts (Hwang et al., 2023).

### *Comprehension of Informational Text*

Informational text (e.g.,TEKS 110.3[9][D][i-iii]) refers to written material designed to inform, instruct, or explain a specific topic or subject matter. Unlike literary works, which often prioritize storytelling and creative expression, informational texts emphasize conveying factual information in a clear and organized manner. These texts come in various forms, and understanding their structures is crucial for effective comprehension. Common text structures found in informational texts include sequential or chronological order, cause and effect, compare and contrast, problem and solution, and descriptive or explanatory formats. Teaching students about different text structures, such as compare/contrast and cause/effect, enhances their ability to navigate and comprehend complex texts (Duke et al., 2012; Kuhn et al., 2017).

Comprehending various text structures empowers readers to effectively navigate informational texts, pinpoint essential details, and grasp meaning with clarity and depth. Educators can facilitate this process by ensuring students are familiar with keywords that serve as cues for specific structures; for instance, "because" often signals a cause-and-effect relationship. Moreover, reinforcing comprehension can be achieved by employing graphic organizers that mirror text structures, allowing students to track their understanding in alignment with the organization of the text. This combination of explicit instruction and practical application equips students with the tools they need to decode complex texts and extract meaning efficiently (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Gajria et al., 2007; Williams, 2005; Williams & Pao, 2011).

Summarization is another powerful strategy for comprehension development, helping students identify main ideas, organize information, and improve recall (Armbruster et al., 1987; Bogaerds-Hazenberg et al., 2021). Teaching students to identify key points, distinguish between important and supporting details, and condense information into concise summaries enhances comprehension and memory retention. By integrating these strategies into teaching practices,

educators support students in improving comprehension skills. These approaches provide active engagement and metacognitive opportunities, aligning with empirical findings on effective reading instruction (Ghimire & Mokhtari, 2025; Spörer et al., 2009).

## Writing Support

The constructed response not only assesses content knowledge but also writing skills. Academic writing is "specific to the academy and represents a particular discourse" that is quite different than the informal first-person writing in which many students engage (Mason & Atkin, 2021, p. 1049). The type of writing expected in the constructed response can be a new challenge for teacher candidates. TEA (2022a) offers a rubric that delineates the anticipated performance criteria for the constructed response. To achieve a top score of "4," candidates should fulfill the following criteria:

- The response comprehensively covers all aspects of the assignment.
- It showcases a precise and highly proficient application of the pertinent content knowledge and skills.
- The response presents robust, pertinent evidence, specific examples, and well-founded explanations.

Furthermore, TEA's (2022a) sample prompt requires teacher candidates to identify significant needs and cite specific evidence from exhibits to support their analysis. They are to describe an appropriate and effective instructional strategy or activity that would address the identified student needs and help them achieve grade-level standards. They are also tasked with explaining why each instructional strategy or activity described would be effective in addressing the identified needs and assisting the student in achieving grade-level reading standards as outlined in the TEKS for ELAR.

To support teacher candidates in transitioning into this style of writing, we recommend teaching them the "moves" that should be made in this type of writing. To do this, we analyzed the criteria and expectations outlined by TEA (2022a) and identified three of these "moves". In addition, we propose sentence stems that illustrate the syntax used when implementing these moves to further scaffold candidates' writing development (see Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Moves to Make and Sample Sentence Stems*

| Move | Sentence Stems |
|---|---|
| Move 1: Identify significant needs and cite specific evidence from exhibits. | ● In the exhibits, I observed that there is a significant need for *[insert specific need]*, as seen when *[insert specific example from exhibits]*.<br>● The evidence presented in *[insert specific exhibit]* highlights a critical need for *[insert specific need]*. For example, *[insert specific example from exhibits]*<br>● From my analysis of the exhibits, it is apparent |

| | |
|---|---|
| | that there is a substantial need for *[insert specific need]*. Evidence of this need is illustrated when the student *[insert specific example from exhibits]* |
| Move 2: Describe an appropriate and effective instructional strategy or activity to address the student's need. | ● Considering the specific need, an appropriate instructional approach involves [*describe the approach*], which is designed to [*explain its effectiveness in addressing the need*]<br>● To effectively support the student, an instructional approach that could be used is [*name the strategy and describe it step-by-step*]<br>● Based on the identified need, an effective instructional strategy would be to [*describe the strategy*], as this would help the student [*explain how it addresses the need*] |
| Move 3: Explain why the described strategy or activity would be effective in addressing the identified needs and assisting the student in achieving grade-level reading standards as outlined in the TEKS for ELAR. | ● [*name the strategy*] is effective in addressing the identified needs because….<br>● An important aspect of [*name the strategy*] that supports the student's need is its emphasis on …., directly addressing the grade-level expectation of ….<br>● The rationale behind choosing [*name the strategy*] is... |

We recommend embedding valuable opportunities for teacher candidates to analyze and discuss data within all literacy courses as an integral part of their learning experience. This process not only enhances their understanding of literacy concepts but also fosters the development of crucial skills in data interpretation and communication. To scaffold this activity effectively, faculty can incorporate sentence stems and sentence frames, as outlined in Table 1, to model the structured writing required in their future educational practice. This intentional scaffolding allows teacher candidates to practice forming constructed responses while providing a clear framework for expressing their thoughts. By integrating data analysis discussions early in the coursework, candidates can apply this structured approach to their written paragraphs. These opportunities within EPPs can offer a supportive environment for refining both content knowledge and writing. Frequent practice and feedback on these activities may lead to improved proficiency in expressing ideas coherently, a skill that is invaluable in the complex and dynamic field of education.

## Conclusion

The recent changes in teacher certification requirements in the State of Texas, particularly the introduction of the Science of Teaching Reading (STR) exam, mark a significant shift in the landscape of educator preparation in our state. With the implementation of this exam, aspiring Pre-K through 8th-grade educators are now faced with the challenge of demonstrating

not only their content knowledge but also their writing proficiency. This shift, mandated by the Texas State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC), points to the importance of a comprehensive understanding of theoretical models that embody this shift, such as the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) and Scarborough's Reading Rope (Scarborough, 2001), as well as the ability to apply explicit systematic instruction techniques. As teacher candidates navigate this new certification process, it is imperative to provide them with guidance and support in preparing for the constructed response segment of the STR exam. By equipping candidates with the necessary content knowledge and writing skills, we empower them to succeed in their journey towards becoming effective educators, capable of meeting the diverse needs of students in today's classrooms.

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Bascolyne Day is a dedicated educator and a doctoral candidate at Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi (TAMUCC), where her research focuses on literacy and cultural responsiveness in education. With over 13 years of teaching experience, she has worked with students across a wide range of grade levels, from Pre-Kindergarten through 7th grade. Her passion for fostering inclusive and equitable learning environments has shaped both her classroom practice and academic pursuits. Through her research, Bascolyne aims to bridge the gap between culturally responsive pedagogy and literacy development, enabling educators to serve diverse student populations better.


Jo'Ann Ruiz-Garcia is a high school educator with 19 years of experience. She has taught all levels of secondary English courses, including remediated and advanced classes. In her spare time, she enjoys spending time with her husband and five children. Her favorite places include various churches and libraries, and her favorite activities include learning, reading, and writing. Jo'Ann's future plans are graduating from TAMUCC with a Doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction and publishing a book of poetic prayers. She also hopes to find a way to remain a student for at least another twenty years!