

The Dreaded Timed Test

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Have you ever found yourself searching for just the right word as you're speaking? Or the one word that truly matches the picture in your mind? This is precisely what happens to visual-spatials, nearly every day. The process for a visual-spatial learner to translate mental images into words (or numbers) is a lot like a computer downloading graphics. If you've ever downloaded a photograph on your computer, you know that it typically takes longer to bring up images than it takes to bring up text, especially if you still have dial-up! Not only must VSLs “download” their mental images, they then have to convert them to words. When there's the pressure of a time limit, it can be particularly challenging, if not impossible, to do.

Timed tests are being seriously questioned. In fact, several states are moving toward un-timed assessments. Mel Levine (2002) writes in *A Mind at a Time*:

...as kids get older, output controls function slower and slower and slower. In other words, well-controlled output requires adolescent minds to work slowly, to be reflective rather than impulsive, to take their time and not do the first thing that comes to mind. This is ironic, of course, since our high schools force our kids to do everything as fast as possible. They have to write quickly, think fast, remember on the spot, sprint through timed tests, and meet tight deadlines. This frenzied pedagogical rhythm is totally contrary to what the students' brains are striving to become...I think we should reward adolescents for taking as much time as they need to do a good job. Most tests should be un-timed, or else students should be allowed to do as much as they can do well... (p. 84.)

I have a funny story for you about my very visual-spatial son. One day, when he was about seven years old, I was backing out of the driveway and he began panicking saying, “No! I'm not ready, don't go!” I called back, “What's wrong?” Matt hollered, “I can't get the backward seven to work!” I kept backing up while I was thinking, “Backward seven? What is it? How does it work? And why does he need it?” As I started to drive forward, the panic level in his voice started rising and he began pleading with me not to go. When I finally got to the stop sign, I looked back to see that he couldn't get his seatbelt fastened. From Matt's point of view, his seatbelt was clearly a backward seven!



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Because Matt could only see the picture in his mind and because there was pressure for him to tell me what was wrong (he knew better than to be in a forward-moving car with no seatbelt on), he could not translate his picture into words. He was left with “backward seven” because he couldn’t find the word, “seatbelt,” fast enough to get me to stop the car. If you consider that a picture is worth a thousand words and your visual-spatial students are struggling to find just the one word that will match what you seek, you begin to understand the problem. It’s not that these children are in any way slower than their auditory-sequential counterparts—it’s that they’re working twice as hard to translate their mental images.

Such is the scenario when presented with timed tests. Most VSLs can’t translate their mental pictures into words (or numbers, if it’s a math test) very quickly when they are under pressure knowing they have a limited amount of time to get out the correct answer. They have an image readily available to them, but they are panic-stricken trying to translate that image into the right answer.

If you want your students to gain experience with timed tests, try some of the tips below to help speed up their translation time:



- Play games that require the players to answer within a specified time. CraniumTM, ScattergoriesTM, and BoggleTM are good examples of games that come with timers.

- Add a timer to a favorite game. Putting a time limit on Scrabble™ or Upwords™, would provide practice in taking a timed spelling test. Adding a minute glass to Yahtzee™ may help with timed math tests. You can use a minute glass (mini hourglass) or quiet kitchen timer to limit the amount of time.
- Play Pictionary™ to practice translating words into pictures, then back into words. Add a time limit to the game, too. Charades is a fun game to play where players start with a word, and then act it out in order to get other players to say the word.
- Games like “I’m Going on Safari” where players think of what they’ll bring in alphabetical order give practice in translating images to words. The first player says, “I’m going on safari and I’m going to bring an apple (anything that starts with the letter “a”). Then the second player says, “I’m going on a safari and I’m going to bring an apple (or whatever the first player said) plus a beagle (anything that starts with the letter “b”). And so on, through the alphabet. This requires players to keep words (or pictures they must translate into words) in their minds through the entire game/alphabet. Add a time limit to thinking up a new word and remembering the entire list.

If the ticking of a timer bothers your students, make sure you use a sand-filled minute glass instead. These can be found in many games and game stores in two or three minute versions. I would also suggest not adding a timer to games like chess, where their skills in spatial awareness really shine and can’t be rushed!

I understand the desire to prepare students for the future timed tests of their lives, especially state standards tests, the SAT and ACT, etc. (By the way, a number of states have eliminated the time component of their state assessments! Can it be long before test constructors of every state understand the disadvantage of a timed test to visual-spatial learners?) But, if you’re still using Mad Minutes in the classroom, I would like to invite you to go explore teaching math facts in a more VSL-friendly way and to drop Mad Minutes altogether. (You can find more in the upcoming release, *The Visual-Spatial Classroom: Differentiation Strategies that Engage Every Learner*.) Help your students to speed up the translation time from their images to words and numbers, not just the speedy recitation of facts.

Until we understand the bias against visual-spatial learners in placing time constraints on these kids, we’ll need to help our students cope with the stress of taking timed tests. With practice in a safe environment, where your students can translate their pictures into words, under less pressure, they will be able to successfully take timed math or spelling tests. Under such conditions, our visual-spatial students can begin to earn grades commensurate with their abilities, improving not only their grades, but their self-esteem, as well.

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