VERMONT
AGENCY OF EDUCATION

Vermont Comprehensive Assessment Program (VTCAP)

Stimulus Specifications

English Language Arts

Grades 3–9

Science

Grades 5, 8, & 11

cognia

Contents

English Language Arts

Reading Stimuli

All reading items are based on authentic, published passages and focus on students' capabilities to comprehend, analyze, and interpret complex literary and informational texts. In addition to single passages, all grade levels include paired passages to support standards requiring comparison and analysis across texts.

In elementary grades, item sets are associated with both literary and informational texts with an emphasis on literary texts. In middle school and high school grades, students are still assessed on literary and informational texts, but the emphasis shifts to informational texts. The configuration of literary and informational texts on the assessment seeks to balance each text type in accordance with national high-quality assessment guidance (e.g., NAEP, CCSSO, etc.) as well as considerations around test length.

Literary Texts

Literary texts may include:

- Fictional narratives, including short stories and excerpts from longer works
- Poetry, including traditional and contemporary forms
- Dramas or plays
- Folktales, myths, and legends

These texts should center around experiences with which students are familiar or provide sufficient context that a student unfamiliar with the experience is not disadvantaged. Passages should be excellent models of exemplary writing and include such literary elements as character development, a well-crafted plot, a text structure that supports the meaning of the passage, and the development of a point of view. Passages should include text structures and literary devices (figurative language, irony, etc.) appropriate to the grade level being assessed.

Informational Texts

Informational texts may include:

- Expository and explanatory texts, such as essays, articles, and reports
- Historical or scientific articles or texts
- Biographies and autobiographies
- Persuasive texts and editorials

- Documents such as speeches, letters, and primary source materials

Informational passages must include current and accurate information. In addition, care must be taken to avoid topics and details that could quickly become dated (news stories, technologies, discoveries, etc.). Text content should be consistent with the current best thinking in the various fields represented on the test and be neither overly speculative nor highly tentative, given the likelihood of such texts becoming dated over the long course of test development and administration.

Informational passages must be able to stand on their own and should not require any outside knowledge (other than common knowledge) to understand the topic or author's position. Informative/explanatory texts and arguments should be accurate, well-reasoned, and logically organized, reflecting a variety of logical text structures including, but not limited to, compare/contrast, cause/effect, order of importance, sequence/steps in a process, problem/solution, description and explanation, question and answer, and cyclical structures. It should also be noted that domain-specific vocabulary must be easily understood via context clues, minimal footnotes, and/or authorial explanation.

Writing & Language Stimuli

All writing and language items are based on commissioned narrative, informative, and argument passages using an embedded-error format. These original texts are crafted with intentional grammar, usage, and mechanics errors, as well as opportunities to improve development and organization. They allow students to demonstrate skills in clear narrative writing, accurate expository writing, and effective argumentation.

Informative passages typically cover one of three subject areas: Social Studies/History; Science/Technical Subjects; and, to a lesser extent, the Humanities. Written for a general audience, these passages present information on relevant topics—such as new interpretations, overlooked events or figures, or foundational knowledge—without assuming prior content knowledge. Technical language is used only when necessary and always with clear context.

Argument/opinion passages present a clear position supported by evidence, address a counterclaim (in grades 7 and 8), and use rhetorical techniques like persuasive transitions and appeals to reason or emotion. These passages often focus on social science issues or current events and feature arguments that are clear, positive in tone, and modest in scope.

Narrative passages concisely depict fictional events, including elements such as plot, conflict, climax, dialogue, and character thoughts. Despite their brevity, they maintain coherence and clarity consistent with narrative form.

Text Complexity

To help establish the complexity of stimuli that appear on the test, content specialists use both quantitative and qualitative measures in their development or evaluation of texts. Quantitative measures are certainly helpful in situating a passage within a grade band; they will also help to establish a passage as appropriate (or not) for a particular grade. However, quantitative complexity evaluations must be coupled with thorough qualitative review in order to make an informed grade assignment. The qualitative measures of text complexity are evaluated using the qualitative dimensions of text complexity found in Appendix A of the Common Core State Standards, as well as the CCSSO Text Complexity Qualitative Measures Rubrics for Informational and Literary Texts.

The quantitative measures used for Reading and Writing & Language passages are shown below. It should be noted that passages may sometimes fall outside these ranges if the passage content is deemed appropriate in light of qualitative complexity measures.

Grade	Passage Type	Reading Word Count	W&L Word Count	Lexile Measure*
3	Single	300 – 800	250–400	520L to 820L
	Paired	600 – 1,000	N/A	
4	Single	300 – 800	275–425	740L to 940L
	Paired	600 – 1,000	N/A	
5	Single	300 – 800	300–450	830 L to 1010L
	Paired	600 – 1,000	N/A	
6	Single	500 – 1,000	325–550	925L to 1070L
	Paired	800 – 1,200	N/A	
7	Single	500 – 1,000	350–625	970L to 1120L
	Paired	800 – 1,200	N/A	
8	Single	500 – 1,000	350–625	1010L to 1185L
	Paired	800 – 1,200	N/A	
9	Single	800 – 1,400	350-650	1050L to 1260L
	Paired	1,000 – 2,400	N/A	

*Ranges are based on the text complexity grade bands in the Common Core State Standards for English, Language Arts, Appendix A (Additional Information), NGA and CCSSO, 2012.

Listening Stimuli

Listening stimuli are two- to three-minute scripts that are professionally recorded. They cover a range of general interest topics and may be presented as stories read aloud to a class, conversations among students, or mini lessons from teachers. Because listening stimuli reflect the way people speak, they can differ significantly from reading stimuli. Rather than being a read-aloud reading passage, each listening stimulus is crafted as a transcription of spoken speech—as a script to be performed. Therefore, each listening stimulus includes the following:

- Shorter, less complex sentences with fewer embedded elements
- Simple, high frequency vocabulary
- Use of contractions and other elements common to speech (e.g., pauses, such fillers as “um,” “well,” or “I mean”)
- Some disfluency and incomplete sentences (when they would seem natural in spoken English, provided they do not increase difficulty and are used in moderation)
- Restatements of important thoughts or ideas (especially those that are tested in the items)

Science

Items on the Science VTCAP are based on phenomena and problems. Relevant information and data for the phenomenon or problem must be presented in the stimulus for the item. Many items on the science assessment are grouped together in an item format called a cluster. All clusters are written with an extended stimulus to support the group of four items associated with it.

A cluster stimulus must present a single, rich science phenomenon or engineering design problem aligned to the standards/performance expectations being assessed. The phenomenon or problem must launch and support a single storyline, or sequence of sense-making, which is carried out in the items.

The stimulus may present any variety of elements to provide the necessary information related to the phenomenon or problem and the storyline: text paragraphs, passages, graphs, data tables, models, drawings, etc. All information in the stimulus should be necessary, but not conceptually sufficient, for students to respond (i.e., students must also use their own knowledge of the constructs in the standards to answer the items, rather than simply identify given information), and the stimulus must provide enough information to allow students to engage in the Science and Engineering Practices (SEPs), Disciplinary Core Ideas (DCIs), and Crosscutting Concepts (CCCs) of the targeted standards as they respond to items.

Text Complexity

The quantitative measures used to help establish text complexity for extended science stimuli are shown below.

Grade	Stimulus Word Count	Lexile Measure
5	< 300 words	≤ 820L
8	< 400 words	≤ 1010L
11	< 400 words	≤ 1185L

The word counts are based on stimulus text and do not include words in graphics (charts, tables, diagrams). The word counts align with the lower range of ELA word counts from the previous grade band (or two grades below for grade 5) in consideration of the additional information in graphic elements.

The Lexile measures do not exceed the upper limit for ELA texts from the previous

grade band (e.g., grade 3 ELA limit for grade 5 science, grade 5 ELA limit for grade 8 science, grade 8 ELA limit for grade 11 science). However, stimuli may sometimes exceed these Lexile specifications if the scientific vocabulary is deemed appropriate with respect to the standard and associated dimensions.

Fairness and Accessibility

Bias and Sensitivity Review

All stimuli undergo a thorough bias and sensitivity review by diverse experts who assess the material for fairness and inclusivity. Reviewers identify and address potential cultural, racial, gender, socioeconomic, and other biases. Stimuli are also screened to exclude content that is highly sensitive, distressing, or polarizing in a testing context. This process ensures texts are free from stereotypes, offensive language, and exclusionary themes that might unintentionally disadvantage any student group. Additionally, reviewers confirm that texts are accessible and supportive of diverse learners, including English Learners and students with disabilities.

Cultural Relevance and Representation

Cultural relevance in selected ELA passages is evaluated through a comprehensive review process. Texts are examined for representation of diverse cultures, identities, and experiences, including those of historically underrepresented groups. Reviewers assess the authenticity of perspective, prioritizing works that accurately and respectfully portray cultural details, settings, and language, often by authors with lived experience or credible expertise. The process actively avoids stereotypes and bias while seeking works that present multiple perspectives to encourage critical thinking. Cultural and historical references are fact-checked for accuracy, and depictions are reviewed for nuance, portraying communities in multidimensional ways that include both challenges and positive achievements.

Across both ELA and Science, stimuli are developed and selected to reflect a wide range of cultures, identities, and lived experiences, ensuring that students see themselves and others authentically represented. The content avoids culturally specific references that might be unfamiliar or confusing without appropriate context; avoids stereotypes and bias; and is fact-checked for accuracy of both information and representation. This careful selection helps to promote engagement and equitable access to content.

Language Accessibility

The language used in stimuli is carefully crafted to be clear and appropriate for the target grade level. Unnecessary complex vocabulary, idiomatic expressions, and jargon are minimized unless essential to the content and accompanied by sufficient context. Special consideration is given to support English Learners and multilingual students by providing text that is comprehensible and fair, without diluting academic rigor.

Testing Accommodations and Supports

Stimuli are created with accessibility in mind, following Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles to support diverse learning needs. Information is presented through multiple formats—such as text, visuals, and audio when appropriate—to minimize barriers and help all students engage effectively. Accessibility features include screen reader compatibility, clear layouts, appropriate font sizes, and sufficient color contrast.

Stimuli are also designed to align with available testing accommodations and supports, such as read-aloud (TTS) features, glossaries, and translations. These supports are carefully implemented to help ensure valid and equitable participation.

Additional information about accessibility features can be found in the **VTCAP Accessibility and Accommodations Guidelines** on the Cognia help and support website.