

FOCUS: EXPANDED SYNTHESIS QUESTIONS

The purpose of expanded synthesis questions is to ask the test-taker to integrate an additional piece of information provided in the stem of the question with the information from the reading selection. This type of question assesses the reader's ability to synthesize information from two different sources and, in some cases, determine their overall effect or significance.

Synthesis questions can draw on several sources for the piece of additional information: events that occur earlier or later in the work from which the selection is excerpted; information about the author's life, his or her other work, critical reviews of the work; or historical and cultural background information for the selection itself.

Sample Reading Selection and Expanded Synthesis Question

HOW DOES THIS MOTHER FEEL ABOUT HER NEW BABY?

Morning Song

Love set you going like a fat gold watch,
The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
Took its place among the elements.

Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.
In a drafty museum, your nakedness
Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls.

I'm no more your mother
Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow
Effacement [wearing away to nothing] at the wind's hand.

All night your moth-breath
Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:
A far sea moves in my ear.

One cry, and I stumble from the bed, cow-heavy and floral
In my Victorian nightgown.
You open your mouth clean as a cat's. The window square

Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try
Your handful of notes;
The clear vowels rise like balloons.

"Morning Song," from ARIEL by Sylvia Plath. Copyright © 1961 from Ted Hughes, used by permission of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.

Sylvia Plath, the author of this poem, is known for her interest in examining her life in great detail, often with an underlying concern about old age and death.

What aspect of the poem might this information help to explain?

The poem's

- (1) rhyming words
- (2) reflective mood
- (3) mention of a midwife (line 2)
- (4) preoccupation with dark images
- (5) emphasis on natural landscapes

Strategy for Answering Expanded Synthesis Questions

(1) Read question stems slowly and carefully.

Students should know before taking the *Language Arts, Reading Test* that they will encounter expanded synthesis questions. Train your students to read this type of question particularly carefully in order to understand exactly what is being asked. Remind them that this question type is unusual because the stem provides new information that is separate from what appears in the actual reading selection. Students must know that they must consider both the new information and the original excerpt in order to correctly answer the question.

(2) Identify the additional information in the question stem.

Expanded synthesis questions provide an additional piece of information for the test-taker to consider. Help your students get into the practice of explicitly looking for this new information in the stem of the question as they are reading. The stem of an expanded synthesis question will clearly indicate that new information is being provided as part of the question. Remind students that they will not find mention of this information in the reading selection itself; therefore, they should not waste time looking for it there.

Below are the stems of three sample expanded synthesis questions. Use them to help your students practice identifying the new information that would not be found in the specified reading selection. (For your information, these are the italicized sections.)

Question A—based on Paul Laurence Dunbar’s poem “Sympathy”

Maya Angelou, an African American writer, titled her autobiography I KNOW WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS. What does her use of the line from the poem “Sympathy” in her title suggest about the message of her book?

Question B—based on an excerpt from Doris Lessing’s novel “The Habit of Loving”

Doris Lessing, the author of this excerpt, describes Margaret’s life as a farmer’s wife as filled with difficulties. *Urban workers, too, face their own share of challenging problems.* Which one of the following would affect both farmers and urban workers?

Question C—based on Robert Frost’s poem “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening”

Each Christmas Robert Frost would bind an unpublished poem of his with an illustration by a favorite artist to send to his close friends. From his message in the poem and knowing Robert Frost’s Christmas tradition, which qualities best describe him?

(3) *Analyze the additional information.*

The test-taker must be able to analyze the new information that is provided in the stem and integrate it with the reading selection in order to answer the question. Once your students are able to identify the “new information” sections in the question stem (see section (2) above), ask them to consider the following questions.

- How is the new information from the question stem related to what I already understand from the reading selection?
- Does the new information from the question stem help me understand the reading selection in a different or deeper way?
- How does the new information from the question stem affect the way in which I interpret the reading selection?
- What new light does the additional information from the question stem shed on the reading selection’s character(s), speaker, setting, author, etc.?

As you can see, some of these questions overlap in content and may elicit similar answers from your students. They are just slightly different ways to help test-takers to (1) start analyzing the significance and effect of the new information provided in the stems of expanded synthesis questions, and (2) integrate or synthesize this new information with the original reading selection.

When helping your students master this question type, remind them regularly to answer some of the analytical questions listed above until they do it automatically on their own. Consider placing them in pairs or small groups to discuss these questions.

Example of Strategy (Using the Sample Reading Selection and Question)

- (1) *Read question stems slowly and carefully.*
- (2) *Identify the additional information in the question stem.*

As a test-taker carefully reads the question stem, s/he will notice that new information about the poet has been included in the sentence “*Sylvia Plath, the author of this poem, is known for her interest in examining her life in great detail, often with an underlying concern about old age and death.*” This sentence gives the reader additional details that are not mentioned in the 18-line poem, which focuses on a mother’s reflections about her child.

The wording of the question itself (“*What aspect of the poem might this information help to explain?*”) cues the test-taker to consider both the additional information about Sylvia Plath and the poem itself in order to correctly select an answer. It is not enough to rely on one or the other sources of information; rather, both must be used.

- (3) *Analyze the additional information.*

In the question stem, the test-taker learns that Plath often considers questions of aging and death in her poetry. The experienced test-taker will answer at least one of the general guiding questions listed in the previous section. The test-taker might consider the way in which this background information affects her/his interpretation of the poem.

One possible train of thought might be as follows:

If Plath tends to discuss aging and death in many of her poems, then she might do the same in “Morning Song.” In that case, the tone, language, or images in this poem might be a bit serious or sad. Are there examples in the poem where this is true? Phrases and words such as “shadows,” “blankly,” “slow effacement,” and “dull stars” seem to reflect a more

serious tone. However, the poem also uses more uplifting language and images, such as “fat gold watch,” “flat pink roses,” “mouth clean as a cat’s,” and “clear vowels rise like balloons.”

Now, when the test-taker carefully considers the answer choices within the context of both the question stem and the poem, certain alternatives can be eliminated. (1) can be automatically ruled out since there is no pattern of obviously rhyming words. The mention of a midwife (3) is unconnected to the details about the poet’s concern about aging or death. (4) may seem at first glance a tempting option when the test-taker considers the additional information in the question stem; however, there are enough happy and uplifting images in this poem (see above) to render this answer choice incorrect. (5) is incorrect because there are at least as many references to domestic/indoor spheres (for example, “gold watch,” “drafty museum,” “statue,” “wall,” “mirror,” “bed,” “window square”) as there are to natural landscapes.

“A reflective mood” (2) is the correct choice because it describes both the seriousness of Plath’s concerns about aging and death and the speaker’s tender care of and attention to her child. In order to arrive at this correct answer choice, the test-taker must consider the information provided in the question stem along with the reading selection itself.