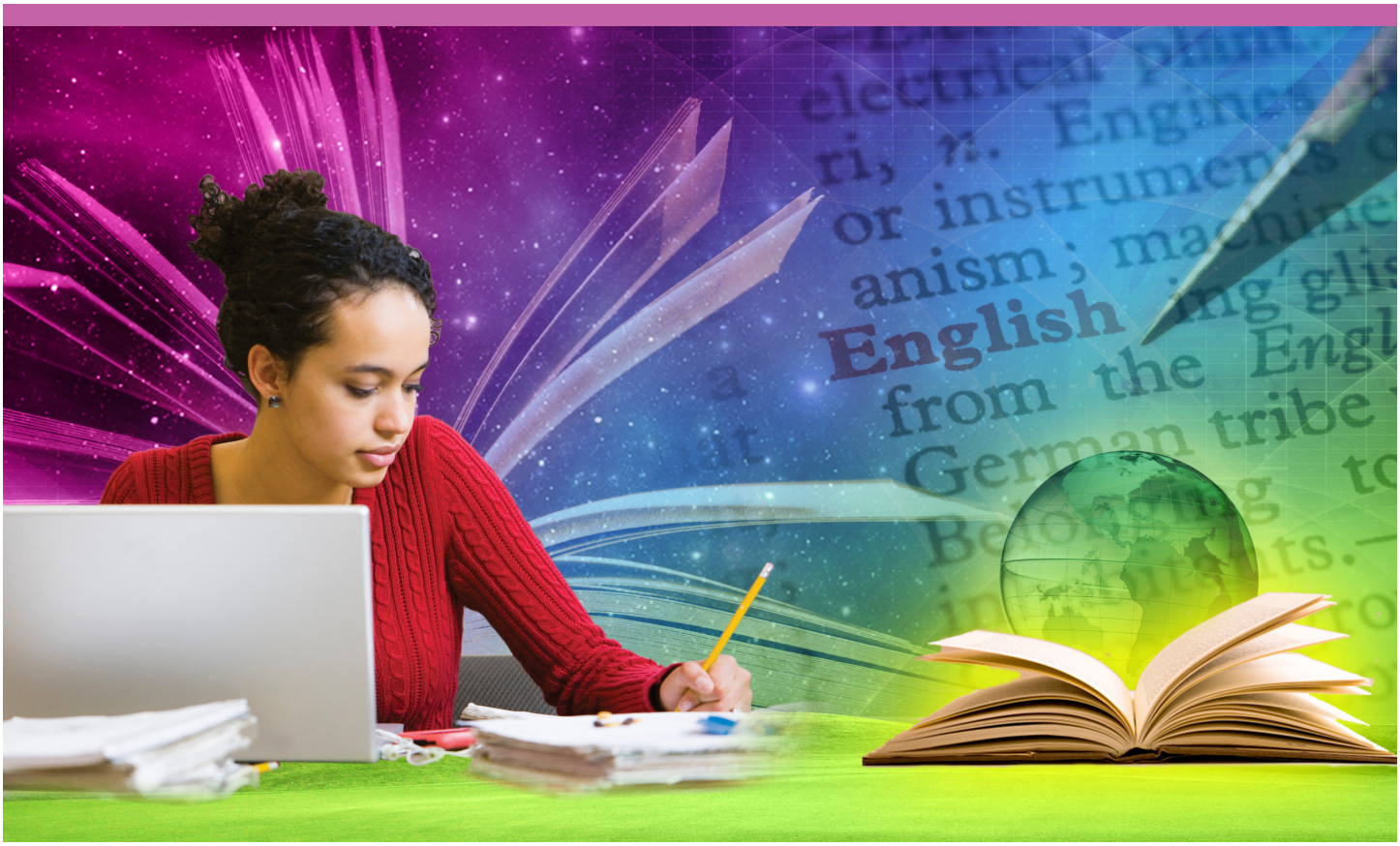
Common Core Sample Items



English Language Arts Grade 7

The new English Language Arts standards will require assessments to measure a student's ability to read critically, to grasp essential information, to develop and defend ideas based on what was read, and additionally, to demonstrate reading comprehension and writing skills in a range of other subjects.

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This informational, persuasive text supports depth and breadth measurement of diverse Common Core State Standards for Reading Informational Text. Of moderate to high complexity, it attends to the Common Core recommendations that students read scientific texts. What adds to the complexity—as well as the interest—of the text is the humorous, tongue-in-cheek tone assumed by the author. The tone may help to make the scientific text and topic more engaging and accessible for the Grade 7 student.

Directions

Read this passage. Then do Numbers 1–4.

Pluto in the Elementary School Classroom

by Neil Degrasse Tyson

Yes, it really is official. According to the general assembly of the International Astronomical Union's vote in August 2006, Pluto is not a red-blooded planet. Pluto is now a "dwarf" planet.

How rude.

The vote overturned the Planet Definition Resolution proposed by the Planet Definition Committee, which had stated simply that round objects in orbit around the Sun are planets. Pluto is a round object. Therefore, Pluto is a planet. This first attempt to define "planet" would have given everyone the right to utter Pluto and Jupiter in the same breath even though Jupiter is 260,000 times larger than Pluto. Plutophiles had about a week to rejoice before learning the sad news that Pluto fails a new criterion—that a legitimate[1] planet must also dominate the mass of its orbital zone. Poor Pluto is crowded by thousands of other icy bodies in the outer solar system.

Embarrassing as it was to us all, the term planet had not been formally defined since the time of ancient Greece. In 1543, Nicolaus Copernicus published his thesis[2]—his newfangled, Sun-centered (heliocentric) universe, which confounded the wanderer classification scheme. Instead of being stationary and in the middle of things, Earth moved around the Sun just like everybody else. From that moment on, the term planet had no official meaning at all. Astronomers just silently agreed that whatever orbits the Sun is a planet. And whatever orbits a planet is a moon.

Not a problem if cosmic discovery freezes in time. But shortly thereafter, we learned that comets orbit the Sun too, and are not, as long believed, local atmospheric phenomena. Are they planets too? No, we already had a name for them: comets. They're the icy objects on elongated[3] orbits that throw a long tail of evaporated gases as they near the Sun.

[1] legitimate: authentic or genuine

[2] thesis: a long research paper, written to defend an argument

[3] elongated: something that is more long than wide, as if stretched

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How about the craggy chunks of rock and metal that orbit the Sun in a region between Mars and Jupiter? Hundreds of thousands roam there. Are they each a planet too? While first called planets—beginning in 1801 with the discovery of Ceres—it became rapidly clear as dozens more were discovered that this new community of objects deserved its own classification. They came to be called asteroids.

Meanwhile, Mercury, Venus, Earth, and Mars form a family of their own, being relatively small and rocky, while Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune are large and gaseous, have many moons, and bear rings. And what's going on beyond Neptune? Beginning in 1992, icy bodies were discovered that look and behave a lot like Pluto. Yet another swath[4] of populated real estate was discovered, akin to the discovery of the asteroid belt two centuries before. Known as the Kuiper belt, in honor of the Dutch-born American astronomer Gerard Kuiper, who championed its existence, this region of the solar system contains Pluto, one of its largest members. But Pluto had been called a planet since its discovery in 1930. Should all Kuiper belt objects be called planets?

Without a formal definition for the word planet, these questions created years of debate among people for whom counting planets matters.

If my overstuffed in-box is any indication, planetary enumeration remains a major pastime of the elementary schools and a deep concern of the print and broadcast media. Counting planets is what allows you to invent clever mnemonics[5] to remember them in sequence from the Sun, such as "My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Nine Pizzas." Or its possible successor: "My Very Educated Mother Just Served Us Nachos." Here's one that may grow on us all: "My Very Educated Mother Just Said Uh-oh No Pluto."

[4] swath: long, narrow strip

[5] mnemonics: strategies to develop or improve the memory

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This selected-response item will provide evidence regarding students' proficiency in analyzing interactions among events and ideas in a text (RI.7.3). The item requires analysis of the author's purpose: Why does the author include the cited information in the text? How did the event described by the author influence scientific ideas?

1. Why did the author **most likely** include the information about Kuiper belt objects?

A to highlight Dutch contributions to astronomy

B to show that many objects behave like Pluto

C to share the excitement of their discovery

D to point out their similarity to asteroids

This item requires students to analyze how one part of a text contributes to the text's overall meaning and structure (RI.7.5). While the incorrect responses are directly connected to the text and may have a degree of plausibility to students who have misread or misunderstood the text, only one answer choice (C) is clearly correct regarding the author's purpose, and students must use inferential, critical thinking to determine that.

2. Read this paragraph from the passage.

Meanwhile, Mercury, Venus, Earth, and Mars form a family of their own, being relatively small and rocky, while Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Neptune are large and gaseous, have many moons, and bear rings.

What is the purpose of this paragraph?

A to question how astronomers get information about planets

B to show that the author knows the order of the planets

C to reveal that there are differences among planets

D to list the features that planets possess

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This constructed–response item raises the level of rigor for students, for it requires that they identify and explain two key ideas from the text (RI.7.1), using textual support to do so (RI.7.2). Students must re-read and re-examine the text in order to complete the table. While this item does not demand a high level of analysis—particularly because the information is rather explicit in the text—the item does support and fall within a basic learning trajectory for the construct.

3. Complete the chart by identifying **two** qualities of a planet. Explain whether Pluto has each quality.

Qualities a planet must have	Explanation of whether Pluto has the quality
1.	
2.	

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The next set of items presents one approach to a performance task (PT) in which students are guided through a series of smaller tasks, or components, that provide a scaffolded, cognitive journey. The targeted constructs for this PT cross Reading Informational Text, Writing, and Language strands of the Common Core State Standards.

This PT uses the same text as that of the previous items but most likely would not appear in the same test.

In this first component of the PT, students must demonstrate an understanding of the overall purpose of the scientific text (RI.7.6). In doing so, they will also be identifying the author's viewpoint, which is pervasive in the text. As this is a constructed-response item, students will write their response and provide appropriate textual support for their conclusion, which is a foundational element of the Common Core State Standards. By introducing the PT with this component, students will be pushed to re-read and re-examine the full text before moving on to the subsequent components of the PT.

4. PART A

Explain the author's main purpose for writing this passage.
Include details from the passage to support your answer.

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In this next component, students analyze another level of the text, the author's tone. The item stem identifies the tone as humorous, which scaffolds understanding of this challenging concept. Given pairs of phrases from the text, students must analyze the phrases to determine which pair contributes most to the tone. Thus, the item provides one measure of students' understanding of how word choice creates tone (RI.7.5). An item like this one is more cognitively demanding than those tone items which simply ask, "What word describes the tone of the article?"

PART B

Which set of phrases from the passage is the **best** example of the author's humorous tone?

A "family of their own"
"dominate the mass"

B "Not a problem"
"icy bodies in the outer solar system"

C "red-blooded planet"
"newfangled Sun-centered (heliocentric) universe"

D "community of objects"
"wanderer classification scheme"

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For this next component, students must examine details over the course of the text, and these details illustrate and support the numerous scientific points the author makes (RI.7.2). Students must graphically organize the textual details. Adding to the rigor of the task are the many details from the relatively short text that support each point. As with the previous two components of this PT, the completion of the chart will require students to re-read and re-examine the text for a more complete understanding of the text.

PART C

The chart below contains the attributes of various objects in the solar system. Using information from the passage, complete the chart to determine which objects in the solar system have these attributes.

Attribute of Objects in the Solar System	Objects in the Solar System with Attribute
Round	
Orbits the Sun	
Dominates the mass of its orbital zone	
Small and rocky	
Large and gaseous with many moon	
Contained in the Kuiper belt	

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This short informational text is to be used by the student when responding to Part D of the PT. The text's topic is related to that of the primary text, and thus, students will bring what they have read and learned to their reading of this text. Including this text will promote critical thinking and integration of knowledge and ideas from two related texts.

Directions

Read this passage. Then do Part D.

Clyde Tombaugh

Pluto, now considered a dwarf planet, was discovered in 1930 by American astronomer Clyde Tombaugh. Pluto, believed for many years to be the ninth planet, was the first object to be detected in the far reaches of the solar system.

Tombaugh's love for astronomy began at an early age when he viewed the stars using a telescope purchased by his uncle and father. By the time he was 22, he had built several homemade telescopes. He did not receive his degree until 1936—six years after he discovered Pluto.

Tombaugh dedicated most of his life to science and studying astronomy. He believed that instinct and intuition have a lot to do with being a scientist. He said that in science, people must "have an alertness to deal with the unexpected." During his searches for objects in our solar system, he discovered hundreds of asteroids, and even named some after himself and his family members. Tombaugh's curiosity and drive to learn more about the universe never ceased. During an interview in 1991, he stated, "I always wanted to know what's on the other side of the mountain." Tombaugh died in 1997, before Pluto was downgraded to a dwarf planet.

The selected-response component makes an inference from the second text regarding the downgrading of Pluto to the status of "dwarf planet." Students will have to think critically to determine which of the four statements from the text best supports and explains the inference (RI.7.1). Although a selected-response item is often thought to be less challenging, this particular item requires analysis and inferential thinking and would most likely target students at the high end of the learning trajectory for this construct.

PART D

Which statement from the article **best** supports the conclusion that Clyde Tombaugh would have agreed that Pluto should have been downgraded to a dwarf planet?

A Tombaugh dedicated most of his life to science and studying astronomy.

B He believed that instinct and intuition have a lot to do with being a scientist.

C He discovered hundreds of asteroids, and even named some after himself and his family members.

D Tombaugh's curiosity and drive to learn more about the universe never ceased.

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As the culminating component of the PT, students will write essays that explicitly connect the information in the primary text that they have read and examined. Completing their essays will require students to integrate many of the concepts and skills of the Common Core, most notably, evaluating an author's argument (RI.7.8), drawing evidence from informational texts to support analysis while applying grade-appropriate reading standards (W.7.9), and writing and supporting an argument (W.7.1). General writing guidelines and scoring criteria are presented to the student in the prompt; these criteria are directly linked to the Common Core, including Language standards 1-3. A robust response from a student will provide evidence that the student can read, write, and think critically and purposefully.

PART E

The author of "Pluto in the Elementary School Classroom" makes arguments and claims in support of Pluto being reduced to a "dwarf" planet by the International Astronomical Union. Evaluate whether the evidence the author presents is adequately supported.

In your response, be sure to include:

- specific details from the passage to support your answer
- an introduction, a logical arrangement of ideas, and a conclusion

Check your writing for spelling, grammar, capitalization, and punctuation.

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