

# **INFORMAL READING-THINKING INVENTORY**

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# **INFORMAL READING—THINKING INVENTORY**

**AN INFORMAL READING INVENTORY (IRI)  
WITH OPTIONS FOR ASSESSING ADDITIONAL ELEMENTS  
OF HIGHER-ORDER LITERACY**

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## PREFACE

The *Informal Reading-Thinking Inventory* breaks new ground in the area of literacy assessment. It is like most informal reading inventories in many ways; for example, it permits the examiner to assess a student's listening level, oral reading of words in isolation and in context, and basic comprehension of text. These allow an instructor to ascertain a student's relative capacity to read, level of proficiency in word recognition and analysis, and reading comprehension at the literal and certain lower levels of inference.

The *Informal Reading-Thinking Inventory*, however, actually increases the flexibility of a traditional informal reading inventory by offering options that enhance assessment beyond these typical factors. The most important of these options is a separate means of assessing student reading and thinking "beyond the lines." This is done by asking questions that require connecting what is read to prior knowledge, experience, and learning. Another option permits evaluation of the student's level of engagement with, or orientation and commitment in, addressing the test tasks. This is inferred from how well the student answers questions "congruently," rather than just correctly or incorrectly. Congruency here simply means responses that are contextually sensible, indicating that the student is engaged and intentionally listening, and not just hearing. Other options include a measure of the student's ability to evaluate his or her own comprehension, or *metacognition*, and opportunities to write in response to reading.

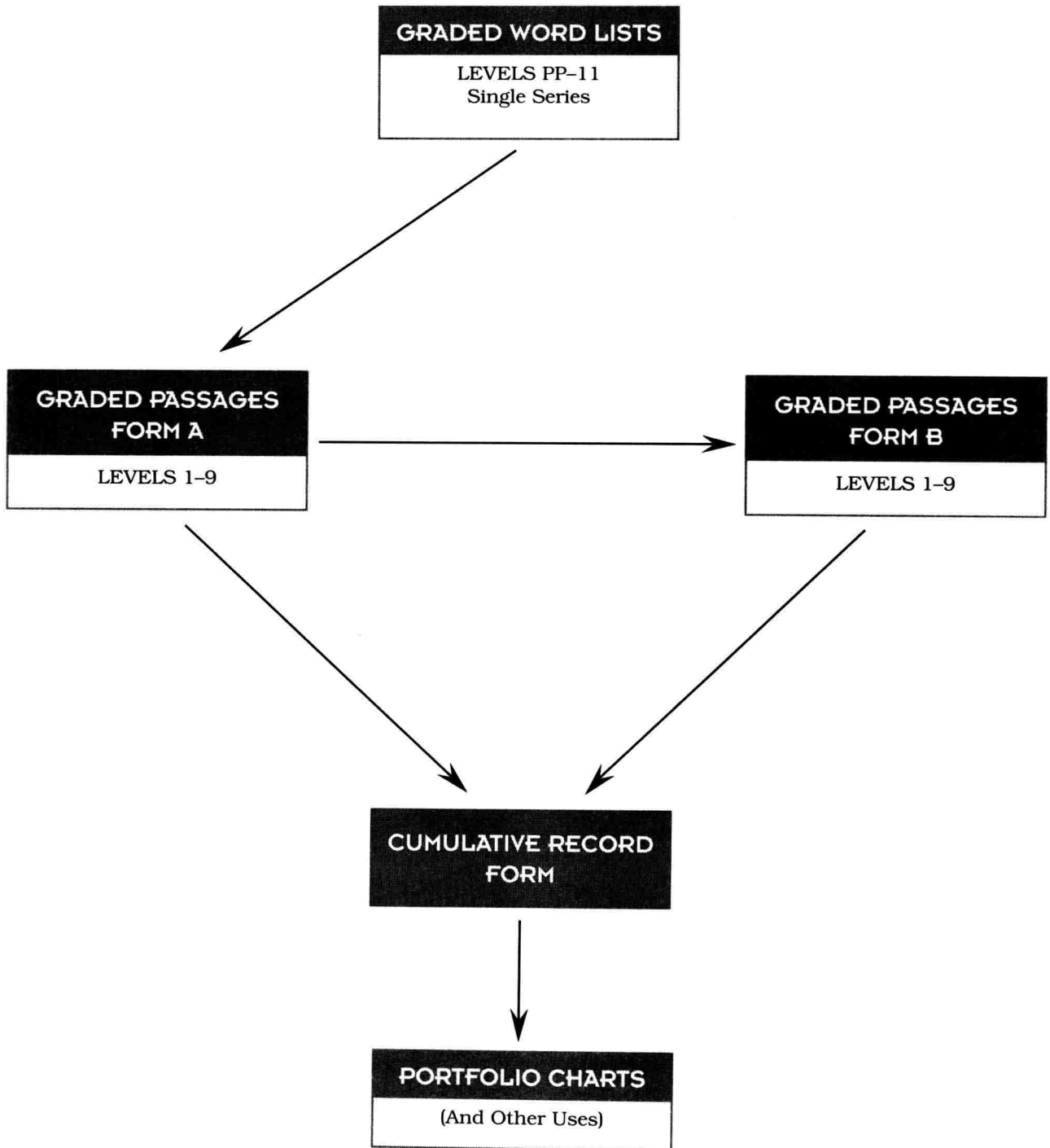
Why the need for these options? The *Informal Reading-Thinking Inventory* was constructed from the start to address some of the technical psychometric issues that have plagued informal reading inventories for five decades, such as intermixing passage dependent and independent questions. This inventory attempts to be responsive to the new issues that have arisen from recent theories of comprehension and philosophies of instruction, including the "constructivist" ideal of constructing a reasonable interpretation of what one reads. Also, the current movement in education toward alternative forms of assessment entails reduced emphasis on product measures, such as standardized tests, and a greater focus on "process" measures, or performance-based and diagnostic evaluation of the student's thinking, reflection, and strategy choices. Simply put, the *Informal Reading-Thinking Inventory* attempts to better assess the thinking, or meaning-making, aspects of reading that are emphasized in current views of the reading process. The expectation is that a means of *measuring* this dimension of reading will support more widespread professional discussion of, and teaching toward, these higher-order objectives.

A caveat is needed here: although this inventory has been in development for over ten years, its evolution will continue. Further developments will be guided by what you learn, think, experience, and subsequently suggest. We encourage you to write, phone, or fax us with your thoughts.

We would like to extend a special thanks to Siriwan Ratanakarn and Brenda Anderson, graduate assistants, for their considerable help in the development of this instrument. Thanks, too, to the many classroom teachers who did field evaluations; to the reviewers of the inventory—Phyllis Fantauzzo, Rider College; Edward Poostay, Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania; Leo Schell, Kansas State University; and Carmelita Williams, Norfolk State University; and to JoAnne Weaver, Senior Acquisitions Editor, and Tracy Napper, Developmental Editor at Harcourt Brace, for making this publication possible.

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of the IR-TI



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# **PART**

## **1**

### **MANUAL FOR ADMINISTERING AND INTERPRETING THE IR-TI**

The examiner pipes and the teacher must  
dance—and the examiner sticks to the old  
tune. If educational reformers really wish the  
dance altered they must turn their attention  
from the dancers to the musicians

—H. G. Wells, 1892



## **SECTION 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE IR-TI**

### **The IR-TI and Recent Developments in Assessment**

A new wave in assessment is spreading across the nation. It is called “performance-based assessment,” and it emphasizes determining whether students can do the complex, integrated tasks that life and learning really require rather than merely give correct answers to literal-level questions on standardized tests. In practical terms, this means that teachers should be doing more of the following:

- Offering children authentic and challenging tasks to do, such as writing a student handbook for children new to the classroom or school
- Assessing student progress as a seamless part of the tasks children are engaged in, tasks such as portfolio construction and analysis (described in more detail ahead)
- Using assessment dynamically to guide instruction, not merely for evaluation of student achievement
- Appraising higher levels of learning, such as the application and evaluation of what is read and taught

The Informal Reading-Thinking Inventory (IR-TI) is designed to help the teacher acquire further “know-how” for undertaking this seamless and dynamic type of assessment. While it does require stopping to administer the inventory initially, one of its primary purposes is to help teachers build the experiences, insights, and skills necessary to continually appraise student progress in the materials they read in more typical and authentic learning situations.

The formula for this basic instrument has been in the reading teacher's repertoire for many years. We have merely enhanced it to better orient the teacher's attention to modern conceptions of the reading process, especially the need to foster higher levels of reading/thinking in all students. It is seldom recognized, but this need is greatest in remedial level readers, who often are systematically deprived of the uplifting benefits to self-concept, motivation, and learning that come from being challenged to higher levels of thought and analysis.

## 4 SECTION 1 Introduction to the IR-TI

One of the chief values of the IR-TI is to help you, the teacher, to personalize the question types, formats, and formulas for estimating student progress while you are engaged in teaching and discussions with your students. Ideally, as you do so, your students will begin to ask similar questions of you, of one another, and also of themselves while they read. Evidence that this actually happens is mounting quickly, as you will learn if you read the historical background section ahead. If you are primarily a hands-on learner, you may wish to skip ahead for now to the description of the instrument and its administration. No matter which order you choose, set your sights on becoming a more astute watcher of students in teaching/learning situations, for this is the basis of the superior intuition and ability needed to do seamless teaching and assessment. Seamless teaching and assessment also is known in the literature by names such as “dynamic assessment” (Cioffi & Carney, 1983) and “intervention assessment” (Paratore & Indrisano, 1987) and even much earlier as “diagnostic-teaching” (Betts, 1936). By any name, the meaning is the same: getting to know individual strengths and weaknesses so instruction can be sensibly organized to take advantage of strengths or to support areas of weakness. A basic example of this practice would be to have a weak reader first listen to some portion of a passage before reading the remainder silently.

### **Historical Background of the IR-TI**

Near the turn of the century, E.L. Thorndike concluded from his research that “reading is reasoning” (1917). However, over fifty years had to pass before Stauffer’s (1969) Directed Reading-Thinking Activity added a clear thinking component to traditional Directed Reading Activity lessons (Betts, 1946). Even with this progress, assessment of reading has remained essentially stalled at the literal to inferential levels, with little attention to the constructive nature of the reading process. The most notable attempts during this period to do more have centered around informal—as opposed to conventional standardized—testing. However, even these attempts have largely been focused on means to better analyze and interpret oral reading

“miscues,” as Goodman (1973) called deviations from the printed page that previously had been referred to as “errors.”

This shortfall in assessment has tended to inhibit teachers and education in general from better understanding and addressing higher levels of comprehension. Attention to higher levels of comprehension will help you discover things about teaching and learning that most teachers sense but have had difficulty documenting. For example, most teachers notice that even weaker readers, such as those with erratic word calling and weak literal comprehension, often have surprising *strengths* in critical and creative thinking. The IR-TI provides a means of assessing and documenting such strengths. It also provides concrete evidence that some seemingly proficient readers have *weaknesses* that need attention. Some children, for example, have effective strategies for word recognition and literal comprehension but do not seem to connect the text to life experience or to think critically and creatively about what they read. Our inability as educators to document higher-order thinking has made it difficult for us to build on children’s strengths and to remediate their weaknesses at this level. This is especially unfortunate, since emphasizing critical and creative thinking or “teaching up,” as Estes (1991) refers to it, can positively benefit basic reading, writing, and thinking of students at all levels of proficiency (Collins, 1991; Cooter & Flynt, 1986; Haggard, 1976). In short, current assessment systems leave typical remedial students and those who may appear proficient, but are not, poorly served, because their needs are not documented and hence go unattended.

### **Why a New Type of IRI?**

Since their formal origin half a century ago (Betts, 1946; Kilgallon, 1942), Informal Reading Inventories (IRIs) have become the method of choice for estimating reading and listening levels and for quickly assembling baseline information about word recognition abilities (Dechant, 1981; Johns, 1977; Lipson & Wixson, 1991). Despite their usefulness and popularity, as evidenced by numerous commercially successful instruments, a number of technical

## 6 SECTION 1 Introduction to the IR-TI

measurement issues remain inadequately addressed by IRI developers (Baumann, 1988; Searles, 1988). These include problems such as weak reliability, inadequate estimates of the difficulty levels of passages, and intermixing of passage dependent and independent questions. Thus, IRIs continue to involve something of an approach-avoidance, love-hate struggle for many educators.

Three principal facts encourage us to believe that a new kind of Informal Reading Inventory can address a number of these and other emerging assessment issues and, more importantly, can result in better decisions in planning instruction. First, the IR-TI was constructed from the start to address some of the technical psychometric issues that have plagued IRIs for five decades. For example, you will see later how we were able to solve the problem of intermixing passage dependent and independent questions rather easily with a design modification that essentially separates the two question types. A second related point is that the IR-TI attempts to be responsive to the new issues that have arisen from recent theories of comprehension and from philosophies of instruction. Chief among these new concerns is the distinction between *reconstructing* an author's intended meaning (the usual view of comprehension) and the "constructivist" concept of *constructing* a reasonable interpretation of what one reads. The IR-TI is designed to assess both of these dimensions of comprehension in a manner that grounds it in current theory by acknowledging the "constructivist" ideal of promoting higher-order literacy or literate responses. Third, the movement toward alternative forms of assessment entails reduced emphasis on product measures, such as standardized tests, and greater focus on "process" measures, or performance-based and diagnostic evaluation of the student's thinking, reflection, and strategy choices. Instead of teachers continuing the practice of not assessing at all what cannot be assessed easily and definitively, we urge teachers to use the IR-TI to become more expert in continuing to informally assess critical/creative reading and thinking in a variety of settings and classroom situations. This, again, is the basis of "performance-based" assessment.

**Other Additions to the Mix**

As stated above, the Informal Reading-Thinking Inventory includes the traditional components of the IRI and extends this format to include assessment of several aspects of critical/creative, or constructive, thinking. However, it also offers means for inferring aspects of attitude, language proficiency, personal-social adjustment, and learning style—factors that the examiner can further appraise with other collateral instruments, including some available at little or no cost (see “Appendix A: Collateral Instruments”). The value of this more *holistic* assessment of student progress is that it achieves a better fit with current views of the reading process, of child development, of curriculum design, and of efforts to promote greater teacher empowerment.

Hence, typical uses of the IR-TI might include:

- Guiding students into materials from which they are most likely to profit
- Assessing, reporting, and addressing individual needs
- Acquiring a richer basis for forming cooperative and needs-based groups
- Assessing largely unacknowledged strengths and deficits in selected areas of reading/thinking (as specified later)
- Evaluating student progress in ways that more closely parallel the larger objectives of education and the modern views of the reading process
- Providing self-educating experiences for teachers in learning how to do performance-based assessment in reading/thinking
- Conducting site-based action research and program evaluation



## SECTION 2 PURPOSES AND COMPONENTS

The IR-TI allows you to accomplish all of the purposes of the traditional IRI and more. The option of how to use the IR-TI always rests with you, the teacher. It can be used in exactly the same way an IRI is used (which we call the streamlined option) or it can be used to reach additional conclusions (the regular option).

### Purposes of a Traditional IRI

A traditional IRI is given to determine one or more of the following:

1. Independent Level (highest level at which comprehension is good *without help*)
2. Instructional Level (highest level at which comprehension is good *with help*)
3. Frustration Level (lowest level at which comprehension is poor *even with help*)
4. Listening Level (highest level at which comprehension is good when passages are read aloud to the student by the teacher)
5. Decoding strategies used by the reader (inferred from oral reading performance)
6. Reading rate

Successful administration of a traditional IRI leads to a revealing portrait of the child as a reader. Such a portrait is based on a few logical assumptions about the graded passages the child has read or listened to. For example, the Independent Level should be lower than the Instructional Level, which in turn should be lower than the Frustration Level. A given child might have an Independent Level of second grade, an Instructional Level of third grade, and a Frustration Level of fourth grade. The Listening Level is generally at least as high as the Instructional Level, and (especially for elementary-age children) it is frequently higher. For example, it would not be surprising for this child to have a Listening Level of fourth or fifth grade. When the child is then asked to read passages aloud, the types of errors (called *miscues*) that have been made by the child can lead to insights into how the child approaches the task of word recognition. A teacher may discern, for instance, a tendency to rely too heavily on context or a habit of skipping over unfamiliar words.

## 10 SECTION 2 Purposes and Components

Even though the creators of an IRI offer guidelines for its use, the teacher is fully empowered to modify it to suit individual needs. For example, a teacher interested primarily in placing a child into instructional materials would probably not bother determining the Listening Level or conducting an analysis of miscues. Understandably, this sort of flexibility has had great appeal for IRI users.

### Purposes of the IR-TI

The IR-TI actually increases the flexibility of a traditional IRI. If a teacher wishes, the IR-TI can be used exactly like an IRI to provide the six types of information just listed and no more. This *streamlined option* has much to offer, for the information it provides is highly important. However, the IR-TI positions the teacher to discover much more about a child's reading and language development through the *regular option*. It requires asking more questions and making more judgments after each passage is read by the child, but the advantages are considerable. The IR-TI breaks new ground in the area of literacy assessment. In addition to the six types of information produced by a traditional IRI, several more types can be gathered through the IR-TI (continued here with the seventh):

7. Measurement of two dimensions of comprehension:
  - reconstructive (literal plus inferential comprehension)
  - constructive (critical and creative comprehension)
8. The degree of "engagement," or attention, in listening and responding to questions  
(this is inferred from a count of congruent, or relevant though not necessarily "correct," responses to questions, a notion that is more fully explained and illustrated later)
9. The extent of metacognition, as inferred from observations of self-monitoring and from quantitative counts of self-evaluations of accuracy in answering questions
10. Language development, as informally approximated from a comparison and summation of reading, listening, speaking, and writing