CHAPTER 1

PIRLS 2026 Reading Assessment Framework

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Overview

In 2026, IEA's PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) conducts its sixth reading assessment, providing data on 25 years of trends in comparative reading achievement across countries. Reading literacy is the foundation for student academic success and personal growth, and PIRLS is a valuable vehicle for studying whether new or revised policies impact achievement. The PIRLS 2026 Reading Assessment Framework and the instruments developed to assess this framework reflect IEA's commitment to continuous improvement and innovation.

For 2026, PIRLS has completed its transition from paper-based booklets to a digital delivery format. Presenting PIRLS reading passages and items via computer allows for an engaging and visually attractive experience to appeal to students. It increases operational efficiency for the delivery of the tasks and the recording and scoring of student responses. Also, the PIRLS 2026 Framework has now integrated what was previously referred to as ePIRLS,[a] in acknowledgment that in the 21st century, understanding children's reading achievement requires us to learn how students process, locate, comprehend, and evaluate text information when presented in digital format, such as a website or other formats commonly presented on a computer.[1,2] However, while PIRLS 2026 is a fully digital assessment, it is not an assessment of digital or internet skills: It continues to be a study of reading comprehension as described in this assessment framework.

PIRLS is based on a broad notion of what the ability to read means—a notion that includes reading not only for the pleasure it provides but also for the way it allows one to experience different worlds, other cultures, and a host of new ideas, thus broadening a child's understanding of multiple perspectives and points of view. It also encompasses reflecting on a variety of texts

a   Initiated in 2016, ePIRLS was a computer-based assessment of online reading in a simulated internet environment.

and text features as tools for attaining individual and societal goals, also known as "reading to do."[3] This view is increasingly relevant in today's society, where greater emphasis continues to be placed on students' ability to use the information they gain from reading.[4,5,6,7] Emphasis is shifting from demonstrating fluency and basic comprehension to also demonstrating the ability to apply what is understood to new situations or individual purposes (see also the *PIRLS 2021 Encyclopedia*).[8,9,10,11,12]

The PIRLS framework for assessing reading achievement was initially developed for the first assessment in 2001, using IEA's 1991 Reading Literacy Study as the basis for the PIRLS definition of reading literacy and for establishing the aspects of reading comprehension to be assessed.[13,14,15] Since then, the PIRLS assessment framework has been updated for each subsequent assessment cycle and now for PIRLS 2026.[16,17,18,19,20]

A Definition of Reading Literacy

The PIRLS definition of reading literacy is grounded in IEA's 1991 study, in which reading literacy was defined as "the ability to understand and use those written language forms[b] required by society and/or valued by the individual."

With successive assessments, this definition has been elaborated so that it retains its applicability to readers of all ages and a broad range of written language forms, yet makes explicit reference to aspects of the reading experience of young students as they become proficient readers, highlights the widespread importance of reading in school and everyday life, and acknowledges the increasing variety of text sources in today's technological world. The current PIRLS definition of reading literacy is as follows:

> *Reading literacy is the ability to understand and use those written language forms required by society and/or valued by the individual. Readers can construct meaning from texts in a variety of forms. They read to learn, to participate in communities of readers in school and everyday life, and for enjoyment.*

This view of reading reflects numerous theories of reading literacy as a constructive and interactive process.[21,22,23,24,25,26,27,28,29] Meaning is constructed through the interactions between readers, text sources, and their purposes or tasks in the context of particular reading experiences.[30,31] Readers are regarded as actively constructing meaning, reasoning with the text, accessing and integrating background knowledge, knowing and applying effective reading strategies, and reflecting on what they read.[32,33,34,35,36] Before, during, and after reading, readers use a repertoire of linguistic skills, as well as other cognitive and metacognitive strategies, to construct meaning.[37,38,39,40,41,42] In addition, the circumstance or situation in which the reader finds themselves can support the construction of meaning by promoting engagement and motivation to read, or it can distract or impede the meaning construction process.[43,44,45,46,47,48,49]

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b Which may include associated visuals such as photos, illustrations, tables, charts, and other iconography typical in literacy artifacts past and present.

To acquire knowledge of the world and about themselves, readers can use various text types from various sources. Any given text type can take many forms and combinations of forms. These include books, magazines, documents, and newspapers. Reading on digital devices often implies interacting with text and media on websites or through offline resources stored locally.

Increasingly, reading and learning from internet sources has become an essential aspect of school curricula and one of the central ways students acquire information in and outside of school. Reading skills and strategies adapted or learned in order to read and navigate online texts and their accompanying features and structures are necessary for reading success.[50,51,52,53,54] Websites often contain multiple pages or tabs and embedded links that allow one to navigate across text and other information in a nonlinear fashion. This online environment may present unique challenges relative to reading and learning.[55,56,57,58] For example, efficiently locating and comprehending information within a website, or across multiple sites, often requires higher levels of self-regulation and evaluation skills to determine whether information is appropriate given the needs of the reader. Thus, the construction of meaning in online environments requires a blending of new skills with the foundational reading comprehension processes.[59,60,61,62,63,64,65,66,67,68,69]

As young students begin to expand the contexts in which they are reading to learn, they often construct richer meanings of the texts when having an opportunity to discuss or share what they have read with different groups of individuals. Social interactions involving reading in one or more communities of readers can be instrumental in helping young students gain an understanding and appreciation of texts, different perspectives, new sources of information, and alternate interpretations of meaning.[70,71,72,73,74,75,76] Socially constructed environments can be physically located in or outside the classroom (such as school or public libraries) or remotely established via computer or web-mediated communication tools or platforms.

Formal and informal opportunities for social communication among young students can broaden their perspectives and help them see reading as a shared experience with their classmates and others. These activities can be extended to communities outside of school as young students talk with their families and friends about ideas, stories, or information acquired from reading. Although this social aspect of reading comprehension is highlighted in the definition of reading, PIRLS does not assess this aspect directly in the achievement portion of the assessment. However, it is addressed in the context questionnaires as an important factor for understanding home and school environments for learning.

The PIRLS Framework for Assessing Reading Achievement

This document provides the foundation for the PIRLS international assessment of students' reading achievement in their fourth year of schooling. The framework focuses on the two overarching purposes for reading that account for most of the reading done by young students both in and out of school: for literary experience, and to acquire and use information. In addition, the PIRLS assessment integrates four broad-based comprehension processes within each of the two purposes for reading: focus on and retrieve explicitly stated information, make straightforward inferences, interpret and integrate ideas and information, and evaluate and critique content and textual elements.

It should be recognized that the purposes for reading and the processes of comprehension do not function in isolation from one another, nor from the context in which students live and learn. The processes describe increasingly demanding operations that students need to engage in to understand texts of varying complexities; the purposes describe a classification of texts into two broad categories in which these processes get applied. It should also be noted that these purposes and processes have been expanded and elaborated to be inclusive of online reading literacy environments.[77]

PIRLS Framework Emphases

The two reading purposes and four comprehension processes form the basis for assessing reading in PIRLS. Exhibit 1 presents the percentages of reading purposes and approximate percentages of tasks aligned with each process assessed by PIRLS.

Exhibit 1: **Percentages of the PIRLS Reading Assessment Devoted to Each Reading Purpose and Comprehension Process**

Purposes for Reading	
Literary Experience	50%
Acquire and Use Information	50%
Processes of Comprehension	
Focus on and Retrieve Explicitly Stated Information	20%
Make Straightforward Inferences	30%
Interpret and Integrate Ideas and Information	30%
Evaluate and Critique Content and Textual Elements	20%

Reading achievement in PIRLS is reported overall, as well as by reading purpose and comprehension process subscales. The comprehension processes are combined to report two subscales: retrieving and straightforward inferencing; and interpreting, integrating, and evaluating. More details of reporting reading achievement are described in Chapter 3.

Purposes for Reading

Throughout the world, reading literacy is directly related to the reasons people read; broadly, these reasons include reading for pleasure or personal interest, for learning, and for participation in society. Reading can also involve social communicative interactivity, as readers discuss what they have read with others to share experiences and perspectives. The early reading of most young students often includes reading narrative texts that tell a story (e.g., storybooks or picture books) or informational texts that tell students about the world around them. Increasingly, this reading is done on a device (e.g., computer, tablet, or smartphone), with all the accompanying affordances and challenges of learning non-static text navigation skills, functions, features, and actions. As young students develop their literacy abilities and are required to read to learn across the curriculum, reading to acquire information from books, other physical materials, and other digital sources (e.g., the internet) becomes more important.[78]

Aligned with these reading purposes, PIRLS focuses on reading for literary experience and reading to acquire and use information. Because both purposes for reading are important for young students, PIRLS contains an equal proportion of material assessing each purpose. The PIRLS texts are classified broadly as literary or informational, and the accompanying questions address text characteristics aligned with each respective purpose for reading. That is, texts classified as literary have questions addressing theme, plot events, characters, and setting, and those classified as informational are accompanied by questions about the information contained in the texts. Although the texts distinguish between purposes for reading, the comprehension processes readers use are more similar than different for both purposes; therefore, the comprehension processes are evaluated across all texts in PIRLS.

The two categories of texts used in the PIRLS assessment (literary and informational) are consistent with the types of texts associated with certain reader purposes. For example, reading for literary experience is often accomplished through reading fiction, while reading to acquire and use information is generally associated with informative articles and instructional texts. However, the purposes for reading do not always align strictly with text types. For example, biographies or autobiographies can vary in characteristics that serve both literary and informational purposes. In addition, the reader's personal purpose for reading these or any text type may be for leisure or personal interest, for learning, to be able to do something, or a combination of aims.

Different types of text often differ in systematic ways in which the ideas are organized and presented, eliciting a variety of ways to construct meaning. Text organization and format can involve sequential ordering of written material or snippets of words and phrases arranged with pictorial and tabular data. For example, within informational texts, authors may describe, explain, compare and contrast, or present an argument intended to persuade the reader. The content, organization, or style of text content can have implications for the reader's approach to understanding the text.[79,80,81,82]

As noted, it is in the interaction between readers, texts, and goals or tasks that meanings are constructed and purposes are achieved. In selecting texts for PIRLS, the aim is to present a wide range of text types within each broad purpose for reading. The goal is to create a reading experience for students participating in the assessment that, as much as possible, is similar to authentic reading experiences they may have in and outside of school.

Reading for Literary Experience

In literary reading, readers engage with the text to become involved in events, settings, actions, consequences, characters, atmosphere, feelings, and ideas, and to enjoy language itself. To better understand and appreciate literature, each reader needs to bring to the text their own experiences, feelings, appreciation of language, and knowledge of literary forms. For young readers, literature can offer the opportunity to explore situations and feelings they have not yet encountered, helping them to understand and analyze alternative perspectives or points of view.[83]

Events, actions, and consequences depicted in narrative fiction allow readers to experience vicariously and reflect upon situations that, although they may be imagined, illuminate those of real life. The text may present the perspective of the narrator or a principal character, and a more complex text may even have several viewpoints. Information and ideas may be described directly or through dialogue and events. Short stories or novels sometimes narrate events chronologically or sometimes make more complex use of time with flashbacks or time shifts. Illustrations accompanying literary texts enrich the reading experience and play a role in engaging readers and deepening their connection to the text.

The main form of literary texts used in PIRLS is narrative fiction. Given differences in curricula and cultures across the participating countries, it is difficult for PIRLS to include some forms of literary texts. For example, poetry is difficult to translate and is therefore avoided.

Reading to Acquire and Use Information

Informational texts are both read and written for a wide variety of functions. While the primary function of informational text is to provide information, writers often address their subject matter with different objectives. The kinds of informational texts presented to children in schools are typically selected from trustworthy, credible sources such as scholastic publishing companies. These texts are intended to convey information that is primarily factual or at least not intentionally misleading. For example, authors may elect to convey facts and explanations through an expository summary, a persuasive essay, or a balanced argument.[84] Even with such credible sources, readers must bring a critical mind to these texts to form their own opinion or view, which will impact how they form or update their understanding with information provided in the texts.[85]

When readers venture out from trusted sources, their critical and evaluative skills must be even sharper and brought to the forefront of comprehension processing. There is a universe of valid, useful information to be found on the internet; there are also websites and text sources that may appear credible and truthful, but some or all of the information is not so. All PIRLS texts are derived from credible sources.

To best address the various functions of texts, information can be presented differently, such as by varying the content, organization, and form. Young students may read informational texts that cover a range of content, including those that are scientific, historical, geographical, or social.[86] These texts also may vary in the organization of the content conveyed. For example, historical facts may be organized chronologically, instructions or procedures sequenced step-by-step, and an argument presented logically, such as employing cause-and-effect or compare-and-contrast text structures.

Information can be presented in many different formats. Both static texts (e.g., manuals and newspapers) and websites present a considerable amount of information via lists, charts, graphs, diagrams, video, and other multimodal formats.[87,88] Also, there is a wide variety of approaches to structuring supplemental or supporting information, such as advertisements, announcements, sidebars, or timelines.

As noted, online information is often presented multimodally. Websites may include interactive and experiential features that are impossible in print. Multimodal texts utilize multiple communicative modes, which are then integrated by the reader to extract meaning from the text. For example, online text presentations may integrate dynamic elements for visual interest, illustration, or as primary sources of information. Common elements include videos or audio clips, animated graphics, hyperlinks, and pop-up windows. Online texts may also use a variety of visual cues, such as information that appears and disappears, revolves, or changes color.

Looking for and learning from written text sources on the internet involves comprehending information arranged within this complex reading environment. Effective learning when reading online necessitates the integration of multiple texts, which may contain different or contradictory points of view or incomplete information. Textual elements and attributes—such as source information, relevance to the assigned task, and relationships to other sources—must be recognized and evaluated to integrate texts successfully. The informational texts used in PIRLS reflect students' authentic experiences with reading informational text in and out of school. Some PIRLS informational texts include animated graphics, hyperlinks, and pop-up windows. Typically, these texts and websites have been written by authors who understand writing for a young audience. Moreover, many of the texts are provided by the participating countries as representative of the informational materials their students read.

A fundamental component of successful internet research and comprehension is the ability to locate information that meets one's goals. Readers need to be able to evaluate one or more sources to select the web pages or websites that will provide the target information, navigate to the relevant web pages, and follow links to new content. Evaluating sources requires the additional comprehension demands of inferring the potential usefulness of yet unseen texts (e.g., when evaluating search engine results or links). Once on a given website or page, readers must continue to infer the relevance of the various types of information and texts presented, while ignoring a barrage of advertisements and other distracting displays. This may involve self-regulatory processes to maintain focus on the task at hand, so as not to be distracted by other interesting topics or advertising.

Indeed, finding information online may be different in terms of tools used and volume of available sources, but in terms of the goal of the search, it is not unlike looking for a book or an article in a library, searching through shelves of books and library catalogs located in a physical brick-and-mortar building. While the additional complexities of searching for information are part of the reader's experience and require skills related to the experience of reading, these are not the focus of the PIRLS assessment.

Processes of Comprehension

PIRLS assesses four broad-based processes of comprehension typically used by fourth-grade readers: 1) focus on and retrieve explicitly stated information; 2) make straightforward inferences; 3) interpret and integrate ideas and information; and 4) evaluate and critique content and textual elements. Transcending these processes are the metacognitive processes and strategies that allow readers to examine their understanding and adjust their approach and reading goals.[89,90,91,92,93] In addition, the knowledge and background experiences that readers bring to reading equip them with an understanding of language, texts, and the world, through which they filter their comprehension of the material.

In PIRLS, these four comprehension processes are used as a foundation for developing the comprehension questions, which are based on each text (or set of texts) or task. Across the passages, the variety of questions measuring the range of comprehension processes enables students to demonstrate a range of abilities and skills in constructing meaning from written texts. In addition, the questions included in PIRLS 2026 capitalize on the digital platform to use response formats that go beyond standard multiple-choice and written-response formats (e.g., drag-and-drop, matching).

In thinking about assessment questions, there is, of course, a substantial interaction between the length and complexity of the text and the sophistication or complexity of the comprehension processes required by the reading task. Generally, locating and extracting explicitly stated information can be expected to be less difficult than, for example, making interpretations across an entire text and integrating those interpretations with external ideas and experiences. However, texts and tasks can vary with regard to length, syntactic complexity, abstractness of ideas, organizational structure, and cognitive demand. Certainly, locating and extracting information from a website with multiple pages and complex sentences, for example, is cognitively more demanding than from a short narrative story with simple sentence structure. Thus, the nature of the text impacts the complexity of the questions asked, across and within the four types of comprehension processes.[94,95]

Focus on and Retrieve Explicitly Stated Information

Readers vary the attention they give to explicitly stated information in the text. Some ideas in the text may elicit a particular focus, and others may not. For example, readers may focus on ideas that confirm or contradict predictions they have made about the text's meaning, become captivated by an interesting detail, or skim and scan a text to identify information related to their general purpose for reading. In school tasks, readers often need (or are asked) to retrieve information explicitly stated in the text to answer a question they bring to the reading task, or to check their developing understanding of some aspect of the text's meaning.[96,97]

Successful retrieval requires a fairly immediate or automatic understanding of the words, phrases, or sentences, in combination with the recognition that they are relevant to the information sought.[98] In classifying items for PIRLS, it is essential to examine the item stem and correct response in relation to the text. If the item stem and the correct response both use exact words from the text and are located within a sentence or two of each other, the item is classified as

"focus on and retrieve." If some synonyms are used, the item still is "focus on and retrieve." As the relationship becomes less literal, the item may be classified as requiring a straightforward inference.

Reading tasks that may exemplify this type of text processing include the following:

- identifying and retrieving information that is relevant to the specific goal of reading,
- looking for specific ideas,
- searching for definitions of words or phrases,
- identifying the setting of a story (e.g., time and place),
- finding the topic sentence or main idea (when explicitly stated), and
- identifying specific information in a graphic or on a web page (e.g., graph, table, or map).

Make Straightforward Inferences

As readers construct meaning from text, they make inferences about ideas or information not explicitly stated. Making inferences allows readers to move beyond the surface of texts and to resolve the gaps in meaning that often occur in texts. Some of these inferences are straightforward in that they are based primarily on information that is contained in one place in the text—readers may merely need to connect two or more ideas or pieces of information. The ideas themselves may be explicitly stated, but the connection between them is not, and thus must be inferred. Furthermore, despite the inference not being explicitly stated in the text, the meaning of the text remains relatively clear.[99,100]

Skilled readers often make these kinds of inferences automatically. They may immediately connect two or more pieces of information, recognizing a relationship even though it is not explicitly stated in the text.[101,102,103] In many cases, the author has constructed a text to lead readers to an obvious or straightforward inference. For example, the actions of a character at a point in the story may clearly point to a particular character trait, and most readers would arrive at the same conclusion about that character's personality or viewpoint.[104,105]

With this type of processing, readers typically go beyond the word-, phrase-, or sentence-level meaning in focusing on the local meaning residing within one part of the text. In online reading, this often involves making some inferences about the best approaches to use in searching for information. On the web, readers also may infer whether it is necessary or useful to follow a link to a definition or another page.[106,107]

When classifying items, if the item stem and correct response use paraphrases of the original phrases or sentences in text, then the item is classified as "straightforward inferencing." Also, if the correct answers to the item are located in several places within the text, but the item stem and the correct response both use exact words from the text, then the item is classified as a straightforward inference.

Reading tasks that may exemplify this type of text processing include the following:

- inferring that one event caused another event,
- giving the reason for a character's action,

- describing the relationship between two characters, and
- identifying which section of the text or web page would help for a particular purpose.

Interpret and Integrate Ideas and Information

As with the more straightforward inferences, readers who are engaged in interpreting and integrating ideas and information in text may focus on local or global meanings, or they may relate details to overall themes and ideas. In any case, these readers may be making sense of the author's intent and are engaged in developing a more complete understanding of the entire text.[108,109]

As readers interpret and integrate, their goal is to construct a more specific or more complete understanding of the text by reflecting on and incorporating personal knowledge and experience with meaning that resides within the text, and then perhaps to go beyond that by interrogating other interpretations of the meaning. For example, readers may go beyond the literal text content itself to draw on their own experience to infer a character's underlying motive or to construct a mental image of the information conveyed.[110,111]

As readers engage in this interpretive process, they are making connections that are not only implicit, but that may vary across individuals based on differences in perspective. Because of this, meaning that is constructed through interpreting and integrating ideas and information is likely to vary among readers, depending upon the experiences and knowledge they bring to the reading task.[112,113] Learning is about acquiring new knowledge, as well as updating and revising one's prior knowledge based on the evidence that is either explicitly or implicitly provided in the text. However, individual interpretations that depend solely on personal perspectives or individual experiences are not appropriate for an assessment of reading. In PIRLS, interpretations elicited through comprehension questions must be derived from the text and provide plausible explanations of aspects described in the text with relevant evidence.

Using the internet requires the ability to read and digest information from multiple online sources. Integrating and synthesizing information across texts is challenging no matter the source of the content, because readers need not only to comprehend one text, but to consolidate information across two or more texts. In an online environment, this includes integrating relevant written information across web pages that may also include graphics, animations, or videos, as well as pop-up windows and rollover text and graphics.[114,115]

Items classified as "interpret and integrate ideas and information" use concepts and generalizations not explicitly stated, but still grounded, in the text. The new ideas or derived inferences may be based on information included in the item stem, the text, or both. A full-credit response requires showing comprehension of the entire text, or at least significant portions of it, as well as providing ideas or information that go beyond the literal text content.

Reading tasks that may exemplify this type of text processing include the following:

- discerning the overall message or theme of a text,
- considering an alternative to actions of characters,
- comparing and contrasting text information,

- inferring a story's mood or tone,
- interpreting a real-world application of text information, and
- comparing and contrasting information presented within and across texts or websites.

Evaluate and Critique Content and Textual Elements

As readers evaluate the content and elements of a text, the focus shifts from constructing meaning to critically considering the text itself. Readers engaged in this process step back from a text in order to evaluate and critique it.

The text content, or meaning, may be evaluated and critiqued from a personal perspective or with an objective view. This process may require readers to make a justified judgment, drawing on their interpretations and weighing their understanding of the text against their understanding of the world—rejecting, accepting, or remaining neutral to the text's representation. For example, readers may counter or confirm claims made in the text or make comparisons with ideas and information found in other sources.

In evaluating and critiquing elements of text structure and language, readers draw upon their knowledge of language use, presentational features, and general or genre-specific features of texts.[116] The text is considered a way to convey ideas, feelings, and information.

Readers may reflect on the author's language choices and devices for conveying meaning and judge their adequacy. Relying on their understanding of language conventions, readers may find weaknesses in how the text was written or recognize the successful use of the author's craft. Further, readers may evaluate the mode used to impart information—both visual and textual features—and explain their functions (e.g., text boxes, pictures, or tables). In evaluating the organization of a text, readers draw upon their knowledge of text genre and structure. The extent of past reading experience and familiarity with the language are essential to each piece of this process.

With respect to text sources found in environments such as the internet, evaluate-and-critique skills are often brought to the forefront, as one searches and locates relevant information that align with the reader or task goals. Because internet sources vary widely in purpose and intent of the website producers, readers must make judgments about the relevance of the source of the information, as well as determine the perspective, point of view, and potential bias in written content as conveyed by the producers of the website. Students must learn to identify, evaluate, and integrate information within and across various texts that may contain overlapping, unique, or conflicting messages. They will need not only to expend resources on identifying relevant information and credible sources, but also to build mental models of individual texts as well as connections across texts. The visual, textual, and multimodal features on websites can be more varied than found in static written texts. Thus, evaluate-and-critique processes are a prominent part of online reading.[117,118]

For an item to be classified as "evaluate and critique," an acceptable response to that item involves a *justified judgment* about some aspect of the text. For example, the item stem can present more than one point of view where it is possible for students to argue either point of view (or both) based on the text. Or, an item stem can ask for a judgment and the evidence to support it.

Reading tasks that may exemplify this type of text processing include the following:

- judging the completeness or clarity of information in the text;
- evaluating the likelihood that the events described could really happen;
- evaluating how likely an author's argument would be to change what people think and do;
- judging how well the title of the text reflects the main theme;
- describing the effect of language features, such as metaphors or tone;
- describing the contribution of the graphic elements to understanding the text or website;
- determining the point of view or bias of the text or website; and
- determining an author's perspective on the central topic.

Selecting Texts for PIRLS 2026

While a large proportion of the content from the previous cycle is maintained for measuring trends in reading achievement, each cycle of PIRLS involves new development. The initial stage of the development process focuses on the selection of texts, which is driven by the assessment design (see Chapter 3) as well as an established set of text criteria based on the PIRLS reading assessment framework and guiding principles of test development. The text selection process for PIRLS 2026 continues to emphasize the importance of including a range of text types, formats, and content that provide opportunities for questions that adequately measure the processes of comprehension outlined in this framework.

The PIRLS texts undergo extensive review by the Reading Development Group and the National Research Coordinators. Considerable effort is expended to ensure that the texts have the following characteristics:

- appropriateness for the target grade of the PIRLS student population;
- clarity and coherence;
- appropriate content across countries and cultures;
- interesting, engaging content for a wide range of students; and
- adequate basis for assessing the full range of comprehension processes.

To reflect the goal of approximating an authentic reading experience in the assessment, the reading passages in PIRLS reflect those read by students in their everyday experiences in and outside of school. The selected texts, which are usually authored by published writers, are typically provided and reviewed by the participating countries and are thus representative of the literary and informational materials their students read.

The assessment's time constraints impose limitations on text length, as students require ample time to read the entire passage and respond to comprehension questions. Reflecting the range in difficulty levels in PIRLS, passages typically range from 500 to 800 words. Other text features also contribute to the rate at which students read texts and complete the assessment.

With the transition to digital format, the aim is to increase the range of text types included in PIRLS 2026. For example, PIRLS may include texts from magazines and newspapers as well as online texts, emails, and short messages. Also, information can be presented in many different formats. Texts may present some of the information via lists, charts, graphs, and diagrams, with some websites and digital text formats possessing more multimedia elements.

The online texts in PIRLS are adapted from informational science or social studies websites. Each task involves approximately three different websites totaling about 5 to 10 web pages. Reflecting the fact that online reading often involves sorting through more information than is actually necessary to achieve one's goal, each online task in PIRLS averages about 1000 words in total. Recognizing that being able to locate information underlies all the reading processes, the emphasis for internet tasks is on assessing reading comprehension rather than navigation skills. Moreover, because students have a range of internet experiences, the PIRLS online tasks use a teacher avatar to help guide students through the web pages so that students have the opportunity to accomplish the reading tasks in the allotted assessment time. Throughout the assessment, the teacher avatar points students toward websites and provides additional assistance when students have difficulty locating web pages.

Clarity and coherence are essential criteria for PIRLS texts. Typically, the passages and websites have been authored by people who understand writing for a young audience, such that the texts have an appropriate level of linguistic features and density of information. In the context of an international study, attaining authenticity in assessing reading experience may be somewhat constrained by the need to translate the texts into numerous languages. Thus, care is taken to choose texts that can be translated without loss of clarity in meaning, or in potential for student engagement.

In selecting texts for use in an international reading assessment, it is crucial to pay close attention to the potential for cultural bias. Texts that depend heavily on culture-specific knowledge are typically identified and excluded early in the development process. Text selection involves collecting and considering texts from as many of the participating countries as possible. The goal is for the texts to be universally applicable across cultures, and for the set of texts in the assessment to vary as widely as possible across nations and cultures, such that no country or culture is overrepresented in the assessment texts. The final selection of texts is based, in part, on the national and cultural representation of the entire set of assessment texts.

The appropriateness and readability of texts for the PIRLS assessment primarily is determined through iterative reviews by educators and curriculum specialists from countries participating in the assessment. Considering fairness and sensitivity to gender, racial, ethnic, and potential religious concerns, every effort is made to select texts that are topic and theme appropriate for the grade level and that elicit the full range of comprehension processes.

Finally, it is extremely important for the texts to be interesting to the greatest number of students. As part of the field test, students routinely are asked how well they like each of the texts or tasks, and a high level of positive response is fundamental for a text or task to be selected for the final set of assessment instruments.

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