

THE TEST TESTER

By Douglas Evans

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IT WAS TEST WEEK at W. T. Melon Elementary School, and the students in the classroom at the end of the hall were taking one test after another. On Monday and Tuesday they took the eight-part National Achievement Test. Today, Wednesday, they were taking the six-part State Standardized Test, and tomorrow they would take the four-part School District Skills Test. On Friday the tall teacher would give his weekly spelling test and maybe even announce a pop quiz on the times tables. This meant that all week the fifth-graders, using number 2 pencils, were filling in oval bubbles, circling T's and F's, and writing short answers, trying not to begin with the word "because."

In the second row, Loren read the seventh question in her test booklet. Scowling, she found the bold 7 on her answer sheet and studied the blue ovals beside it marked A, B, C, and D.

"Eeny, meeny, miny, moe," she said, tapping each bubble with her pencil point. "Well, I've already filled in lots of A's and B's. Last question I filled in C, so this time I choose D."

Around and around her pencil went inside the oval. Careful not to go outside the blue line, she filled in the D bubble until it was shiny black.

"Filling in bubbles is the only good part of Test Week," Loren said. "Reading a bunch of questions and figuring out a bunch of answers is a total waste of time."

The tall teacher looked up from his desk. "Loren, I hope you're trying your best on these tests. Concentrate. Test scores are important."

"Important?" said Loren. "How important can a sheet of black bubbles be? What do kids get for doing all this extra work anyway? The only thing tests teach us is how to take more tests. I can't wait until Test Week is over so we can get back to learning."

The teacher frowned. "These tests show what you know and what you don't know, Loren."

“But I already know what I know,” Loren said. “Tests are nerve-wracking. My neck hurts and my bottom is numb. My fingers ache and my hand is cramped. Why should I try on tests when they are bad for my health?”

“Keep working, Loren,” said the teacher. “You have twenty minutes to finish that section.”

Loren groaned. Before reading the next question, she looked toward Miss Nosewiggle, the class guinea pig, who was running inside her exercise wheel. “You’re lucky, Miss Nosewiggle,” she said. “Guinea pigs don’t ever have to take tests.”

Loren picked up her pencil. After filling in five more bubbles, she heard a *ding!*, the sound the tall teacher’s bell made when the test period was over. But this sound hadn’t come from the front of the room. It came from inside Loren’s desk.

Curious, she raised her desktop. Next to her glue bottle was something surprising, a red pen. She picked it up and pushed the button on the end.

“Where’d this come from?” she asked herself. “A red pen is for grading tests, not for taking them.” She read the words on the pen’s side:

ITS: Iowa Test Site

At that moment the classroom phone near the door chirped. The office used this phone to give the tall teacher important messages. Now Loren watched as her teacher walked over to the phone and picked up the receiver. He spoke a few words, listened for a moment, and then, to Loren’s great surprise, held the phone out toward her.

“Loren, it’s for you.”

Delighted, Loren rose from her seat. Not only did this give her a break from testing, but it was her first-ever call on the classroom phone.

Under the tall teacher’s watchful stare, Loren took the phone and held it to her ear. “Hello?”

The phone crackled before a voice said, “*Attention! This is a test.*” It wasn’t the secretary’s voice or the principal’s voice or any office voice that Loren recognized. “*This is a test, only a test!*” It sounded deep and official, as an army sergeant might sound.

“Is someone there?” Loren asked.

“*Loren, this is Colonel Cram from ITS, the Iowa Test Site,*” the voice said through more static. “*Did you receive the pen we sent you?*”

“The red pen? Yes, it was in my desk,” said Loren. “But what’s it for? What’s ITS?”

In a low voice, almost a whisper, Colonel Cram replied, “*Loren, everything I’m about to tell you about ITS is top-secret.*”

“It is?” said Loren, growing excited.

“*Loren, ITS is a secret facility located under a cornfield in Iowa,*” the colonel explained. “*ITS is where all of our nation’s school tests are stored.*”

“It is?” said Loren. “That place must be huge!”

The phone crackled some more. “*Affirmative. ITS is miles deep. But the reason I’m calling, Loren, is that ITS is also where our nation’s school test testing and exam examining take place. Our ITS officers heard your testimonial about detesting tests, and we have a top-secret test task for you.*”

Loren looked toward the teacher, who sat at his desk, still watching her. “A test task?” she said softly. “For me?”

“*Affirmative,*” Colonel Cram repeated.

“But why me?” asked Loren.

“*Because, Loren, you are a student who questions tests before allowing tests to question you.*”

Loren turned her back toward the teacher’s desk. “That’s true. I’m always wondering why we take so many tests. So what top-secret test task do you want me to do?”

“*Loren, as you know, this is Test Week in schools across our nation,*” the colonel said. “*Millions of tests, more tests than ever before, are given to students. We must dig the ITS test store-room deeper every year. Tests are so abundant that our test testers must work overtime.*”

“Test testers? What’s a test tester?”

“*The Iowa Test Site Test Testers are four inspectors who travel to each school checking for flawed, fraudulent, or defective tests that might have slipped into a classroom. Our test tester’s names, Loren - and again this is top-secret - are Eeny, Meeny, Miny, and Moe.*”

“Eeny, Meeny, Miny, and Moe?” Loren exclaimed. “I was just talking about them!”

“*Many students call out the names Eeny, Meeny, Miny, and Moe during Test Week, Loren,*” said Colonel Cram. “*Unfortunately, this week of all weeks, Moe had to fly to India to catch a tiger by the toe. That’s why we especially need your assistance.*”

Again, Loren checked her teacher and met his stare. “So you want me to test the tests I’m taking?” she said into the phone. “Is that what the red pen is for?”

“Affirmative. After you take each test, Loren, we want you to put a grade in red ink, A+ through F–, in the upper right corner of the first page.”

“Sounds easy enough,” said Loren.

“For years, Loren, ITS officials have been trying to get a School Test Ban Treaty signed,” the colonel went on. “But until that day arrives, our test inspectors have an important mission. Loren, you can be a safeguard against the spread of bad tests in our nation’s schools. Think what a disaster it would be if faulty, false, or counterfeit tests were given to students. Can ITS count on you to be our assistant test tester?”

“I’ll do it,” Loren announced. “I’ll put my tests to the test and examine my exams.”

“Excellent,” said Colonel Cram. “Now, one more thing, Loren. Don’t talk to anyone about your test-testing mission unless he or she has first given the top-secret pass-phrase.”

“Top-secret pass-phrase?” said Loren, more excited than ever. “What’s the top-secret pass-phrase?”

Static filled the phone, and she listened closely to hear the answer.

“Testing, one, two, three. Repeat after me. Testing, one, two, three.”

“Testing, one, two, three,” said Loren. “Why, that’s what people say into microphones at school assemblies! I had no idea they were all from ITS.”

“Affirmative. Now you must get to work, Inspector Loren,” said the colonel. “You must complete as much of the test as you can, as carefully as you can, before the bell rings. Keep your eyes sharp and your number 2 pencils sharp. Over and out.”

Loren hung up the phone and returned to her desk.

“Everything all right, Loren?” the tall teacher asked.

“Affirmative,” Loren said, placing the red pen in her desktop pencil groove. Was all that test talk about the Iowa Test Site for real? she wondered. Well, it had to be real, she concluded. Hadn’t she heard it on the official classroom phone?

Loren picked up her pencil and read the next test question.

“Hmm, not a bad question,” she said in her head. “Rather easy, though - the answer is C. But the question isn’t silly or wordy. It’s a paragraph about cows, and although I really don’t care about cows, the question is pretty good. So far I give this test a B–.”

After filling in the C bubble, Loren read the next question. That, too, she answered while mentally grading the test. Question after question she read, and bubble after bubble she filled in as accurately as she could. By the time she finished the final question she had decided upon a final test grade.

“Not the best test, but not the worst one either,” she said to herself. And using the red pen, she wrote C+ in the upper right-hand corner of the first page.

“A fair grade. Good effort. But there’s room for improvement. I hope the next test will be better.”

Ding! The tall teacher's bell ended the test period.

“Pencils down, class,” the teacher called out. “We’ll take a short restroom break before our testing resumes.”

Loren walked to the window, stretching her arms. “So far the test testing is OK,” she told herself. “No fake, funny, or phony test is going to slip by me.”

As she stood there, she heard a small voice say, “Testing, one, two, three.”

A chill went up Loren's spine.

“Testing, one, two, three,” the voice repeated. “In the cage, Loren.”

Loren looked toward the guinea pig cage but saw only Miss Nosewiggle, wiggling her nose.

“Did you just talk, Miss Nosewiggle?” she whispered. “Did you just say the secret ITS pass-phrase?”

The guinea pig’s mouth quivered the way it did when nibbling on lettuce. But this time words came out. “Indeed I did, Loren. Most class-room pets - the rats, white mice, and guinea pigs - can speak English. We learned your language while serving a term at the Iowa Test Site.”

“You can? You did?” Loren stammered. “What do guinea pigs do at ITS?”

Miss Nosewiggle took a sip from her water bottle before answering. “The test animals run through mazes, push buttons, and pull levers - stunts like that - all in the name of testing new tests. And with the megatons of new school tests being produced nowadays, they are kept extremely busy.”

“It’s true,” Loren grumbled. “Kids can’t do anything at school without being tested on it. I was tested before I could ride my bike to school or use the computer. I’m tested on books I’ve read and state capitals I’ve learned. I was even tested to get into kindergarten.”

“This school is lucky to have you as a test watchdog, Loren,” said Miss Nosewiggle. “Keep up the good work.”

At that moment the tall teacher called out, “OK, class, take your seats and open your test booklets. I’ll read the instructions while you follow along.”

Loren returned to her seat and flipped to the next test in her booklet - vocabulary. This test was Loren’s favorite. The instructions said to match a given word with its meaning, and Loren was an expert at word meanings.

“Well, Colonel Cram, you picked the right kid to test this test,” she said, and began filling in bubbles.

After completing two pages, Loren stopped. “This is a pretty good test,” she told herself. “Useful words. Good definitions. It’s a B+ so far.”

She continued to answer the questions carefully but steadily until she came to the final one, which she had to read twice:

If a room is immense, it is:

- A. crowded**
- B. warm**
- C. empty**
- D. purple**

Loren bit hard on her number 2 pencil.” “Immense’ means ‘big,’ “she said to herself. “I’m positive. But none of the choices has anything to do with size. Could this test have an error?”

She glanced toward Miss Nosewiggle and then read the question a third time.

“Yes, this test is faulty,” she said, reaching for the red pen. “So there’s only one grade it deserves.” And in the top right-hand corner of the first page, she wrote F -.

Ding! Test time was over.

“Close your test booklets, class,” the tall teacher said. “It’s lunchtime. We’ll begin testing again right after lunch recess.”

Loren stood, rubbing her neck. When the room was empty, she stepped to the guinea pig cage. “I had to give that vocabulary test a failing grade,” she said to Miss Nosewiggle. “I’m sure I did the right thing. What will happen now? What will ITS do?”

“ITS has ways of dealing with tests that don't make the grade,” the guinea pig replied. “Just keep testing your tests the way you’ve been doing, Loren. Our nation owes you a big thank-you.”

After lunch the third-graders took the math portion of the State Standardized Test. This was Loren’s poorest subject, but still she read each question with care, did the figuring on a piece of scratch paper, and filled in each bubble as best she could. She gave the computation section a B, but she found the word-problem section dull and outdated, so she graded it C -.

All afternoon Loren wondered what would happen to the test that she marked with an F -. The *ding!* at the end of the day marked the end of the state tests. The tall teacher collected the test booklets and dismissed the class.

“More testing tomorrow,” he announced.

Slowly and stiffly, Loren stood up. She wiggled her fingers and rubbed her shoulder. On the way to the coat closet she stopped by the guinea pig cage.

“Every joint in my body hurts, and every muscle aches,” she said. “If I close my eyes I see little black eggs floating around.”

“Just how I felt after a day of testing at ITS,” said Miss Nosewiggle. “I suggest taking a warm bath and getting lots of sleep tonight. Test Week is a long way from being over.”

Loren hobbled into the coat closet and opened her lunchbox. Four chocolate chip cookies remained from lunch.

“Which should I eat first?” she said. “Eeny, meeny, miny, moe.”

“You called?” said a deep voice behind her.

Loren spun around. On the wall she saw the shadow of a man wearing a trench coat and a hat with a brim. She looked all through the closet but couldn't find the man himself, only his shadow.

“Testing, one, two, three,” the silhouette said.

“You’re from ITS?” Loren whispered.

“Inspector Moe here, Inspector Loren,” the dark shape muttered.

“Moe? But I thought you were in India trying to catch a tiger by the toe.”

“It hollered, so I had to let it go,” Moe said. “I’m here to remove the vocabulary test that you gave an F -.”

“Yes, the test had a wrong answer,” said Loren. “It’s on my teacher’s desk. So where will you take it, Moe?”

“Back to the Iowa Test Site, where it will be . . . how can I put this mildly? Destroyed. That's what happens to all defective tests.”

“And until the School Test Ban Treaty is signed, another test will take its place, I bet,” said Loren.

“And I can testify that the new tests will be bigger and more powerful than ever, Inspector Loren,” said Moe. “Exams, quizzes, essay tests, oral tests, midterms, finals, SATs, MATs, CATs, SCATs—the proliferation of school tests in this country is scary. The ITS storeroom, no matter how deep we dig it, is still packed to the roof with tests. There are enough tests in schools to make any kid testy.”

“Well, Test Week still seems like a waste of time to me, Moe,” said Loren. “But from now on, whenever a test is placed on my desk, I’m taking it with special attention. We test testers must never let a flawed, fraudulent, defective, faulty, false, forged, counterfeit, fake, funny, or phony test slip by.”