

# How To Play the Test Game—and Win

by DON EASTMAN

In his keynote address to the delegates at the annual meeting of the American Council of Education last summer, Ernest Boyer, the U.S. Commissioner of Education, related how his five-year-old son had become testwise.

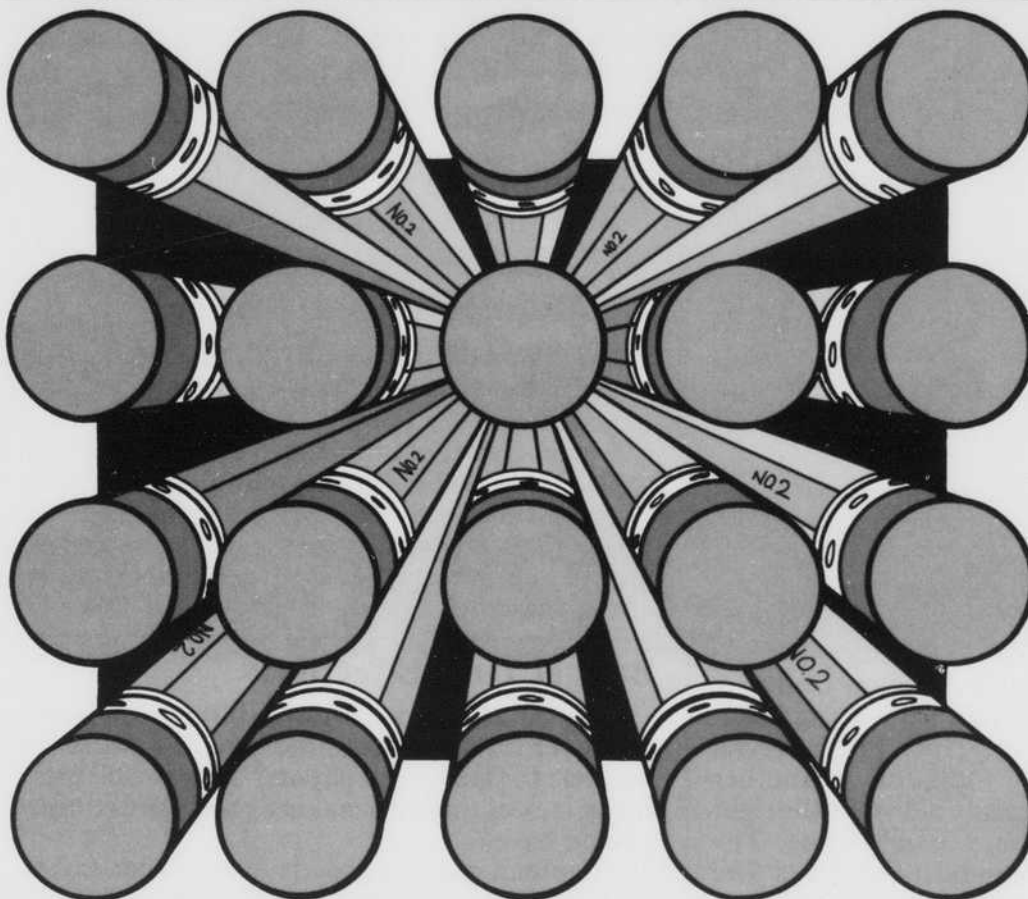
The boy had been attending kindergarten less than a week when, instead of saying his nightly prayers, he launched into a recitation of the alphabet. "I realized the educational implications of this recitation," said Boyer, "and was filled with fatherly pride at my son's accomplishment."

Embarrassed by his father's praise for learning the alphabet in less than a week in kindergarten, the boy confessed, "I actually learned it on *Sesame Street*, but my teacher thinks she taught it to me."

"Ah, then I was doubly proud," said Boyer, "for he had not only learned the alphabet, but he had learned the system as well."

Like most educators, Boyer understands that American education consists of two distinct parts: there is learning, and there is the game of learning.

No one is quite sure whether testing and grading, which occupy a remarkable portion of time and energy in the American educational system, measure learning—or simply the ability of students to make grades and pass tests. It is clear, however, that students who know how to play the game of education—that is, who know how to take tests and make good grades—quickly achieve a favored status in our society. The testwise



student knows and uses the rules of the game; whether he is actually learned or not, he is the declared winner in the educational sweepstakes.

The first matter to consider, and to come to terms with, is the quite obvious fact that formal education is

---

**American education consists of two distinct parts: there is learning, and there is the game of learning.**

---

not a monolithic, unified, univocal experience, but a series of courses taught by individuals. The act of taking a course is quite similar, for good historical and psychological reasons, to a brief apprenticeship. What one is asked to do in taking a course is to see the particular subject matter through the eyes of the instructor. You may have, or may develop, additional perspectives as well, but what the course is about, *and what you will be graded on*, is your ability to see the subject matter from the instructor's perspective.

Once this notion is understood, we can forget all those silly arguments about how five different English teachers will grade the same theme in five different ways, which is supposed to be an argument against the validity of testing and grading. *Of course* they are all different: nobody knows what

the truth is. All anyone, including English teachers (*especially* English teachers), has to go on is a truth, that is, a single, limited, individual version of what the truth might be. Truths, like grades and tests, are a thoroughly individual matter.

Obviously, the educational system, particularly higher education, depends upon the student having a goodly number of these brief apprenticeships. Each apprenticeship provides a different perspective—a view from a different angle. The result, if the student is lucky and reasonably industrious, is what Matthew Arnold called the ability to "see life steady, and see it whole."

The first rule of the test game, then, is: *Identify the perspective of the instructor.* What are the key issues and the key approaches to the subject according to Professor X? Do everything you can to discover that perspective: look up old tests at the fraternity house; consult test files in the University Center; look up students who have taken the course before and grill them for clues; ask the instructor for copies of old tests—"just for practice"; badger the instructor repeatedly to be as precise as possible about what kind of tests will be given and what issues or problems will be covered. You may even want to attend class from time to time to pick up organizational hints.

Having determined as definitively as possible the kind of test that will be given, you are ready to apply Rule Number Two: *Make up all the answers in advance.* When the test is to