

Reading MCA-IV: Updates and Resources

As academic standards are revised, a new series of Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs) is developed to align with the updated standards. The MCAs are criterion-referenced, which means they measure performance against a fixed set of criteria, the Minnesota Academic Standards. In the Minnesota Department of Education's (MDE) official documents and test data, the MCA series number is included—at least in the initial reference—to indicate the academic content standards that are being measured. The Reading MCA-III was administered from 2013-2025 and was aligned to the Reading strand of the 2010 Minnesota Academic Standards in English Language Arts. Spring 2026 is the first administration of the new Reading MCA-IV assessment aligned to the Reading strand of the [2020 Minnesota Academic Standards in English Language Arts](#).

The Reading MCA-IV is still administered in grades 3-8 and 10. It assesses standards 4-9 of the Reading strand, which address reading skills ranging from basic comprehension to analysis and interpretation of a wide variety of texts.

What is assessed on the Reading MCA-IV?

Similarities between the Reading MCA-III and MCA-IV

In format, purpose, and content, the Reading MCA-IV shares several essential features with the MCA-III. The assessment is still adaptive, meaning it adjusts the difficulty level of questions based on a student's performance on previous questions. In addition, question types remain the same.

The MCA-IV still seeks to measure student reading proficiency levels by assessing integral skills of reading. These skills include citing text evidence; making inferences; drawing conclusions; summarizing; recognizing word meanings presented in context; analyzing text structures; identifying author's purpose, identity, perspective, and bias; and evaluating effective argumentation and degree of credibility. These general English Language Arts (ELA) skills provide the tools for interpreting an author's message.

Another essential feature maintained in the MCA-IV is a thorough passage development process with a continued emphasis on high-quality, authentic commissioned and published passages. Passages continue to present a variety of text complexities that support a wide range of question difficulties.

Passages cover multiple topics and genres, allowing students to engage with a wide variety of literary and informational texts and to experience an inclusive and diverse representation of cultures, identities, and perspectives. Reading levels and passage lengths vary across grade levels and align with the representative skills in each grade. Text sets continue to be included on the MCA-IV for the purpose of comparing features such as

genres; authors' messages, perspectives, and styles; themes and ideas; literary elements; historical periods; and opinions.

Differences between the Reading MCA-III and MCA-IV

Although the Reading MCA-IV assesses many of the same reading skills as the MCA-III, a few reading skills are being assessed for the first time, or with additional emphases, on the MCA-IV. For example, reading media literacy skills are now assessed. Specifically, with standard R9, benchmark 2, students focus on relevancy and credibility of mass communication sources such as online webpages, brochures, book covers, advertisements, and public service announcements.

The three benchmarks under Standard R6 consider “own voices narratives” from members of Minnesota’s Indigenous communities as well as narratives from members of other communities and cultures. Students will consider how identity, perspective, and context, such as time period, shape a particular text. Questions may require analysis of author’s purpose based on personal, community, and cultural identity and experience. Another important consideration is how topics or ideas are approached and presented over time, based on additional factors such as the influences of myths, traditional stories, historical events, and other literary types or authors’ works. Recognizing degrees of fact versus fiction in passages may also be assessed.

In addition to the new skills assessed under standards R9 and R6, the Reading MCA-IV also presents additional emphasis on visual images under standard R5, benchmark 3. Students now have the opportunity to analyze how images such as infographics (charts, diagrams, etc.), photos, and art directly influence or aid in developing the author’s message.

Note: To support a variety of student needs, accommodated versions of the test include only multiple-choice or multiple-response questions and passages that do not focus on visual elements or experiences. For the MCA-IV, some accommodations and supports that were not available in MCA-III have been added. An outline of the general test administration changes between the Reading MCA-III and MCA-IV is available in [Comparison of the Reading MCA-III and Reading MCA-IV](#).

In addition to these significant changes, many smaller changes exist between the 2010 ELA Standards and the 2020 ELA Standards and, therefore, between the MCA-III and the MCA-IV assessments. We encourage educators to review the [ELA Standards and Curriculum Alignment Tool](#), which highlights similarities and differences between the new and former standards.

How are results reported for the Reading MCA-IV?

Standard Setting and Performance Level Descriptors

After the first administration, all new assessments must go through a process called “standard setting” in the summer before scores can be released. The standard setting process determines the criteria for proficiency and the corresponding score at each performance level using [Performance Level Descriptors](#) (PLDs) to establish

these levels. PLDs describe what students know and can do at each of the four performance levels for the new MCA-IV assessments: Beginning, Intermediate, Meets, and Advanced.

Timeline of Results

Final student results from the first Reading MCA-IV will be released in fall 2026 after going through standard setting, which will take place in summer 2026. In addition, On-Demand Reports, which provide student scores within 60 minutes after testing or data entry is completed, are not available during the first year of a new assessment.

Organization of Results

Results are reported as two different content areas:

1. **Themes, Central Ideas, Details and Vocabulary** (Reading standards 4 and 8): This category assesses students on reading performance regarding basic comprehension, close reading, and understanding content and language of on-grade-level text through application of skills such as citing text evidence, making inferences, and drawing conclusions; summarizing; analyzing central ideas, themes, and supporting details; and analyzing literal and nonliteral language and vocabulary presented in context.
2. **Structure, Author's Perspective, Arguments, Relevancy and Credibility** (Reading standards 5, 6, 7, and 9): This category assesses students on reading performance regarding analysis of how author's identity and perspective influence the content, meaning, and style of a text, including perspectives of Minnesota Indigenous communities, through application of skills such as analyzing and evaluating text structure, sources used, claims, biases, argumentation, and credibility.

What is the relationship between results from different assessments?

Results from multiple assessments should be considered but not compared to each other. Assessments are receiving much attention as districts prepare to implement the Literacy Screening Tools required by the Minnesota Reading to Ensure Academic Development (READ) Act across all grades and the 2026 Reading MCA-IV and Alt MCA. Because these are completely different assessments that assess different skills, resulting scores are not comparable to one another. While it is important to consider the data from various assessment tools and tempting to draw conclusions across years and across assessments, the data from different assessments cannot be used in ways that are not aligned to the purpose of the assessment and should not be compared.

Reading MCA-IV and Alt MCA

The purpose of the Reading MCA-IV and Alt MCA is to assess a student's reading skills based on the 2020 Minnesota Academic Standards in English Language Arts. When results are released in fall 2026, consider the similarities and differences to past results releases, but do not compare this data because these are new assessments aligned to a different set of academic standards than the Reading MCA-III and the MTAS.

Statewide assessments, specifically the MCAs and Alt MCAs, are standards-based assessments – meaning they measure performance against a fixed set of criteria (the Minnesota Academic Standards). In addition, these assessments are summative – meaning they provide data about student performance when instruction is wrapping up. They provide a single data point that should be interpreted alongside standards-aligned classroom, school or district assessment data. Districts and schools can use these results to gain a broader understanding of how well curriculum and instruction are aligned to state standards.

Data from statewide assessments results provide a useful starting point, but the most robust evaluations of district and school performance, and the most useful findings for maintaining and improving that performance, is provided when the data from statewide assessments is paired with data from district, local, and classroom assessments.

Literacy Screening Tools

Literacy screeners (such as FastBridge, DIBELS, Capti ReadBasix) measure foundational reading skills as well as characteristics of dyslexia. They screen for student knowledge of oral language, phonological and phonemic awareness, phonics, and morphology. In other words, they assess students' foundational literacy skills to read accurately and fluently. They are not based on the Minnesota Academic Standards in English Language Arts. Consider results from literacy screeners; however, do not compare them to the standards-based assessments. The screeners' results are not designed to predict student performance on the Reading MCA-IV and Alt MCA.

What are some available educator resources?

Test Specifications

Details on the test structure of the MCA-IV are included in the [Reading MCA-IV Test Specifications](#). Information on the alternate assessment for students with significant cognitive disabilities, the Reading Alternate MCA is also described.

Standards Implementation

The [ELA Standards Implementation](#) page on the MDE website includes official standards documents and standards supplemental resources, including resources to support shared understanding of standards implementation, curriculum selection and adaptation, and instructional shifts. The Reading MCA-IV assesses standards R4-R9 in the Reading strand of the academic standards. All other ELA standards are assessed at the school and district level.

Performance Level Descriptors

As ELA standards implementation takes place across all grade levels this year, refer to the [Performance Level Descriptors](#) page on the MDE website. Performance Level Descriptors (PLDs) communicate student learning

described in the academic standards that characterize student knowledge and skills at each of the four performance levels: Beginning, Intermediate, Meets, and Advanced.

PLDs can be used to promote consistent learning goals for all students across the state by clarifying expected learning outcomes for instruction, and local assessment of Minnesota Academic Standards and can support teachers' analysis of the alignment and depth of their curriculum, instruction, and classroom assessments.

Minnesota Questions Tool

The [Minnesota Questions Tool \(MQT\)](#) provides access to released test questions from past Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments (MCAs) and MTAS/Alternate MCA (Alt MCA) for reading, mathematics, and science. This tool is intended to support educators in understanding how the academic standards are assessed on the MCA and MTAS/Alt MCA, to help identify student misconceptions, and to show assessment of student learning at varied Depth of Knowledge (DOK) levels. Current Reading MCA questions are aligned to the 2020 ELA standards. Questions are released into the MQT on a regular basis as they are retired from the assessment.

Student Readiness Tools

Student Readiness Tools (SRTs) are available on the [Student Readiness Tools \(SRTs\)](#) page of the Minnesota Assessment Hub. These comprehensive resources can be used to help familiarize students with the format of the MCAs (online or paper) or Alt MCAs (online, paper, or hybrid administration modes). The online SRTs and Alt MCA SRTs include instructional videos and practice opportunities to help students and educators become familiar with the online test environment, including how to navigate within the test, use its tools and test supports, and indicate answers for each type of question. The paper SRTs can be printed and provided to students to help them become familiar with the paper test materials and practice indicating answers for each type of question. Educators can also print Alt MCA SRT materials to familiarize themselves and their students with this test.

Accommodations and Universal Supports

With new assessments, MDE seeks to continuously improve the supports, tools, and accommodations for students on the MCAs. As a result, some accommodations and supports become available for each new subject test(s) as we transition to the new assessment series. For example, the Reading MCA-IV includes a new universal support: the English glossary. This support is for all students on the online Reading MCA (questions only). Additionally, translated and glossed word lists are available to all students. To learn more about supports and accommodations for the Reading MCA-IV, refer to the following resources.

- [Guidance for Universal Supports and Accommodations for Minnesota Statewide Assessments 2025-26](#): This resource provides detailed descriptions of the available universal supports and accommodations, including guidance for when and how to select and administer tests with each support and accommodation.
- [2025-26 MCA Supports and Accommodations](#): This infographic is a quick reference resource that summarizes the available universal supports and accommodations for the MCAs.