Reading sample tasks in PISA

Reading literacy in PISA is defined as:
understanding, using and reflecting on written texts, in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to participate in society.

PISA assesses three types of reading processes. Students are expected to demonstrate their proficiency in:
(a) retrieving information,
(b) interpreting texts and forming a broad general understanding of the text, and
(c) reflecting and evaluating its contents, form and features.

The third element of assessment is the context or situation of the text. Four situations are distinguished: personal use, public use, occupational use and educational use. For example, a novel, personal letter or biography is written for people’s personal use; official documents or announcements for public use; a manual or report for occupational use; and a textbook or worksheet for educational use. Each question used in a PISA survey falls into one category of each of the three aspects.

1. LAKE CHAD

Figure 1 shows changing levels of Lake Chad, in Saharan North Africa. Lake Chad disappeared completely in about 20,000 BC, during the last Ice Age. In about 11,000 BC it reappeared. Today, its level is about the same as it was in AD 1000.

Use the above information about Lake Chad to answer the questions below.

**QUESTION 1.1**
What is the depth of Lake Chad today?
A. About two metres.
B. About fifteen metres.
C. About fifty metres.
D. It has disappeared completely.
E. The information is not provided.

**QUESTION 1.2**
In about which year does the graph in Figure 1 start?
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

**QUESTION 1.3**
Why has the author chosen to start the graph at this point?
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________

**QUESTION 1.4**
Figure 2 is based on the assumption that
A. the animals in the rock art were present in the area at the time they were drawn.
B. the artists who drew the animals were highly skilled.
C. the artists who drew the animals were able to travel widely.
D. there was no attempt to domesticate the animals which were depicted in the rock art.

**QUESTION 1.5**
For this question you need to draw together information from Figure 1 and Figure 2.
The disappearance of the rhinoceros, hippopotamus and aurochs from Saharan rock art happened
A. at the beginning of the most recent Ice Age.
B. in the middle of the period when Lake Chad was at its highest level.
C. after the level of Lake Chad had been falling for over a thousand years.
D. at the beginning of an uninterrupted dry period.

**LAKE CHAD SCORING 1.1**

**Full credit:** A. About two metres.
**No credit:** Other responses and missing.

Answering this question correctly corresponds to a difficulty of 478 score points on the PISA reading scale. Across OECD countries, 65% of students answered correctly. To do so, they correctly retrieved information.
LAKE CHAD SCORING 1.2

**Full credit:** 11,000 BC (or approximation between 10,500 and 12,000; or other indication that the student has extrapolated from the scale)

- 11,000
- 11,000 BC
- 10,500 BC
- Just before 10,000 BC
- About 12,000
- About 11,000 BC

**No credit:**
Other responses, including arrow pointing to the starting point of the graph.

- 10,000 BC *Failure to extrapolate from the scale.*
- 20,000 BC
- 8000 BC *Has looked at wrong figure.*
- 11000 BC 4000 BC *Ignore crossed-out answer.*
- 0

Missing.

Answering this question correctly corresponds to a difficulty of 540 score points on the PISA reading scale. Across OECD countries, 50% of students answered correctly. To do so, they correctly retrieved information.

LAKE CHAD SCORING 1.3

**Full credit:** Refers to reappearance of lake. Note: answer may receive full credit even if previous answer is incorrect.

- Lake Chad reappeared in 11,000 BC after disappearing completely around 20,000 BC.
- The lake disappeared during the Ice Age and then came back at about this time.
- It reappeared then.
- About 11,000 BC it came back.
- Then the lake reappeared after being gone for 9000 years.

**No credit:**
Other responses.

- This is when animals started to appear.
- 11,000 BC is when humans began to do rock art.
- 11,000 BC was when the lake (first) appeared.
- Because at that time Lake Chad was completely dried up.
- Because that was the first movement on the graph.

Missing.

Answering this question correctly corresponds to a difficulty of 600 score points on the PISA reading scale. Across OECD countries, 37% of students answered correctly. To do so, they reflected on and evaluated the text.
LAKE CHAD SCORING 1.4
**Full credit:** A. the animals in the rock art were present in the area at the time they were drawn.
**No credit:** Other responses and missing.

Answering this question correctly corresponds to a difficulty of 397 score points on the PISA reading scale. Across OECD countries, 77% of students answered correctly. To do so, they interpreted the text correctly.

LAKE CHAD SCORING 1.5
**Full credit:** C. after the level of Lake Chad had been falling for over a thousand years.
**No credit:** Other responses and missing.

Answering this question correctly corresponds to a difficulty of 508 score points on the PISA reading scale. Across OECD countries, 57% of students answered correctly. To do so, they interpreted the text correctly.

2. FLU

**ACOL VOLUNTARY FLU IMMUNISATION PROGRAM**
As you are no doubt aware the flu can strike rapidly and extensively during winter. It can leave its victims ill for weeks.

The best way to fight the virus is to have a fit and healthy body. Daily exercise and a diet including plenty of fruit and vegetables are highly recommended to assist the immune system to fight this invading virus.

ACOL has decided to offer staff the opportunity to be immunized against the flu as an additional way to prevent this insidious virus from spreading amongst us. ACOL has arranged for a nurse to administer the immunisations at ACOL, during a half-day session in work hours in the week of May 17. This program is free and available to all members of staff.

Participation is voluntary. Staff taking up the option will be asked to sign a consent form indicating that they do not have any allergies, and that they understand they may experience minor side effects.

Medical advice indicates that the immunisation does not produce influenza. However, it may cause some side effects such as fatigue, mild fever and tenderness of the arm.

**Who should be immunised?**
Anyone interested in being protected against the virus.
This immunisation is especially recommended for people over the age of 65. But regardless of
Who should not be immunised?
Individuals hypersensitive to eggs, people suffering from an acute feverish illness and pregnant women.
Check with your doctor if you are taking any medication or have had a previous reaction to a flu injection.
If you would like to be immunised in the week of May 17 please advise the personnel officer, Fiona McSweeney, by Friday May 7. The date and time will be set according to the availability of the nurse, the number of participants and the time convenient for most staff. If you would like to be immunized for this winter but cannot attend at the arranged time please let Fiona know. An alternative session may be arranged if there are sufficient numbers.
For further information please contact Fiona on ext. 5577.

Fiona McSweeney, the personnel officer at a company called ACOL, prepared the information sheet on the previous page for ACOL staff. Refer to the information sheet to answer the questions which follow.

QUESTION 2.1
Which one of the following describes a feature of the ACOL flu immunisation program?
A. Daily exercise classes will be run during the winter.
B. Immunisations will be given during working hours.
C. A small bonus will be offered to participants.
D. A doctor will give the injections.

QUESTION 2.2
We can talk about the content of a piece of writing (what it says).
We can talk about its style (the way it is presented).
Fiona wanted the style of this information sheet to be friendly and encouraging.
Do you think she succeeded?
Explain your answer by referring in detail to the layout, style of writing, pictures or other graphics.

QUESTION 2.3
This information sheet suggests that if you want to protect yourself against the flu virus, a flu injection is
A. more effective than exercise and a healthy diet, but more risky.
B. a good idea, but not a substitute for exercise and a healthy diet.
C. as effective as exercise and a healthy diet, and less troublesome.
D. not worth considering if you have plenty of exercise and a healthy diet.

QUESTION 2.4
Part of the information sheet says:

Who should be immunised?
Anyone interested in being protected against the virus.
After Fiona had circulated the information sheet, a colleague told her that she should have left out the words “Anyone interested in being protected against the virus” because they were misleading. Do you agree that these words are misleading and should have been left out? Explain your answer.

**QUESTION 2.5**

According to the information sheet, which one of these staff members should contact Fiona?

A. Steve from the store, who does not want to be immunised because he would rather rely on his natural immunity.

B. Julie from sales, who wants to know if the immunisation program is compulsory.

C. Alice from the mailroom who would like to be immunised this winter but is having a baby in two months.

D. Michael from accounts who would like to be immunised but will be on leave in the week of May 17.

**ANSWER AND SCORING:**

**FLU SCORING 2.1**

**Full credit:** B. Immunisations will be given during working hours.

**No credit:** Other responses and missing.

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Answering this question correctly corresponds to a difficulty of 443 score points on the PISA reading scale. Across OECD countries, 70% of students answered correctly. To do so, they correctly retrieved information.

**FLU SCORING 2.2**

**Full credit:**
- Refers accurately to the text and relates style to purpose, consistent with “friendly and encouraging”. The answer must do AT LEAST ONE of the following:
  1. refer to one of the features in detail (layout, style of writing, pictures or other graphics; or other similar) – that is, to a specific part or quality of a feature; AND/OR
  2. use evaluative terms other than “friendly” and “encouraging”. (Note that such terms as “interesting”, “easy to read” and “clear” are not considered to be adequately specific.)
- Opinion about whether Fiona succeeded may be stated or implied.
  - No, it was a bad idea to put a picture of a syringe near the beginning. That looks scary. [*Refers to one specific part of the design: a particular picture (1). Uses own evaluative term: “scary” (2).]*
  - Yes, the pictures break up the writing and make it easy to read. [*Describes a specific aspect of layout (1).]*
  - The cartoon-like picture of the virus is friendly. [*Refers to a specific aspect (“cartoonlike”) of one illustration (1).]*
  - No, the pictures are childish and irrelevant. [*Uses own terms (“childish”, “irrelevant”) to evaluate one of the features mentioned in the stem (2).]*
  - Yes, the written style is relaxed and informal. [*Uses own terms (“relaxed”, “informal”) to evaluate one of the features mentioned in the stem (2).]*
- Yes, the style was warm and inviting. [Uses own terms to evaluate style (2).]
- There is too much writing. People wouldn’t bother reading it. [Refers to a relevant feature of the presentation: amount of text (1). Uses own evaluative terms (2).]
- She doesn’t put pressure on people to get the injection, and that would encourage people. [Implicit reference to manner or register: an aspect of style (2).]
- No, the writing style is very formal. [Debatable but plausible application of own evaluative term: “formal” (2).]

Partial credit:

Refers accurately to the text and relates purpose to information and content (rather than style), consistent with “friendly and encouraging”. Opinion about whether Fiona succeeded may be stated or implied.
- No, there is no way that a message about having an injection could be friendly and encouraging.
- Yes she succeeded. She’s giving many opportunities and arranging times for a flu immunisation. She also gave suggestions about health.

No credit:

*Gives insufficient or vague answer.
- Yes, it makes it sound as if it would be a good idea.
- Yes it is friendly and encouraging. [Terms not applied to specific features.]
- No, it doesn’t work.
- No because some of the information is not correct. [Refers to content without making any connection to the idea of “friendly and encouraging”.]
- Yes, the illustrations are encouraging and the style of the announcement is also acceptable. [“Illustrations are encouraging” does not go beyond the terms of the question. “The style of the announcement is also acceptable” is too vague.]
- She succeeded, easy to read, and clear. [The terms used are not specific enough.]
- I think that she has succeeded well. She has selected pictures and written interesting text. [Pictures are not evaluated in any way, and “interesting text” is too vague.]

Shows inaccurate comprehension of the material or gives an implausible or irrelevant answer.
- Yes everyone should have the injection. [Irrelevant and inaccurate.]
- No, the pictures have nothing to do with the message. [Inaccurate]
- Yes, because she wants people to be worried about getting the flu. [Conflicts with the idea of “friendly and encouraging”.
- It’s good but it’s only one opinion. [Irrelevant]
- Yes, it gave brief information on what they will do to stop flu. [Irrelevant – refers to content in a non-specific way.]
- Yes, she just tells the facts. [Irrelevant]
- Yes, because more people should be immunised. [Gives a general opinion on the subject of immunisation, does not refer to the style or to details of content.]
- Yes I do because no-one wants to be sick. Everyone wants good health. [Irrelevant]

- Missing.

Answering this question correctly corresponds to a difficulty of 583 score points on the PISA reading scale. Giving a partially correct answer to this question corresponds to a difficulty of 542 score points on the PISA reading scale. Across OECD countries, 44% of students answered
correctly. To do so, they reflected on and evaluated the text.

**FLU SCORING 2.3**

**Full credit:** B. a good idea, but not a substitute for exercise and a healthy diet.

**No credit:** Other responses and missing.

Answering this question correctly corresponds to a difficulty of 521 score points on the PISA reading scale. Across OECD countries, 53% of students answered correctly. To do so, they interpreted the text correctly.

**FLU SCORING 2.4**

**Full credit:**

Evaluates the section of text in relation to the term “misleading” by indicating that there is a potential contradiction. (“Who should be immunised? Anyone...” vs “Who should not be immunised?”). May or may not explain what the contradiction is.

Agreement or disagreement may be stated or implied.
- Yes, because it would be dangerous for some people to have the immunisation (e.g. pregnant women). [Describes contradiction.]
- No, because you only have to read another couple of lines to realise that some people shouldn’t have the injection, and on the whole she wants people to have it.
- Yes, because she says “anyone” can and later she states the people who should not be immunised. [Contradiction identified.]
- This line suggests that all people should get the vaccine, which is untrue. [Contradiction briefly indicated.]
- Yes, to some extent! Maybe: “Anyone interested in being protected against the virus, but who doesn’t suffer from any of the following symptoms or diseases.” [Suggested rewording implies recognition of the contradiction.]

Evaluates the section of text in relation to the term “misleading” by indicating that the statement may be an exaggeration. (i.e. Not everyone needs the immunisation, or the immunisation does not offer complete protection.) May or may not explain what the exaggeration is. Agreement or disagreement may be stated or implied.
- Leave out because having the immunisation is not a guarantee that you won’t get the flu.
- I don’t agree, even though it makes it sound as if you will definitely get the flu if you don’t have the injection.
- Having the injection is not a complete protection.
- Leave out because not everyone gets the flu, especially if you are fit and well.
- Yes I agree because it makes the shot sound better than it is. [Implies an exaggeration, though unspecified.]

**No credit:**
Gives insufficient or vague answer, or restates “misleading” without explanation.
- Leave it in, it’s good. [No explanation.]
- They should have put another picture there instead of the heading. [No explanation.]
- Yes, this sentence is misleading and it could cause problems. [No explanation]

Shows inaccurate comprehension of the material or gives an implausible or irrelevant answer.
- It should have been left out because everyone has the right to decide for themselves. [Misunderstanding of register of the text: it is not an order.]
- I think the word FLU should have been put in between THE and VIRUS, because people just taking a glance at it might think that they are talking about another virus and not the flu. [Implausible explanation for “misleading”.]  
- Yes, people may be interested but may have a fear of needles. [Irrelevant]

Missing.

Answering this question correctly corresponds to a difficulty of 637 score points on the PISA reading scale. Across OECD countries, 37% of students answered correctly. To do so, they reflected on and evaluated the text.

**FLU SCORING 2.5**

**Full credit:** D. Michael from accounts who would like to be immunised but will be on leave in the week of May 17.

**No credit:** Other responses and missing.

Answering this question correctly corresponds to a difficulty of 562 score points on the PISA reading scale. Across OECD countries, 45% of students answered correctly. To do so, they interpreted the text correctly.
3. GRAFFITI

I’m simmering with anger as the school wall is cleaned and repainted for the fourth time to get rid of graffiti. Creativity is admirable but people should find ways to express themselves that do not inflict extra costs upon society.

Why do you spoil the reputation of young people by painting graffiti where it’s forbidden? Professional artists do not hang their paintings in the streets, do they? Instead they seek funding and gain fame through legal exhibitions.

In my opinion buildings, fences and park benches are works of art in themselves. It’s really pathetic to spoil this architecture with graffiti and what’s more, the method destroys the ozone layer. Really, I can’t understand why these criminal artists bother as their “artistic works” are just removed from sight over and over again.

Helga

There is no accounting for taste. Society is full of communication and advertising. Company logos, shop names. Large intrusive posters on the streets. Are they acceptable? Yes, mostly. Is graffiti acceptable? Some people say yes, some no.

Who pays the price for graffiti? Who is ultimately paying the price for advertisements?
Correct. The consumer.

Have the people who put up billboards asked your permission? No. Should graffiti painters do so then? Isn’t it all just a question of communication – your own name, the names of gangs and large works of art in the street?

Think about the striped and chequered clothes that appeared in the stores a few years ago. And ski wear. The patterns and colours were stolen directly from the flowery concrete walls. It’s quite amusing that these patterns and colours are accepted and admired but that graffiti in the same style is considered dreadful.

Times are hard for art.

Shopia

Source: Mari Hankala.

The two letters above come from the Internet and are about graffiti. Graffiti is illegal painting and writing on walls and elsewhere. Refer to the letters to answer the questions below.

QUESTION 3.1
The purpose of each of these letters is to
A. explain what graffiti is.
B. present an opinion about graffiti.
C. demonstrate the popularity of graffiti.
D. tell people how much is spent removing graffiti.

QUESTION 3.2
Why does Sophia refer to advertising?

________________________________________

________________________________________

QUESTION 3.3
Which of the two letter writers do you agree with? Explain your answer by using your own words to refer to what is said in one or both of the letters.
QUESTION 3.4
We can talk about what a letter says (its content).
We can talk about the way a letter is written (its style).
Regardless of which letter you agree with, in your opinion, which do you think is the better letter?
Explain your answer by referring to the way one or both letters are written.

GRAFFITI SCORING 3.1

Full credit: B. present an opinion about graffiti.
No credit: Other responses and missing.
Answering this question correctly corresponds to a difficulty of 421 score points on the PISA reading scale. Across OECD countries, 76% of students answered correctly. To do so, they interpreted the text correctly.

GRAFFITI SCORING 3.2

Full credit:
Recognises that a comparison is being drawn between graffiti and advertising. Answer is consistent with the idea that advertising is a legal form of graffiti.
- To show us that advertising can be as invasive as graffiti.
- Because some people think advertising is just as ugly as spray-painting.
- She’s saying that advertising is just a legal form of graffiti.
- She thinks advertising is like graffiti.
- Because they don’t ask your permission to put up billboards. [The comparison between advertising and graffiti is implicit.]
- Because advertisements are placed in society without our permission, as is graffiti.
- Because the billboards are like graffiti. [A minimal answer. Recognises a similarity without elaborating on what the similarity is.]
- Because it is another form of display.
- Because advertisers stick posters on the wall and she thinks it is graffiti as well.
- Because it is on the walls too.
- Because they are equally nice or ugly to look at.
- She refers to advertising because it is acceptable unlike graffiti. \([\text{Similarity of graffiti and advertising is implied by contrasting attitudes to the two.}]\)

Recognises that referring to advertising is a strategy to defend graffiti.
- So that we will see that graffiti is legitimate after all.

**No credit:**

Gives insufficient or vague answer.
- It’s a way of making her point.
- Because she wants to, she mentions it as an example.
- It’s a strategy.
- Company logos and shop names.

Shows inaccurate comprehension of the material or gives an implausible or irrelevant answer.
- She’s describing the graffiti.
- Because people put graffiti on them.
- Graffiti is a kind of advertising.
- Because graffiti is advertising for a certain person or gang. \([\text{Comparison goes in the wrong direction i.e. graffiti is a form of advertising.}]\)

- Missing.

**Answering this question correctly corresponds to a difficulty of 542 score points on the PISA reading scale. Across OECD countries, 53% of students answered correctly. To do so, they interpreted the text correctly.**

**GRAFFITI SCORING 3.3**

**Full credit:** Explains point of view by referring to the content of one or both letters. May refer to the writer’s general position (i.e. for or against) or to a detail of her argument. Interpretation of writer’s argument must be plausible. Explanation may take the form of paraphrase of part of the text, but must not be wholly or largely copied without alteration or addition.
- I agree with Helga. Graffiti is illegal and that makes it vandalism.
- Helga because I am against graffiti. \([\text{Minimum answer}]\)
- Sophia. I think it’s hypocritical to fine graffiti artists and then make millions by copying their designs.
- I sort of agree with both of them. It should be illegal to paint over walls in public places but these people should be given the opportunity to do their work somewhere else.
- Sophia’s because she cares about art.
- I agree with both. Graffiti is bad but advertising is just as bad so I won’t be hypocritical.
- Helga because I don’t really like graffiti either but I understand Sophia’s point of view and how she didn’t want to condemn people for doing something they believe in.
- Helga’s because it really is a pity to spoil the reputation of young people for nothing. \([\text{Borderline case: some direct quotation, but embedded in other text.}]\)
- Sophia. It is true that patterns and colours stolen from graffiti appear in stores and are accepted by people who consider graffiti dreadful. \([\text{The explanation is a combination of phrases from the text, but the amount of manipulation indicates that it has been well understood.}]\)
No credit:
Support for own point of view is confined to a direct quotation (with or without quotation marks).
- Helga because I agree that people should find ways to express themselves that do not inflict extra costs upon society.
- Helga. Why spoil the reputation of young people?

Gives insufficient or vague answer.
- Sophia’s because I think Helga’s letter doesn’t back her argument with reasons (Sophia compares her argument to advertising etc.) [Answers in terms of style or quality of argument.]
- Helga because she used more details. [Answers in terms of style or quality of argument.]
- I agree with Helga. [No support for opinion.]
- Helga’s because I believe what she is saying. [No support for opinion.]
- Both, because I can understand where Helga is coming from. But Sophia is also right. [No support for opinion.]

Shows inaccurate comprehension of the material or gives an implausible or irrelevant answer.
- I agree more with Helga. Sophia doesn’t seem to be sure what she thinks.
- Helga’s because she thinks some have talent. [Misinterpretation of Helga’s argument.]
- Missing.

Answering this question correctly corresponds to a difficulty of 471 score points on the PISA reading scale. Across OECD countries, 67% of students answered correctly. To do so, they reflected on and evaluated the text.

GRAFFITI SCORING 3.4

Full credit: Explains opinion with reference to the style or form of one or both letters. Refers to criteria such as style of writing, structure of argument, cogency of argument, tone, register used, strategies for persuading audience. Terms like “better arguments” must be substantiated.
- Helga’s. She gave you lots of different points to consider and she mentioned the environmental damage that graffiti artists do which I think is very important.
- Helga’s letter was effective because of the way she addressed the graffiti artists directly.
- I think Helga’s letter was the better one of the two. I thought Sophia’s was a bit biased.
- I thought Sophia put forward a very strong argument but Helga’s was structured better.
- Sophia, because she didn’t really aim it at anyone. [Explains his/her choice in terms of quality of content. Explanation is intelligible when interpreted as “Doesn’t attack anyone”.]
- I like Helga’s letter. She was quite dominant getting her opinion out.

No credit:
Judges in terms of agreement or disagreement with the writer’s position, or simply paraphrases content.
- Helga. I agree with everything she said.
- Helga’s was the better letter. Graffiti is costly and wasteful, just as she says.
Judges without sufficient explanation.
- Sophia’s letter was the best.
- Sophia’s was easier to read.
- Helga had a better argument.

Shows inaccurate comprehension of the material or gives an implausible or irrelevant answer.
- Helga’s is better written. She works step by step through the problem and then, on the basis of that, she comes to a logical conclusion.
- Sophia because she kept her position to herself until the end of her letter.

Missing.

Answering this question correctly corresponds to a difficulty of 581 score points on the PISA reading scale. Across OECD countries, 45% of students answered correctly. To do so, they reflected on and evaluated the text.