
Visual-Spatial Learners Under Pressure: The Dreaded Timed Test

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Have you ever had a hard time finding the word you're trying to say? Or one that truly matches the picture in your head? How about your visual-spatial children? Have you ever watched them fumble to find the word they were looking for? The process for a visual-spatial learner to translate mental images into words (or numbers) is much like a computer downloading graphics. It takes considerably longer for a computer to bring up an image than it does to bring up text. The visual-spatial learner must not only "download" mental images, but convert them to words, as well. When the pressure of a time limit is imposed, the task can become unbearable, if not impossible.

I have a story for you about my *very* visual-spatial son, Matt: One day, we were in the car headed for some errand and as I was backing out the driveway, he started panicking saying, "No! I'm not ready, don't go!" "What's wrong?" I called back. "I can't get the backward seven to work!" he hollered as the panic level in his voice continued to rise. I kept backing up while thinking, "Backward seven? What is it? How does it work? And, why does he need it?" As I started to drive forward, Matt started really getting upset and begging me to not keep driving. I looked back at him to see that he couldn't get his seatbelt fastened, which, from his vantage point, was clearly a backward seven! Because Matt could only see the picture, and because there was an issue of time involved (he knew better than to be in a forward-moving car with no belt on), he could not translate that picture into a word. His ability to communicate to me what was wrong was reduced to an image that he was trying, but failing, to convey. He was left with a "backward seven" because he couldn't find the word, "seatbelt."





This happens a lot to visual-spatial kids when they are taking timed tests. They just can't translate their pictures into words (or numbers, if it's a math test) fast enough and they are greatly pressured knowing they have a limited amount of time in which to spit out the correct answer. Besides, if, "a picture is worth a thousand words," how are they to find just the right word, anyway?

If your kids find this happening and there doesn't seem to be any way they're going to get out of taking timed tests, try these tips to help them to speed up their translation time:

- Play games with that require answers within the time of a minute glass (mini hourglass). Cranium, Scattergories and Boggle are good examples.
- Add a timer to their favorite game. By putting a limit on Scrabble or Upwords, you've simulated taking a timed spelling test. Adding a minute glass to Yahtzee may help simulate a timed math test.
- Play Pictionary for "reverse" translation: words into pictures, with a time limit involved. Charades may help with this, too!
- While you're in the car, you can play games like "I'm Going on Safari" where each player thinks of what they'll bring in alphabetical order. So, the first player says, "I'm going on safari and I'm going to bring ____ (something that starts with the letter "a"). Then the second player says, "I'm going on a safari and I'm going to bring (what the first player said) plus ____ (something that starts with the letter "b"). And so on through the alphabet. This requires them to keep words (or pictures they must translate into words) in their minds through the entire game/alphabet.

If playing games with timers makes your children too anxious—don't do it. At least let them play a game without a timer every once in a while. Perhaps you could start with longer time limits and gradually decrease them to eliminate any anxiety. Minute glasses that have no audible ticking would also help. I would also suggest not adding a timer to games like chess, where their skills in spatial awareness really shine and can't be rushed!

Until we can get teachers and test creators to understand the bias against visual-spatial learners in placing time constraints on these kids, we'll need to help our children cope with the stress of taking timed tests. Hopefully, with practice in a safe environment, where your children can translate their pictures into words at home, under less pressure,

they will be able to successfully make those translations at school while they take timed math or spelling tests.

Understanding the passing of time

Visual-spatial kids—and adults—are generally known for not having a very good sense of time. Most can get so lost in what they are doing, that they forget altogether about whatever else they are supposed to be doing. Does this sound like your kids? There are lots of times our children are expected to know just how much time has gone by and that it is time for them to move to another activity. Throughout the school day, subjects end and new ones begin, forcing them to stop what they are doing and move to the next activity. No sooner are they home from school than mom is hounding them about getting the homework done, right? Then, just when they've finished homework and chores and finally found something fun to do outside, they're being called in to dinner. Or, so it feels to them!

Well, here's a trick to help your children get a feel for when certain periods of time have passed. Visual-spatial kids often get so involved in what they are doing that 15 minutes feels like less than five. Do you have a board game that comes with a small minute sandglass? Usually these come in one, two, or five minute increments. Find one and use it the next time your kids are playing computer or with their toys. Set it next to them so they can see just what five minutes of playing feels like. After awhile, they should start to get a better idea of what one minute, two minutes or five minutes really feels like. If not, remember, there are secretaries, spouses and Palm Pilots to remind them of where they need to be when!

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