

Brushing up on assessment

Starting out in assessment

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One of
ten guides for
school practitioners
and those looking
to brush up on
their assessment
knowledge

Best classroom practice comprises a virtuous circle of teaching, learning and assessment. This is one of a series of guides designed to help primary school teachers and classroom practitioners understand and develop good practice in assessment.

What is assessment?

Many people assume that 'assessment' means taking a test, but assessment is broader than that. There are two main types: **summative** and **formative**. It is likely that both happen at some level in most classrooms. The key to good assessment practice is to understand what each method contributes and to build your practice to maximise the effectiveness of each.

Summative assessment



Summative assessment sums up what a pupil has achieved at the end of a period of time, relative to the learning aims and the relevant national standards (the assessment **of** learning). The period of time may vary, depending on what the teacher wants to find out. There may be an assessment at the end of a topic, at the end of a term or half-term, at the end of a year or, as in the case of the national curriculum tests, at the end of a key stage.

A summative assessment may be a written test, an observation, a conversation or a task. It may be recorded in writing, through photographs or other visual media, or through an audio recording. Whichever medium is used, the assessment will show what has been achieved. It will summarise attainment at a particular point in time and may provide individual and group data that will be useful for tracking progress and for informing stakeholders (e.g. parents, governors and Ofsted).

Formative assessment



Formative assessment takes place on a day-to-day basis during learning, allowing teachers and pupils to assess attainment and progress more frequently (assessment **for** learning). It begins with diagnostic assessment, indicating what is already known and what gaps may exist in skills or knowledge. If the teacher and pupil understand what has been achieved to date, it is easier to plan the next steps. As the learning journey unfolds, further formative assessments indicate whether teaching plans need to be amended to reinforce or extend learning.

Formative assessments may be questions, conversations, tasks, quizzes or more formal assessments. Often formative assessments may not be recorded at all, except perhaps in the lesson plans drawn up to address the next steps indicated.

SUMMATIVE	FORMATIVE
End of a learning period	Day-to-day
Sums up learning	Guides learning
Recorded	Not usually recorded
Formally graded	Not formally graded
Used to provide pupil and school accountability	Used to provide pupil feedback
Examples - end-of-term tests, coursework, end-of-year teacher evaluation	Examples - strategic questioning, classroom quizzes, self-assessment, peer-assessment

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Getting started



Although there are guiding principles underpinning good practice, there is no one 'correct' method of assessment. Every school will have its own approach which should be outlined in its assessment policy. To get started:

- Familiarise yourself with the assessment policy and its underlying principles.
- Speak to your school's assessment coordinator or assessment leader if you have any questions about the policy.
- Ensure you understand the roles of other people involved in assessment and plan ways to make best use of them. They may include teachers, heads of year/key stage, teaching assistants and even pupils themselves (e.g. for self and peer assessment).

What to assess



A key step in good assessment is to understand what you want to achieve in your teaching. Once this is clear, you can define your next steps – what to assess, when and how. Most schools will expect teachers to set learning objectives (also known as targets) for pupils or with pupils. When setting objectives, decide what the success criteria will look like then consider how assessment fits within the various stages of that learning journey. Assessment methods should be fitted to the learning context and learners' needs.

Success may be defined by something a pupil understands or can do that they couldn't before. It may vary from a pupil showing full competence to showing a glimmer of understanding. It is therefore important to consider the extent to which an assessment activity assesses what is intended, enabling the outcome to be used for the purpose/s intended. In other words, whether an assessment is valid.

When considering if an assessment activity is appropriate, ask yourself the following:

- Does the assessment activity truly probe understanding of the relevant thing you want to assess?
- Could anything else affect how the pupil performs (e.g. a heavy reading load)?
- Does the assessment activity give the pupil a chance to demonstrate their skills?
- Is the assessment activity accessible to the pupil or does it need to be adapted?
- Could the pupil respond in a way that might suggest competence or understanding where none really exists (for example, by mimicking a response from another pupil or using key phrases without understanding)?



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You may want to consider developing questioning techniques or activity outlines that encourage expanded responses so you can evaluate the true extent of pupils' achievement or understanding. You may also need to adapt assessment methods when assessing pupils with special educational needs or English as an additional language. It's worth remembering that some pupils find it hard to record their achievements in writing. This doesn't mean you can't assess their skills in this area. It just means that you may need to use other media – audio, visual or observational. Remember that good practice in assessing pupils with particular needs can also benefit other pupils, so consider these methods with other pupils too.

The timing of assessment will be determined by its purpose.

When should I assess?



When you assess will depend on the context. Your school may specify times when formal assessments will be conducted and recorded, however you will also assess learning as it happens in the classroom. Many schools encourage a rolling programme of assessment, so that different subjects or different groups of pupils are focused on at different times. The timing of assessment will be determined by its purpose. For example, assessments that give information at school level may need to be timetabled using different criteria from those giving information at class, group or individual level.






To build assessment into your teaching, it is useful to identify and plan assessment opportunities at the same time as planning learning activities.

Developing good assessment practices



Assessment needn't be a chore – for teacher or pupils. Good assessment practice is an integral part of learning, and acting upon its outcomes can maximise learning. Just as a good teacher will try to make learning experiences engaging and purposeful, assessment should also be engaging and purposeful. Think of it as a tool to guide learning.

Bear in mind these key principles:

-  **Assess all subjects, not just the core subjects of English, maths and science.**
-  **Assess when you need to and when your school's policy specifies.**
-  **Make sure you use the outcomes.**
-  **If you are not using the outcomes from your own assessments, reconsider why you are doing them.**
-  **If you are not using the outcomes from assessments specified by others, think about ways that you might make the outcomes more useful.**

Tips for enhancing your own assessment practice

- Talk to colleagues and observe assessment taking place in your school and in other schools. Share ideas and adapt them for your own class.
- Look beyond the year group you teach; you may find inspiring assessment practice elsewhere. (For example, some year 6 teachers report finding relevant practice in the foundation stage despite the overt differences between the two age groups.)
- Maximise the depth of your subject knowledge as well as the breadth – good understanding of the subject and subject-specific pedagogy is critical in formative assessment; you will be more adept at assessing pupils and will find it easier to embed assessment into your teaching.

Limitations of assessment



All assessment activities have their limitations. Any individual assessment (summative or formative) gives a snapshot of a pupil's achievement on one occasion and may not allow you to draw conclusions about achievement beyond that situation. As a result, it is important to interpret outcomes from any single assessment activity in a broad context. Your tracking records will be useful for this, giving a broad picture of learning over time, taking account of both formative and summative assessment information.

Some teachers report feeling pressurised to focus on assessment rather than teaching and learning. This can be especially true of preparation for external summative assessments. Others argue that focusing on teaching and learning, rather than test coaching, produces better results because pupil outcomes on tests then reflect deep rather than superficial learning.

Read more on the dos and don'ts of test preparation in our guide *"Preparing pupils for tests"*.

Tracking progress



In England, end-of-key-stage 1 reporting requires teachers to make judgements about pupils' attainment against published teacher assessment frameworks. This is no longer statutory for key stage 2, except for the assessment of writing. While these frameworks can be suitable for summative purposes, they are less helpful for formative assessment, particularly where pupils progress in small steps. For formative purposes, your target setting and assessment activities may be based on other sources, such as the national curriculum programmes of study.

In Wales, teachers and/or practitioners are required to assess children twice during the Foundation Phase – a baseline and an end of Foundation Phase assessment. At key stages 2 and 3 statutory teacher assessments are required at the end of the key stage, for each eligible learner in specified subjects. Teachers are also required to formatively assess learners' literacy and numeracy skills across the curriculum using the Literacy and Numeracy Framework (LNF) and report to parents annually on progress and next steps.

A new curriculum and accompanying assessment arrangements will be published in 2020, for use throughout Wales from 2022.

Your school will probably have an agreed means of recording pupil progress. This may involve portfolios of work or teacher records held centrally. Many schools also hold copies of records in the relevant classrooms, so that they can easily be used to inform teaching. It is important to keep records up to date, both for reporting purposes and to inform your future lesson planning. In addition to tracking pupils in your own class, be aware of the wider assessment picture in your school.

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Understanding and contributing to the bigger picture

- Look at patterns of progress across the school and consider what they might tell you about individuals/groups of pupils or the school's performance.
- Consider how this might affect your own assessment practice.
- Evaluate whether there are aspects of your own practice you might usefully share with colleagues.

Found this useful?

This guide is part of NFER Classroom's *'Brushing up on assessment'* series, a collection of free guides providing those looking to build their knowledge with an overview of key elements in assessment.

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