

Brushing up on assessment

Getting ready for tests

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





The previous guide in this ten-part series, 'Understanding tests', gave an overview of the different types of testing used in schools, how these assessments are developed and what schools might want to consider when selecting them. To help with next steps, this guide outlines some key considerations for teachers ahead of testing, including guidance on test administration, helping children feel comfortable and access arrangements.

Administering a test

Tests should be administered consistently to ensure the validity of the results. To help ensure this, the statutory national curriculum tests, as well as many commercially produced tests (including NFER's assessment range), will provide test administration guidance. This outlines important information such as the format of the test, what equipment is required, and what level of assistance can be provided to test-takers (if any).



If you are administering an independently produced test with no set guidance, make sure you determine the following before the test is administered:

-  **How much time should be allowed for the test?**
-  **Is a break necessary or appropriate? If so, how long should it be and how should it be managed?**
-  **What equipment is needed? (e.g. calculators, rulers, erasers, dictionaries, lined paper)**
-  **What will be your response if a pupil asks a question during the test?**

Bear in mind that test-takers of different ages will have different needs. For example, key stage 1 children may require more assistance than key stage 2 children. They will also require shorter test periods or a break during the test. If pupils are able to read a clock, it may be helpful to explain how long the test will be and give countdowns to the class throughout the test.



Top tips to share with test takers

- Do not spend too long on one question; if it is too difficult leave it and try again later.
- If you finish the test early, check your answers and go back and try any unanswered questions.
- If a question is hard to understand, read it again and underline key words that tell you what to do.

Familiarisation

Before a test begins it may be appropriate (unless otherwise stated in the teacher administration guide) to offer some practice questions to familiarise pupils with the types of question they will be asked. Another way to familiarise pupils with different types of test questions is to integrate some test familiarisation into teaching. This can help pupils feel comfortable with the types of question that appear in tests so they are able to show what they can do, and also aids learning. This may be particularly useful in the primary stage when pupils are unfamiliar with the requirements of written assessments.

Here are some ideas for integrating test familiarisation into your teaching:

-  **Ask all pupils to think about a potential test question and write an answer, then discuss it as a class.**
-  **Produce several potential answers to a question and ask pupils (individually or in pairs/groups) to judge which is the best answer and explain why.**



Ask each pupil to write their own answer and then discuss in a small group, with each group attempting to reach a consensus about the best answer. This may mean integrating elements of different answers into the 'best' answer, and can result in further learning/ reinforcement along the way.

Strategies like these enable pupils to become familiar with the format of test questions but in a focused, unpressured environment, allowing them to reinforce their knowledge and increase their engagement with a topic. For more on formative assessment methods, see additional guides in this series '*Assessment for learning*' and '*Self and peer assessment*'.

A broad and balanced approach

Although reading, writing and mathematics in England, and reading and numeracy in Wales, are the only subjects in which there is statutory testing, it is important that pupils are taught a broad and balanced curriculum throughout the primary stage. To support teaching and learning throughout this period, a range of assessment methods should be considered across all curriculum subjects, not just those that are formally tested.

Access arrangements

Levelling the playing field

The purpose of access arrangements is to ensure that there is a 'level playing field' for all test-takers. This means that no pupil should be disadvantaged by a feature of the test requirements that is not part of the construct (e.g. a skill, ability or understanding) being assessed by a test. For example, it is often permissible to allow a reader in a mathematics test – the pupil with reading difficulties can have the test questions read out and then they work out their answers. In this instance reading ability is not being assessed – it is not part of the test construct. It would not, however, be appropriate to have a reader for a reading test, for the passages or the questions. The skill that is being assessed in this case is reading, including decoding. The provision of a reader would provide an unfair advantage to the test-taker.

In a technical sense, what we are trying to avoid is 'construct irrelevant variance' – something having an impact on test outcomes that is not part of the construct being assessed. It is important therefore that it is very clear to the administrator exactly what the purpose of the assessment is and what is to be taken into account in the evaluation or marking. What we must ensure is that each test-taker is given as fair a chance as possible to demonstrate their skill in the assessed construct; what we must be careful to avoid is compromising the assessment by introducing inappropriate access arrangements. In addition, the pupil must be familiar with any access arrangement that is being used and it should be part of their usual classroom practice and not introduced just for the assessment.



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What about additional time?

Additional time is an access arrangement (also known as an accommodation) that can be very helpful for some children and actually be unhelpful for others. If teachers know that specific children need more time than is typical to complete work, and are provided with this in their day-to-day class work, then it can be appropriate to allow them more time to complete a test. (Although this can be contentious if the test is 'speeded' i.e. speed is identified as an element that is relevant to performance.) On the other hand, for a pupil who is struggling, simply providing more time will not necessarily enable them to perform any better and may in fact just create a difficult situation when other children have finished and the pupil in question is expected to continue whilst struggling.

Further guidance

For national curriculum tests (NCTs), the Assessment and Reporting Arrangements published each autumn by the Standards and Testing Agency (STA), provides guidance about the use of access arrangements in NCTs. In other assessments, the administration guidance provided should provide information about permissible variations from standard test administration practice.

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 of assessment with an overview of some key elements, and offering insight to support them in delivering an assessment approach that is right for their pupils and their school.

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Mrs A Hawkins, Headteacher at Allendale Primary School

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