

starting out in assessment

Assessment is part of the learning journey. And as with most journeys, it helps to know where you're going, why you want to go there and how you plan to get there. It's also important to know where you are before you begin the journey!

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](#) (also referred to as [assessment for learning](#)). 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 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 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. Or, in terms of the metaphor with which we began, it will show the stage the pupil has reached in his or her journey.

If the learning journey has been well planned, its end will coincide with the destination envisaged at the beginning. This is where formative assessment is useful. Formative assessment takes place during learning, allowing teachers and pupils to assess progress on the learning journey. You might think of it as stopping every so often to check the map. It begins with diagnostic assessment, indicating what is already known and what gaps may exist in skills or knowledge. If a 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.

As with summative assessment, formative assessments may be recorded in a variety of ways, or may not be recorded at all, except perhaps in the lesson plans drawn up to address the next steps indicated.

More information about summative and formative assessments can be found in other leaflets in this series. The series includes a [Glossary](#) explaining some key assessment terms.

Getting started

There is no one 'correct' method of assessment, although there are guiding principles underpinning good practice. Some key points are listed below.

- Assessment methods should be fitted to the learning context and learners' needs.
- Your school's assessment policy should outline good practice, as well as expectations about when and how to assess (see [Policy into practice](#)).



- Familiarise yourself with the policy and its underlying principles. Your school's [assessment coordinator](#) or [assessment leader](#) will be able to answer any questions you have.
- Ensure you understand the roles of other people involved in assessment and plan ways to make best use of them. They may include teachers, the assessment coordinator, heads of year/key stage, learning support assistants and the pupils themselves (see [Self and peer assessment](#)).

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. 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: in other words, how will you recognise that you have arrived at the correct destination? What will the pupil understand or be able to do that he/she couldn't do or understand before? Does success mean that a pupil understands fully/shows full competence, or does it mean that he/she shows the first glimmer of understanding/competence? These extremes, and the points between them where learning is being consolidated, are all stages on the learning journey, and the answers to these questions will vary across pupils and situations. The important thing is to consider what you want from the particular part of the journey that each pupil is taking.

It is important to ensure that assessment activities are [valid](#): that is, that they assess what is intended. Bear the following in mind.

- Ask yourself whether a given activity truly probes understanding of the relevant aspect of the curriculum or gives the pupil a chance to demonstrate his/her skills.
- Consider whether a pupil could 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).
- Develop questioning techniques or activity outlines that encourage expanded responses so you can evaluate the true extent of pupils' achievement or understanding.
- You may need to adapt assessment methods when assessing pupils with special educational needs or English as an additional language, but the same underlying principles of assessment apply.
- Some pupils find it hard to record their achievements in writing. This doesn't mean you can't assess. 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.

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.

- 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.
- Talking to colleagues and observing assessments in your school and in other schools may help.

- 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.

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. Remember that assessment is only part of the learning journey. If it becomes the main focus, the journey risks deteriorating into aimless wandering.

When and what should I assess?

- Assess all subjects, not just the core subjects of English, maths and science.
- Build assessment into your teaching; it is useful to identify and plan assessment opportunities at the same time as planning learning activities.
- Assessment is easier when your own subject knowledge is solid. Don't be afraid to ask for help from subject leaders in areas where your confidence in your subject knowledge is low. All teachers have strengths and weaknesses and no one can master all subjects taught in a primary school.
- Maximise the depth of your subject knowledge as well as the breadth; you will be more adept at assessing pupils and will find it easier to embed assessment into your teaching. Seek out relevant courses to improve your subject knowledge.
- When you assess will depend on the context. Your school may specify times when formal assessments will be conducted and recorded. 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 affected by its purpose: 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.

Tracking progress

End-of-key-stage reporting requires teachers to make judgements about pupils' attainment against published attainment target ('level') descriptions (or [P scales](#), for pupils aged five and over but working below national curriculum level 1). While these descriptions can be suitable for summative purposes, they may be 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, schemes of work or early learning goals.



This is one of 12 leaflets published by the NFER to support good assessment practice in primary schools.

The full list of titles available in this series, *Getting to grips with assessment: primary*, is:

- **Starting out in assessment**
- Policy into practice
- Assessment for learning
- Self and peer assessment
- Interpreting information from different sources
- Moderation of assessment judgements
- Making the most of assessment data
- Assessment information and different audiences
- Understanding assessment information (a leaflet for parents)
- Understanding tests
- Glossary of key assessment terms
- Resources and useful weblinks

All leaflets are also available online at www.nfer.ac.uk/gripping-assessment-primary

Terms defined in the Glossary are underlined / hyperlinked. Links to other leaflets are given in italics.

Your school will probably have 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 (see *Policy into practice*). 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.

- 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.

Information and support

Assessment has a high profile and there are many sources of information and support available. Some are outlined in *Resources and useful weblinks*, which is just one of the 12 leaflets in this series (see the margin for a list), which will help you to make the most of your assessment journey!



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