

ASSESSMENT

Types and Purposes of Classroom Assessment

Assessment is the systematic effort to determine to what degree of complexity students know and understand important aspects of the curriculum, and how well they can demonstrate that understanding, skill and knowledge.

Assessment results inform students, their parents and you, the teacher, about students' progress toward short- and long-term goals. Assessment information provides students with directions for additional work, review and areas for growth. It indicates what you are teaching effectively and what you might wish to change, emphasize or extend.

Assessment activities fall along a **continuum** from *formative* to *summative* depending on the purpose for the activity in relation to students' learning. Formative and summative assessment are not mutually exclusive, nor is one "better" than the other. They serve related but different purposes. It is important to know the purpose of each assessment activity/assignment—formative, formative/summative, summative—because that purpose should define the boundaries for the activity, the scoring method, and the acceptable use and reliability of the results.

Formative Assessment

Formative assessment activities serve as practice or rehearsal for more formal work and presentation. For some formative activities, students—singly or in groups—are the primary audience. For others, the teacher is the audience. Regardless, these activities are designed to help students progress in their learning, understand and express their learning processes, see the results of their learning to date, and plan for their improvement and growth.

Assessing Process

Formative assessments often focus on the processes that students are using as they move toward more formal work and understanding. The following are examples of formative assessment activities that emphasize processes as well as content:

- Describing thinking and planning sequences while preparing for an oral presentation
- Recording group dynamics—strengths and challenges in a group project
- Critiquing the draft of a writing assignment
- Submitting the plan for a major research project
- Developing a work plan for a group project
- Outlining personal learning goals for a particular unit of study
- Reflecting on work completed and work yet to do
- Responding to literature or film in a response journal
- Articulating in a reading record how to understand aspects of complex text
- Keeping viewing logs, reading logs and writing journals
- Maintaining portfolios of work completed.

These are examples of important activities that help students control their own learning and record their accomplishments and understandings. Such activities are integral to instruction and essential to learning. They are, however, means to other ends rather than ends in themselves. They are amongst the many ways that students become independent, thoughtful and articulate listeners, readers, viewers, speakers and writers.

Results from Formative Assessment

As pieces of the assessment puzzle, such formative activities are legitimate and merit grading. However, the grading of work in progress or of activities that support final goals should be more global than precise, more verbal than numerical, more part of a learning plan than of a learning record.

The results from formative assessments should not have significant weight in final grades, report card marks, or grades used for placement or promotion.

Summative Assessment

Summative assessment activities serve many of the same functions as formative assessments. They show students and teachers how well goals have been achieved and provide direction for further work and study even into the next grade or course. However, the main purpose of summative assessments is to “sum up” progress to date in relation to particular learning outcomes, expectations or goals.

Performance Assessments

The other label often applied to assessment activities is performance assessment. Performance assessments are exactly what the name says—measurements of performances. What are some performances in language arts?

- Writing assignments of all kinds, including essays
- Oral presentations—reading, readers’ theatre, drama productions, speeches, oral commentaries
- Multimedia presentations—videos, films, infomercials, representations, posters, collages, models, drawings
- Concrete representations of complex ideas, concepts or text.

Assessments, regardless of their place in the continuum, are only “good” if they are appropriately and effectively designed to fulfill a specific purpose in furthering students’ learning. The **purpose of the assessment** determines its place along the continuum. The **quality of the assessment**—the instructions, the wording of the task(s), the clarity, and the fairness and appropriateness of scoring—determines its value.

Most performance assessments in language arts fall into the summative assessment band in the continuum. Note that these should be handled sensitively with Aboriginal students whose culture avoids spotlighting.

If you review the examples above, you will note that these “performances” are examples of what language arts teachers expect students to do/present at the **end** of a segment of instruction. Even diploma examinations have a major (50%) performance component.

Tests, Quizzes and Examinations

What about tests? Are tests summative or formative? Are tests different from performance assessments?



Tests, depending on their structure and purpose, fit into both formative and summative categories.

For example, a quiz on a homework reading assignment is a formative assessment; its purpose is more motivational than instructional, its assessment of curriculum outcomes is relatively low, and its assessment of work completed as required is relatively high.

On the other hand, a midterm examination common to all students in a course is a summative assessment. Such an examination should be **explicitly designed** to assess how well students are doing with respect to the learning outcomes in the program of studies. Such an examination might have a performance component—a writing assignment, a response to text question and/or an oral or project component completed prior to the set examination period—as well as an “answering specific questions” component, i.e., a demonstration of specific skills and knowledge.

Every question or assignment on a major test or examination must be directly tied to learning outcomes and expectations in the program of studies. Source material (reading texts, film clips, photographs) must be of a difficulty level appropriate to the standards and expectations for the course.

If results have consequences and are reported to students and their parents, it is important that all tests/examinations are designed to be valid ways of measuring how well students are progressing in terms of the program of studies goals for the course.

-  Excellent sources of examples and models for designing and scoring such end of term/unit/section/course examinations are the *Classroom Assessment Materials Project (CAMP)* materials. There is a set of CAMP materials in every school. Additional copies are available for purchase from the Learning Resources Centre.
-  The materials that accompany diploma examinations and achievement tests are other helpful sources that illustrate how specific questions, assignments and scoring categories relate to the outcomes in the program of studies. Look for diploma examination or achievement test blueprints, information bulletins, and detailed results reports on the Alberta Learning Web site at http://www.learning.gov.ab.ca/k_12/testing.

Summative Assessments Other than Tests or Examinations

All cumulative work falls into the summative assessment category. An essay about a character in a short story or Shakespearean play, a group presentation of a scene from a play, a poetry project that includes several components (some oral, some written, some visual), a personal essay about travel experiences, a short story, a film or video, or a poem might all be summative assessments.

Requirements for All Summative Assessments

Regardless of the kind of task, **if the grades count and will have consequences for students, the assignment and its scoring are subject to the following constraints of summative assessments:**

- Nothing is assessed unless it has been taught.⁸
- The task(s) must be connected to learning outcomes in the program of studies.
- Students must be aware of what is being assessed and what is expected of them.
- Scoring must be explained in advance.
- Scoring must be curricularly valid and fair; e.g., If work were to be scored a second time by another teacher—or by a group of students if peer evaluation is part of the scoring—ask yourself, “Would the assignment receive the same grade? Are the scoring categories and criteria in keeping with the expectations in the program of studies?”

Results from Summative Assessments

The results from summative assessment activities inform students, their parents and teachers of areas for more effort as well as areas of accomplishment and success. Grades from summative assessments—performances, examinations, cumulative classroom work—should constitute the bulk of the grades that go on report cards as information to parents, the school and the school district about students’ progress. **The results of summative rather than formative assessments should be the principal basis for report card marks or grades used for promotion or placement.**

Consequences

This reporting function for summative assessments places a great importance on such activities and their scoring. When assessment results have consequences for students’ futures, whether they are the results for the first term report card or the marks on a diploma examination, teachers must be able to stand behind those grades. Teachers need to be able to show students and their parents that:

- the assignments and tests included in the grade are instructionally and curricularly valid
- the scoring process is legitimate, transparent and fair
- there has been sufficient instruction, practice and development to merit assessing the skill, knowledge or understanding
- there is a clearly stated appeal process for marks that is in keeping with school and district policies.

8. “Taught” is meant in the broadest sense. While crucial learning comes from direct instruction, student learning also comes from extensive, purposeful and directed interaction and exploration, exposure, discussion and practice.

What Does Good Assessment Look Like?

General Principles of Good Assessment

All worthwhile assessment tasks and activities:

- Are worth your students' and your time and effort
What additional learning will the assessment activity foster?
What skills will it reinforce and offer opportunity to practice?
- Relate to instruction and promote further learning
Have I taught students the skills and awareness that the assignment is assessing?
Do I expect them already to have these skills and this awareness in place?
How much practice have the students had with these skills and concepts?
What will they learn from the assessment itself and the assessment process?
- Are tied to learning outcomes in the program of studies
What do I think the activity is measuring? Does it really measure that?
What other skills/attitudes/knowledge does it measure?
What prior knowledge is required?
Are these appropriate expectations at this point in the course?

One way to think about this very complex issue is to ask yourself, “*What skills and knowledge do students have to bring to this task in order to do it?*”

- Clearly state the requirements
Do all students know what is expected of them? And why?
Have I worded the assignment (examination question, project instructions) so that there is no opportunity for confusion?

Precise wording for instructions and tasks is crucial. If you state the question or task imprecisely, you will find yourself making adjustments after the work is done and you have started to evaluate.

Some excellent ways to get experience in the demanding skill of wording tasks are to volunteer to contribute to common assessments in your school and district, to participate in workshops arranged by the Alberta Assessment Consortium, or to work on diploma examination item development or review committees.

- Have valid, reliable, transparent scoring
How will the activity be scored?
For what will it be scored? Why?
How fair and how reliable is the scoring?
What are the standards—how good is good enough?
Are the students familiar with the scoring procedures and criteria?
Will the students contribute to the scoring, e.g., self-evaluation/peer evaluation? If so, what is its weight and purpose?

Grades and Learning

Grading should also contribute to students' further learning. For example, a total score for a project becomes more meaningful to a student if it is broken into its components, which should be identifiable areas for study and skill development. Such a breakdown, accompanied by a commentary or a student–teacher conference that highlights successes and specific areas for additional work along with suggestions for how to do that work, turns an assessment activity into an integrated learning activity.

Grading Creative Assignments and Group Work

If you intend to count the work toward the students' report card marks or include the work in a final grade, it must be evaluated. This includes creative work and students' contributions to group projects.

It is as feasible and desirable to demand clarity, thoughtfulness, effective communication, and precise, correct language from creative work as it is from the more commonplace projects and assignments. The poet has as many obligations as the essayist. The multimedia presenter has as much obligation for thoughtful content as the research paper writer. You can and should use established criteria combined with conferencing and/or commentary to grade creative work just as you would more conventional work. The same holds for group work.

Scoring Categories and Criteria

Scoring category and scoring criteria are more accurate words for the general word, rubric.

The scoring category is the broad learning construct for which work is to be scored. For example, Thought and Understanding is a scoring category that would tie directly to learning outcome subheading 4.1.3 and learning outcome heading 4.2. The quality descriptions for the work that is assigned particular scores in Thought and Understanding are the scoring criteria. A whole set of scoring criteria is a scoring guide.

It is unnecessary and often counterproductive to attempt to develop scoring criteria unique to each task. Task-specific criteria imply to students that there are no generalized skills or understandings. They keep students from seeing the conceptual and skill links between apparently different tasks, genres and forms.

Use agreed-upon criteria that accurately describe qualities of work at several levels of achievement, and adapt the number of categories for which you score a given assignment to the importance of the task and your instructional goals. **Scoring categories must be linked to the learning outcomes in the program of studies.**

The CAMP materials include sets of scoring criteria developed by Alberta teachers, field tested in Alberta classrooms, and revised by teacher markers. There are criteria for collaborative projects, oral presentations, readers' theatre, film projects and writing assignments—personal response to text as well as analytical response to text. Each set of criteria is accompanied with examples of students' work to illustrate the standards—including a video that shows the oral projects. All are adaptable to the revised program of studies and to other assignments and projects.

Types of Questions

Assessment literature is full of debate about the acceptability of “multiple choice questions” in various disciplines. It is likely more useful to consider test or assignment question type from the perspective of the learning you hope to reinforce through the assessment, and the purpose of the assessment.

It is also more fruitful to describe questioning in terms of what the question asks of the student. In that context, questions are selected response, collaborative response or constructed response:

- Selected response questions are those that require students to select either a best or correct answer from a list, in response to a stem that might be a phrase completion or a question.

Selected response questions are exceptionally difficult and time-consuming to develop. Should you need selected response questions for convenience or to give students practice with the form, use CAMP questions or questions from previously-administered achievement tests or diploma examinations.

- Collaborative response questions are those that require groups to complete a task. See the CAMP materials for examples you can adapt. Don't forget that these tasks need exceptionally precise wording if they are going to work and not create confusion and frustration for you and/or your students.
- Constructed response questions are questions or assignments that require students to produce their own responses—either short or extended.

These questions include the full range from short answer quiz questions to research paper assignment questions. They will be effective only if they are precise and clear.

If you are looking for precisely worded questions that you can modify to make effective constructed response tasks, try adapting selected response stems from achievement tests or diploma examinations to suit your purposes.

The CAMP materials have examples of constructed response questions that you can adapt to other materials and situations.

Standards— How Good Is Good Enough?

The word standards when applied to learning and achievement has three related but different applications: achievement standards, explicit standards (sometimes called assessment or scoring standards), and implicit standards (sometimes called content standards).

Achievement Standards

The term *achievement standards* comes from the technical language of testing and measurement. It is a pre-set (usually through consultation) expectation for performance on a particular test or set of tests.

Alberta teachers recognize that the achievement standards set for diploma examinations are that at least 85% of the students tested will achieve the *acceptable standard* or better, and 15% will achieve the *standard of excellence*.

The achievement standards provide a bar against which schools and districts can interpret their students' overall achievement from one year to the next. Such informed discussion is helpful in planning for instruction, resources and professional development.

Explicit Standards (Assessment or Scoring Standards)

Explicit standards (assessment or scoring standards) are descriptions of what students' work looks like at various levels of achievement. Typically, the levels of achievement have consistent labels across domains (scoring categories) assessed.

Scoring Guides

The explicit standards for writing on the diploma examinations are set out in the scoring guides for the various written response assignments. (See the diploma examination information bulletins on the Alberta Learning Web site at http://www.learning.gov.ab.ca/k_12/testing/diploma.)

In Alberta, the explicit standards for the diploma examination programs are *acceptable standard* (50% or better) and *standard of excellence* (80% or better).

In language arts performance assessments, those two standards are further defined, i.e., made explicit, so that the full range of students' performance is captured in the scoring. The *acceptable standard* includes work scored as Satisfactory, Proficient and Excellent. Work below the *acceptable standard* will be scored as Limited or Poor. Work at the *standard of excellence* includes that scored as Proficient and Excellent.

Examples of the Standards for Students' Writing

The Learner Assessment Branch of Alberta Learning provides examples of the explicit standards for students' writing. Refer to the Alberta Learning Web site at http://www.learning.gov.ab.ca/k_12/testing/diploma/bulletins for the most recent compilations of example papers for the English Language Arts 30-1 and English Language Arts 30-2 Diploma Examinations.

Several of the authorized basic resources also have annotated samples of students' writing.

Examples of Standards for Collaboration and Reading

The CAMP materials, available from the Learning Resources Centre, are other excellent sources of explicit standards. There are scoring guides and examples of students' responses at each level of achievement for writing, reading and collaborative assessment activities.

The CAMP materials show explicit standards for Grade 10 and Grade 11 ELA. What you should be able to discern is a **continuum of expectation** that links the expectations in the Grade 9 English language arts provincial achievement test scoring guides and example papers, through the CAMP materials for Grade 10 and Grade 11 ELA, to the diploma examination scoring guides and examples of students' writing.

Explicit Standards for Reading

Another source of descriptive explicit standards is the School Achievement Indicators Program (SAIP). SAIP is one of the few sources for **explicit description of reading**. Reports of the SAIP reading and writing assessments are available from Alberta Learning and from the Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (<http://www.cmec.ca>). These reports contain the descriptions of levels of performance for reading and writing as well as examples of what the levels mean. Cultural accommodation for Aboriginal and ESL students should be considered.

Implicit Standards (Content Standards)

Implicit standards (content standards) are the expectations inherent in all of what students are asked to do. Standards are implicit in the literature students are expected to read and discuss, in the questions they are expected to answer, in the films they study and in the concepts they are expected to internalize.

Text and Task Complexity

What is the appropriate complexity of texts for students to study in each language arts course? What is the appropriate complexity of assignment tasks for each course? This discussion about implicit standards in course materials and assignments in relation to the learning outcomes in the program of studies underlies all of the activities and goals you will set for your students. It is the most critical professional discussion for you and your colleagues at the school, district and provincial levels.

Growth in Complexity

Your discussion of implicit standards will be better informed if you have a clear idea of the text complexity teachers have agreed on for the end of students' senior high school experience, i.e., the complexity of texts and questions on the ELA 30-1 and ELA 30-2 Diploma Examinations. This understanding should make it more feasible for you and your colleagues to map out the steps and growth students will need to move from where they are at the end of Grade 9 to where they need to be by the end of Grade 12.

Your articulation of implicit standards will assist you in selecting appropriate resources for your students.

Grade Level Appropriate Standards

It is critical to have commitment to implicit standards that are grade and course level appropriate. Scoring criteria designed for the end of Grade 12, for example, is not appropriate for use with Grade 10 students.

Implicit Standards in CAMP

The CAMP materials, established by Alberta teachers, provide examples of *implicit standards* that are grade and course level appropriate.

If you look at the reading selections in the *English 10* (CAMP) resource in comparison to those in the *English 13* (CAMP) resource, and at the kinds of questions and tasks asked of students in each, you will see a difference in complexity and expectation.

The same is true for the collaborative assessments. The film in the English 10 (ELA 10-1) collaborative assessment is more metaphoric, ironic and intricate than the film selected for English 13 (ELA 10-2). Similarly, the collaborative task asked of the English 10 students demands more independence and complexity than that asked of the English 13 students.

The CAMP materials will help you make appropriate grade/course level decisions in your own context.



Note: The *English 10*, *English 13*, *English 20* and *English 23* CAMP materials are suitable for use with ELA 10-1, 10-2, 20-1 and 20-2 respectively. The CAMP materials are available in print or CD-ROM format and can be purchased from the Learning Resources Centre (Telephone: 780-427-5775; Web site: <http://www.lrc.learning.gov.ab.ca>).

Diploma Examination Assessment

With the implementation of the new English Language Arts Senior High School Program of Studies, the diploma examinations and scoring guides in ELA 30-1 and ELA 30-2 have changed to reflect the new emphases. The changes in the examinations, aligned with the program of studies, reflect the following significant areas of focus: a broadened definition of text, the importance of context, and metacognition.

Teachers who participated in the field validation of the new ELA 30-1 and ELA 30-2 courses (whose students also wrote the pilot diploma examinations, which reflected the changes in the new program of studies), indicated that by embracing the new emphases, their students were well prepared for—and even enjoyed—writing these final examinations.

Teaching that meets the expectations in the new program of studies prepares students in the following ways:

Broadened Definition of Text

- Broader range of literary experiences to respond to means more meaningful responses.
- Expansion of the concept of text encourages broad literature study, enabling students to write with more voice and confidence.
- Exposure to and study of different types of texts supports a broad variety of text creation (personal, creative, critical).
- Students feel more confident about writing for a variety of purposes and audiences. Emphasis on purpose, tone, audience and format puts control of assignments in students' hands.
- By expanding the meaning of text to include visual literacy (e.g., films, photographs, cartoons, iconography) visual learners can address text more easily.
- An increased focus on careful reading develops more critical reading of a variety of texts.

Importance of Context

- The element of context supports comprehension and expands students' abilities to draw conclusions and analyze text.
- Examination of context teaches students to think for themselves and to question.
- Understanding context broadens thinking on issues.
- Emphasis on scaffolding helps students to apply knowledge to new situations.
- A thematic, integrated approach assists students in making connections between texts.

Metacognition

- Metacognition forms the basis for learning. It empowers, encourages and enlightens students. By reflecting on and adapting their own learning strategies, students are better able to deal with the unexpected.
- More focus on self-assessment strategies creates ownership for learning and confidence as learners (and test-takers).
- Students trust the process and, therefore, gain more confidence as learners.
- Learner-based rather than teacher-based experiences create better thinkers.
- Focus on planning encourages better writing.
- Students become accustomed to relating to literature on a personal level.
- Emphasis on responding to literature expands students' understanding, confidence and voice.

The diploma examinations allow students to demonstrate their learning in these areas by providing opportunities for personal response to a variety of texts, including visual texts, and by providing choice in developing critical responses to literary texts in the written portion, Part A. In Part B, the multiple choice portion, a variety of texts are provided, including visual texts, and several text selections are connected thematically with questions related to these linked passages. The scoring guides for both ELA 30-1 and ELA 30-2 reflect the changes to the program of studies by reinforcing the value of student voice in writing and also allowing for more variety in form and structure of written work.

Further information to assist students in preparing for diploma examinations in English language arts is available in the following forms:

- subject bulletins outlining important details for each examination sitting
- guides for students preparing to write the English Language Arts 30-1 and English Language Arts 30-2 Diploma Examinations
- blueprints of the examinations
- exemplars of examination questions
- samples of student responses on diploma examinations.



All this information is available on the Alberta Learning Web site at http://www.learning.gov.ab.ca/k_12/testing/diploma/bulletins.

