

Quality Classroom Assessment Techniques



Classroom Tips

Each new school year brings high hopes, great expectations and challenges for both new and seasoned educators. The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has developed a series called *Classroom Tips* to help educators start the year off right and anticipate the year ahead.

Classroom Tips is developed with you, the educator, in mind. The tips in this collec tion are taken from real classroom experiences and are part of the AFT's Educational Research and Dissemination (ER&D) professional development program.

IDS aft Classroom Tips

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s an educator, you know that standardized tests are a fact of life. They can produce useful information, but the results often are too late, too shallow or not what you needed to find out.

Research shows that administering more and more of these types of tests does nothing to raise student achievement. Instead, if we want to see real gains in achievement and learning, we need to start with sound classroom assessment techniques. When done right, classroom assessments give us the most reliable and individualized information (data) on each of our students.

Quality classroom assessments focus on students receiving feedback, having discussions about their work, and being able to do so without always having to worry about what the grade might be. Moreover, they:

- Can provide instant feedback allowing for modification and individualization.
- Help build rapport with students by opening the lines of communication and letting them know their teachers really care about their learning.
- Improve student performance and learning by involving the student and giving them the opportunity to take responsibility for their own learning.

Quality classroom assessments are the best tool that teachers have to probe more deeply into what their students already know, what they need to know, and whether they are on track to learn the expected content and skills.



Tips for Developing Classroom Assessments

Start with the end in mind

Consider the outcome you want (How will students demonstrate achievement?) and "map backward" from the standards and the evidence needed to meet the goal (the assessment) to instruction. The assessment should represent what students need to know. As a result, it guides what you teach.

Teach to the assessed content, not test questions

Teaching to the content will come pretty naturally when classroom-based assessments reflect your state's content standards and curriculum. That is, the tests will be aligned with the curriculum and reflect what's happening in your classroom. Teaching to the content keeps students moving toward standards or goals. In this system, content standards, curriculum and instruction are the centerpiece.

Avoid teaching to the test items. This occurs when students are taught to perform well on particular test questions. This kind of teaching tells us little to nothing about how well students are actually progressing toward mastery of the standards—a true understanding of the content. Under the teaching-tothe-test scenario, test items are the centerpiece. As a result, the goal of measuring progress toward the content standards and curriculum is lost.

Use a combination of summative and formative assessments

Summative assessments are given at the end of instruction. They answer the question: Did the students get it? Examples of summative assessments include end-of-unit tests, final projects and final research reports. Formative assessments occur during instruction. These tests answer the question: Are students on the right track? Examples of formative assessments include feedback, observations, rough drafts and spot-check quizzes.

TRY IT: Second Chance

Chelmsford, Mass., High school teacher Robert Bradman gives struggling students a second chance by offering them a contract for improvement. The students agree to show him their daily homework efforts (or another area that needs attention), and in exchange Bradman doubles the weight of all the remaining grades for the term. "The is puts more emphasis on future opportunities and can substantially raise their grades," he notes.

Incorporate formative assessment techniques

The best formative assessments are part of the instructional process in which teachers stop to make spot checks, engage students or see if they're on the right track. Formative techniques include:

- Observing. Use anecdotal records (for instance, focus on three to five students per day and make notes about each student's learning) and checklists (say, a set list of criteria, skills, behaviors, etc., that you fill out).
- Asking well-designed questions. "Closed questions" focus on recall of facts or simple comprehension. There is a right answer. (Who is the main character in the story?) "Open questions" focus on



finding out what students know, understand or are able to do. (Would you rather live when the story takes place or now? Why?)

• **Providing feedback.** Feedback is communicating how students did in light of a goal—what was and was not accomplished. Evaluative feedback provides a judgment (in other words, a grade) summarizing the quality of the learning. Descriptive feedback provides specific written comments that help the student understand what needs to improve.

TRY IT: What's the Date?

Instead of writing the date on the chalkboard, turn it into a math calculation for students. For example, Nov. $\sqrt{32} + 42$ would be Nov. 5, and Dec. $8 \div \frac{1}{2}$ would be Dec. 16. Encourage students to design their own math/date calculations to post in class.

Improve your communication with students

Students respond better to give-and-take than to a letter grade. Researcher Ruth Butler, an education professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, found that assigning grades to student work had no positive effect. It didn't improve students' performance. However, when teachers provided only descriptive feedback and no grade, student performance improved by 30 percent. When Butler looked at both assigning a grade and providing descriptive feedback, she found no positive effect—assigning grades negated the positive effects of the feedback.

Adding more standardized tests to the school calendar won't raise academic achievement. What will help students is timely, meaningful feedback on their schoolwork. Such assessments let you probe into what they know, what they still need to learn and whether they're on the right track. And that, ultimately, is how to help your students learn and grow.

TRY IT: Corrections Memo

Sometimes students will "lose" their graded tests after getting them back. Try passing out a "Corrections and Mistakes" memo sheet on colored paper when the test is returned to students. Ask them to record correct answers and procedures and to write out what their mistakes were. Collect the tests and memo sheet and keep a file for each student's tests. It's useful to have these on hand for future reference.

Make Your Assessments BLOOM

You can take advantage of a system called Bloom's Taxonomy to create classroom assessments that develop students' thinking skills.

In 1956, a group of educational psychologists headed by Benjamin Bloom found that more than 95 percent of test questions required students merely to recall facts. In response, Bloom developed a classification of intellectual behavior important in learning. These six levels start with recall of facts and move up through increasingly complex and abstract levels, to evaluation. In the 1990s, a new group of cognitive psychologists, lead by Lorin Anderson (a former student of Bloom's), updated the taxonomy to reflect 21st century work.

Good questioning will move back and forth among all levels. Here they are, with examples of classroom questions:

Remembering: To recall or remember information

- Who is the main character in the story?
- Who were other important characters?
- Where was _____ going?
- What words in the story were new to you?

Understanding: To explain ideas or concepts

• Why did _____?

- Draw two scenes from the story.
- Write a paragraph using five of the new words from the story.

Applying:

To use previously learned knowledge, rule or method in a new way

- Describe a place that you have visited that is like the setting of the story.
- Write a letter to _____ from _____.
- Write a telephone conversation between ______ and _____.

Analyzing:

To break information into parts to explore understandings and relationships

- What parts of the story could not have actually happened?
- Pick one character and write five questions from his/her point of view.
- Compare/contrast _____ and _____.

Evaluating:

To judge the value of materials or ideas and justify a stand, position or decision

- What if you were the _____ in the story? Defend your character's actions and feelings.
- Would you rather live where (or when) the story takes place or where you live in the present? Why?
- Do you think _____? Why?

Creating: To put ideas together in a new way to develop a new product or point of view

- How might the story have been different if _____?
- What if _____?
- What if you added another character to the story? Write a new ending from the new character's point of view.

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American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO 555 New Jersey Ave. N.W. Washington, DC 20001 202/879-4400

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