



A Guide to Assessments

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Informal Assessments

It is important to evaluate why you are giving a test (or an "assessment") before you administer it. Also, keep in mind that no one test can give you all of the information you need. Informal assessments, which can be conducted in a whole group setting or individually, can involve the following:

- ◆ Observations and rating scales
- ◆ Interviews
- ◆ Check of daily work assignment (usually only checking one or two problems)
- ◆ Oral discussion or question/answer period
- ◆ Checklists or rubrics
- ◆ Homework
- ◆ Questionnaire
- ◆ Group project

Teachers often conduct informal assessments without knowing it. When I work with my small groups of struggling math students, I often just take quick notes on what they are struggling with so that I can review the skill later. The key is, I make the assessment of the skill and have a reason for the assessment.

Strengths

One of the main strengths of informal assessments is that you can do them without a lot of planning and expense. They are less stressful for students because they often do not realize they are undergoing an assessment. You can receive immediate data and then plan accordingly. With a formal assessment administered to the entire class, it takes time to grade the work and put the data into a form that is useful. If a student finds testing stressful and does not perform to the best of their ability on a written, formal assessment, an informal assessment may give you the most accurate measure of a student's true ability.

Weaknesses

One weakness of an informal assessment is any hidden prejudices or stereotypes within the person administering the assessment that can influence judgment. As with any assessment, those giving informal assessments need to be unbiased and evaluate students on equal grounds.

Some students may need the motivation of performing well on a formal assessment, and thus may not give 100% on an informal assessment. Only you know your students and can evaluate whether this is the case.

Formal Assessments

Formal assessments are data driven and the data supports the conclusions that are derived from the results. They are assessments that have been used before, and therefore there are statistics that can be used to gauge success or failure. Data is mathematically computed and scores can be reported in a variety of organized formats. A formal assessment should be administered to assess overall achievement or to compare a student's performance to others at his/her grade level or age. Types of formal assessments include:

- ◆ Written examinations
- ◆ Coursework
- ◆ Essays
- ◆ Standardized tests

One of the major complaints surrounding formal assessments refers to students who simply do "not test well." If we are basing the success or failure of a student on one standardized test, we may not be truly getting a full picture of a student's capabilities. If a student experiences a high level of anxiety on a test, are the results truly valid?

Informal vs. Formal

Which is better, informal or formal? Now that you know the strengths and weaknesses of informal assessments I hope it has become obvious that you really need both types. Formal assessments need to be administered to assess the overall achievement of your student. An informal assessment will be important to help you drive instruction on a daily basis.