

How To Level Up Your Assessment Questions



Read more



Thoughtful test questions make for a more effective assessment.

Assessments sit at the intersections of gaining insights into student learning and providing feedback to guide future success. It doesn't matter whether your students are taking a formative, interim/benchmark, or summative test. The qualities of a good assessment are always the same, and you can uphold them by creating fair, transparent, and reliable questions for every test.

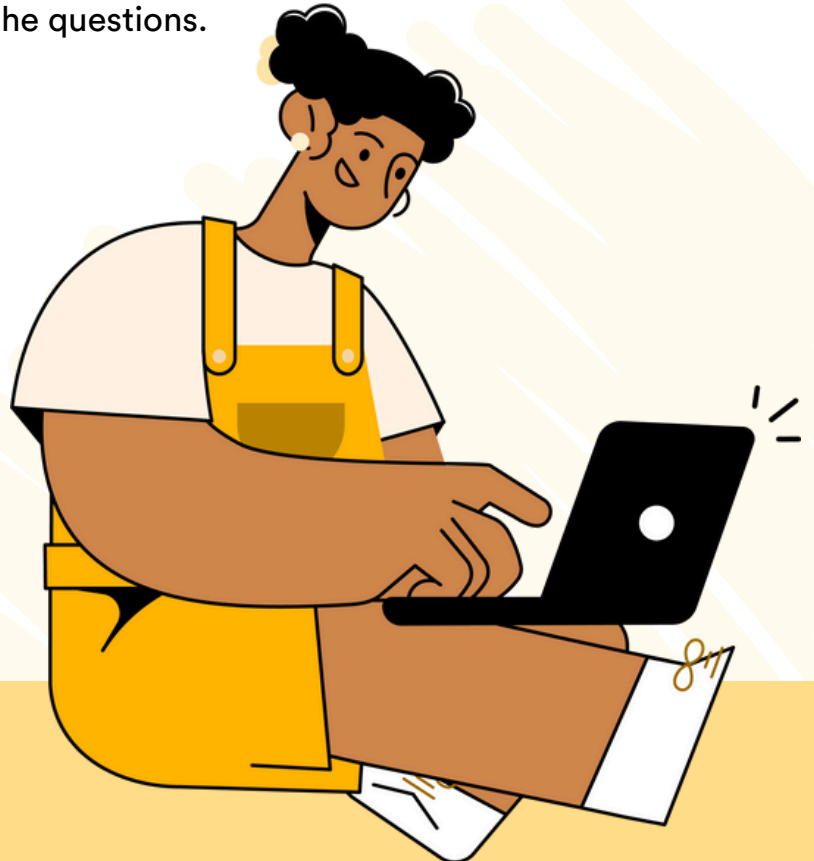
The tricky part is knowing if the questions you create—or choose from your core or supplemental curriculum resources—measure up. Does each question evaluate the right material at the right level? Does each one match students' expectations about what they learned? Can you count on accurate, consistent, and repeatable results?

These are just a few of the things you should look for when creating new assessments or evaluating the ones you currently use in your classroom. To make the creation and evaluation process easier, we've identified nine areas where you can level up your assessment questions to better understand what students know, spot their knowledge gaps, and adjust instruction accordingly.



How To **Level Up** Your **Assessment Questions**

1. **Determine the assessment's purpose:** Choose what you want to evaluate.
2. **Use multiple question types:** Account for learning styles and accessibility.
3. **Assess one idea at a time:** Focus on the significance of each question.
4. **Use clear, straightforward language:** Write questions students understand.
5. **Consider the context:** Make questions relevant to your students.
6. **Create plausible detractors:** Consider the incorrect answers.
7. **Account for length, time, and grading:** Develop a feasible assessment.
8. **Collaborate with others:** Gather input from multiple sources.
9. **Provide quality feedback:** Go beyond the questions.



WHAT DO YOU WANT TO EVALUATE?

1. Determine the assessment's purpose

Meaningful assessments give us accurate information about each learner. When planning out your assessment questions, get explicit about your expectations for each one. What were students supposed to learn, and how would you evaluate their learning? Being as clear as possible with your goals reduces ambiguity when deciding what questions to write. Plus, it clarifies the information for students when they take the test.

Ensure each question matches the assessment's purpose by:

Revisiting learning objectives and outcomes

Pairing questions with your learning objectives helps you evaluate what students should know after completing a lesson or unit. Sometimes, the objectives call for students to memorize information so you can test their knowledge of key facts and details. Other times, objectives ask for higher-order thinking, like analysis and evaluation, measured by open-ended questions.

Try to write at least two questions for each learning outcome and use the other criteria in this guide to choose which ones make it onto the exam.

Considering the depth of knowledge for each question

When writing questions based on your learning objectives, consider the depth of knowledge (DOK) necessary to answer each one. [Dr. Norman L. Webb's framework](#) can help you decide if the question you wrote matches the learning outcome. The four categories include:

- **Recall and reproduction:** Students simply recall facts, details, and procedures without interpretation and application.
- **Skill or concept:** Students apply basic skills or concepts in a more complex manner, such as through analysis, comparison, or explanation.
- **Strategic thinking and reasoning:** Students develop a plan or strategy using complex reasoning and evidence.
- **Extended thinking:** Students think critically, synthesize information, and apply knowledge to new situations like tasks or real-world problems.



Formative Fact

With Formative, you can [tag your questions](#) with single or multiple standards to map them to learning objectives and track student growth.



HOW WILL YOUR STUDENTS RESPOND?

2. Use multiple question types

According to [Carnegie Mellon University's Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence and Educational Innovation](#), “There is no single best type of exam question.” It’s more important to choose questions and question types that accurately reflect your learning objectives. There are two primary types of exam questions you can choose for your assessments:

- **Objective:** Questions with clear, correct answers that measure fact recall or check for understanding.
- **Subjective:** Questions with various answers that show mastery beyond a simple right or wrong answer.

Using a mix of objective and subjective question types helps you evaluate if your students don’t know the material or if they just don’t understand the question. Plus, adding variety to your assessment questions makes them more accessible and gives students [different ways to show what they know](#).

What types of questions can you choose?

Multiple-choice

Multiple-choice questions are objective and measure comprehension and fact recall. When creating multiple-choice questions, make sure to randomize answer choices where possible and provide students with between three and five alternatives.

Multiple-selection

Like multiple-choice questions, multiple-selection options are objective and measure comprehension and fact recall. With this question type, you can make between two and four alternatives the correct answers. Randomize answer choices where possible and provide students with three to five alternatives.

Matching

Matching questions are objective and test students' knowledge of various content with one question. For example, you may use matching to have them pair vocabulary words with definitions. As with multiple-choice and multiple-selection questions, randomize both the clues and matches where possible. Give students between three and six pairs to complete with any matching question.

Fill-in-the-blank

Fill-in-the-blank questions are objective and test knowledge of specific facts and details. With this question type, students must know the answer from learning or studying rather than just being able to recognize it in a list of alternatives.

To scaffold between multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank questions, you may provide a word bank with alternatives from which students can choose the correct answer for each blank. Provide more alternatives than blanks to prevent guessing. You can also arrange the word bank in alphabetical or chronological order to avoid answer bias in the list, such as putting all the correct answers first.

Short answer

Short-answer questions are subjective and typically pair with skill and knowledge or strategic thinking and reasoning depth of knowledge categories. Subjective questions minimize guessing, require students to know and prove their answers, and often don't have just one correct response.

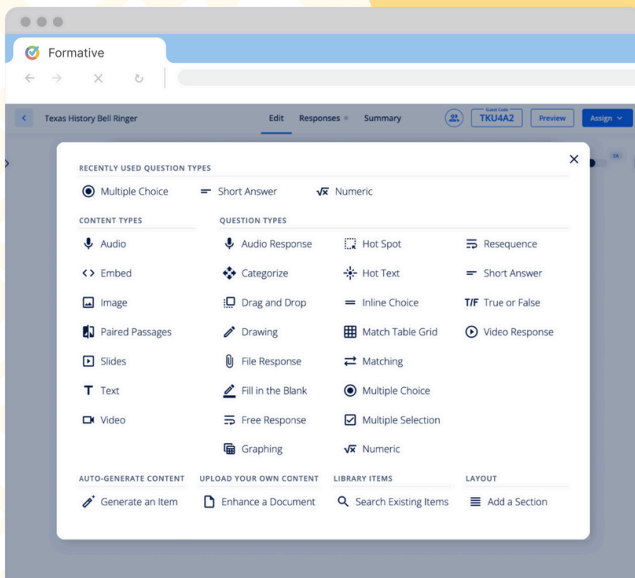
Free response

Free response questions are subjective and test for complex understanding. They evaluate students' abilities to organize their knowledge and stimulate deeper learning and studying strategies. Similar to short answer questions, these questions minimize guessing, require students to prove their point with evidence, and have more than one correct response.



Formative Fact

Formative offers 20+ question and content types to add to your assessments to test students' knowledge and understanding in various ways. Choose from all the options mentioned here, plus others, like show your work, graphing, and audio or video response.



IS EACH QUESTION SIGNIFICANT?

3. Assess one idea at a time

Each question in your assessment should have a specific, significant purpose. During lesson planning or after each lesson, create a few possible chapter or unit assessment questions. You can also review or adapt questions from formative assessments and reuse them during a summative assessment. This technique can help make your summative assessment questions more specific, as individual lessons and formative assessments typically cover a narrower range of material.

To make an assessment more specific:

Create a question for each step

Each question on an assessment should only evaluate one skill or one piece of knowledge. Asking students to do too many steps at once can also overload their brains with too much cognitive input. Instead of one question that asks students to do multiple things, ask multiple questions where students only have to do one thing at a time.

Offer one short answer or free response question per test

When including subjective short-answer and free response questions in your assessments, make sure all students complete the same question or questions. Students who choose different response prompts are essentially taking different tests. This makes repeating and tracking results across students, classes, or grade bands more difficult.



Formative Fact

Keep your past assessments in your personal, school, or district's private Formative library. Then you can return to previous assessments to find, update, and revise valuable questions and use them on new tests.



DOES EACH QUESTION MAKE SENSE?

4. Use clear, straightforward language

The goal of an assessment is to understand what your students know and can do. It's not to trick them with confusing questions. Make sure all your assessment questions are straightforward, clear, and concise.

The simplest form of an assessment item is typically a one-sentence question followed by an instruction prompt. For example: "Who signed the Declaration of Independence? Select all that apply."

How can you ensure students understand each question?

Use direct action verbs

Using action words in the instruction prompts helps pair each question to the DOK you want to assess. You can use [Bloom's taxonomy](#) to find the right verbs that match with each level of thinking. For example, "list" and "label" indicate recall, while "argue" and "compare" indicate higher-level thinking.

Eliminate vague words and phrases

Avoid vague terms that make questions and answer choices ambiguous. Words like "possibly" or "may" make objective questions subjective. Subjective questions that use terms like "discuss" or "explain" are open for student interpretation. Using Bloom's taxonomy verbs can help make subjective questions more concrete. For example:

- **Vague:** Explain the plot of the story.
- **Clear:** List the events that make up the plot of the story.

Avoid double negatives

Double negatives unnecessarily complicate assessment questions. For example, if the question asks, "Which of the following is NOT a cause of the Civil War?" a response like "Not holding a Congressional hearing" creates a double negative.

This construction makes it easier for students to misunderstand or misread question and answer choices. Then, they spend more time figuring out what the question is asking rather than showing you what they know about the topic. Avoid using negatives in a question or stem unless the learning outcome or objective requires it. You can typically frame questions positively to make them clearer for students.

Avoid absolutes

Absolutes like “always,” “never,” “all of the above,” or “none of the above” let students hack assessment questions. For “all of the above” answers, they only need to know two choices are correct, and for “none of the above,” they only need to know two choices are wrong.

If they can use those clues to answer correctly without reading the full question, you’re not testing their content knowledge or skills, just their knowledge of assessment structures.

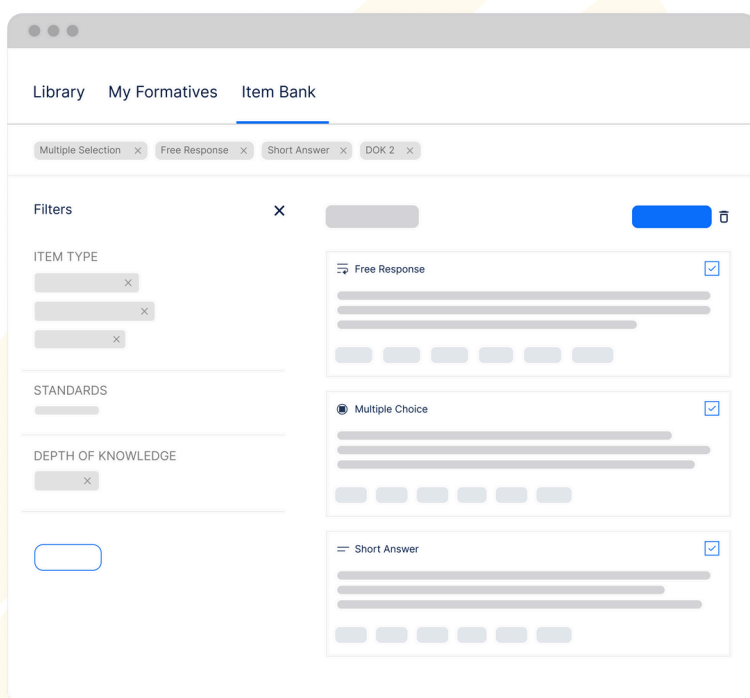
Remove grammatical answer clues

Avoid grammatical clues in questions that can eliminate some answer choices. Using “a” or “an” alone in the question stem can signal an answer must start with a vowel or consonant. Students can then eliminate those choices without even reading them. If you have to write a question that ends this way, use “a/an,” which makes all potential choices valid.



Formative Fact

Formative’s item bank add-on includes subject-specific free-response, multiple-selection, and multiple-choice questions created by professional subject matter experts. Each question is tagged with common core standards and DOK categories so you can choose exactly what you want to assess with each question.



ARE YOUR ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS RELEVANT?

5. Consider the context

Consider cultural bias, relevance, and accessibility when creating assessment questions. When you understand your students' cultures, background knowledge, and accessibility needs, you can create culturally relevant and appropriate questions. You can include recognizable and relevant names and situations in your questions where possible to help students connect with the material and want to answer them.

How can you make your assessment questions resonate with students?

Use scenarios when possible

Scenario-based questions require higher-level thinking than just recall and help students apply what they know to real-world situations. While scenarios may not work for every assessment question, they can help you understand if students grasp a concept beyond memorizing and finding the correct answer.

Avoid idioms, colloquialisms, and biased language

Avoid language that may not make sense to all students or show bias toward a particular group. For example, idioms and colloquialisms may have unclear or regional meanings inaccessible to English language learners. It's also important to avoid using names, themes, or terms that may favor a certain group of students over others.

Consider accessibility needs

There are some ways you can differentiate assessment questions to make them more accessible for all students. Offering read-aloud options, audio or video responses, or adaptability for screen readers or other assistive devices are ways to make sure all students take the same test in a way that meets their needs.



Formative Fact

Formative has a host of accessibility features like text-to-speech, audio and video responses, and standards tracking for IEP goals to adapt your assessment questions to meet the needs of every student.



HOW CAN YOU WRITE “GOOD” WRONG ANSWER CHOICES?

6. Create plausible detractors

Assessment questions should be clear, but that doesn't mean they should be too easy. Wrong answer choices should at least sound plausible or logical enough to make students consider if they're actually the right answer.

Plausible detractors:

Account for contextual relevance

Detractors should contain a kernel of truth to make them plausible. For example, let's say one of your assessment questions was, "Why did Rip Van Winkle sleep for 20 years?" Which of these two choices is more plausible?

1. He had a medical condition.
2. His iPhone alarm didn't go off.

The second option doesn't make sense for the time period or context of the story. It's not plausible and, for most students, would be too easy to eliminate from the given alternatives.

Have a similar construction to the correct answer

Detractors should resemble the correct answer in some way to increase the question difficulty. That means incorrect answers should be similar in length, tense, and construction to the correct answers. For example, if the correct answer is a single word, all detractors should be a single word, too.

Reflect common student errors

Good detractors include common student errors that arise throughout a lesson or unit. Write down student misconceptions that you correct in class and use them as detractor options on assessments. This isn't meant to trick students but rather to let you know if they've corrected their thinking over the course of the unit.



Formative Fact

Formative's answer choice explanations allow you to give immediate feedback about students' answers as soon as they receive their scores. This feature works with multiple choice, multiple selection, and true/false questions and helps students correct misconceptions about the questions or material in the moment.



CAN STUDENTS FINISH THE ASSESSMENT ON TIME?

7. Account for length, time, and grading

Students should be able to finish an assessment within the allotted class period or testing window. Even students who receive special accommodations for extended testing have a period in which they have to finish the assessment. If your test is too complex, it may not be feasible for students to give adequate time to each question and finish without rushing.

To make an assessment feasible, consider:

Length

The types of questions you use influence how long it takes students to complete them. Often, you can include more objective questions in one test than you can with subjective questions since they require lower-level thinking.

Time

Students often don't start an assessment the second they enter the classroom. They also need time to turn in their tests and pack up at the end of class. Keep these considerations in mind. If your test takes 40 minutes to complete but there are only 40 minutes in the class period, that won't be enough for students to finish a 40-question test on time. It would only give them one minute to answer each question!

Point values

It's important to be fair when assigning point values to each question and sharing them with students. Questions that involve understanding more information or using more subskills are often worth more points. Sharing question values with students can help them prioritize which questions to answer first so they can earn the highest number of points per assessment.



Formative Fact

Formative's Respondus LockDown Browser add-on helps you control your students' testing environments. It prevents students from opening new tabs, visiting other URLs, or screenshotting assessments. They're "locked in" to the special assessment environment until they submit their test or provide the correct "quit password."



HOW DO YOU COLLABORATE WITH OTHERS TO CREATE ASSESSMENTS?

8. Collaborate with others

The best creative work comes from collaboration. That includes assessment questions! Working with fellow educators or even your students can help you create more intentional, clear, and effective assessment questions.

Some ways to collaborate while creating assessment questions:

Use common assessments

When possible, use common assessments to ensure you're posing the best questions to all students. These tests offer a standardized way to capture data, track progress, identify students or groups who need additional support, and better predict learning outcomes. When you use the same assessments for all your classes or use a common assessment across your grade band, you can ensure they're both reliable and impactful.

Ask a colleague to review

When creating a brand new assessment, you can ask a co-teacher or a fellow educator to review your assessment questions before you give the test. They can provide feedback about questions that are unclear, too hard, too easy, or not culturally relevant enough to resonate with your students. Offer to return the favor when they write their next assessment!

Take and review student question submissions

Throughout a lesson or unit, ask students to come up with questions they would ask their classmates to help study the material. Review their submissions to look for common topics and themes or common misconceptions, and include those in your assessment questions.



Formative Fact

Formative's common assessment supports and reports help you measure student performance consistently and fairly across classes. You can tag activities as common assessments and share them with colleagues to streamline the assessment development process.



WHAT HAPPENS AFTER AN ASSESSMENT?

9. Provide quality feedback

Your work isn't done after you've written your assessment questions. After students take a test, it's important to provide quality feedback so they understand why they missed questions—or to reinforce and remind them why they got questions right. This helps strengthen their learning and take insights into the next assessment.

Ways to provide quality assessment feedback:

Explain the answer

Knowing whether an answer is correct or incorrect isn't helpful if students don't also know why. Explain the rationale behind each correct and incorrect response to help students learn from their choices.

Define key terms

If students struggle with key terms and definitions, include them in your feedback responses. Define any subject-specific vocabulary that influences an answer choice to help make the answer choices clearer.

Provide in context

Your feedback should be in the context of the lesson and assessment. Tie your responses to the question or the student's answers, an event that happened in class, or a passage in the book or text they had to read.

Keep it clear and concise

Just like when writing assessment questions, keep your feedback clear and concise. If the explanation gets lengthy, schedule a time to meet with students face-to-face to discuss their results more deeply.



Formative Fact

Formative allows you to provide real-time feedback to students on activities or assessments. You can give feedback to the whole class or to individual students based on their individual learning needs.

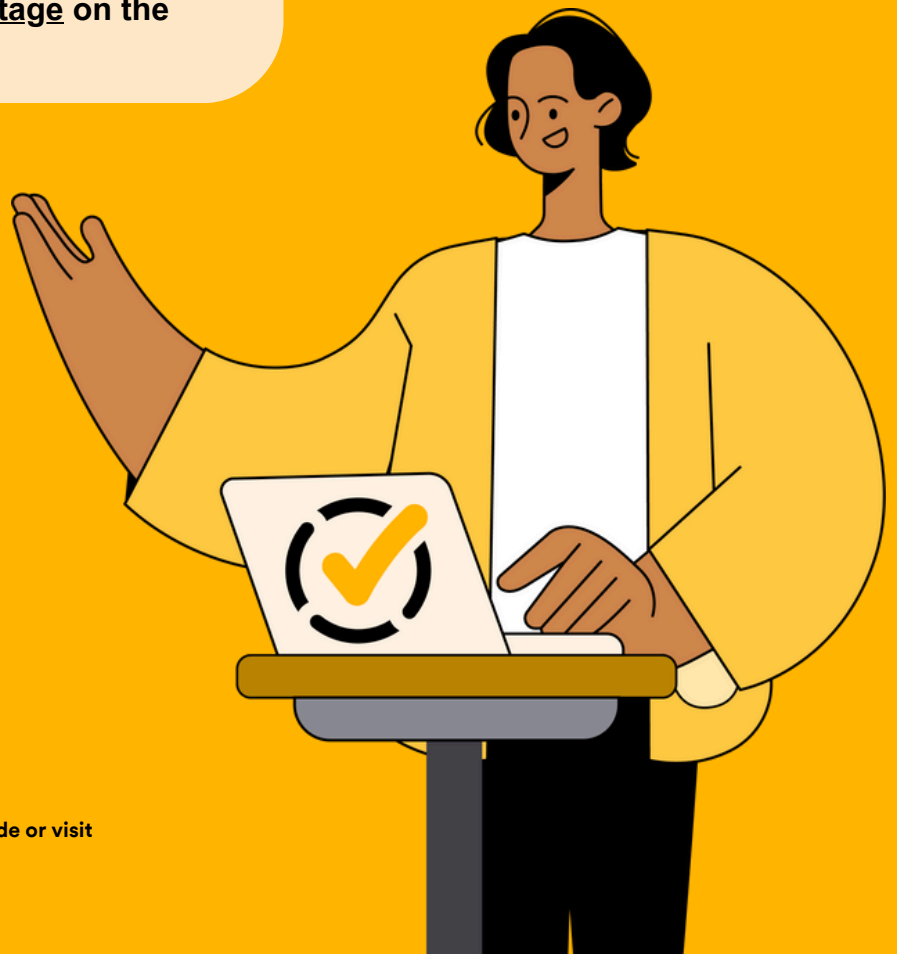


Collaborate on instruction and power a range of **assessment needs**

Formative is where educators come together for instruction and assessment. It's your go-to Newsela product that checks all the boxes needed to provide frequent, high-quality assessment opportunities, collaborate on assessment development, and track data to better influence instruction in any subject or grade level.

Ready to drive meaningful student outcomes in your classroom? Try [Formative for free](#) today, or [get in touch](#) with us to talk about a Formative school or district plan.

Formative is research-backed! Secondary students who use Formative regularly for math saw the equivalent of a nine-percentile advantage on the FastBridge math assessment.



 **newsela**

To try Formative for free, scan this QR code or visit
app.formative.com/signup