

Whether you're teaching in-class or online, assessments can be divided into two main types: (1) formative assessment, and (2) summative assessment.

Formative Assessment

Formative assessment helps learners learn something new, practice what they are learning, or self-check their knowledge. In other words, this kind of assessment can be called assessment for learning. This assessment is usually not graded or is graded as a complete/incomplete.

The goal of formative assessment is to monitor learning to provide ongoing feedback that can be used by learners to improve their learning. Feedback is most effective when provided at the right time. For example, it is a good idea to present at least one formative assessment for learners to complete prior to assessing them for marks. Formative feedback should indicate to the learner where they are in relation to the learning objectives and how they can improve. More specifically, formative assessments:

- help learners identify their strengths and weaknesses and target areas for improvement
- help faculty recognize where learners are struggling and address problems immediately.

Examples of formative assessments include asking students to:

- draw a concept map in class to represent understanding of a topic.
- submit one or two sentences identifying the main point of a lesson.
- turn in a draft of work for early feedback.

Summative Assessment

Summative assessment is what we usually think about when we think about assessment: assignments or tests that are evaluated by the instructor and used to determine a student's grade. In other words, this kind of assessment can be called assessment of learning. This assessment is always graded because the goal of summative assessment is to evaluate student learning at the end of an instructional unit by comparing it against some standard or benchmark. Summative assessments are often high stakes, which means that they have a high point value.

Examples of summative assessments include:

- a midterm exam
- a final project
- an end of term paper
- a final presentation

Information from summative assessments can be used formatively when students or faculty use it to guide their efforts and activities in subsequent courses.

Assessment Versus Grading

The goal of assessment is to improve student learning. Although grading can play a role in assessment, assessment also involves many ungraded measures of student learning. In fact, some educators practice [ungrading](#), which allows other forms of feedback to be provided for learners. Assessment goes beyond grading by systematically examining patterns of student learning across courses and programs and using this information to improve educational practices.

References

Lovett, M.C., et al. How Learning Works: 8 Research Based Principles for Smart Teaching, 2023

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