

Formative, Interim, and Summative Assessments: It Takes All Three

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Making sure all students are college and career ready requires not only an alignment of curriculum and instruction with college and career requirements but also an approach to monitoring student progress on a continual basis, with in-class formative assessments, frequent interim assessments, and focused summative assessments. Taken together, formative, interim, and summative assessments, aligned to Common Core State Standards (CCSS), will support instructional decision making and enhance daily learning activities.

At Measurement Incorporated, we have always operated on the premise that assessment serves instruction. We are careful to create test items, tests, scoring rubrics, and ancillary materials that blend into instructional materials and methods with a minimum of disturbance and a maximum of useful information. Figure 1 below depicts the interactions among the three types of assessments. An explanation follows.

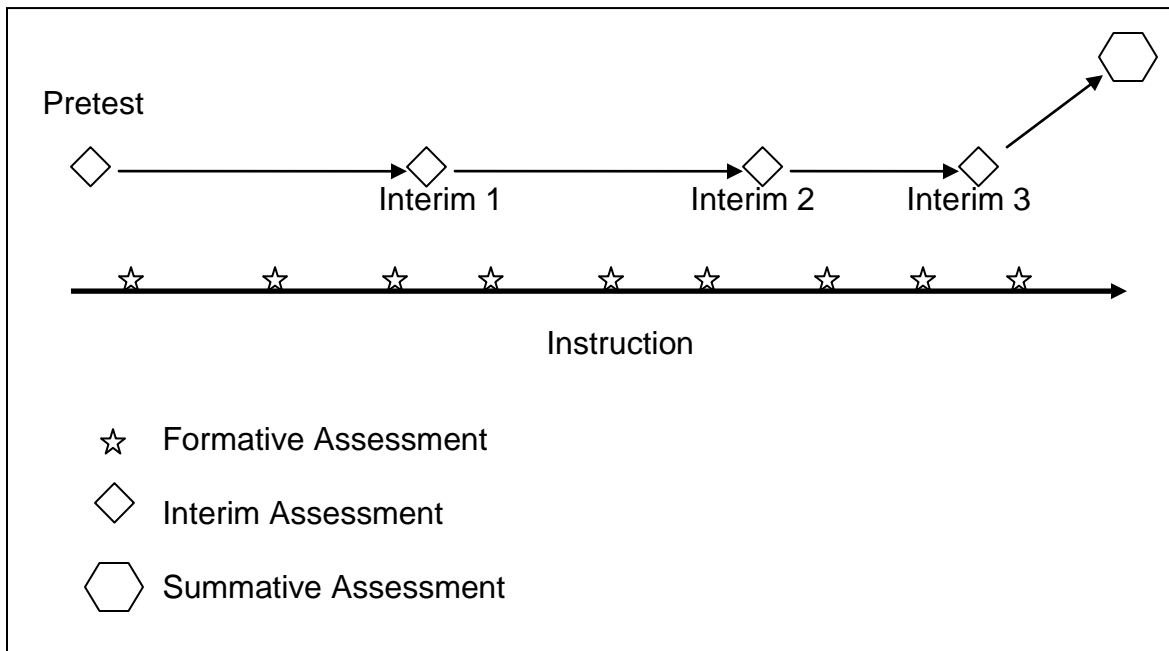


Figure 1. Schematic of Interactions among Instruction and Three Assessment Tiers

Figure 1 assumes instruction based on the CCSS. Consequently, all assessments, regardless of tier, must also be aligned to the CCSS. Assessment begins with a pretest (a form of interim assessment), which not only provides an evaluation of the previous year's (or semester's) instruction but also a general indication of the readiness of students for this year's (or

semester's) instruction. In a sense, the pretest provides information for the classroom teacher as well as instructional leaders at the school and district level.

Each star in Figure 1 represents a formative assessment event. These events may occur at any time, even multiple times in a single day. Focusing on very specific segments of instruction, they provide information to students and their teachers that is both evaluative (What have you learned?) and directive (What do we still need to do?). Depending on the level of specificity, these assessments can also be diagnostic (Why do you continue to experience difficulties in this area?). The pretest guides instruction in a general way, while the formative assessments continue to guide instruction in much more specific ways. At each formative assessment, the teacher and student are able to assess the student's current functioning and either move forward with confidence that the student has mastered the current material, or identify material that needs further review.

Later interim assessments serve as progress checks and may also be diagnostic if they are detailed enough. It is on this particular dimension that formative and interim assessments are most likely to differ in significant ways. Formative assessments are able to focus on such specific elements of the curriculum that their construction permits highly specific questions that get at a level of detail that would certainly be impractical for a summative assessment and possibly even for an interim assessment. For example, a single formative assessment could contain an item for every vocabulary word in a set of readings, while an interim assessment might include a sample of one vocabulary word from a list of ten words, and a summative assessment a sample of one word from a list of twenty. A formative assessment may devote all its items to a single content standard, while an interim assessment might focus on half a dozen, and a summative assessment all standards associated with the subject.

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The lone summative assessment in Figure 1 represents a global end-of-course or end-of-grade assessment. As such, it focuses on the high-level concepts and rules of the course. While its items will span the full range of depth of knowledge (DOK), its content will be of necessity quite general. Such tests have little diagnostic value and serve primarily to inform instructional leaders at the building, district, and even state level about progress of large groups of students.

Each assessment is preceded and succeeded by other assessments. All these assessments are coordinated with instruction through joint alignment with the CCSS. Each component of Figure 1 thereby interacts with and informs each other component. Table 1 on the next page summarizes the functions and characteristics of the three tiers.

Table 1: The Three Tiers of Assessment

Feature	Formative	Interim	Summative
What is their primary purpose?	Feedback to adjust ongoing teaching	Evaluation of student progress; informing decisions at classroom, building, and district level	Evaluation of student learning after an extended period of instruction; student grading and faculty/course evaluation
On what do they focus?	Short-term goals and objectives; material recently covered	Short- and intermediate-term goals; material covered over a period of weeks	Long-term goals, all material covered in a course or grade
What kinds of items do they contain?	Highly focused, curriculum embedded; they may not appear to be test items at all but part of instruction	Combination of general and specific items; they look like traditional multiple-choice and constructed-response test items	Full range of cognitive levels (depths of knowledge) with focus on concepts and rules, rather than details; item types are similar to those found in interim assessments
Who creates them?	Classroom teachers, with some help from outside experts as necessary	Outside experts and teachers from around the district or state write the items; classroom teachers may assemble items into tests, or outside experts may do so	Outside experts create the items; teachers from around the district or state review the items; district or state staff and outside experts assemble test forms from approved field tested items
Who administers them?	Teacher	Teacher	Teacher or Proctor
How frequently are they administered?	Could be daily	Every several weeks	Once or twice a year
Who uses the results?	Teacher, Parents/ Guardians	Teacher, Parents/ Guardians, School, District	Teacher, Parents/ Guardians, School, District, State