NSW Department of Education

What Works Best 2025

Practical guide

Assessment

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

How to use this guide

This resource is part of the **practical guide series** for What Works Best 2025. It provides teachers and school leaders with practical ideas for implementing effective assessment practices in their school. It is not intended to capture all aspects of assessment, and it is important to consider how strategies and practices should be responsive to the learning needs and goals of students.

Before engaging with these ideas, it may be useful to first consider your current practice, and how it influences teaching and learning. What is working well, and which areas could be strengthened? The following ideas may support you when planning next steps.

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What is assessment?

Assessment is the process of identifying, gathering and interpreting information about student achievement (NESA 2024). It can be used to document students' academic readiness, learning progress, skill acquisition and educational needs. Assessment also provides feedback on teaching practice and instructional effectiveness.

Assessment encompasses a variety of methods that teachers can use to evaluate, measure and gauge student understanding to inform teaching and learning. These include the informal questions, teacher judgements and observations that occur in classrooms, as well as formal examinations, standardised tests, class tests, work samples and analysis of student portfolios. The department's Assessment modes advice conceptualises this variety into 4 modes of assessment that range from less formal to more formal.

Assessments can be formative, summative, or both formative and summative, depending on their purpose and how the information they generate is used.[1]

Why does assessment matter?

Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning. High-quality student assessment enables teachers to effectively monitor student progress, identify appropriate next steps, evaluate the impact of their teaching strategies on both learning and engagement, and measure student understanding of a unit of work (Stronge 2002).[2]

A carefully considered combination of formative and summative assessment tasks can significantly impact learning culture. Assessment tasks provide teachers with invaluable information to assist students in identifying and overcoming barriers to their learning and enrich the overall learning experience (Graham et al. 2018).

The relationship between assessment and explicit teaching

Assessment is integral to effective explicit teaching as teachers frequently check for student understanding and then make on-the-spot judgements to determine when concepts or skills need to be retaught, when and what types of scaffolding students need and when students are ready to progress to more independent practice.

1 Refer to Chapter 5: Assessment in the What Works Best 2025 evidence guide for more information on formative and summative assessments.

2 Teachers should consider using a range of data sources for decision-making as it can improve the reliability and validity of their findings, as well as provide a more complete picture of student achievement. For more information, refer to Chapter 4: Using data to inform practice in the What Works Best 2025 evidence guide.

Assess student learning as part of everyday practice

- **Clearly communicate to students how assessment of their learning relates to the learning intentions for a lesson or series of lessons.** This could be done by visibly displaying the learning intentions and success criteria of a lesson in the classroom (for example, on the whiteboard) and referring to them when checking for understanding and/or throughout the lesson. Teachers can also explicitly highlight how formative assessments gauge students' progress toward the learning intention – for example, by saying, "In today's lesson we are looking at the structure and function of cell organelles. Later in the lesson we will have a short quiz on key points to check for understanding."

  Further example:

Connecting assessment to learning intentions – Stage 1 Mathematics

Syllabus outcomes:

- **MAO-WM-01 – Working mathematically:** develops understanding and fluency in mathematics through exploring and connecting mathematical concepts, choosing and applying mathematical techniques to solve problems, and communicating their thinking and reasoning coherently and clearly.
- **MA1-CSQ-01:** uses number bonds and the relationship between addition and subtraction to solve problems involving partitioning.

Learning intention: We are learning to use a number line to add and subtract.

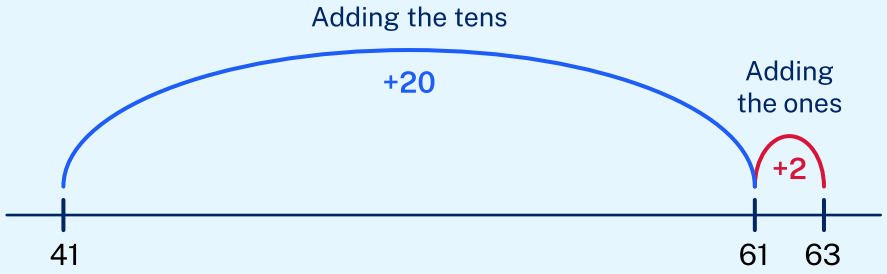
Task: Complete the following number sentences:

- 24 + 25 =
- 31 – 11 =
- 41 + 22 =

Success criteria: I can:

- draw a number line starting with the first number
- add/subtract the tens
- add/subtract the ones.

Worked example: 41 + 22 = 63



Student: "41 plus 22 equals 63."

Teacher: "That was some great addition there! How did you use our success criteria?"

Student: "I used my number line to add the tens in one jump and then the units in one jump."

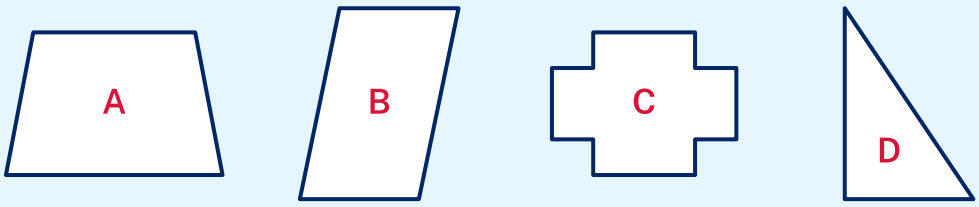
- **Apply a variety of assessment methods during lessons so that students have multiple opportunities to demonstrate what they know and can do in relation to the learning intentions and success criteria.** Assessment methods can include teacher observations, quick quizzes, asking students to summarise lesson content or asking hinge questions. By doing so, teachers can gain valuable information about where students are up to in their learning, allowing them to adapt their teaching and lesson planning in response to students' needs.

Hinge questions are pre-planned questions that check for student understanding. They are designed for all students to answer in a short time – for example, by finger voting, using mini-whiteboards or flashcards.

Hinge questions are so-called because they can act as a turning point in a lesson, allowing teachers to gather real-time data and make an informed decision about whether to move on to the next stage of the lesson, reteach or provide more practice. Hinge questions should be designed carefully so that students cannot get the correct answer for the wrong reason. This can be done by designing questions with multiple correct responses, or by intentionally including 'distractors' – that is, incorrect answers that appear plausible to students with incomplete understandings of a concept (Wiliam 2015a).

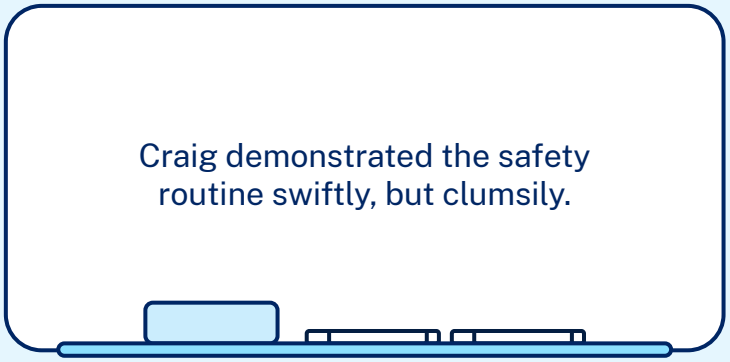
Example 1:

A teacher displays the following shapes on the smartboard and asks students to write on their mini-whiteboards how many lines of symmetry each shape has (Wiliam 2015b).



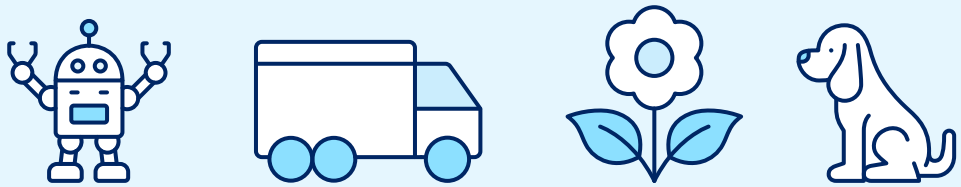
Example 2:

A teacher writes the following sentence on the smartboard and asks students to use their mini-whiteboards to write down all the adverbs (Wiliam 2015a).



Example 3:

A teacher hands each student flashcards labelled A, B, C and D and displays the following images on the smartboard, asking students to hold up all the flashcards that correspond with a living thing.



A B C D

Example 4:

A teacher asks students to answer a question on an interactive quiz platform that requires them to insert the correct particles in the sentence written in Japanese below.

- **Ask students questions that prompt them to deepen their thinking and articulate their reasoning.** Teachers can use question structures such as "Why/how is _____ an example of _____?" or ask students to explain a contrast. For example:
  - "Why is nocturnal behaviour an example of a behavioural adaptation?"
  - "Why is a tree an example of a living thing?"
  - "Why is 11 a prime number but 9 is not?"
  - "How was the art of the Early Renaissance different from the art of the High Renaissance?"

  When asking such questions, it is important to pause and give students enough time to formulate an answer. Teachers can consider using strategies such as think-pair-share to encourage all students to share a response.[3] Listen carefully to students' responses to identify any misconceptions and correct any errors.

3 Refer to the department's Key questioning strategies webpage for more strategies that engage all students in questioning.

Use assessment to provide students with learning opportunities

- **Facilitate opportunities for students to engage in self-assessment.** Before this, teachers should provide scaffolding and guidance, such as going through the success criteria and/or assessment rubric with students and analysing annotated work samples at varying levels of proficiency. Any teacher judgement is delayed until students have engaged with the assessment rubric and work samples. It is important that self-assessment activities are developmentally appropriate, meaning they should match students' age and skill levels so that they can understand and effectively apply the assessment criteria. Self-assessment can enhance students' self-efficacy (Panadero et al. 2017; Yan et al. 2020). It can also help students to develop self-regulated learning strategies such as monitoring their progress against a goal and engaging in self-reflection (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Yan and Brown 2017).

  Further examples:

  - A teacher provides students with a checklist that they can refer to while completing their artworks and allocates a set time for them to apply it. The checklist contains a list of questions relating to the success criteria, such as:
    - "Is my shading gradual or can I see an abrupt transition from light to dark?"
    - "Have I used shape to accurately represent proportion in my drawing?"

    This can help students to gauge their achievement and identify areas for improvement.
  - A teacher provides each student with 3 cards: one red, one yellow and one green. Students are asked to place one of the cards on their desk as they are working to indicate their level of understanding of a topic – green can indicate that the student fully understands the concept and can complete the task independently, yellow can indicate that the student is working towards fully understanding the concept, and red can indicate that the student is stuck and needs help to understand the concept. The teacher moves around the classroom during the lesson and provides assistance to students according to their cards.

- **Include opportunities for self-reflection as part of the assessment process.**[4] For example, after an assessment has been graded or returned, ask students to respond to questions such as 'What did I do well?', 'What do I need to do to improve?' and 'How can I apply this to future learning?' This can be done verbally or in writing. Engaging in self-reflection can help students to develop greater awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, as well as what they can do to achieve their goals (Yan and Brown 2017).
- **Facilitate a shared understanding of success criteria with students.** One way of doing this is to provide students with purposefully chosen anonymous work samples at varying levels of proficiency, then ask them to compare and rank the samples and explain which one best meets the success criteria. Teachers can also refer to the success criteria while modelling how to complete the task and evaluate one's work – for example, "Now I'm going to look at what I've written in my exposition so far and check to see if I've met all the success criteria – have I used high modality language, and have I included a mix of personal and objective arguments?"

  Ensuring a shared understanding of the success criteria provides students with transparency and clarity about what is expected of them (Wiliam 2011). Students are then also more likely to be able to apply the success criteria in their learning (Wiliam 2011).

Design and deliver high-quality assessments

- **Collaborate with colleagues to:**[5]
  - **Develop or select assessments that are accessible to all students.** Accessible assessments are those that are designed to enable all students to demonstrate the full extent of their learning, regardless of their gender, physical ability, cultural background or geographical location (Masters 2013; Ofqual 2025). For example, avoid creating assessments that refer to geographical locations, landmarks or other contextual details that are not familiar to all students undertaking the assessment if these are not essential to the content or skills being assessed. This is because they may be a distractor and may disadvantage the students who do not have this assumed knowledge. Instead, it is recommended that teachers use references that are culturally relevant or localised – for instance, a question referring to 'avocados' could be adapted to 'apples' if students are more likely to recognise the latter. Instructions on how to complete the assessment should also be very clear, using language that is age-appropriate and relevant to what is being assessed (Ofqual 2025). For example, an assessment based on foundational scientific concepts should not use complex jargon.

4 Self-assessment and self-reflection, while related, are distinct processes. Self-assessment refers to the evaluation of one's skills or knowledge against set criteria and often involves a rubric to assist in gauging one's performance in relation to the criteria (Desjarlais and Smith 2011). Self-reflection focuses on personal introspection instead of formal evaluation and does not usually involve set criteria (Desjarlais and Smith 2011). In self-reflection, students look back on what they have done, what they learned and how they felt about it to gain further insights and understanding of their learning.

5 Effective practices for collaboration can differ depending on the school context. For example, collaboration activities can take place within a school or within a community of practice with other schools. Statewide Staffrooms are online collaborative spaces where teachers can access high-quality resources and expert advice, as well as connect with colleagues from across NSW.

Additionally, assessments should ensure that all students can demonstrate the extent and depth of their knowledge. One way this can be done is by including tiered levels of difficulty within an assessment – for example, by incorporating different levels of cognitive questions.[6] Teachers can also consider using a range of assessment activities to give students different ways to demonstrate their understanding – for example, students' understanding of a scientific concept can be assessed by drawing a diagram and labelling it instead of writing a paragraph (ASCD 2015).[7]

- **Design or choose high-quality assessments.** Focus on attributes such as validity, reliability, objectivity and inclusiveness.[8] Also consider clarity, syllabus focus, structure differentiation and purpose. Effective assessments provide an accurate measure of students' knowledge and skills, which in turn allows teachers to make accurate decisions about student learning and progress (Stronge 2002). An effective assessment framework will be guided by the purpose of the assessments used throughout the year – what questions the assessments are answering, and how the data will be used.
- **Develop success criteria and assessment rubrics** that clearly describe what students need to do to succeed and the various levels of proficiency students can attain in relation to particular components of the task. Well-developed rubrics are powerful tools as they support teachers to make consistent judgements about student achievement, help students to understand the success criteria (Chappuis et al. 2012, cited in Lyna et al. 2016) and can support more accurate student self-assessment (Krebs et al. 2022). For guidance on how to develop a rubric, refer to the NSW Department of Education's (2025) Developmental rubrics (PDF 682KB) resource.
- **Strengthen consistency of teacher judgements in assessments.**[9] Consistent teacher judgements improve the validity and reliability of student learning data (NSW Department of Education 2024) and, in turn, the identification of areas for learning improvement. In addition to collaboratively planning and designing assessments with colleagues, this can be achieved by comparing student work samples and organising assessment moderation activities. Such activities can be taken within a school, or – particularly in regional, rural and/or remote settings – in a wider community of practice with other schools.

6 Refer to the NSW Department of Education's Key questioning strategies advice for examples of frameworks and tools to assist in developing higher cognitive questions. Teachers can also refer to this webpage for information on other questioning strategies such as question sequencing and wait times.

7 Using a range of assessment activities is particularly important in learning and support plans (🔒staff only) for students who may require adjustments to participate in the curriculum on the same basis as their peers.

8 Refer to Chapter 5: Assessment in the What Works Best 2025 evidence guide for more information on attributes of high-quality assessments.

9 Consistent teacher judgement requires teachers to have a shared understanding of assessment and syllabus standards, and apply that understanding consistently when making judgements about what students know, understand and can do. For more information, refer to the NSW Department of Education's Effective assessment practices – a guide for teachers and leaders resource and Consistent teacher judgement webpage.

Further examples:

- Teachers co-develop an assessment requiring students to create a role-play in German, working together to create a marking rubric. Discussions are held to ensure that teachers have a shared understanding of the marking criteria, as well as what student achievement at each of the proficiency bands would look like. Following the assessment, teachers reconvene to watch some of the recorded role-plays that they have marked from each of their respective classes. Teachers discuss and compare their judgements and considerations when marking to ensure that the marking criteria is being applied consistently (AITSL 2016a).
- A teacher works with their stage and/or faculty colleagues to review work samples from a task requiring students to compose a short story. They jointly analyse and interpret the student work samples to identify areas of strength in relation to the success criteria and syllabus. The teachers also identify areas for improvement for students and discuss the underlying reasons why students may be finding it difficult to grasp the key concepts underpinning the lessons. Following this discussion, the teachers are able to adapt their teaching for future lessons and evaluate their teaching practice (AITSL 2016b).

- **Develop and implement culturally responsive assessments that consider students' cultural ways of communicating.** It is important to be aware of the cultural composition of a class because assessment strategies might need to account for students' cultural ways of participating in the classroom – for example, students from cultures with a strong emphasis on social harmony and relationships may prefer not to critique another student's response as it may be seen as impolite. To practise culturally responsive assessment, teachers need to understand their students' cultural ways of expressing themselves. Some strategies identified as having potential to be culturally responsive include (Nortvedt et al. 2020):
  - **performance-based assessments** that evaluate the application and demonstration of knowledge or skills (as opposed to knowledge recall) – for example, student work portfolios or group projects
  - **creativity assessments** that assess students' ability for creative thinking – for example, a maths problem that asks students to create as many questions as possible that fit a provided graph and solve them.

- **Provide students with timely and relevant feedback after every assessment to improve their performance in future tasks.** Feedback should be specific and actionable, with an emphasis on how students can progress their learning – for example, "Your presentation was well structured, with a clear introduction, relevant examples and a strong conclusion. In future presentations, try using intentional pauses to add emphasis to key points." Effective feedback helps students to gauge where they are in their learning, correct any misconceptions or errors, identify any gaps in their knowledge and improve.[10]

  Further example:

  - "I love how you used bright colours such as yellow and orange to show happiness in your painting! I can see that you've put a lot of thought into how colours can be used to express how you feel in your artwork. Next time, you might want to focus on the background of your artwork as well."

School leaders play an important role in building a school-wide assessment culture

School leaders can help ensure that there are consistent school-wide assessment practices in place to monitor, plan and report on student learning across the curriculum.[11] In particular, as there may be variance in teachers' efficacy and approaches to assessment, school leaders can foster a school-wide understanding of effective assessment practices through the provision of structured professional learning. For example, professional learning can help foster a shared understanding of the purpose of assessment and principles of quality assessment design (validity, reliability, objectivity and inclusiveness). Professional learning can also be used to strengthen teachers' collective and self-efficacy in developing effective success criteria and rubrics, and in implementing effective assessment practices.

In addition to professional learning, school leaders can strengthen the consistency of assessment practices by formalising opportunities for collaboration and support from colleagues. This can involve:

- developing a school-wide culture of assessment, including the effective use of data
- regularly reviewing assessments used in the school to ensure they best meet their intended purpose and are aligned with current evidence and other requirements – this may require removing or replacing unnecessary or ineffective assessments

10 Refer to the What Works Best 2025 practical guide – Effective feedback for more information on how to implement effective feedback practices in the classroom and school.

11 Refer to Chapter 4: Using data to inform practice in the What Works Best 2025 evidence guide and the practical guide on this theme for more information on how assessment data, in addition to other sources of data, can be effectively used to inform decisions about student learning.

- allocating time in faculty and/or stage meetings to discuss, share and refine evidence-informed assessment practices (for example, establishing processes to improve consistent teacher judgement)
- allocating time to develop standardised assessment rubrics
- facilitating classroom observations and peer mentoring opportunities (for example, professional learning communities and shoulder-to-shoulder teaching)
- embedding assessment goals into School Excellence Plans as part of school improvement planning.

Other What Works Best 2025 resources on assessment

- Evidence guide – Chapter 5: Assessment
- Illustration of practice – Assessment at Warrimoo Public School

Additional resources

- NSW Department of Education (2025) Sharing learning intentions technique guides on 'Developmental rubrics' and 'Sharing learning intentions and success criteria'
- NSW Department of Education (2024) Checking for understanding
- NSW Department of Education (2024) Effective assessment practices – a guide for teachers and leaders
- NSW Department of Education (n.d.) Assessment professional learning (🔒staff only)
- NSW Department of Education (n.d.) Leading effective curriculum implementation – module 4: effective assessment and reporting practices (🔒staff only)
- NSW Department of Education (n.d.) Strengthening assessment
- NSW Education Standards Authority (NESA) (n.d.) Assessment and reporting

Reflection questions

Teachers

- Am I using a variety of assessment methods so that students have multiple opportunities to demonstrate what they know and can do in relation to the learning intentions, success criteria and syllabus outcomes?
- How do I communicate the purpose of assessments to students?
- How do I collaborate with colleagues to design and implement high-quality assessments that are accessible and culturally responsive to the needs of students in our school?
- How do I ensure that assessments are marked consistently and objectively within my class and between classes?
- How do I use assessments to facilitate learning opportunities for students?

School leaders

- Does our school have consistent school-wide assessment processes to monitor, plan and report on students' learning outcomes?
- As a leadership team, how do we work with teachers to establish a clear understanding about the purpose of assessments that take place in our school? For example, can we collectively answer 'what', 'when' and 'why' in relation to the assessments that are taking place?
- What opportunities does our school provide for teachers to build and strengthen their knowledge and skills on designing and implementing effective assessment practices?
- As a leadership team, how do we create formal opportunities for teachers to collaboratively design high-quality assessments and analyse student results to ensure consistent teacher judgement?

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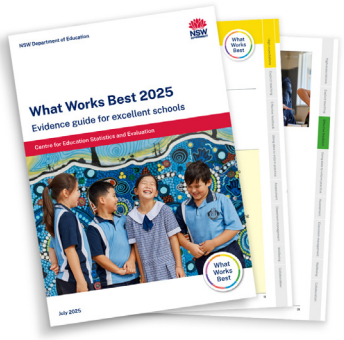
Access the full suite of What Works Best resources

What Works Best 2025 is a suite of resources for teachers and school leaders that outlines 8 effective practices that are known to improve student learning and wellbeing:

- high expectations
- explicit teaching
- effective feedback
- using data to inform practice
- assessment
- classroom management
- wellbeing
- collaboration.

The resources can be used individually or in conjunction with one another to implement evidence-based, quality teaching and learning practices and inform school excellence planning.



The What Works Best 2025 – Evidence guide for excellent schools provides an overview of the evidence that underpins each of the 8 themes.

The What Works Best practical guides translate evidence into practice by providing teachers and school leaders with practical ideas for implementing each of the themes in their classrooms and schools. The guides unpack not only 'what' should be done to successfully implement a theme, but also the 'how' and 'why'.

The What Works Best illustrations of practice provide teachers and school leaders with examples of how some of our great schools from across NSW have implemented the themes.

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