



*A Union of Professionals*

# Classroom Tips

## **Quality Classroom Assessment Techniques**



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Each new school year brings high hopes, great expectations and challenges for both new and seasoned educators.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has developed a series called *Classroom Tips* to help educators start the year off right and anticipate the year ahead.

*Classroom Tips* is developed with you, the educator, in mind. The tips in this collection are taken from real classroom experiences and are part of the AFT's Educational Research and Dissemination (ER&D) professional development program.

The AFT is a leader in providing educators the resources they need to help them succeed. Visit AFT's Web site for classroom resources at [www.aft.org/tools4teachers](http://www.aft.org/tools4teachers) today.



**A**s an educator, you know that standardized tests are a fact of life. They can produce useful information, but the results often are too late, too shallow or not what you needed to find out.

Research shows that administering more and more of these types of tests does nothing to raise student achievement. Instead, if we want to see real gains in achievement and learning, we need to start with sound classroom assessment techniques. When done right, classroom assessments give us the most reliable and individualized information (data) on each of our students.

Quality classroom assessments focus on students receiving feedback, having discussions about their work, and being able to do so without always having to worry about what the grade might be. Moreover, they:

- Can provide instant feedback allowing for modification and individualization.
- Help build rapport with students by opening the lines of communication and letting them know their teachers really care about their learning.
- Improve student performance and learning by involving the student and giving them the opportunity to take responsibility for their own learning.

Quality classroom assessments are the best tool that teachers have to probe more deeply into what their students already know, what they need to know, and whether they are on track to learn the expected content and skills.



## Tips for Developing Classroom Assessments

### Start with the end in mind

Consider the outcome you want (How will students demonstrate achievement?) and “map backward” from the standards and the evidence needed to meet the goal (the assessment) to instruction. The assessment should represent what students need to know. As a result, it guides what you teach.

### Teach to the assessed content, not test questions

Teaching to the content will come pretty naturally when classroom-based assessments reflect your state’s content standards and curriculum. That is, the tests will be aligned with the curriculum and reflect what’s happening in your classroom. Teaching to the content keeps students moving toward standards or goals. In this system, content standards, curriculum and instruction are the centerpiece.

Avoid teaching to the test items. This occurs when students are taught to perform well on particular test questions. This kind of teaching tells us little to nothing about how well students are actually progressing toward mastery of the standards—a true understanding of the content. Under the teaching-to-the-test scenario, test items are the centerpiece. As a result, the goal of measuring progress toward the content standards and curriculum is lost.

### Use a combination of summative and formative assessments

Summative assessments are given at the end of instruction. They answer the question: Did the students get it? Examples of summative assessments include end-of-unit tests, final projects and final research reports. Formative assessments occur during instruction. These tests answer the question: Are students on the right track? Examples of formative assessments include feedback, observations, rough drafts and spot-check quizzes.

## TRY IT: Second Chance

Chelmsford, Mass., High school teacher Robert Bradman gives struggling students a second chance by offering them a contract for improvement. The students agree to show him their daily homework efforts (or another area that needs attention), and in exchange Bradman doubles the weight of all the remaining grades for the term. “This puts more emphasis on future opportunities and can substantially raise their grades,” he notes.

## Incorporate formative assessment techniques

The best formative assessments are part of the instructional process in which teachers stop to make spot checks, engage students or see if they’re on the right track. Formative techniques include:

- **Observing.** Use anecdotal records (for instance, focus on three to five students per day and make notes about each student’s learning) and checklists (say, a set list of criteria, skills, behaviors, etc., that you fill out).
- **Asking well-designed questions.** “Closed questions” focus on recall of facts or simple comprehension. There is a right answer. (Who is the main character in the story?) “Open questions” focus on

finding out what students know, understand or are able to do. (Would you rather live when the story takes place or now? Why?)

- **Providing feedback.** Feedback is communicating how students did in light of a goal—what was and was not accomplished. Evaluative feedback provides a judgment (in other words, a grade) summarizing the quality of the learning. Descriptive feedback provides specific written comments that help the student understand what needs to improve.

## TRY IT: What’s the Date?

Instead of writing the date on the chalkboard, turn it into a math calculation for students. For example, Nov.  $\sqrt{32 + 42}$  would be Nov. 5, and Dec.  $8 \div \frac{1}{2}$  would be Dec. 16. Encourage students to design their own math/date calculations to post in class.

## Improve your communication with students

Students respond better to give-and-take than to a letter grade. Researcher Ruth Butler, an education professor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, found that assigning grades to student work had no positive effect. It didn’t improve students’ performance. However, when teachers provided only descriptive feedback and no grade, student performance improved by 30 percent. When Butler looked at both assigning a grade and providing descriptive feedback, she found no positive effect—assigning grades negated the positive effects of the feedback.

Adding more standardized tests to the school calendar won’t raise academic achievement. What will help students is timely, meaningful feedback on their schoolwork. Such assessments let you probe into what they know, what they still need to learn and whether they’re on the right track. And that, ultimately, is how to help your students learn and grow.



## TRY IT: Corrections Memo

Sometimes students will “lose” their graded tests after getting them back. Try passing out a “Corrections and Mistakes” memo sheet on colored paper when the test is returned to students. Ask them to record correct answers and procedures and to write out what their mistakes were. Collect the tests and memo sheet and keep a file for each student’s tests. It’s useful to have these on hand for future reference.

## Make Your Assessments BLOOM

You can take advantage of a system called Bloom’s Taxonomy to create classroom assessments that develop students’ thinking skills.

In 1956, a group of educational psychologists headed by Benjamin Bloom found that more than 95 percent of test questions required students merely to recall facts. In response, Bloom developed a classification of intellectual behavior important in learning. These six levels start with recall of facts and move up through increasingly complex and abstract levels, to evaluation. In the 1990s, a new group of cognitive psychologists, led by Lorin Anderson (a former student of Bloom’s), updated the taxonomy to reflect 21st century work.

Good questioning will move back and forth among all levels. Here they are, with examples of classroom questions:

### Remembering:

#### To recall or remember information

- Who is the main character in the story?
- Who were other important characters?
- Where was \_\_\_\_\_ going?
- What words in the story were new to you?

### Understanding:

#### To explain ideas or concepts

- Why did \_\_\_\_\_?

- Draw two scenes from the story.
- Write a paragraph using five of the new words from the story.

### Applying:

#### To use previously learned knowledge, rule or method in a new way

- Describe a place that you have visited that is like the setting of the story.
- Write a letter to \_\_\_\_\_ from \_\_\_\_\_.
- Write a telephone conversation between \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

### Analyzing:

#### To break information into parts to explore understandings and relationships

- What parts of the story could not have actually happened?
- Pick one character and write five questions from his/her point of view.
- Compare/contrast \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

### Evaluating:

#### To judge the value of materials or ideas and justify a stand, position or decision

- What if you were the \_\_\_\_\_ in the story? Defend your character’s actions and feelings.
- Would you rather live where (or when) the story takes place or where you live in the present? Why?
- Do you think \_\_\_\_\_? Why?

### Creating:

#### To put ideas together in a new way to develop a new product or point of view

- How might the story have been different if \_\_\_\_\_?
- What if \_\_\_\_\_?
- What if you added another character to the story? Write a new ending from the new character’s point of view.

# Five Great Reasons to Join a Union of Professionals

## The American Federation of Teachers:

**1 Supports you in the classroom.** Effective learning only takes place when high-quality teachers, with the support of other competent professionals, have the materials and assistance needed to accomplish the task. Your union is a strong advocate for quality classroom materials that are aligned to the standards of achievement we expect our students to meet. We also insist that state and district assessments for measuring student progress are aligned with these standards and that the assessments be used appropriately to support student learning.

**2 Helps you prepare.** No matter how well prepared you may have been before entering the classroom, there is always room for improvement. Ongoing professional development that meets you at your point of need is vital for continued growth as an educator. The AFT and its affiliates deliver some of the finest professional development programs available; and in situations where ours are not available, we advocate and broker for you to receive the best training possible.

**3 Stands up for you.** Whether the discussion is taking place in the White House, in the halls of Congress, on the floor of your statehouse, in colleges of education or in your local editorial pages, you can be sure that union representatives are weighing in assertively, ensuring that the collective voice of educators comes through clearly and effectively.

**4 Advocates for your profession.** No one enters the teaching profession without a strong desire to help children reach their potential. Yet, at times the realities of life make this calling difficult to stick with. Adequate salaries and benefits are essential in order to keep the best teachers, paraprofessionals and support staff in our public schools. Working conditions such as manageable class sizes, adequate teaching materials, and discipline policies that support teaching and enhance student learning are important factors in ensuring that the best teachers remain in the classroom.

**5 Keeps you informed.** *American Educator* is one of the most highly respected journals available to keep you informed on current thinking in public education by some of the most capable thinkers and doers in the field. *American Teacher* will keep you on top of the challenges and successes of your colleagues across the country. And a host of optional publications, as well as a comprehensive Web site that will assist you in addressing the particular needs of your school and classroom, provide the balance of a professional literature package that is second to none.



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