



FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT: 10 Key Questions

Introduction

Consider using this document as one of a variety of resources to support educators' professional practice, to increase assessment literacy, and as a powerful tool to build student-teacher relationships and improve student outcomes. When considering the setting and purpose to use this document, feel free to customize it to your own needs.

Possible uses in professional development:



- Share during a faculty meeting to surface experiences with and attitudes toward professional practice
- Discuss during PLC time to apply, extend, and sharpen professional practice
- Use with new or struggling teachers to enhance professional practice and assessment literacy
- Focus on one or two questions with a team to engage in deep reflection about understanding, current practices, connection-making, areas of strength and for growth, etc.

What is formative assessment?

Formative assessment is a deliberate process used by teachers and students during instruction to provide specific, actionable, and immediate feedback. They are designed to **quickly inform instruction** by providing **specific and immediate feedback** through **daily, ongoing instructional strategies** that are **student- and classroom-centered**, and that answer "**what comes next for student learning?**"

The formative assessment process plays a vital role within the Wisconsin Strategic Assessment System. To examine how formative assessment practices fit within a Strategic Assessment System, please refer to the videos and foundational documents at www.dpi.wi.gov/strategic-assessment.

**Please note that Wisconsin Department of Instruction refers to the "formative assessment process" AND "formative practices" (that occur within that process) but refrain from using the term "formative assessments." We avoid the word "assessments" because the strategic use of formative practices to elicit feedback from students is not a test event -- but rather an instructional process.*

Questions

1. [What makes an assessment formative?](#)
2. [What are some examples of effective formative assessment practices?](#)
3. [How is the formative assessment process different than summative and interim assessment?](#)
4. [What is best practice regarding formative assessment practices, grading, and homework?](#)
5. [How can homework be used formatively?](#)
6. [How can I make sure my students are using the feedback I provide to advance their learning?](#)
7. [What if a student shows a solid understanding of the learning target within my formative practice, but does NOT within the classroom summative assessment \(chapter test, end of unit test, etc.\)?](#)
8. [What are "common formative assessments"? How are they different than formative assessment practices?](#)
9. [How much time does the formative assessment process take? How do I find time in my schedule to use it my classroom?](#)
10. [What should I look for if I am purchasing a "formative assessment" commercial product to use in my classroom?](#)

1. What makes an assessment formative?

An assessment is “formative” if the data collected is used to gauge student understanding; provides students with specific, actionable, and immediate feedback; and adjust instructional strategies in relation to the standards or learning goal. The formative assessment process involves both the teacher AND the student, answering the following questions regarding student learning:

- *Where am I going?*
- *Where am I now?*
- *How do I get from here to there?*

Within the formative assessment process, the teacher and the student are giving and receiving feedback about the student’s learning progression using a continuous dialogue in order to know what comes next for student learning. As such, formative practices personalize the teaching and learning cycle.

Feedback may occur in the form of teacher-student, student-teacher, student-student, or student-self. An essay, project, quiz, test, or informal check for understanding can serve as a formative assessment **if** the data is used to adjust instructional strategies to meet the needs of students at various levels of learning. However, if a teacher were to use that same assessment to report a final grade, or provide the data to the district or state, the assessment would be summative because it would be an assessment **OF** learning, not an assessment **FOR** learning. Summative assessments are meant to gauge student learning in relation to a specific set of standards, at a particular point in time.



It’s not formative unless the teacher acts on the results by adjusting instruction and by providing feedback.

2. What are some examples of effective formative assessment practices?

Most teachers are already using formative assessment practices within their own classrooms. Some examples include teacher observations of student learning, student-teacher conferencing, questioning for understanding, thumbs up/thumbs down, exit and entrance tickets, students using whiteboards within the classroom, etc. The key to using these strategies effectively is to use the data gathered from formative practices to reflect on and provide high-quality feedback that guides future teaching and learning.

This could include examples such as a teacher taking anecdotal notes and referencing these notes to help form learning groups; a teacher re-teaching a skill to a small number of students who did NOT show proficiency during a conference; or a teacher providing extension opportunities for students who are ready to move on to the next level of learning. The important piece to note is that in all of these examples, the teacher is using data gathered from the formative assessment process in order to guide future instruction and to personalize student learning to close student learning gaps.

In the vignettes below, each teacher is using formative practices, ranging from Teacher A's quick check of student understanding to Teacher C's most systemized and strategic formative practice.

The Formative Assessment Process: Teacher Vignettes

A teacher is finishing a lesson on a new learning target and conducts a quick check for student understanding in order to plan for the next lesson. She asks the class to give her a thumbs up if they are confident in their comprehension of the new material, a thumbs to the side if they have a question(s) about the new material, or a thumbs down if they do not understand the new material and need additional help from the teacher.

Characteristics of Effective Formative Assessment Practices

	Based on specific learning targets	Designed by teachers	Elicits evidence of student learning	Informs instruction	Involves students	Provides specific, actionable, immediate feedback
<p>Teacher A</p> <p>...After looking around the room at the students' thumbs up/thumbs down, the teacher notes which students she needs conference with about misconceptions and questions. Since the majority of the students showed a thumbs up, the teacher decides to continue with the lesson.</p>	X	X	X	X		
<p>Teacher B</p> <p>... The next day, she confers with the students who had a question or a misconception. The students from that group who feel confident join the thumbs up group to continue practicing.</p>	X	X	X	X		
<p>Teacher C</p> <p>... Next, the teacher confers with the students who had their thumbs down, or who still had questions to re-teach the lesson and provide guidance as necessary to ensure understanding. The next day, all students complete an entrance slip assessing the new material. The teacher rechecks student comprehension and the formative assessment cycle continues as students' needs arise.</p>	X	X	X	X	X	X

3. How is the formative assessment process different than summative and interim assessment?



Teachers use the formative assessment process naturally and continuously within **daily/weekly** lessons to collect data on students' learning progression. Effective formative practices allow teachers the ability to make real-time adjustments to both lessons and teaching strategies in order to meet student needs while answering the question, "What comes next for student learning?"

Interim assessments are different than formative in that they are designed to benchmark and monitor progress by providing **multiple data points across time** through periodic snapshots that are typically grade-level and school-centered, and that answer the question, "What progress are our students making?" Interim assessments are test events, while formative practices are a part of the learning process, embedded within an instructional flow (not a 'stop and test' event).

Summative assessments are administered to students to determine mastery of skills at the **end of a unit, semester, or year**. Dr. James Popham, a UCLA professor and advocate of formative assessment describes the differences between the two types of assessment as, "Whereas formative assessment intends to improve ongoing instruction, summative assessment tries to answer the question, 'Was instruction effective?'" More simply, formative assessment is assessment **FOR** learning, while summative assessment is assessment **OF** learning.

4. What is best practice regarding formative assessment practices and grading?

This question has been debated by both teachers and experts within the field. Many educators believe that assessments are only formative if they are ungraded and used solely to guide and improve student learning. Practitioners with this viewpoint believe that because formative assessment is thought of as "practice", it should not be scored nor count toward a summative grade.

"Stated bluntly, giving students a grade is not formative feedback." ~ Margaret Heritage

Instead, they believe that student progress should be communicated through specific, actionable, and immediate feedback including face-to-face conferencing or narrative comments. Providing students with written or verbal feedback is more powerful than assigning a grade. Feedback should be given on-the-spot to within one day of the formative assessment, either through student-teacher conferencing, written narrative comments, small group dialogue with teacher or peer conferencing. Feedback should help students and teachers answer the essential questions:

- *Where am I going?*
- *Where am I now?*
- *How do I get from here to there?*

"Feedback is among the most critical influences on student learning." ~ John Hattie & Helen Timperley

Resources:

 [Should Formative Assessment Be Graded? Four experts offer their takes on the question and suggest some alternatives](#)

 [Granted, and... ~thoughts on education by Grant Wiggins Formative vs summative assessment – and unthinking policy about them](#)
[Formative Assessment and Standards Based Grading by Robert Marzano](#)

Teachers should always provide specific feedback through suggestions to improve performance, deepen learning or overcome misunderstandings rather than praising or shaming student work. Formative assessment allows for a constant cycle of feedback that can accelerate student mastery of the learning targets.

5. How can homework be used formatively?

Homework can be used formatively if:

- the homework is selectively assigned for practice within a new learning target
- teachers provide students with specific, actionable, and immediate **feedback** regarding their performance on the homework (*Grades are not considered formative feedback*)
- teachers quickly use evidence gathered from the homework to adjust what comes next in instruction

Homework as Formative Assessment Vignettes:

Math Homework: A teacher assigns math students two problems as homework based on the learning target. The following day, he collects the assignment as an entrance ticket, and quickly scans the assignments to form small groups based on the specific skills each student needs to successfully master the learning target.

Science Homework: A science teacher assigns homework to write a hypotheses for an experiment. At the beginning of class, students discuss their hypotheses in small groups while the teacher listens to and observes discussions, noting students who need further guidance in writing strong hypothesis, and those who need explicit instruction to begin writing a basic hypothesis.

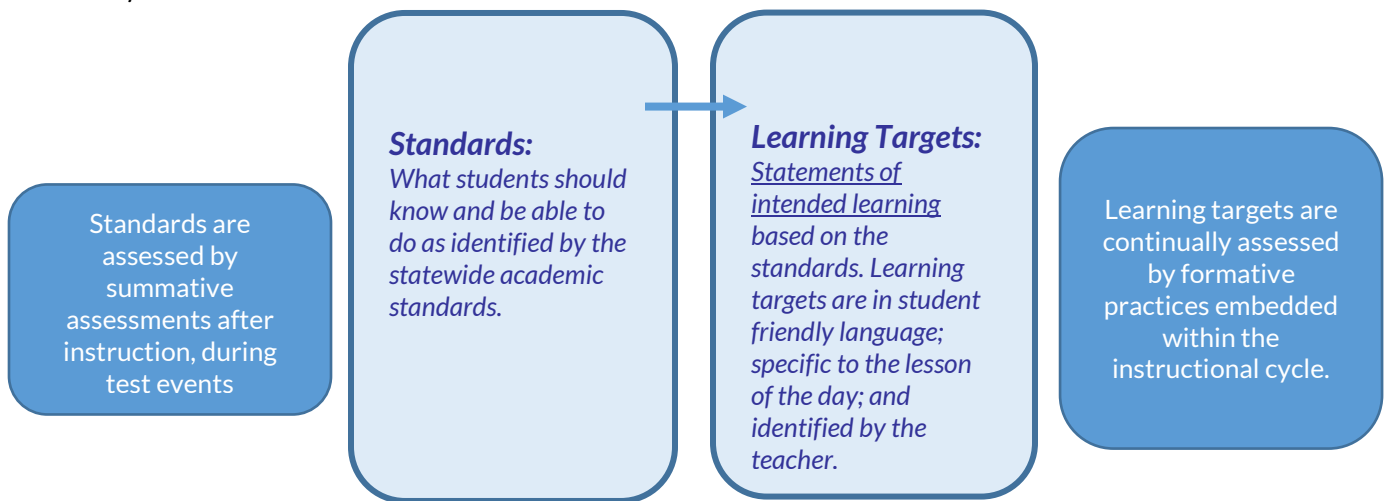
6. How can I make sure my students are using the feedback I provide to advance their learning?

Many teachers observe students throwing away assignments after giving the letter grade a quick glance, forgetting that the assignment ever existed. Through the formative assessment process, effective feedback is communicated not through letter grades, but through verbal and written conversations. Within the formative assessment process, teachers are constantly tracking and monitoring student learning, and students are constantly working with teachers to close learning gaps. Because most educators do not grade formative assessments, they serve as a means of practice. Through this practice, students work to improve their skills by seeking feedback from teachers and peers before embarking on the summative assessment.



7. What if a student shows a solid understanding of the learning target within my formative practices, but does NOT within the classroom summative assessment (chapter test, end of unit test, etc.)?

This issue may occur because the classroom summative assessment is not measuring the intended target or standards that were measured within the formative practice. There should be a direct relationship between what is being assessed formatively and summatively. It is important for educators to remember that formative assessment practices focus on smaller learning targets and the more immediate question, “What comes next for student learning?” while summative assessments determine mastery of skills at the end of a unit, semester, or year answering the more retrospective question, “Did all of my students meet the standard/master the content?”



This issue could also occur because students are not as familiar with the summative test. Teachers can familiarize students with the assessment format, encourage students to read and listen to all of the directions, and review test-taking strategies.

Resource

This toolkit by The Center on Standards & Assessment Implementation includes videos and supplemental materials to help educators write and select well-designed assessments.

[Assessment Design Toolkit](#)

8. What are “Common Formative Assessments?” How are they different than formative assessment practices?

“Common formative assessments” are created by teacher teams and are administered to whole grade levels, or to an entire class at various times throughout a unit, semester, or year to collaboratively monitor student progress and instructional effectiveness within a classroom, grade, or department. The results are analyzed collaboratively within data teams to provide timely feedback and allow teachers to adjust instruction as needed to meet student needs within classroom instruction. The term “common formative assessment” is used by some to describe a process that teacher teams follow to monitor student progress and respond in ways that are common to the grade level, content area, or to the PLC.

If you are using common formative assessments, remember that they are just one part of the ongoing formative assessment process that involves student participation, individualized assessment for learning, and personalized feedback. Ideally teacher teams and PLCs are collaborating around all student information, regardless of assessment type, not just formative data.

Characteristics	Formative Assessment Practices	“Common Formative Assessment”
Assesses specific learning targets	X	X
Based on state standards	X	X
Designed by teachers	X	X
Scheduled, administered and reviewed by collaborative teacher teams with entire grade level/class		X
Allows for immediate adjustments to instruction	X	
Elicits evidence of student learning (data)	X	X
Informs instruction	X	X
Timely	X	X
Involves students	X	
Provides data on individual students	X	X
Individualizes assessment for learning	X	
Provides personalized feedback	X	

“An assessment is an important part of the formative-assessment process, but it is only that—a part of the formative-assessment process. The entire process involves ..., selection or construction of suitable assessment procedures, judgments about whether assessment-elicited evidence should lead to adjustments, and choices about the nature of any adjustments. Assessments are a key component of the formative-assessment process, but they are not the entire process.” ~ James Popham

9. How much time does the formative assessment process take? How do I find time in my schedule to use it my classroom?

The formative assessment process should occur naturally within lessons, and therefore, it should not take away from instructional time, but rather personalize instruction. However, teachers will need to factor in time to review the information gathered from their formative practices whether it be looking through exits slips to form small group skill work, reading through anecdotal notes to understand student misconceptions, or studying data from a quiz to determine which students have shown proficiency and are ready to move on to the next standard or skill. Usually, teachers have already incorporated these practices into their planning time, since this is simply part of being a reflective practitioner. The formative assessment process is simply thinking about student learning progressions, and adjusting to meet the day-to-day instructional needs.

10. Can I purchase an effective “formative assessment” commercial product to use in my classroom?

Formative practices are teacher techniques, not a test that can be purchased or pulled off a shelf. By definition, these practices change continuously based on student needs, although educators likely have a core set of tools and techniques upon which they rely to support these formative practices.

If a vendor is selling a formative product, be cautious. A **practice or technique** can't be purchased, but they can be developed and refined. These teacher techniques are embedded into an educator's professional practice and are used to engage students.

There are a number of **tools** that may aid your formative practices. For example, educators may purchase clickers that allow them to gather immediate feedback from students, by polling class understanding. There are also several formative assessment apps available to download and use in your classroom to gather immediate feedback from your students. These tools can be an efficient way to collect formative data. Remember that effective formative practices are the teacher designed strategies, not the tools or technology that are purchased.

Resources: [Wisconsin's Strategic Assessment Systems](#)

References:

- Hattie, John and Helen Timperley. 2007. "The Power of Feedback." *Review of Educational Research* 77:61-112.
- Heritage, Margaret. 2010. *Formative Assessment: Making it Happen in the Classroom*. Thousand Oaks: Corwin.
- Popham, James. 2011a. "Formative Assessment—A Process, Not a Test." *Education Week*. <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2011/02/23/21popham.h30.html> (accessed January 5t, 2017).
- ———. 2011b. *Transformative Assessment in Action: An Inside Look at Applying the Process*. Alexandria: ASCD.