

Formative assessment

Formative assessment helps teachers understand student learning in real-time, allowing them to adapt teaching approaches and support student progress effectively.

Formative assessment *is*



When teachers check how student learning is progressing during a lesson or unit. It helps teachers understand what students know, what they're struggling with and what to teach next. It's like a quick check-in that guides both teacher and student — helping the teacher decide what to teach next and helping the student see what they've learned and where to focus.



During lessons, simple low-stakes approaches like quick quizzes, exit tickets or asking probing questions can be used. Teachers use this information to adapt their instruction, identify misconceptions early and provide timely feedback to students. It creates a continuous cycle where assessment informs teaching, which then informs further assessment.



Formative assessment also helps students become aware of their own learning progress and guides them toward success. It's most effective when integrated regularly into teaching and learning programs, rather than as an add-on activity.

Formative assessment *isn't*



High-stakes testing or formal examinations

It's not about grading students or ranking their abilities against each other. Formative assessment doesn't replace summative assessment but works alongside it.



Time-consuming or overly complicated

Effective formative assessment uses light-touch methods that can be implemented quickly during regular instruction.



Something that only happens at the end of a lesson or unit

Formative assessment happens during learning. It's ongoing and helps teachers provide feedback and adjust instruction in real time.



Only about identifying what students don't know

While it's important to identify areas of learning that need strengthening, formative assessment is also about celebrating and building on what students do understand.



Why it works

For learners:

- **Reduces anxiety:** Keeping evaluation informal gives a more accurate picture of student abilities in a low-stakes environment where mistakes are seen as part of the learning process.
- **Strengthens memory:** Regularly retrieving information builds stronger neural connections and improves retention.

For teachers:

- **Reveals understanding:** Provides immediate insight into student knowledge so misconceptions can be corrected early.
- **Targets instruction:** Guides teaching to learner needs at the point of need, supporting more effective practice across diverse classrooms.

In practice

Primary school example

After handwriting practice, a Year 1 teacher asks students to circle 3 words they're proud of and underline a word they're unsure about. Looking at their work, she notices many students have errors in their capital letter formations and placement. She demonstrates again with a short modelling activity for the whole class and provides another set of words for the students to practise and circulates the room again to provide guidance for those students who need it.

Secondary school example

After a science lesson on photosynthesis, a Year 8 science teacher asks his students to write one thing they learned and one question they still have on a slip of paper before leaving. Reading the responses, he discovers many students are confused about the role of chlorophyll. He begins the next lesson by clarifying this misconception and checking for understanding through questioning, before introducing new content about plant respiration.



For more about [formative assessment](#), take a look at AERO's suite of resources on the topic.

AERO's work is made possible by the joint funding it receives from Commonwealth, state and territory governments.

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