

# focus

on university teaching and learning

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## Assessment Tips

adapted by  
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*This issue of "Focus" contains tips on the assessment of student learning in higher education. The tips are gleaned from the literature on student assessment. The writings of many of the prominent authors in the field have been reduced to point form and to short quotations to accommodate the format of this bulletin. The Resource Centre of the Office of Instructional Development and Technology and the Killam Library collection offers a number of excellent books on the subject of evaluation in higher education. We hope that this bulletin whets your appetite and encourages you to consult some of the sources we recommend as you review the design of your student assessment instruments and procedures for the upcoming academic term.*

Editor

"Assessment which is the servant rather than the master of the educational process will necessarily be viewed as an integral part of teaching and the practice of improving teaching. A sophisticated theory of teaching leads directly to the proposition that the assessment of students is above all about understanding the processes and outcomes of student learning, and understanding the students who have done the learning."

Ramsden (1992)

"The most important function of testing is not to provide a basis for grading. Rather tests are an important educational tool. Not only do they direct students' studying, but they can provide important corrective feedback. The comments written on essay tests are far more important than the grade."

"The motivational as well as the cognitive aspects of comments need to be considered. Misconceptions need to be identified, but not in overwhelming number. Encouragement and guidance for improvement should set the overall tone. Feedback that helps students see their progress helps build self-efficacy and motivation for further learning."

"Often we get so wrapped up in the pure mechanics of correcting and grading tests that we overlook the fact that measures of student performance not only can diagnose student weaknesses but also can reveal areas in which our teaching has failed to achieve its purposes. Think about what you need to do as well as about what the students need to do."

McKeachie (1994)

## Tests: Some Suggestions

1. Use a variety of testing methods
2. Always give feedback, promptly if possible
3. Tests should be more for learning and for motivating than for measuring
4. Regard the absolute worth and accuracy of testing with suspicion
5. Reduce the threat tests pose
6. Don't grade all tests
7. Clarify test objectives both before and after
8. Be honest, open, and fair
9. Let students be makers and takers of tests
10. Don't stress the trivial
11. Surprise quizzes and tests should be a reasonable length
12. Be imaginative
13. Be generous.

Eble (1988)

## Fourteen Rules for Better Assessment

1. Link assessment to learning
2. Follow assessment with suggestions
3. Learn from students' mistakes
4. Deploy a variety of methods
5. Encourage student participation in process
6. Promote understanding for success
7. Balance diagnostic and summative functions
8. Use 'objective' tests with caution
9. Require some explanations in prose when quantitative manipulations are involved
10. Focus on validity before reliability
11. Reduce anxiety in students
12. Write model answers to your questions
13. Reduce competitive aspects
14. Human judgment is most important.

Ramsden (1992)

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## Purposes of Assessment and Testing

- To reveal to students their area of strength
- To reveal student progress to instructor
- To provide motivation for students
- To help instructors evaluate their teaching
- To provide a basis for grades
- To evaluate students in terms of their professional and career goals.

Greive (1990)

## Improving Your Evaluations of Student Performance

- Experience being evaluated
- Open your evaluative criteria to negotiation
- Ask your students to evaluate your evaluations
- Promote self-evaluation and peer evaluation.

Brookfield (1990)

## Preparing Students to Take Essay Examinations

- Instructor should emphasize vocabulary unique to discipline
- Students should be instructed to begin their essays with a true, declarative sentence that lays out the direction of their argument and treatise
- Read entire test before writing
- Encourage students to write legibly
- Faculty must emphasize to students that good grammar provides the logic of communication
- Instructors can provide a practice exercise in class
- Instructors should help students develop the study habits that will enhance their performance on tests.

Jacobs & Chase (1992)

## Problems with College Tests

- Tests do not focus on what is most important
- Too little feedback is provided
- The questions are often unclear
- The tests are too short to sample content
- Instructors fail to communicate to students the purpose of their classroom tests and use of the results
- Courses do not have enough exams.

Jacobs & Chase (1992)

## Preparing Multiple-Choice Questions

- Provide four possible answers
- Do not include impossible answers
- Do not use "none of the above"
- Be consistent with the response format
- Do not use qualifiers such as "always"
- State all the questions in a positive format
- Keep all statements the same length.

Greive (1990)

## Giving Feedback to Student Writers

A teacher's response should:

- Be clear to the student
- Be friendly in tone
- Be positive as well as negative
- Respect the student's culture and ideas
- Set priorities
- Suggest specific actions

A teacher's response should be appropriate to the following:

- Announced criteria
- Announced audience and purpose
- The stage of the writing process
- The student's stage of development as a writer
- The student's ability to use the advice.

Walvoord (1993)



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