

CHECKLIST

11 most commonly misused assessment terms



Chinese philosopher Confucius recognized the importance of semantics. “If names be not correct,” he said, “language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success.”

We use a lot of complex terminology in education. In the spirit of getting everyone on the same page, here’s a list of frequently misused terms and their definitions.

Student achievement, proficiency, and growth

The terms “achievement” and “proficiency” are frequently used interchangeably, but they’re not the same. “Growth” is an extension of these. Together, all three terms provide a true picture of student progress.

- ☐ **Achievement:** An objective measurement of ability, achievement reflects the amount of academic content a student has at any given point in time. How much math or reading do they have? The result is a number, score, or percent correct that reflects a student’s performance on a test. The outcome may be negatively impacted by several external factors, such as whether a student had breakfast on test day, their English proficiency, health issues, and more.
- ☐ **Proficiency:** This is a value-driven measurement. Does a student have enough of reading or math relative to their grade, age, or other standard at a given point in time? End-of-year, summative tests that determine whether students meet certain criteria measure proficiency.

The difference between proficiency and achievement? All students have achievement, whereas not all may have proficiency.

- ☐ **Growth:** Growth is all about improvement. How much has a student gained from point A to point B? To simplify this, let’s use height as an example.

Suppose a student grew from 4'6" to 5' between eighth and ninth grade. Their gain score measures the change: six inches. But that's only part of the story. How do we know if six inches is on target for their age? Percentile improvements complete the picture. The six-inch gain puts them in the 60th percentile, a leap forward from the 50th percentile they were in the previous year. That's important growth.

The difference between growth and proficiency? Students can demonstrate significant growth in a subject but still not enough growth to be proficient. Students who aren't proficient have to demonstrate above-average growth to catch up.

Screening and diagnostic assessments

The easiest way to think about these terms is relative to your own health care experience.

- ☐ **Screening:** When your doctor checks your blood pressure, height, weight, and temperature, they're screening for risk indicators. The same is true in the classroom. By screening students, you get a view into whether certain kids are at risk for academic struggles and need further evaluation.

A universal screening assessment is more than a thermometer that checks for only one risk factor. It's able to screen for multiple indicators with one test.

- ☐ **Diagnostic:** To dig in and diagnose what's causing a student's weakness in an area may require diagnostic testing. This is akin to a CAT scan. If every patient coming in for an annual checkup received one, 95% of the time it wouldn't reveal anything useful for a doctor. It's the same with assessments. Diagnostic assessments are time-consuming and best used once a screening has identified a student with risk factors.

Formative, interim, and summative assessments

These assessments are all based on cadence. That is, they fit into a cycle—from daily testing to periodic and one-time tests. Taken together, they create a balanced assessment system.

- ☐ **Formative:** These are the spot checks administered most frequently, whether day-to-day or at multiple times during a course. Formative assessment may mean asking students to raise their hands, engage in classroom discussion, or take quizzes. The goal is to get feedback in the moment to determine where students are in their learning. This allows teachers to course correct their instructional paths and tools to meet students' needs.
- ☐ **Interim:** Periodic testing that occurs on a regular cycle (e.g., fall, winter, and spring) is interim assessment. These tests also allow teachers to course correct and can help predict proficiency at the end of the school year.
- ☐ **Summative:** These assessments are used to show how much students have learned at the completion of an instructional period, like at the end of the year, end of a chapter, or end of a course. These may be graded tests or projects and include year-end state tests.

Norm- and criterion-referenced assessments

If you want to measure how students are doing relative to other test takers in the classroom versus measuring their performance against a prescribed standard for proficiency, you'll want to know about these assessments.

- ☐ **Norm-referenced:** Imagine racing a friend to the bus stop. Even if you don't have a timer or stopwatch, you can evaluate who's faster based on who got there first. If 100 people join in, you'll get ranked against all the runners and put in a percentile. That's how it is with norm-referenced assessments, which compare and rank students relative to each other on a bell curve. These are achievement and growth measurements.

- ☐ **Criterion-referenced:** How do you know where you and the other runners stand relative to proficiency? Maybe you came in first. But is that proficient? Criterion-referenced tests measure performance against a fixed set of criteria or standards. They assess what students know relative to what they're expected to know at a specific stage of their education. Advanced placement tests are an example of this.

High-stakes assessments

- ☐ **High-stakes:** While this is a subjective term, most educators agree that it points to anything tied to the important decisions that have an impact on student, educator, school, or district outcomes. These tests may determine whether a student has to repeat a grade or whether test scores have an impact on a teacher's continued employment.

Learn more

For a deeper dive into the language of assessment, browse the [Glossary of Education Reform](#).



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