



What are summative assessments?

Essential Characteristics of Summative Assessments

Summative assessment is used to summarize student achievement following the conclusion of periods of instruction. Summative assessments, sometimes referred to as “assessments of learning,” are given when instruction on the skills and concepts being tested has concluded and no further instruction is planned or will be provided. Consider this instead: An assessment can be considered “summative” when its purpose is to describe how much each student has achieved by the end of a period of

instruction, and then move on to the next instructional unit—during the current or subsequent school year.

Examples of Summative Assessments

While often associated with annual student assessments required by federal or state laws, summative assessments need not be limited to those given only once a year. They can be designed to be administered once a year, several times during the school year, or even more frequently. Table 1 illustrates some of the types of summative assessments that students might encounter in school.

How Can Summative Assessment Data be Used?

A frequent misconception is that summative assessments are useful for teachers in planning their next instruction, as soon as the day after testing, and should be used in this manner. However, since summative assessments might cover skills typically taught weeks or months earlier, it is unlikely that such assessments will provide instructionally-relevant information to teachers. Delays in the return of the assessment results may compound this issue. Other assessment practices, such as the use of formative assessment practices daily, provide the information teachers will need to guide daily instruction and student learning.

Table 1: Types of Summative Assessments Used in Schools

Assessment Types/Examples	Description
Annual state assessments (M-STEP; PSAT, SAT, MME; MI-ACCESS; WIDA)	State- and/or federally-required assessments given annually in elementary, middle school, and high school to most general education students, those with significant cognitive disabilities, or English learners.
Periodic interim benchmark assessments	Instructionally-related assessments usually given to students two or more times per school year to gauge growth in learning.
End-of-instructional unit/end-of-chapter tests	Assessments related to the instructional unit or chapter in the textbook that students just completed
Capstone project	An activity at the conclusion of a period of instruction in which the student applies knowledge and skills to completing a project that illustrates their achievement
Portfolio	A collection of evidence selected to illustrate work under way or the growth in learning, or to showcase best work of the student
College entrance tests	SAT or ACT tests administered to high school students for use in college admissions
Advanced Placement tests	College Board-provided tests to determine exemplary student achievement in advanced high school courses.
National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)	Federally-required assessments in several disciplines administered every-other school year to state and national samples of 4th and 8th graders, and a national sample of 12th grade students

What can we learn from summative assessment?

Does this mean that summative assessments have no value? No, not at all. Summative assessments have value in that they provide a snapshot of student performance at a point of time. What if we don't like what we see in that portrait? While it may be too late to help the students who were tested, we learn that unless something changes instructionally for future students, their performance may look the same.

Summative assessments can provide information educators can use to modify and improve their instructional programs so that future groups of students do much better than those assessed this year. Using the data in curriculum mapping and instructional improvement activities can help to assure that school performance improves in the future.

Who uses the information that summative assessment provides?

Summative assessment data can be used by different individuals to answer several key questions, as shown in the table to the right.

If the summative assessment occurred at the conclusion of a unit of instruction, the results of such an assessment might have some value in helping teachers to determine if students are ready to move on to the next unit of instruction. If not, teachers should consider whether students have mastered the key concepts they will need to succeed in the next unit of instruction. If not, the teacher might wish to address those as instruction on the next unit gets under way.

Summative assessment may also have some utility with students in another way. The performance of a few students may be so concerning that the teacher or parents/guardians may wish to ascertain whether the students have learning disabilities or other challenges. While this discovery would not address low achievement on the summative assessment, per se, this use of summative assessment results could have a substantial benefit to these students.

To learn more

Learning Point: What constitutes a high-quality, comprehensive, balanced assessment system? (MAC 2016)

<https://tinyurl.com/LP-Balance>

Learning Point: What do we mean by Formative Assessment? (MAC 2017)

<https://tinyurl.com/LP-Formative>

Learning Point: What do we mean by Interim/Benchmark Assessments? (MAC 2017)

<https://tinyurl.com/LP-Interim>

Think Point: Addressing Assessment Issues: Value of using a two-component accountability assessment system

By Stuart Kahl, Ph.D. (MAC 2019)

<https://tinyurl.com/tp-Kahl>

Michigan's Education Assessment System: What It Is, What It Means, and What It Offers. (Michigan Department of Education, 2019)

An overview of Michigan's state assessments, including why they are given and why they are important <https://bit.ly/3CjzR6y>

Table 2: Assessment Users, Uses, and Key Questions

Users	Uses	Key Questions
Students and their families	Standards-based grading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Has the student achieved all important learning outcomes? Is the student keeping up?
Educators	Normative grading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How well did the student do relative to other students?
	Improved student performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have I improved the instruction I provided this year? Did students in my class achieve more than students last year?
Policymakers and the public	Student growth in learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Did I provide effective instruction this year? How much did students improve in my class this year?
	School accountability for level of performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What proportion of students are proficient or above? Is student performance improving? Are changes needed in the curriculum or instructional program?

How do summative assessments fit in a balanced assessment system?

Summative assessments are an important part of a balanced assessment system. While formative assessment practices, used effectively and often, can provide the feedback teachers and students need to guide instruction and learning, ultimately we want to know:

- How much did students learn?
- Did students miss some important concept or understanding (so we can make sure to cover those topics more effectively the next time we teach these concepts)?

- Are students ready to move on to the next unit of instruction (or, on to the next school year)?
- What extra assistance is needed by some students?
- How do we report students' levels of achievement to those who want to know—the students who were assessed, their parents or guardians, teachers, school administrators, and (for accountability) the public?

These are all important functions of summative assessments in a balanced assessment system.

The Michigan Assessment Consortium's Assessment Learning Network (ALN) is a professional learning community consisting of members from MI's professional education organizations; the goal of the ALN is to increase the assessment literacy of all of Michigan's professional educators.