



Pre-test vs. pre-assessment: Why the distinction matters in a balanced assessment system

In the world of educational assessment, words matter—and so do the definitions behind them. Two terms often used interchangeably are *pre-test* and *pre-assessment*. While they might seem similar on the surface, digging deeper reveals that these terms represent fundamentally different processes with unique purposes, characteristics, and implications. Understanding these differences is essential for educators seeking to build equitable and balanced assessment systems that center on student learning.

Defining the terms

Pre-test refers to a more traditional, often standardized tool used at the beginning of a unit or course to determine what students already know. Typically administered via paper-and-pencil and comprising selected-response questions, pre-tests are formal, structured, and often result in a score. Though the score may not be entered into the gradebook, it is usually communicated to students. The primary goal of a pre-test is to establish a baseline for measuring growth, especially when paired with a post-test later in the learning sequence.

In contrast, **pre-assessment** is a more dynamic and student-centered process. It is designed not simply to measure what students know but also to explore how deeply they understand content, how they apply skills, and how they think. Pre-assessments can take many forms—performance tasks, student reflections, discussions,

Key differences between pre-test and pre-assessment

KEY DIFFERENCES:		
Aspect	Pre-Test	Pre-Assessment
Formality	Highly formal	Can be formal or informal
Format	Often paper/pencil; selected response	Varied formats; open-ended, authentic tasks
Purpose	Establish a baseline for summative comparison	Identify current understanding to inform instruction
Data use	Primarily by teacher	Used by both teacher and student
Outcome	Score or grade (often unused in final grades)	Rich evidence of learning; no score necessary
Authenticity	Often artificial; focused on recall	Authentic; connected to real thinking and application
Student Role	Passive recipient of evaluation	Active participant; holder and user of knowledge
Function	Typically, summative in intent	Foundational to formative assessment cycle

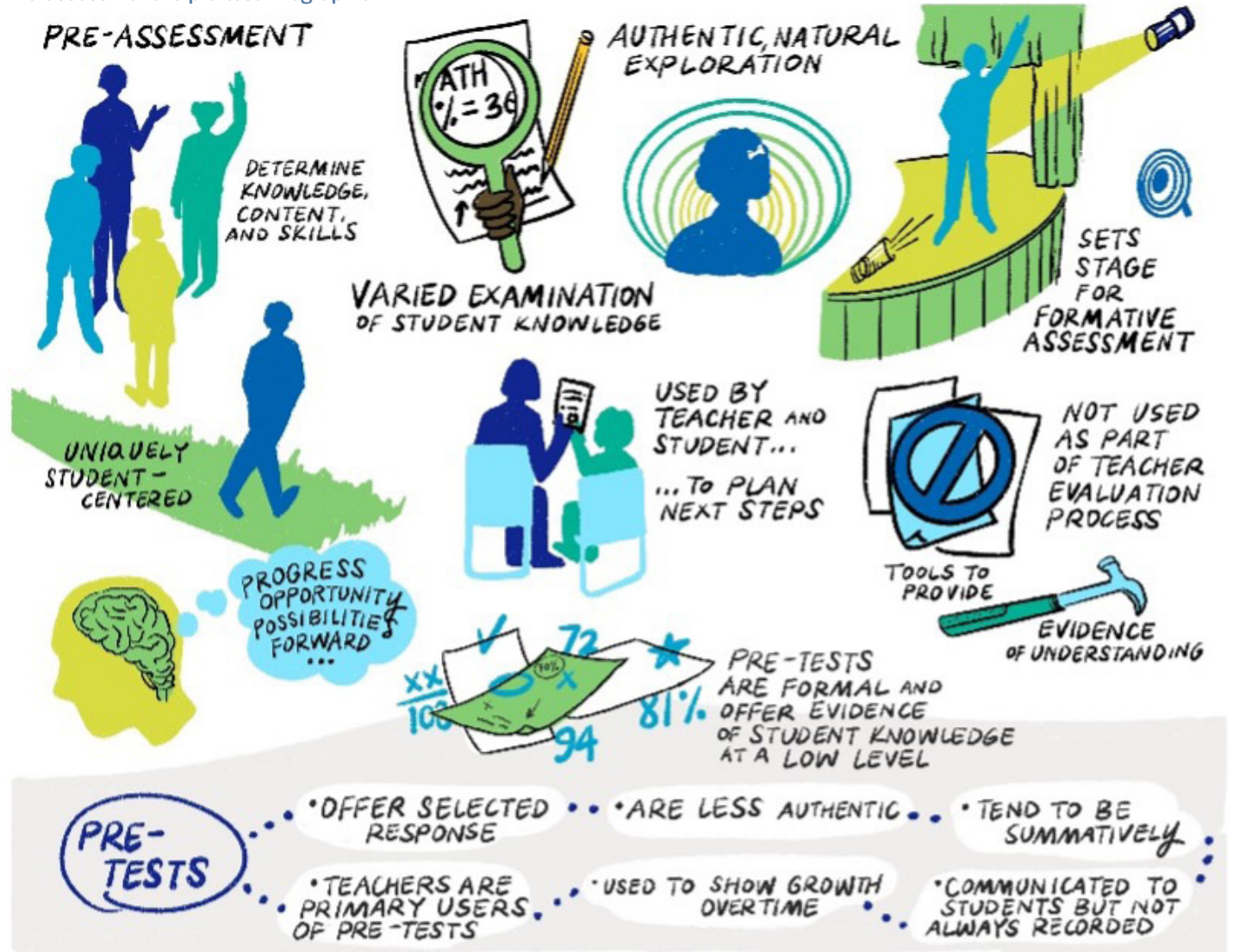
or open-ended prompts—and aim to produce authentic, meaningful evidence of learning. Rather than ending in a score, pre-assessment becomes part of the formative assessment process that fuels learning for both teachers and students.

Why distinction matters

In an equitable and balanced classroom assessment system, it's critical to differentiate between collecting scores and gathering evidence. **Pre-tests** offer a snapshot, a starting point that can be useful for measuring progress over time.

But they often treat students as empty vessels, focusing on what's lacking rather than what's present.

Pre-assessments, on the other hand, operate from an asset-based mindset. They presume that students already have valuable knowledge, experiences, and skills worth surfacing. The goal is not simply to diagnose gaps, but to uncover strengths and use that understanding to guide teaching and learning. When thoughtfully designed, pre-assessments empower students to take ownership of their learning journey and help teachers personalize instruction in meaningful ways.



Final thoughts

While both pre-tests and pre-assessments have a place in the educational landscape, conflating the two limits their potential. In striving for equity, clarity, and intentionality in our assessment practices, we must be precise with our language and deliberate in our approach. Pre-tests may provide data points, but pre-assessments offer insight—insight that fuels growth, reflection, and transformation for both learners and educators.

Understanding and leveraging the distinction between these two processes is not just a matter of semantics; it's a foundational move toward assessment practices that truly support student learning.

TO LEARN MORE

FACT (Formative Assessment for Classroom Teachers: Pre-Assessment), NCME
<https://bit.ly/3G8Rhta>

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“Turning on the Lights: What Pre-Assessments Can Do,” by Kristina Doubet and Jessica A. Hockett. *Educational Leadership*, December 2013, Vol. 71(4), 50-54.
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