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## Assessments With a Focus on Learning

### *Purposes and Promises*

**W**hen you hear the word test, what is your immediate response?

- a. I feel sick.
- b. I feel angry.
- c. I feel stupid.
- d. I feel nervous.

Are you looking for the *all of the above* choice in these selected responses? If so, you are not alone. Many people suffer from test anxiety. However, some people are anxious, while others appear to revel in the challenge of matching wits with test items. We have experienced the range of emotions both as students and as teachers of students facing high- and low-stakes tests. Perhaps the first step in relieving test anxiety is being able to understand some of the reasons for assessing literacy.

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### THE HISTORICAL ROOT OF THE MATTER

True or false? With the advent of the standards movement, testing has become a new and important priority for teachers and students.

We hope you chose *false* on this one. Although widespread public attention to testing results has captured the public's interest through recent government policies and media coverage, taking tests is not a new American trend. If we were to time-travel back to the early nineteenth-century United States, we would find school board members arriving in classrooms, sometimes unannounced and sometimes according to plan, and delivering oral examinations to cross-graded classes full of students. Our teacher colleagues from the past stood to one side, watching and listening hopefully for demonstrations of their students' mastered skills. Although it may not have felt the same as reading standardized test reports today, the hopeful anticipation of a good showing and the feelings of disappointment at failure surely must have been similar. Test equity issues were also apparent back then. School board members sometimes were accused of playing favorites by saving the most difficult questions for the children of rivals and the simplest test items for the children of friends and business associates.

Also in the nineteenth century, schools usually were expected to offer exhibitions of work accomplished by pupils. In his account of country schools in the nineteenth-century United States, Clifton Johnson described "examination day," when the schoolroom was cleaned and the students came attired in their "Sunday-go-to-meetin's" for a community gathering to showcase student work. "Scholars were called out to recite such things as they knew best, and possibly to speak a few pieces and read compositions" (1907, p. 112).

In 1904, the National Education Association appointed a committee to study the use of tests in classifying children and determining their progress. Early scientific reading assessments included gathering student data on eye movements, visual perceptions, reading speed, lip movements during silent reading, and automatic word recognition for reading ahead in oral reading. Mechanical devices called tachistoscopes allowed readers to view only certain letters, words, or phrases as researchers tracked eye movements and questioned participants on the retelling of words or selected texts. Comprehension tests usually required subjects to recall information from a first or second reading. Edmund Huey, noted researcher at the beginning of the twentieth century, attempted to link assessment and research information to instruction by recommending font types and lines per page (Venezky, 1984).

Historian Nila Smith (1934/1970) describes a rapid increase in scientific investigations in reading coinciding with the advent of standardized tests in the 1920s. They became common around the country in the 1920s and 1930s, with multiple-choice item responses providing collective and individual information on students' literacy proficiencies. This information often was connected with grade placement and promotion and with achievement comparisons from school to school.

In their quest to provide individualized instruction, progressive educators in the years between the two world wars sought testing as a diagnostic tool for instructional grouping and as a way to identify learning disabilities. With the

introduction of the Stanford Achievement Battery assessments during this time, simultaneous assessment of multiple school subjects was possible. The tests held promise for the entire education community on the grounds that “they are convenient, interesting, take less time to use, and bring into light particular difficulties which the pupils have encountered and which are a bar to their progress” (Almack & Lang, 1925, p. 148). Other educators during this time proclaimed the growth of measurement and experimentation as “one of the marvels of the age” (Caldwell & Courtis, 1925/1971, p. 108).

Concurrently, writing assessments also were receiving greater attention in measuring students’ literacy progress. In the early 1900s, Edward L. Thorndike and Milo Hillegas assembled a series of writing examples against which student samples could be measured, compared, and scaled. These scaling systems of sample compositions were later reinvented, replicated, and improved upon by numerous research studies. Some provided graded samples for mixed types of writing, some only offered narrative forms, and others just evaluated letter-writing samples. Several educators in the first quarter of the twentieth century suggested analytically measuring structure, content or thought, and mechanics as separate features, thus anticipating the analytic trait scoring process that later became a popular diagnostic tool for writing teachers (Taylor, 2005).

Although the use of testing in composition was increasing during this time, classroom teachers probably were not greatly influenced by the scaling system trend until the late twentieth century. The time necessary for training and scoring and the additional burden of not only correcting but also comparing student papers made it inefficient for busy educators. However, the foundation was established for future standardized writing assessment practices and concerns. The recurring themes of validity and reliability, objectivity and standardization, scientific solutions, and efficiency models as the means of improving student learning increased in visibility and importance throughout the century and into the next.

With the educational focus on accountability beginning in the 1970s, increased reliance on tests designed to determine instructional choices and funding allocations made large-scale assessments more prevalent and more important in education decision making. Today, large-scale, external assessments measure students for grade promotion, high school graduation, and college admittance and also rank students, teachers, schools, districts, and even states in terms of educational effectiveness and eligibility for federal funding. Other, small-scale assessments used at the school or classroom level provide diagnostic information for instructional decisions and individual assistance.

## WHICH LITERACIES?

Please take the quiz on the next page. The definitions are listed in the same row as the dates given. They demonstrate the difficulty in identifying a single definition for literacy today and also the ways in which it has evolved in the last half century. *The Literacy Dictionary* (Harris & Hodges, 1995) lists no less than 38 representative examples of literacy definitions in use today, many of them in connection with competence in specialized fields of knowledge.

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<b>Matching</b>	
Draw a line connecting items in the left column with the year they were cited by UNESCO in the right column.	
The term <i>literacy</i> means	
1. The ability of a person who can, with understanding, both read and write a short simple statement on his or her everyday life	a. 1951
2. A continuum of skills including both reading and writing, applied in a social context	b. 1957
3. The possession by an individual of the essential knowledge and skills which enable him or her to engage in all those activities required for effective functioning in his or her group and community and whose attainments in reading, writing, and arithmetic make it possible for him or her to use these skills toward his or her own and the community's development	c. 1962
4. The ability of a person to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in his group and community and also for enabling him to continue to use reading, writing, and calculation for his own and community's development	d. 1978

NOTE: Based on *The Literacy Dictionary: The Vocabulary of Reading and Writing* (pp. 140–141), edited by T. L. Harris and R. E. Hodges, 1995, Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

The recent national standards documents, as guided by professional organizations, have also suggested contexts in which literacy might be newly defined to assess student knowledge and skills. For example, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics has noted a shift toward speaking and listening skills and an emphasis on oral and written discourse within mathematics instruction. They describe these processes as a means of helping students to solve problems and to clarify and justify ideas through the use of oral language (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 1991).

The National Science Teachers Association has also made spoken and written communications a priority in helping students become active learners. They discuss the means by which teachers can orchestrate discourse in learning communities. Students are asked to explain, clarify, and critically examine and assess their written work (National Research Council, 1996).

The *Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* include reading, writing, and thinking skills as well as abilities to obtain, organize, and deliver information as critical elements of social studies instruction. Essential components of the standards include skills and strategies in acquiring information and manipulating data through reading. Students are also encouraged to develop and present policies, arguments, and stories through instruction and practice in writing (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994).

The national standards document prepared by the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English, titled *Standards for the English Language Arts*, denotes literacy as spoken, written, and visual

language. Spoken language includes listening and speaking skills, written language includes reading and writing skills, and visual language includes two- and three-dimensional texts of a graphic nature that are not text based, such as pictures, concept maps, flowcharts, and video presentations (International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English, 1996). It is in these three literacy areas—spoken, written, and visual language—that we will discuss assessments.

## AUDIENCES AND TYPES OF ASSESSMENTS

Fill in the blanks:

*The most important audiences for assessment results are \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.*

### Audiences

Teachers routinely assess student performance to assist in the grading process and to inform students and their parents about progress and effort. Results become an integral part of instruction that informs and guides decisions for individual students and for the class as a whole as teachers determine what students already know and are able to do so they can base instruction on prior knowledge and understanding.

Large-scale and small-scale assessments are really about finding and analyzing patterns of responses to indicate content and process mastery in subject areas. Certainly, teachers and parents are interested in assessment results to identify patterns of students' strengths and weaknesses and to assist student learning. Multiple types of formal and informal assessments, administered regularly, can provide the teacher, the students, and the students' families with accurate and valid information on progress to assist in meeting individual learning needs. To be valid, the assessment must be adequately aligned to the content that is being taught and tested, and it must be useful in making decisions about instruction.

Administrative educators and policymakers are also interested in using assessment results to determine the effectiveness of particular instructional strategies and programs. The data derived from assessments inform decision making and communicate to the general public how effectively an educational system is performing as a whole.

If you filled in the blanks at the beginning of this section with *students, teachers, parents, administrators, and policymakers* (presented in any order), you are correct. All these audiences have a vested interest in assessment data and use it to make important educational decisions.

### Types

A single test does not provide enough information to support accurate decisions on instruction or progress. A number of reliable assessments must be

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administered over an extended period of time to provide enough data to make informed judgments on student progress. Reliable assessments consistently correspond to what a test is attempting to measure. This means that scores obtained on one day can be expected to provide comparable data when administered under the same conditions at a later time. This will offer consistent information on students' tendencies to respond in certain ways on the tests.

Educational assessments range from quick checks with teacher signals to see whether everyone understands a concept or agrees with a statement or answer, to individual assessments based on a selection of best student work, to standardized, nationally normed tests. All assessment tools have characteristic strengths and weaknesses. Balancing the effort of preparation, administration, and data analysis of an assessment and the usefulness of its results is a challenge to both test designers and educators.

Formal assessments are especially useful to policymakers and educational administrators for determining trends in student achievement. Norm-referenced tests are developed and administered under standardized conditions and then transformed into scores to reflect a normal curve or bell-shaped distribution around an average. They are then reported in various types of statistical formats to compare groups of students and to provide information on an individual's standing within the assessed population. Conversely, criterion-referenced tests focus on targeted curriculum and assess student proficiency with established criteria based on specific content objectives. Rather than providing results as a basis for comparison with other students, these tests are directed at individual students' particular instructional strengths and needs.

Informal assessments provide important information on processes and learning that cannot be measured in more formal situations. Observations, for example, can determine whether children are altering their behaviors depending on situations and their perceptions based on received information. They are particularly useful in determining whether students are exercising a wide range of strategies as they read, write, speak, and listen. Anecdotal records are another way teachers can document student performance in instructional situations and settings. Parents often rely on weekly or monthly progress reports to keep them informed on curriculum and teachers' assessments and expectations for their children's academic and social progress. These informal assessments are part of good instructional practices and occur on a consistent basis, with teachers usually focusing on a few students each day.

Although true-false, multiple-choice, matching, short-answer, and essay questions are the most common methods used in designing classroom-based assessments, other means by which teachers may assess student progress in an ongoing manner, such as interviews, observations, questioning, discussions, and a variety of visual samples of student work, are equally important.

### **TIMING OF TESTS**

Some reading assessments are aimed specifically at early identification of reading difficulties for immediate instructional interventions. Screening and diagnosis

assessments are designed to evaluate student learning needs before instruction. Formative and summative assessments are used during and after instruction to target student populations and determine the effectiveness of the instruction designed to assist them.

Screening measures are used to find which students are at risk for reading difficulty, based on phonemic awareness and early exposure to literacy models. This is the first step in providing additional appropriate instructional strategies to ensure student success in grade-level reading outcomes. In later grades, surveys or preassessments can determine the range of knowledge and abilities in certain areas before instruction and can guide the breadth and depth of needed lessons.

Diagnostic assessments offer more precise information about the need for instruction in specific areas. For example, if a screening test indicates a student's lack of comprehension, a diagnostic assessment might pinpoint the vocabulary words that are limiting understanding of the text. Both standardized and teacher-designed assessments offer practical guidance to help teachers make instructional decisions and offer student support based on information obtained in diagnostic tests.

Formative assessments, both commercially prepared and teacher created, offer information on students' incremental progression, on a monthly, bimonthly, or quarterly schedule. They can take the form of end-of-unit tests, standardized criterion-referenced tests, or teacher-designed tests directly related to content and skills studied. The information generally is reported as progress reports, report cards, spreadsheet data, or part of a narrative. These assessments can identify students in need of additional assistance and can also evaluate different forms of intervention and instruction so that students can receive additional or different forms of instruction that best meet their needs.

Summative assessments generally are provided as a postinstructional assessment. They are designed to evaluate the effectiveness of a literacy program or individual competence mastery at the end of an instructional period to identify areas that need additional attention. They are often reported as individual student grades or in data tables, as in the case of commercially produced and scored tests. Experiences that lead to those summative outcomes also are important and must be described in the summative report.

Through the use of multiple assessments—screening, diagnostic, formative, and summative—a totally integrated evaluation system can provide important information on literacy to determine the next instructional steps for groups of students and for individual students as well. Teachers and schools need to develop a meaningful framework around which assessment collection is organized.

## REASONS FOR ASSESSMENTS

*Essay:* There are a variety of reasons why students are assessed on their literacy skills and knowledge during their academic careers. Explain several reasons for assessments based on each of the language arts areas.

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### Reasons for Writing Assessments

Charles Schultz, noted creator of *Peanuts* cartoons, sometimes portrays his comic strip characters in situations dealing with writing. One of our favorites depicts a soliloquy by Peppermint Patty as she deals with a test. She laments the substitution of an essay item for one in multiple-choice format and mutters, “I hate when you have to know what you’re writing about.” This reason is one of the most important ones cited by teachers and test writers who prefer constructed response formats that require students to write extended answers to test questions. Students in this situation have the opportunity to demonstrate what they know rather than what they are able to guess from selected responses.

Writing assessments vary in format and purpose. Some are used to measure students’ proficiency with writing tasks, and others are used to determine content knowledge and skills from other areas of the curriculum through the use of writing. Both use written communication skills to determine student knowledge and proficiency.

Objective measures used to evaluate writing skills may be presented in multiple-choice formats, usually with four or five choices. Students are directed to select from among several provided responses to determine the correct punctuation or grammar usage, to select or omit relevant or irrelevant sentences, to manipulate sentence structures, or to reorganize a piece of written text by sequencing the order of provided sentences.

Direct writing assessments are performance based and require students to write in response to an assigned topic or prompt during a specified period of time. These are often called “on-demand” writing tasks. Both on-demand formative assessments, used for diagnostic and instructional purposes, and on-demand summative assessments, used for accountability measurements in writing instruction, generally use holistic or analytic trait-scoring formats. They provide criteria, defined by rubrics that include information for students, teachers, parents, and administrators, to understand achievement levels. They also may include anchor paper samples that provide examples of each level of scoring. More information on these processes is included in Chapter 2.

The writing conference is an additional means of assessment designed to evaluate and support students’ progress in writing. Teachers use these opportunities to guide students individually or in small groups through oral discussion about content, style, organization, and editing issues. They can include specialized mini-lessons that target specific needs for each student.

Portfolio collections of student writing are another way of assessing student writing efforts. In addition to being able to document growth over time, they provide opportunities for self-assessments and collaborative assessments between the student and other audiences, including the teacher, peers, and parents. More information on this type of assessment is included in Chapter 5.

Writing assessments used to evaluate achievement in content areas offer questions that are designed to assess the idea development of the response, based on expected standards of content knowledge and skills rather than the process of writing. In these cases, writing itself is not the focus of the evaluation but rather the tool being used to facilitate the assessment. Few would disagree that there is an advantage in being able to use a tool correctly to complete

a task with ease and quality. Therefore, the importance of proficient writing skills, though secondary to the primary focus of the assessment, is still essential to performing well on these types of tests.

## Reasons for Reading Assessments

Reading assessments are administered before, during, and after reading to guide instruction and learning. Prereading comprehension tests determine background knowledge and can provide motivation for reading. Assessments administered during reading can monitor for potential confusions and misconceptions and can also help students construct their own meanings from text. In book clubs and literature circles, students often provide discussion questions that lead the group in exploring the meanings and writing techniques used by the author. Small group discussions are a way to evaluate student understanding of writing techniques used by authors to connect readers or listeners with content.

In addition, reading assessments allow teachers and parents to understand which strategies and skills students are using and in which they need more instruction and practice. They can also help determine appropriate reading materials at an independent reading level. Current reading assessments determine the ability to recognize and decode words and to demonstrate comprehension of ideas presented in the text. The earliest reading assessments are designed to provide information on student performance that will influence informed instruction and allow intervention measures if needed. Core areas for primary-grade reading assessments include phonemic awareness, phonics, spelling, fluency, vocabulary, and a variety of comprehension skills and strategies, as well as motivation to engage in independent reading practice.

Phonological awareness—that is, the understanding of the component sounds of words in learning to read and spell—is an important area around which beginning reading assessments are centered. Phonemic awareness assessments deal with sound comparisons, phoneme segmentation, and phoneme blending. Phonics assessments explore the sound-symbol relationships used to derive pronunciation of words. They are generally assessed individually through oral and written subtests that determine mastery of the alphabet, letter sounds and phoneme-grapheme correspondences, concept-word relationships in text, word recognition in isolation, and word recognition in context. Spelling assessments often are administered to obtain information on students' knowledge of spelling features and word patterns. Words are grouped by patterns of increasing difficulty to determine developmental levels in word knowledge.

Fluency in oral reading usually is associated with reading measured for accuracy, automaticity, and prosody. Students are expected to read words in large, meaningful phrase groups and to read with enough ease and without undue attention to decoding so they can focus on text meaning rather than merely word calling. Assessments in fluency measure the use of phonics, vocabulary knowledge, and syntax and the demonstration of comprehension through inflection.

Vocabulary, the ability to understand and use words accurately, is essential in all literacies. McKenna and Stahl (2003) suggest that it may be the best

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predictor of comprehension. Teachers can use pretests of possible difficult words before reading. They can also measure vocabulary knowledge by assessing students' ability to use word parts to decipher meanings and to take advantage of situational clues to understand a word's meaning in context.

Reading comprehension, or the accurate reconstruction of the intended meaning from a written text, is the basis for all reading instruction. It is the reason why students learn to decode and build vocabulary and struggle with difficult processes. Monitoring students' use of a variety of comprehension strategies will help teachers ensure that students have access to all means to become proficient readers. It is important to evaluate students' abilities not only to answer questions but also to generate their own questions to a text. In addition, they should be able to summarize and find main ideas and themes and to analyze, generalize, and think critically about what they have read.

Assessments in each of these literacy elements that are directly connected to reading instruction are covered in greater detail in Chapter 3, where specific reading assessment models are explored.

### **Reasons for Listening and Speaking Assessments**

The earliest process in literacy learning is the skill of listening for imitation and for constructing meaning. At the very youngest ages, children listen to animal sounds and practice naming the animal with the picture. They also enjoy "reading along" with audiobooks and learn to turn the pages with a sound signal. Importantly, they use their early phonological awareness to build correspondence between letters and sounds. However, we often take for granted the importance of assessing and monitoring listening and speaking skills once students are capable of efficiently decoding a basic litany of words and have become silent readers and social communicators.

There are a variety of uses for oral assessments in all grades. Certainly, phonemic awareness and phonics lessons in primary oral decoding come to mind. Phonemic awareness, the ability to differentiate the sounds (phonemes) that make up spoken words and to focus on and manipulate phonemes in word pronunciation, is essential in learning to read. The notion that early instruction in systematic phonics significantly facilitates reading achievement has been supported by numerous studies (Ehri, Nunes, Stahl, & Willows, 2001). However, through listening assessments teachers can also determine correct understanding of new vocabulary, literal and inferential comprehension, and critical views held by students. Indeed, students' knowledge often is greater than what they are able to demonstrate in a written context.

Listening comprehension usually is the first important link to building background knowledge. Sometimes a student's silent reading comprehension may be quite low because of a lack of sufficient word knowledge or an inability to decode or recognize words. However, the student's skill at understanding the text when receiving the information orally may be higher, in part because of preexisting background knowledge and oral vocabulary. Much research supports the importance of background knowledge of concepts and topics before reading and writing. One of the most efficient ways of assessing and then building on this background is through listening and speaking.

An important reason to continue listening assessments, even in the later grades, is to help students understand the questions or items on all forms of assessment. Bruner (1960) notes that although students may often provide a correct answer, it is sometimes to the wrong question. Although some students can recall information or locate it within a text by rereading and perhaps even draw reasonable inferential and analytical conclusions, unless they can determine what a test item is asking, they are unable to demonstrate this thinking. Content area assessments also include items framed in ways that do not always allow students to demonstrate what they know because they do not understand what they are being asked to do.

Oral assessments provide a scaffold for later print-based assessments. The most fundamental listening skills require simple recall of story details and facts based on spoken text with simple vocabulary and sentence structure. As students progress to more advanced texts with complicated syntax and more complex vocabulary, the comprehension items require more implicit inferences and analysis from spoken passages. As the passages expand in concept load, the levels of questioning also increase. While students are learning to read and recognize new words at one written level, they must also be working on comprehending strategies on perhaps another oral level of instruction. If we wait for students to be able to accurately decode all the words in their listening vocabularies before we move on to higher-level thinking skills, we run the risk of leaving them further behind as they struggle to catch up in comprehension skills and strategies to their more able classmates once they have mastered the code.

Certainly, before we can expect students to think and respond to text in a written format, they need to be able to listen and speak about their responses and discuss what there is about the text or the question that is confusing. Even in the earliest grades, it is important to help beginning listeners connect literacy to their own ideas. Book clubs, fashioned after older students' literature circles and discussion groups, have proved beneficial, even in preschool contexts (Kvasnicka & Starratt, 2005). Teachers and students control topics and turn taking for different patterns of classroom discourse. Models of reciprocal teaching offer evidence of such practices. Here, students and teachers listen and ask each other questions about the information they have just heard.

In addition, students need practice in receiving, attending to, interpreting, and responding appropriately to verbal messages throughout their school and adult careers. Students must be able to listen accurately, follow spoken directions, discern a speaker's organization and transitional uses, and recognize possible bias in a message. Forms of oral and speaking assessments include evidence of student note taking, teacher anecdotal records or observations, audio and video recordings, rubrics, checklists, and evaluation forms.

## Reasons for Visual Assessments

Huey (1908/1915) recommended that students should begin writing by using pictures to stand for words until the use of written words could be substituted for all illustrations. Functional text, including signs and letters, was suggested as a means of introducing children to writing. In the 1930s and 1940s comic pages in newspapers and comic books used a combination of text and

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pictorial representations to provide literary entertainment. In addition, the panels with pictures and text that are characteristic of this format were used to disseminate serious information on the war and other international news. The military even included training information on field sanitation and war machinery through comic-strip format with both visuals and text (Purves, 1998).

Currently, literacy is undergoing a transformation from printed pages to digital displays and multimedia forms of reading, writing, speaking, and listening to communicate and to understand concepts and ideas. Additional literacy skills are needed to produce and understand the graphic and verbal medium of the World Wide Web, with its animation and video presentations of text. Students' ability to evaluate visual materials on Web sites as reliable representations of information is critical to engaging in today's new literacies.

Maps, tables, and graphs are used increasingly to present information not just as a supplement but as a primary focus of the text, and the importance of understanding the relationship between graphics and text has extended to even the youngest learners. Flowcharts, graphic organizers, and diagrams can communicate processes in much more complete and complex ways than words alone. Data represented through charts, matrices, and spreadsheets can become the basis for initial and continued understanding of content material.

Students must be able to locate and interpret pieces of information in a visual representation and also to fill in missing information when necessary. Additional visual skills include summarizing information depicted in a graphic and understanding how two visuals are interrelated and how they may point to trends in information. In addition, as with Web-based information, students must be capable of discerning relevant, reliable information from distracters and also drawing accurate conclusions and making good decisions based on the visual data.

Some assessment items might measure students' ability to retrieve and read data from a graphic. Others might supply a visual representation or a video program from which students are required to interpret data or a process. Student performance assessments sometimes provide directions for drawing and labeling objects such as an insect and its parts or direct students to translate drawings or diagrams into words. Assessment items may direct students to create a diagram or flowchart that defines a process. In later grades, test takers may be required to locate and use information as they interpret a graph, table, or chart, or they might be required to construct a pictorial to define a concept such as motion or design a floor plan or map to provide directions. In addition, they may be asked to compare, summarize, analyze, and synthesize information presented in related graphics.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

*Analogies*

*listening : speaking :: reading : \_\_\_\_\_*

*or*

*road map : journey :: assessments : \_\_\_\_\_*

Tests in literacy achievement can and should serve students and teachers well. Like a road map, they should provide direction to the predetermined objectives. They can also verify individual strengths and weaknesses, document student progress, inform teachers about instruction, and provide information to parents and administrators.

Assessments should encourage students to think, listen, discuss, read, and write in ways to clarify understanding and improve learning. They should inform instruction by providing snapshots of progress and areas for further instruction and development and supplying students with opportunities to explain, interpret, analyze, critique, and research important topics. In addition, large-scale assessments offer parents, policymakers, and the general public information about schools to ensure continued instructional progress for all students.

Assessments certainly are more than testing. They are a mode of discourse in learning that provides teachers with guideposts for decision making based on student understanding. It is important to remember that assessments should be designed to accommodate the needs of student learning and teacher instruction, not the reverse. The results of these assessments can be used to plan and adjust instruction and to provide key feedback to students and parents. In a global community that is based on information and communication, measuring students' abilities to navigate and to effectively use the literacies available to them is essential in ensuring their future success.

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