Best Ever

Literacy Survival Tips
for New Teachers!

By Lori Oczkus

Assessment Survival Tips: Guidelines and TOP 5 Quick, Informal Assessments Every Teacher Should Know

Assessment Overload

These days, we teach in an assessment-crazed environment. Politicians, the general public, and the media focus constant attention on schools and test scores. The pressure to improve student performance is everywhere.

Most likely, your district embraces a variety of required tools for you to bombard students with throughout the year: beginning-of-the-year assessments, ongoing assessments, and a parade of formal and informal district, state, and national tests. Many teachers express frustration with the constant testing and feel that they barely have time to teach the necessary information to do well on the exams or to cover the curriculum.

Questions to Consider When Assessing Students' Reading

- How do I find time to assess my students' abilities and determine their individual needs?
- What level text can each student read, and what is the independent, instructional, and frustration reading level of each student?
- Which skills and strategies do my students need to learn?
- How do my students feel about reading?
- How can I assess the pillars of reading instruction (word work, phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, and comprehension)?
- How can I use informal assessments to inform and improve my daily instruction?

Assessment Is a GOOD Thing

There is some good news! With carefully planned assessment and consistent use of the results to inform instruction, assessment use can lead to increases in student learning. Additionally, our instruction becomes more informed and focused as we strive to vary our lessons to meet student needs and to improve performance.

This article covers some informal, super simple assessments that elementary and middle school teachers employ to improve reading instruction in their classrooms. Brief summaries of each tool make this the perfect quick reference for your own classroom.

When you use these easy, classroom-tested assessments, you gain rich, on-the-spot information that helps

- Back your more formal testing with additional data to inform selection of instructional materials
- Inform your instruction and provide feedback for future lessons to meet student needs
- Group students together who share the same problems or strengths

Reading Assessment 101

The main categories of all assessments we administer in classrooms today are *diagnostic*, *formative*, and *summative*. Serravallo (2010) suggests that when we understand these basic terms, we can categorize the types and purposes of assessments for ourselves, parents, and administrators. The different types of assessment measures work together to give us an accurate picture of students' progress so we can adjust our instruction to meet their needs.

Diagnostic assessments

This type of assessment gives a baseline reading level of the student. We also gain information regarding the student's strengths and needs.

How to use this information: The data gathered help us determine how to group our students for instruction. We can also analyze the strengths and weaknesses of our students and see where we need to improve our instruction. Remember: If you administer an assessment, plan time for analyzing and interpreting the information you collect, then use it!

Examples: Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA), Informal Reading Inventory (IRI)

Formative assessments

These are on-the-spot assessments given while our students are reading. This type of assessment should be given frequently to provide feedback on our lessons and student progress.

How to use this information: The data gathered give us feedback on student progress and advise us which students didn't "get it" and how to reteach or provide differentiated instruction.

Examples: Running records, observations, written responses, verbal responses, student–teacher and student–student conversations, workbook pages

Summative assessments

These are end-of-unit assessments to evaluate how well students have learned the information taught. The information provided is different from that of diagnostic or formative assessments, in that you are assessing how well students have learned what you intended to teach during a specific period of instruction.

How to use this information: The data gathered are analyzed and can be used to form groups for intervention or extension. We can also decide if we need to reteach any of the material or differentiate our instruction.

Examples: End-of-book test or a test on writing summaries after a unit on the strategies and skills for summarizing reading material, end-of-unit tests with formal reading programs, standardized tests, district assessments

Essential Guidelines for Making Assessment Meaningful

The key to making assessment work for you and your students is to involve the students in the process (DiRanna et al., 2008; Heritage, 2010; E. Osmundson, personal communication, November 2010)! Following are some basics for engaging students in assessment so they will be motivated to use strategies to improve their own reading.

Feedback: How am I doing?

Give students immediate feedback as often as possible during lessons so they know if they need to work on a given skill or strategy. Feedback includes compliments, corrections, and suggestions.

When teaching the whole class, you might have students write responses on a slate. You may then add an example to your teaching if you see that half the class didn't get the concept.

When you meet with individual students, provide feedback that they can incorporate immediately. You might say, "You are starting to make some strong inferences about character feelings. You said you think the main character feels sad right

now. I see that you are having trouble finding clues from the text to justify your inferences. Let's find some clues together, and you can practice finding more character-feeling clues on the next page."

Feedback in fluency might sound like this: "You are reading more words per minute and so your speed has improved. Great! I did notice that you are reading so fast that you are speeding past the punctuation signals! Let's try reading this together, and we will try using the punctuation signals to sound more natural when you read."

Immediate feedback sets students on the correct path for learning and improving their reading. Try to build constant feedback for the class and individuals into your lessons.

Modeling: Show me!

It makes sense that if you expect students to do something, they need to know what a "good" one looks like. If you are teaching summarizing or inferring, you need to provide lots of strong examples from text, share your own think-alouds, and allow students to offer examples.

The assessment cycle includes repeated modeling from texts so that students will know what they need to do to improve. For example, if you are teaching how to make strong predictions using text clues and background knowledge, you might model with a text, ask students to practice with partners,

observe their attempts, and return to modeling based on their predictions.

Be sure to praise students for their approximations. You may even want to create simple rubrics or criteria to help students know what good strategy or skill use looks like. For example, you can review with the class the steps for giving a verbal text summary and together list those steps in order for student reference when they practice summarizing.

Peer evaluation: Two heads are better than one!

Another important piece of the assessment puzzle is peer and self-evaluation. During a lesson, students might turn to partners and try a strategy such as summarizing. One student takes a turn providing a summary while the peer observes. The observer uses a class-created rubric or checklist that includes the

Sample Student Goals in Reading

- I want to increase the number of books I read this month to [*number*].

- I will improve my reading fluency to [*words per minute*].

- I will read with expression.

- I will improve my fluency by reading phrases instead of word by word.

- I will read more difficult chapter books with good comprehension. I want to read the book [*title*].

- I will read for 30 minutes every night at home.

- I will explore new genres by reading books such as [*titles*].

- I will improve my use of the strategy [*rereading, using beginning sounds, visualizing, etc.*]. (Note: Have students be specific here. Say something like, "I will improve my use of predicting by looking at headings in nonfiction and thinking about what I might learn," "I will improve my use of visualizing by stopping every two pages to think about the picture I am forming in my head and rereading when necessary," or "I will improve my use of figuring out words by looking at the beginning sounds and thinking about what makes sense.")

criteria for a good summary. (This might include filling in a frame, such as "In the beginning…, then…, next…, finally....") The peer tutor shares what the partner did well and what was missed in the summary, then the partners switch roles.

Wiliam and Thompson (2007) note that the partner who is observing and providing feedback benefits as much as the partner who is reading, because he or she internalizes the learning by evaluating another's work. When you engage students in peer evaluation, they learn with and from each other. Be sure to provide strong modeling along the way.

Goal setting: Encourage independence!

Many popular self-help books promote the idea of goal setting for success in everything from weight loss to time management to gaining financial wealth. The success gurus all seem to agree that goal setting is important if you want to reach new heights, and writing down goals is even better. So why not borrow from the experts and bring goal setting into our classrooms to improve student reading?

A powerful way of engaging students in the assessment cycle is to help them create their own specific goals for reading. Individual student conferences present a perfect opportunity to help students set goals. You can also teach quick, whole-class minilessons on goal setting and model some examples.

Encourage students to write goals and refer to them often. They can keep a record of goals in their reading logs or folders, or on an index card taped to their desks.
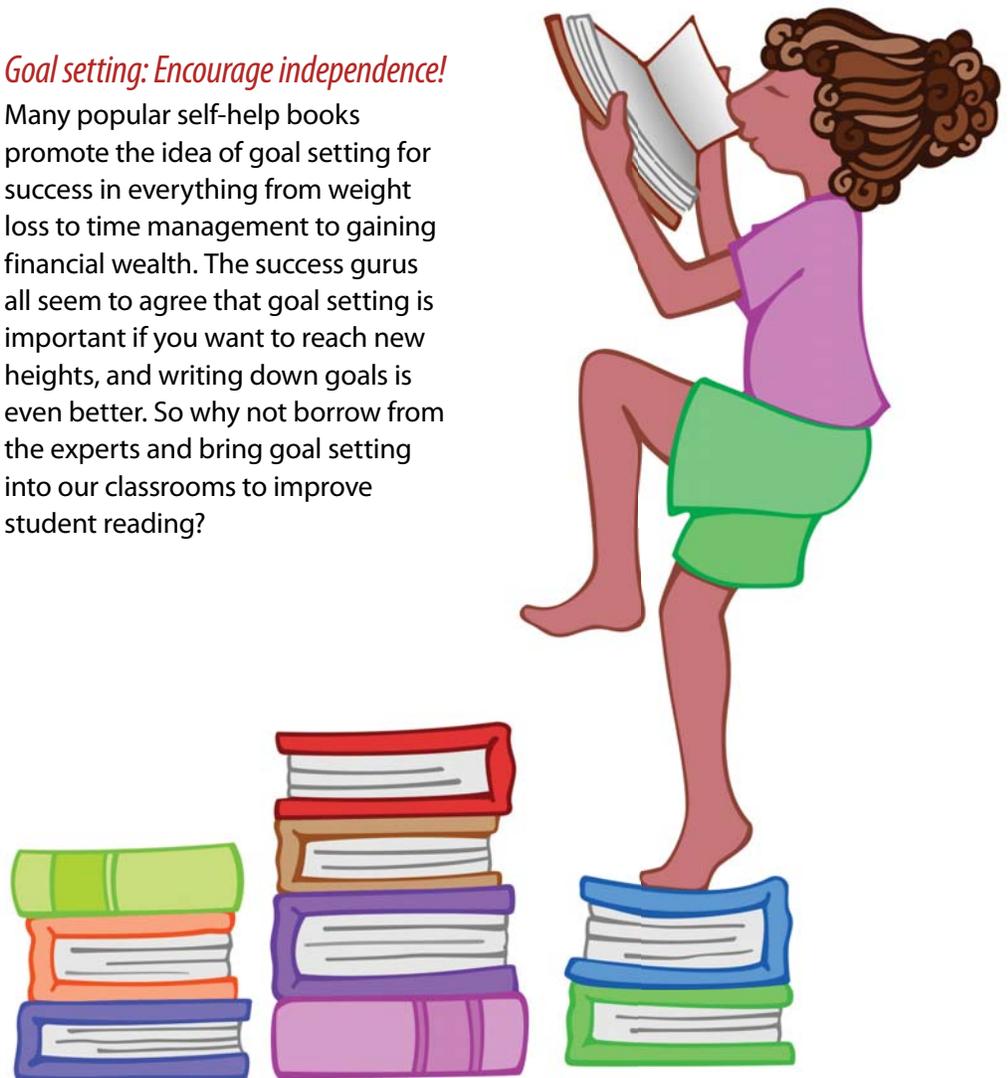
Lori's Top 5 Formative Assessments to Use DURING Lessons

① *Thumbs Up/Thumbs Down*

It is easy to build quick checks for understanding during every lesson to keep track of student learning. By doing so, you provide active engagement while assessing student learning (Oczkus, 2009).

During a think-aloud during reading instruction, read from the text and model how to give a summary. Discuss with students what a good summary looks like, and

either model one or ask students to tell what they think a good summary should include. Then, model a poor short summary lacking information, and ask students to show with a thumbs up or down whether they think your summary was good.

Immediately model in a think-aloud a better summary that includes main ideas in order, and ask for a thumbs up or down. Note which students are able to demonstrate their understanding.

Give another set of examples and see how many students can identify

the better summary. You may then decide what your next lesson will cover and how you will ask students to practice their own summaries based on their responses to your lesson.

In addition to asking students for a thumbs up or down, you might have students indicate responses using the following methods:

- Hold up fingers to indicate which number is correct in a multiple response.

- Hold up fingers to rate a story/author and turn to a partner to justify response.

- Record responses to problems or questions on slates and hold up for you to see.

- Underline portions of text or put a sticky note next to text with a symbol on it.

- Use new technologies such as interactive whiteboards and clickers.

Many school districts across the United States are updating their technology and providing interactive whiteboards and clickers. Each student uses a remote to click an answer to a carefully planned question, revealing immediately which students understood the question and which need additional instruction. A written record is available for reference and lesson planning. Students love to click away and respond to the immediate feedback. The new generation of clickers enables students to type in longer written responses.

Be cautious and judicious with your use of these automated systems. Effective teachers collect evidence on student learning from a variety of sources that reflect the complex processes of reading.

② *Pile Sorting*

Pile sorting is one of my favorite ways to flexibly group students for further instruction. After scaffolded instruction, I ask students to complete a brief assignment, such as a quick-write in their reading notebooks or a quick-write on a paper folded into fourths, requiring four examples. I read and sort their responses in three groups: those who got it, those who sort of got it, and those who didn't get it. This takes just a few minutes and identifies three groups of students with whom I can meet and do the following:

- Provide deeper examples for the group who got it.
- Give opportunities to review and move into deeper examples for the group who sort of got it.
- Reteach and provide intervention for the group who didn't get it.

Another option would be to mix students from all three groups and work through more examples after I model, of course. This way they help one another deepen their understanding. For example, I may teach a lesson on asking questions before reading. The questions begin with the words "I see…and I wonder…" (Oczkus, 2004). Students flip through the illustrations prior to reading to record what they see on each page and something they wonder. When I collect their papers, I skim them looking for wonders that match the text illustrations and follow a logical path of thinking.

In a lesson using the book *Digging Up Dinosaurs* by Aliki, I ask students to write "I see and I wonder" statements for the first 10 pages in the book. The first pages demonstrate how a fish became a fossil. One student writes, "I see a fish buried under layers of soil and I wonder how long it took to become

a fossil." Another student writes in response to the same picture, "I see a fish under the dirt and wonder how long the Tyrannosaurus Rex was here." The second student has some good ideas but is not wondering specifically about the illustration at hand. A third student misses the point entirely and writes, "I see a bone and wonder if I can get a fish." So my quick piles begin: the first student in the got it pile, second in the sort of got it pile, and third in the didn't get it pile.

I plan a lesson to build more background on the topic and model examples of "I see and I wonder" for the students. I provide individual coaching and small-group work to practice wondering. As students turn in their examples, I look for evidence of growth and teach increasingly sophisticated lessons.

③ Clipboard Cruising

Another great addition to your assessment techniques is to be a super kidwatcher (see Goodman, 1985) or observer. As students are engaged in meaningful reading tasks, circulate the room and collect specific evidence of student learning. If you are teaching a lesson on inferences, for example, listen in on conversations about how students arrived at their conclusions. Make notes on your clipboard about who understands what and the evidence. Examine these notes after instruction for patterns and trends.

Clipboard cruising (Kaufeldt, 2005) is a formative assessment technique that can be done in a variety of ways.

■ To get started, keep a clipboard with

a piece of yarn and pen attached that you can grab at any moment to record your observations of students.

■ Put a sheet of computer labels or sticky notes on the clipboard.

■ Circulate around the classroom and date each note as you record information about one student at a time. You may not get to everyone in one day.

■ Once you've recorded an observation for each student, use the information to form flexible groups of students who have similar needs or strengths.

■ The sticky notes or labels with student names are easily removed from the clipboard and placed in a folder for each student.

■ You may look for the same skill or strategy at a later date to see how each student has progressed.

For example, after teaching lessons on predicting while reading, clipboard cruise and ask each student for a prediction and reason for that prediction. Do so three times during a grading period and use the information to create more lessons and flexible groups to target the predicting strategy.

④ Individual Reading Conferences

One of the most powerful ways to instruct students is to conduct individual reading conferences (Routman, 2003). If you are already providing time for independent reading through sustained silent reading or readers' workshop, meet with individual

students to discuss their reading. You may wish to use the clipboard cruising method for recording information; however, you may need an entire sheet of paper rather than sticky notes or labels for recording in-depth interviews.

Routman (2003) points out that by second grade, children do not require oral reading as part of the conference. Use your judgment for how much oral reading you want to observe.

Here are some questions you might ask students in a one-on-one conference (Routman, 2003):

■ What are you reading?
■ Why did you pick this book?
■ Do you like it? Why or why not?

For fiction, ask,
■ Who are the main characters?
■ What is the problem?
■ What are your favorite parts?

For nonfiction, ask,
■ What is interesting?
■ What do you want to learn/what are you learning?
■ How is this book organized?
■ What are your reading goals? (e.g., harder books, topics, fluency)
■ What do you want to read next?

As you confer with each student, you may also want to make a note of the following:

■ Was the book too easy, hard, or just right for the student?
■ How fluently did the student read it aloud to you?
■ What strategies does the student use to figure out words?

⑤ Running Records

A useful reading assessment to easily implement with any text, on the spot, is a running record, where an individual student reads aloud from a

100-word passage while the teacher records and then analyzes decoding, comprehension, and fluency (Clay, 1993). A running record reveals how a student is functioning in a certain level of text and which decoding strategies the student is using, provides a quick fluency check for you to watch for intonation and prosody, and helps you plan specific coaching and lessons around student needs (Cooper, Robinson, & Kiger, 2010).

How often you give a running record depends on your purpose for giving the assessment. You may give more frequent running records, even once a week, to younger children and struggling readers to monitor their progress and to adjust your instruction to fit their needs. When using running records to monitor reading level, you may give running records in grades K–2 every three weeks and in grades 3–6 every four to six weeks.

Analyze the results: You can informally analyze the results and see what patterns the errors form. Ask, Did the student use meaning, phonics, visual clues? How fluently or word-by-word did the student read? How was his or her overall comprehension? Acceptable scores depend on the reading material (Serravallo, 2010). For independent reading material, the student should score 97% or higher in oral reading with natural-sounding fluency and good comprehension. For instructional-level text, the student may score 95% or a bit below, and comprehension and fluency may be lacking. If the score comes in below 90%, the student may be frustrated with the text and unable to maintain meaning.

Use running records to inform instruction: Taking running records is not enough. You can use this valuable information to plan lessons, coach individual students, and form groups.

- Plan lessons—The results from your running records reveal patterns across your class, and you can build lessons around student needs.

- Coach individual students—If a student needs to use more phonics, decoding, or maybe meaning clues while reading, you can model using a variety of texts. You might say, "I noticed you are substituting words that make sense but do not begin with the letter of the word in the book." Then model how to sound out the words and think about what makes sense.

- Form groups—You can group students who need to work on the same strategies, such as reading more fluently or using meaning to figure out words.

Taking Running Records Is Easy

Get started
Choose or have the student select a passage of 100 words out of any text. Make a photocopy of the page or simply take notes on another paper as the student reads to you. Sit next to and a bit behind the student so that he or she will not be as conscious of your note-taking during the reading. Date your notes for later reference and comparison.

Record student errors and self-corrections
Choose either a modified, super simple running record or a more detailed one. Both are easy to take once you've had some practice.

Take a modified, super simple running record! When taking notes without a copy of the text, you can conduct a modified, super simple running record (Routman, 2003). Listen to the student read aloud and then measure overall comprehension by asking the student to retell or to answer a couple basic questions. Record only the substitutions the student makes or the self-corrections. The easiest way to do that is to write what the student says on top and what the text says below it. For example, if the student says "dog" and the text says "pet," you write the following:

> page 3   child reads: dog
> text says: pet

Or take a more detailed running record: To take a more detailed running record, follow a copy of the text as the student reads. Circle omissions and record self-corrections, substitutions, and insertions. Count the number of words the student read correctly, including self-corrections, and calculate results using this formula:

$$\frac{\text{Number of words read correctly}}{\text{Number of words in the text}} \times 100 = \text{\% of words read correctly}$$

Example: Julian read 97 out of 100 words correctly.

$$\frac{97}{100} \times 100 = 97\%$$

Assess comprehension
After a read-aloud, ask the student to retell the reading in his or her own words or to answer a few questions regarding main events and ideas from the text. The student should be able to recall 90–95% of the material.

Q & A

Should I share assessment results with students? How can I use the results to get buy-in from my students?

You should absolutely share assessment results with students and provide feedback so they can grow and learn from the information collected. When students reflect on their results, they become metacognitive and use the information in new reading situations. The key is to be positive in the process. Here are some simple points to consider to get the most out of sharing assessments with your students:

■ Ask students how they think they did on the assessment. What was hard or easy for them?

■ Build on the known. Give compliments on what students do well. For example, "I noticed you check the illustrations to figure out new words or confusing parts in the text. Now you might want to try rereading difficult or confusing words or parts to also help you clarify."

■ Help students set specific goals based on the assessment results and the skills and strategies you are teaching.

■ Praise evidence of progress and approximations as students practice the skills, strategies, and reading behaviors they need to improve.

Lori D. Oczkus is a literacy coach, author, and popular speaker across the United States. Tens of thousands of teachers have attended her motivating, fast-paced workshops and read her practical, research-based professional books, including *Interactive Think-Aloud Lessons: 25 Surefire Ways to Engage Students and Improve Comprehension* (Scholastic & International Reading Association, 2009) and *Reciprocal Teaching at Work: Powerful Strategies and Lessons for Improving Reading Comprehension* (2nd edition; International Reading Association, 2010). Lori has extensive experience as a bilingual elementary teacher, intervention specialist working with struggling readers, staff developer, and literacy coach. She works regularly with students in classrooms and really knows the challenges that teachers face in teaching students to read! You can contact Lori through her website at www.lorioczkus.com.

Web Resources

Bright Hub: www.brighthub.com/education/special/articles/31319.aspx
"Short Cuts to Take and Use Running Records"

Busy Teacher's Cafe: www.busyteacherscafe.com/literacy/running_records.html
This page provides information on administering running records and using the information to guide your reading instruction.

Learn NC Editions: www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/readassess/1.0
"Ongoing Assessment for Reading"

ReadWriteThink: www.readwritethink.org
ReadWriteThink is a great resource for hundreds of free downloadable lessons on all aspects of reading. Here are some to try:

■ "Name Talk: Exploring Letter-Sound Knowledge in the Primary Classroom" (Grades K–1) by Kathy Egawa

■ "Poetry: A Feast to Form Fluent Readers" (Grades 3–5) by Sheila K. Seitz

■ "Promoting Student Self-Assessment" (Grades 6–12) by Phil Wilder

Teacher2Teacherhelp: www.teacher2teacherhelp.com/uncategorized/individual-reading-conference
Educational consultant Annemarie Johnson provides information on individual reading conferences.

References

Clay, M.M. (1993). *An observation survey of early literacy achievement*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Cooper, J.D., Robinson, M.D., & Kiger, N.D. (2010). *Success with RTI: Research-based strategies for managing RTI and core reading instruction in your classroom*. New York: Scholastic.

DiRanna, K., Osmundson, E., Topps, J., Barakos, L., Gearhart, M., Cerwin, K., et al. (2008). *Assessment-centered teaching: A reflective practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Goodman, Y.M. (1985). Kidwatching: Observing children in the classroom. In A. Jaggar & M.T. Smith-Burke (Eds.), *Observing the language learner* (pp. 9–18). Newark, DE: International Reading Association; Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Heritage, M. (2010). *Formative assessment and next-generation assessment systems: Are we losing an opportunity?* Washington, DC: Council of Chief State School Officers. Retrieved November 29, 2010, from www.ccsso.org/Documents/2010/Formative_Assessment_Next_Generation_2010.pdf

Kaufeldt, M. (2005). *Teachers, change your bait! Brain-compatible differentiated instruction*. Norwalk, CT: Crown.

Oczkus, L.D. (2004). *Super six comprehension strategies: 35 lessons and more for reading success*. Norwood, MA: Christopher-Gordon.

Oczkus, L.D. (2009). *Interactive think-aloud lessons: 25 surefire ways to engage students and improve comprehension*. New York: Scholastic; Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Routman, R. (2003). *Reading essentials: The specifics you need to teach reading well*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Serravallo, J. (2010). *Teaching reading in small groups: Differentiated instruction for building strategic, independent readers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Wiliam, D., & Thompson, M. (2007). Integrating assessment with learning: What will it take to make it work? In C.A. Dwyer (Ed.), *The future of assessment: Shaping, teaching, and learning* (pp. 53–82). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.