

## Should Formative Assessments Be Graded?

Four experts offer their takes on the question and suggest some alternatives.

By [Liana Heitin](#)

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When asked whether assignments that are meant to inform instruction should receive a grade, researchers and instructional experts almost inevitably offer a resounding "no."



Formative assessment is about measuring where students are in their learning and giving them feedback, they say, and then working to fill in the gaps. Grading can shut down that process.

But sometimes theory and practice collide in the classroom. Many middle and high school teachers say they need to grade quizzes and homework and in-class tasks to get students to take the work seriously. And parents often expect students to get grades on work they've put effort into. Some districts even have policies requiring that certain numbers or types of tasks be graded, which can make it tough to avoid giving grades on formative assessments.

In an effort to dig a little further into why so many people say formative assessments and grades shouldn't mix, and what teachers can do to get around that, *Education Week* talked with some researchers and practitioners.

### Caroline Wylie

*Research director of the learning-sciences group at Educational Testing Service, who studies the use of formative assessment to improve learning and teaching:*

Grading work meant for formative purposes can be "highly problematic," said Wylie, especially if the goal is to get students to reveal what they don't understand. Giving students comments about their work is helpful, she said. But feedback in the form of grades can be discouraging, according to research by Ruth Butler, an education professor at Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Israel, and others. When teachers pair grades with comments, students still focus on the grades and fail to process the meaningful feedback on how to improve.



Caroline Wylie

The best thing to do is decouple grades and substantive feedback, she said. When working in a system that requires grades on student work, teachers can "find creative ways to give comments first, let students reflect on how to improve their work, then a day later show them their grade," she said. "You have to break the cycle. ... If it's always being reinforced [that] you're a D student, I think that's a real challenge."

This change can be hard to make in a single classroom, she said. "It's got to be a systemic thing, not just this one teacher doing something very differently. It's easier if you have the [entire] school or grade level doing things differently."

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**Kathryn Mitchell Pierce**

*Assistant professor of educational studies at St. Louis University in Missouri, and a 30-year veteran teacher:*

Some teachers enter grades for formative assessments, particularly when using an online gradebook, to keep parents and students informed, Pierce said. "In this instance, the scores are for information purposes. They don't 'count' in the final course or unit grade—they're meant to be feedback on current progress," she said. "I know that some teachers also enter a grade for a formative assessment, and then replace it with the summative-assessment grade. Again, the grade provides a general sense of progress toward a goal."



Kathryn Mitchell  
Pierce

However, a problem here is that "knowing that I have a 7 out of 10 on the formative assessment doesn't help me know what I need to work on or how I can improve my performance." Instead, she said, offering specific feedback "in a scoring guide, in narrative comments, in a face-to-face conference, can be much more useful than providing a score."

Many teachers worry that students won't take tasks seriously if they're not graded, but that's a problem of engagement, Pierce said. "For example, students who want to pass the driving test to get their initial license generally don't need grades or scores to motivate them to learn the material," she said. "Formative assessment, if it helps them improve their chances of passing the driving test, is useful to students, and a grade is not necessary. [And] students writing college-application essays generally appreciate formative-assessment information, because they are committed to crafting a successful essay."

**Lorrie Shepard**

*Dean and a distinguished professor of research and evaluation methodology at the University of Colorado at Boulder:*

The major problem with grading is that it "subverts learning for its own sake," Shepard said. "All the metacognitive things you want to accomplish with formative assessment and the affective dimension of wanting to do it and feeling good about doing it are subverted by grading."



Lorrie Shepard

Online gradebooks that require parents to log in are "the devil," she said, because they often force teachers to grade tasks that would be better off not graded.

One alternative for teachers is to offer "as if" grades, she explained, in which they tell students what grade they would have gotten if what they turned in were a finished product. This can help students "internalize the criteria for good work, which is part of learning."

Teachers also can calculate grades and offer students a choice after a comprehensive test or final project: The students can either take the grade on their final assessment as their grade in its entirety, or take the overall average of their grades. This ensures that students who had a steep learning curve are not penalized, as long as they learned the content by the final.

**Scott Filkins**

*English teacher at Central High School in Champaign, Ill., and author of a book on assessment and learning:*

Grading formative assessment, Filkins said, is akin to ranking basketball teams based on how they do in practice.

"If we say this is for practice and we hold you accountable for the practice, then it wasn't really practice," he said. "You almost want kids to make mistakes on formative assessments because that's how you figure out your next teaching cues. Once we attach a grade, students try to hide their weaknesses."



Scott Filkins

Even so, schools' grading policies can get in the way. "We literally have a grading policy that says there will be X number of major grades and X number of minor grades, and minor grades are things we consider formative," he said. "I don't think we're unusual with that kind of policy."

In that situation, teachers have to talk to students explicitly about the fact that the minor assignments are really for practice and revision, he said, even though they're graded. "That's a strange conversation," he said. But students are flexible. "It's all in how you frame a conversation. [You can say], 'Here's what I learned about you from doing this, here's how I'm going to teach you differently, and here's a goal you can set for yourself for next time,'" he said.

And those grades also don't necessarily have to be written in stone—they can serve as a temporary marker and later be revised, said Filkins.

Overall, though, core-subject teachers have a lot to learn from their colleagues teaching visual arts and music. "When you're watching kids paint or listening to them play an instrument, you give them feedback on the spot," he said. "But you don't take off points for playing the wrong note."

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