

Creating a Rigorous Unit Assessment



In this chapter you will . . .

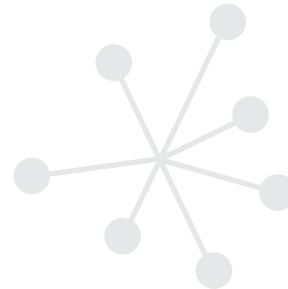
- Find out why planning a unit assessment first supports rigorous instruction.
- Learn the three criteria for a rigorous assessment.
- Learn the steps to creating a rigorous assessment.
- Look at the various assessment formats that lend themselves to rigorous assessment.
- Select or plan a rigorous assessment for an upcoming unit.



Time-Saving Tools

You will complete the work in this chapter more quickly if you have the following handy:

- Your standards, objectives, and essential questions for an upcoming unit.
- Any curriculum guides for the unit provided by your school or district.



How will you know whether students have met a standard in a highly rigorous way? The first step is to select or create a rigorous unit assessment to guide your instruction.

Few teachers today create their learning standards from scratch; in most cases, the standards for a grade level or course are established by the curriculum, the district, or the state. These standards represent both a starting point and an end point for instruction. As a starting point, they provide direction on the type of learning experiences and materials that will help students engage in the kind of thinking and learning embedded in the standard. As an end point, they establish a level of achievement for you and your students to work toward throughout the year.

This latter issue—the ways that standards operate as an end point for instruction—is first on our agenda. In this chapter, you will learn how to create or select rigorous assessments to best measure how well your students have met the standards. Once you have established a rigorous final assessment, you'll be able to create instructional materials and learning experiences to ensure that your students meet the standards in a highly rigorous way and can demonstrate mastery on these assessments.



YES, BUT . . .

What if my standards aren't rigorous?

Even if you don't consider your standards to be particularly rigorous, you can still set learning goals and select content and learning experiences that will push students to meet these standards in highly rigorous ways. For example, with rigorous learning goals, you might design instruction that not only helps students "understand the difference between a republic and a democracy," as the (rather lackluster) standard requires, but also helps students achieve the higher goal of becoming better citizens. By choosing challenging content and creating lessons that require students to think critically, flexibly, and creatively, you can help them exceed course standards and build their capacity to engage in highly rigorous thinking and learning.

Start Unit Planning with a Rigorous Summative Assessment

Although you are probably accustomed to planning by first consulting the curriculum, then selecting materials and learning experiences, and finally creating a summative assessment, when it comes to planning rigorous learning units, we're actually going to work *backward*. We'll start with a rigorous assessment and then select the learning experiences and materials that will give students the best chance of successfully passing that assessment. This is a good idea for several reasons.

First, starting with the summative assessment is a way to clarify learning goals and pinpoint what it is you really want students to learn. The assessment-first approach helps you decide what constitutes mastery of the learning goals and how you want students to be able to demonstrate that mastery. It also helps you make better choices about *mastery thresholds*—the baseline of goal mastery or the point at which you can safely say that a student is within the range of mastery. Once you're clear about the mastery threshold, you can plan learning experiences that are more effective at helping students reach mastery, and you'll have a better idea of when students are not on track.

Second, starting unit planning with the summative assessment helps you choose appropriate learning experiences for students. Once you really know where students need to go, you can make better, more focused choices about content and instructional strategies and about the ongoing assessments you'll use to monitor and support students' progress throughout the unit.

Selecting Rigorous Learning Material

The first step in selecting rigorous learning material is to examine your unit's summative assessment. What kind of thinking does your assessment emphasize? What learning goals does your assessment measure? Answer these questions and then consider: What type of learning material will best help students engage in that kind of thinking and reach each goal?

For instance, if one of your goals is to help students understand the relationships among the national economies of various countries, you might consider *complex material* that will give students opportunities to work with multiple variables and relationships. However, if your learning goal is to help students determine which economic structure is best suited for a primarily agrarian culture, then *ambiguous material* would likely give students a better chance to evaluate variables and make a determination.

Of course, a typical unit has multiple learning goals, addressed through multiple lessons. Each goal is best pursued through different thinking processes and, thus, with material characterized by different aspects and degrees of rigor.

When selecting learning material for a unit, I recommend following a basic decision-making process focused on first considering the *kinds of thinking* associated with mastery of each learning goal and then analyzing the degree to which the learning materials you are considering reflect the characteristics of the four types of rigor. Begin by completing the **Learning Goal Rigor-Analysis Worksheet** (see page 48), which is designed to help clarify the kind of thinking and thinking processes students need in order to master the goal in question. Next, fill in a copy of the **Learning Material Rigor-Analysis Worksheet** (see page 49) for all learning material under consideration, checking off the characteristics that apply and making notes to yourself that capture specific examples, if you desire. Finally, use the data you captured in these worksheets to complete the **Learning Material Decision-Making Template** (see page 51). This matrix asks you to translate your analyses into numerical ratings associated with each type of rigor. Once you've filled in your ratings, determining the best choice of rigorous learning material becomes a simple matter of multiplication.

Learning Goal Rigor-Analysis Worksheet

Learning Goal:			
<i>To master this learning goal, it is important that students learn how to</i>			
<input type="checkbox"/> Construct understanding from context <input type="checkbox"/> Extrapolate key ideas that are unstated <input type="checkbox"/> Fill in gaps and bring background knowledge to bear on the current learning challenge <input type="checkbox"/> Synthesize several clues to determine the correct answer <input type="checkbox"/> Use evidence to detect and defend meaning <input type="checkbox"/> Use logic and reasoning skills to construct and extend meaning <input type="checkbox"/> Distinguish relevant information from irrelevant information <input type="checkbox"/> Interpret symbols, metaphors, and analogies	<input type="checkbox"/> Grapple with uncertainty or the abstract <input type="checkbox"/> Choose and defend a position <input type="checkbox"/> Distinguish between and among points of view <input type="checkbox"/> Examine another's point of view <input type="checkbox"/> Consider several alternatives <input type="checkbox"/> Evaluate evidence and ideas <input type="checkbox"/> Juggle multiple perspectives <input type="checkbox"/> Compare and contrast <input type="checkbox"/> Pick up on nuance and subtlety <input type="checkbox"/> Move beyond black-and-white thinking and learn to deal with shades of gray <input type="checkbox"/> Build interpretations	<input type="checkbox"/> Understand intellectual methodologies <input type="checkbox"/> Monitor their own learning <input type="checkbox"/> Access increasingly more demanding material and/or skills <input type="checkbox"/> Engage in systematic inquiry and dig for meaning by peeling back successive layers <input type="checkbox"/> Develop deductive or inductive reasoning skills <input type="checkbox"/> Follow a logical order to reach a conclusion <input type="checkbox"/> Follow a train of thought to its logical conclusion <input type="checkbox"/> Think systematically <input type="checkbox"/> Combine successive cognitive tasks in order to solve problems	<input type="checkbox"/> Manage multiple variables <input type="checkbox"/> Detect relationships among and between variables <input type="checkbox"/> Impose order on seeming disorder <input type="checkbox"/> Construct meaning by engaging in discipline inquiry under conditions of uncertainty <input type="checkbox"/> Organize and rearrange knowledge in light of new information <input type="checkbox"/> Generate hypotheses <input type="checkbox"/> Represent knowledge in a variety of ways <input type="checkbox"/> Classify information <input type="checkbox"/> Compare and contrast
Seek Material with Implicit Meaning	Seek Material with Ambiguity	Seek Material with Layers	Seek Material with Complexity

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