

Summative Assessment

Category: Assessment, Feedback and Learning

Summative assessment produces a judgement that summarises achievement at a defined point, commonly for grading, certification, progression, selection or accountability. Its evidence may come from an examination, project, performance, portfolio or accumulated coursework. The defining feature is the intended interpretation and use of the result, not the task format.

A result can support several decisions, but each use requires justification. High stakes increase the need for representative sampling, transparent standards, dependable scoring, appropriate moderation and fair conditions. Evidence gathered during learning may contribute summatively when its purpose and consequences are made clear ([Newton, 2007](#)).

Design and Use

1. **Define the decision:** State what judgement will be made, for whom and with what consequences.
2. **Sample achievement:** Gather sufficient and relevant evidence across the intended outcomes and performance range.
3. **Establish standards:** Use defensible criteria, grade boundaries or performance standards aligned with purpose.
4. **Secure judgement:** Support consistency through clear procedures, assessor preparation, moderation and documented reasoning.
5. **Report responsibly:** Communicate meaning, limitations and review routes rather than presenting a mark as self-explanatory.

Examples in Practice

A final engineering project combines a tested prototype, technical report and individual defence. Published criteria address the programme outcomes, assessors moderate borderline decisions, and students receive both the classification and an explanation of the evidence supporting it.

Why It Matters

Summative decisions shape opportunity and strongly influence what learners prioritise. A coherent system protects standards without allowing high-stakes demands to narrow the curriculum unnecessarily. Formative and summative purposes should remain distinguishable even when thoughtfully designed evidence contributes to both formal uses ([Harlen, 2005](#)).

Further Reading

6. Newton, P. E. (2007). [Clarifying the purposes of educational assessment](#). *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 14(2), 149–170.
7. Harlen, W. (2005). [Teachers' summative practices and assessment for learning: Tensions and synergies](#). *The Curriculum Journal*, 16(2), 207–223.
8. Taras, M. (2005). [Assessment – summative and formative – some theoretical reflections](#). *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 53(4), 466–478.

Related Terms: Assessment of Learning | Criterion-Referenced Assessment | Grading | Moderation