

Finding the Balance Between Low and High Stakes Assessments



GOAL: Consider the advantages, disadvantages, and ideal uses of low- and high-stakes assessments, and strategies to find an appropriate and effective balance for your course.

Assessment drives the effort that students put towards their learning. An appropriate balance between low- and high-stakes assessments provides students with opportunities to check their understanding and practice skills before demonstrating their knowledge and abilities on high-stakes assessments. Low-stakes assessments help instructors track students' progress and gauge needs for support around common errors and misconceptions.

What we know from cognitive and learning science about high- and low-stakes assessment:

- Frequent and spaced opportunities to recall and retrieve information and skills [increases learning](#)
- High stakes assessments can increase student anxiety and stress, which can [decrease their performance](#) (even if they understand the content or skills), particularly for equity-seeking groups
- Low-stakes assessments should be meaningful and connected to other coursework and provide crucial feedback to students about their learning. Otherwise, students may perceive them as “busy work.”
- Numerous low-stakes assessments can increase students' perceived and actual workload, which may lead to skipping assessments (intentionally or not), requiring extensions, and feeling overwhelmed. See [The Workload Dilemma](#) for more information about students' perceived workload during the pandemic.

Comparison of High- and Low-Stakes Assessments

	Advantages	Disadvantages	Ideal Uses
Low-Stakes Assessments (e.g., quizzes, discussion posts, one-minute papers, short reflection or reaction papers, and more strategies)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creates line of communication; students may be more willing to ask for help • Students know how they are doing in the course • Instructors know how students are doing and can provide support • More opportunities to practice, learn from mistakes, and demonstrate learning • Can increase attendance, participation, time management • Can lessen anxiety and stress • Workload and grading spread across the semester 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can increase student workload if too many assessments in a single course or across their courses • Can increase instructor workload with grading and feedback • Often focused on specific elements of the course (not synthesis across topics, skills, areas, theories, etc.) rather than 	To assess lower-level learning outcomes (e.g., describe, define) and focused topics, areas, or skills To practice and check for understanding prior to a higher-stakes assessment
High-Stakes Assessments (e.g., exams, final papers, presentations, portfolios, projects)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourages synthesis across the course or multiple topics/areas/outcomes • In some cases, students create discipline-specific products (e.g., research papers, presentations) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students may not receive early enough feedback • Less focus on improvement • Higher stress and anxiety • High workload at concentrated times 	To assess higher-level learning outcomes (e.g., create, evaluate) and ability to synthesize across topics or skills

See also [High Stakes and Low Stakes Assessment](#), Memorial University



Possible Changes to Balance Low and High Stakes Assessments

Before making changes to your assessments, identify challenges with your assessment balance and workload:

- Complete **Worksheet 1: Identifying Assessment Challenges in My Course**
- Use the [Course Workload Estimator](#) to estimate the approximate student workload in your course.
- Ensure the weighting of assessments is aligned with the time students take to complete the assessment.

Possible Change	Do this to...	Examples
Break down a high-stakes assessment into multiple lower-stakes components	<p>Keep a high-stakes assessment and offer opportunities to submit parts of their work for feedback before the final version.</p> <p>Alleviate stress by redistributing the weighting.</p>	<p>Instead of submitting a major paper worth 40% of their grade, students submit:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Outline, 5% - Annotated Bibliography, 6% - Intro, 5% - Draft Body and Conclusion, 8% - Full Paper, 16%
Replace a single high-stakes test with multiple lower-stakes tests or quizzes	<p>Give more frequent, lower-stakes opportunities to test and check understanding, while alleviating stress of a high-stakes test.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Move lower-level questions from a midterm or final exam to weekly quizzes, and use tests for higher-level, cumulative questions • Offer exams at more frequent intervals and reduce the weighting of each
Offer flexibility and choice within low-stakes assessments	<p>Lessen workload for students completing multiple assessments within a single category (e.g., quizzes, discussion posts, reaction papers)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students drop their lowest score or submit X assessments out of the total number (see advice on drop or substitution policies) • Change some low-stakes assessments to optional ungraded assessments
Change a high-stakes assessment to a different assessment	<p>Assess the same learning outcomes while offering a better learning experience for students</p>	<p>Presentations, demonstrations, take-home assessments, portfolios, creative assignments (see our Alternative Assessment website)</p>

*Note: students must still be able to meet the learning outcomes if they do not complete all assessments

What about the Additional Grading and Feedback with Low-Stakes Assessments?

Because low-stakes assessments offer feedback throughout the course, less feedback is often needed on high-stakes assessments. Consider using [different sources of feedback](#) for low-stakes assessments:

Self-Assessment	Students assess their own understanding or abilities using a rubric or checklist, automatically-graded quizzes, or series of open-ended reflection prompts.
Peer Feedback	Students assess each other's work using rubrics or checklists to guide their feedback. Particularly beneficial on drafts or smaller components of higher-stakes assessments.
Instructor Class-Wide Feedback	Instructor provides text, video, or audio feedback to the entire class highlighting strengths and common errors or areas for improvement.

