

VAI EDUCATION SPOTLIGHT

What Do They Know? Using Alternative Assessments in the Classroom

We know assessments — both formative and summative — are critical components of teaching and learning, but so often they become straight-up burdens. At best, they can be boring and uninformative. At worst, they can take on a life of their own, and overtake what we know is most important in the learning process.

In an attempt to mend our slightly bent-out-of-shape relationship with assessment, here are some tools, tips, and take-aways that I hope will help you and your students.

Identifying Power Standards

Did you know that a 5th grade teacher is expected to guide students to mastery of 200 standards each year? Given a typical school year of 180 days, that's 1.1 standards a day! Of course, standards don't exactly work like that. You can certainly teach more than one standard a day, but that doesn't give you time to explore them, unpack them, and revisit them, which is where learning and mastery actually happen. The point is there is a lot of content to cover, and not much time to do it in.

In order to make the most out of our instructional time, we can't treat all standards equally. Some have limited application and require lower levels of critical thinking; others are foundational to future learning and broadly applicable. Identifying your power standards can help you focus your instructional efforts, align your teaching to school goals, and increase the likelihood of successfully preparing your students for future learning.

How do you identify your power standards? Utilize a scoring system to single out the standards that align to the things you care most about. We use the following categories to score standards, grading each standard on a scale of 1–5:

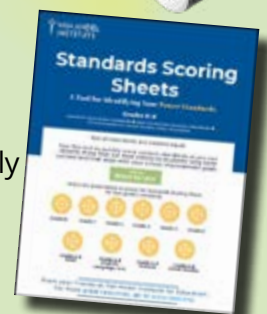
- **Building Block:** How much future learning is dependent on this standard?
- **Cross-Curricular Utility:** How applicable is this standard across content areas?
- **Higher Level Thinking:** What depth of thinking does this standard require?

Scoring standards can be time consuming, so hopefully these [VAI Standards Scoring Sheets](#) will save you some time. We've scored standards for Grades K–8 (Common Core, NGSS, and C3 Framework) according to the criteria above. The first tabs (color coded in blue) contain the scores; the following tabs (color coded in red) automatically order the standards highest to lowest by their score, so you can see your power standards rise to the top of the list for each content area.



FREE STANDARDS SCORING SHEET

Use this FREE tool as is, or change the scores and/or the categories to your liking. The red tabs will automatically adjust so you can easily customize the tool to designate YOUR power standards!



Utilizing Power Standards

Once you have your power standards identified, you can put them to work for you. You may reference the list at different points in the year for different purposes, but here are a few ways you can use it:

- At the beginning of the year, use this tool to help plan out your curriculum, making sure you leave ample time for those power standards.
- When students seem to be struggling with a particular concept or standard, consult the tool to determine how much time to spend remediating. If it's a high-scoring standard, take the time. If not, give yourself permission to move on and try again later.
- For your most important standards, consider building a sustained [project-based learning](#) unit to help students understand and apply your most crucial content in a meaningful and memorable way.
- Toward the end of the year, identify your top 10 standards to focus your efforts and ensure students finish the year strong in your most critical power standards.
- If implementing standards-based grading, use the tool to identify which standards are worth tracking at an individual student mastery level. Use a template such as [Three Strikes and You're In](#) to track student mastery.

Identifying your power standards can help you focus your instructional efforts, align your teaching to school goals, and increase the likelihood of successfully preparing your students for future learning.

10 Alternative Assessment Ideas

With a clear vision for what you want to assess, you can turn your attention to making assessments as informative, interesting, and easy as possible. Nobody likes a plain-ole-paper-and-pencil test, so here are a few options to mix it up a little:

1. **5-Word Challenge:** Quickly assess how well students understand a topic while also developing their creative and critical thinking skills by challenging them to summarize their learning in 5 words or less (can be on video or on paper or other mode of communication). [See it in action \(30-second video\)](#) with our students sharing what they learned about food webs in 5 words (more or less).



2. **Rewind and Fast Forward:** To ensure continuity of learning, give students a short quiz with the majority of questions focused on current learning, 2 questions on past learning, and 2 questions on future learning. Use summatively to capture the current learning or formatively to differentiate for any relearning needs or extension opportunities.
3. **Optional Outputs:** Consider having students demonstrate their understanding using their choice of communication. Below are some ideas along with the free digital tools to bring them to life. For more ideas, visit this [Tech in Pedagogy article](#).
 - Infographics ([Infogram](#) and [Piktochart](#))
 - Video slideshow ([Animoto](#))
 - Poster ([Pixlr](#))
 - Podcast ([Audacity](#))
 - Blog ([Blogger](#) or [WordPress](#))
 - Website ([Google Sites](#))

4. **Present and Defend:** Have students share their work and defend their claim in response to constructive feedback. This allows you to see how students respond to challenges and how deep their understanding of the topic really goes. Great for developing a culture of risk-taking and developing students' ability to exercise informed skepticism. Use the [Present and Defend poster](#) to establish protocols for all students.
5. **Stars and Stairs:** Challenge students to use the [Stars and Stairs graphic organizer](#) to track their progress against a particular learning target or goal. It promotes student ownership of learning and provides a quick visual of progress. Great for sharing with parents and admins as well.
6. **Journaling:** Ask students to capture their learning (or their reflections on their learning) in an ongoing logbook or journal. Journals give you insight into the process of learning and can help you identify where in the process there may be a break in understanding. They also support student construction of meaning as well as an opportunity to apply metacognition skills. Here's a sample [Reflection Journal from the PBL unit, State of Sustainability](#).
7. **Teacher Rubrics:** Tried and true, rubrics are a powerful assessment tool, providing clear expectations and a transparent message about what success looks like. Limit levels of mastery to 3–5 and consider having separate rubrics for the process of learning vs. the product of learning. Here's a sample [Teacher Rubric from the PBL unit, State of Sustainability](#).
8. **Student Rubrics:** Having students self-assess their work with student-facing rubrics provides all the same benefits of a teacher rubric with the added benefit of boosting student ownership and metacognition. It can also prompt healthy communication between teacher and student. Here's a sample [Student Rubric from the PBL unit, State of Sustainability](#).
9. **3 Strikes, You're In!:** Track student progress against specific power standards or goals by logging three consecutive examples of mastery. [This tool](#) allows you to focus on your most critical learning objectives and to ensure each student succeeds.
10. **Separate Content from Habits of Work:** Utilize a separate grading system for habits of work (participation, meeting deadlines, tardiness) and content. Grades are meant to convey what a student knows and is able to do, so subtracting or adding to a grade for behavior renders the grade inaccurate. Both are important, so expect and track mastery in both.



BONUS ASSESSMENT

Shout out to our friend Paul Yenne (@MrYennePaul on Twitter), a 5th grade teacher in Colorado, for this 3-word assessment that I found delightful:

We call it **Teach Me Something**. Simply ask students to teach you something. You can offer ½ credit if you learn something and ½ credit if they feel successful. It's a great way to tap into what students know and are able to do while also gaining insights into what they are passionate about.

Project-Based Learning & Alternative Assessments

If you'd like to try a project-based learning unit that utilizes alternative assessments in an authentic way, take a look at the Blue Apple project, [State of Sustainability](#), where students author a class book about how their state is faring in relation to the UN Sustainable Goals. Students publish their book and sell it to support sustainable development. This project incorporates many of these alternative assessment ideas and is connected to content standards in ELA, Math, Science, and Social Studies.



- This [Project Overview](#) provides a lesson by lesson summary of this project.
- Here is a [book list](#) of rich, diverse literature on the topic of sustainability.
- Here are [content standard connections](#) for this project.
- To see this project in action, check out the [project video](#).

Conclusion

Anything “alternative” is inevitably either wildly attractive or perilously scary, depending on your worldview, your personality, or your particular mood of the moment. But the best classrooms carefully balance the tried and true with innovations that push the boundaries. So, consider how you use assessments in your classroom. Are they advancing learning or curtailing it? Are they serving you or are you serving them? Are you happy with what you have or are you ready for a change?

[Click here if you would like to see a 30-minute webinar presentation of this content:](#)
[What Do They Know? Using Alternative Assessments in the Classroom](#)

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