When you think about the ways you were tested in school, what images come to mind? Essays in blue books; true or false quizzes; matching columns of names, numbers, and facts; fill-in-the-blank items; and lengthy term papers are pretty common for most of us. Assessment in school today still includes these kinds of tests, but it also includes other experiences we may not have had growing up. In this chapter we’ll explain the principles of assessment quality, the variety of assessment methods used in schools today, and the reasons for using each. We’ll also give examples of formative assessment and student involvement in the context of classroom assessments. Last, we’ll explore how homework fits into the assessment picture and offer guidelines for parent involvement in homework.
Assessment Principles: Standards of Quality

All high-quality assessments adhere to the same basic standards, which can be organized as answers to five questions (Figure 4.1): Why? What? How? How much? How accurate?

Figure 4.1 Five Standards of Quality Assessment

**Why: Clear and Appropriate Users and Uses**

Chapter 2 focused on this first standard of quality. In that chapter, we concluded that the primary purpose of assessment should be to improve student learning. Remember that different kinds of assessments meet the needs of different decision makers. Being clear from the outset about what educational decisions each assessment serves is a critical component of a balanced, effective assessment system. Further, commitment to meeting the needs of the most important decision makers—students, teachers, and parents—is an equally crucial component of a healthy assessment system.

**What: Clear and Appropriate Learning Targets**

Chapter 3 explored clear learning targets, the second standard of quality. As you recall, high-quality assessment cannot happen without a clear picture of the learning to be assessed. Anyone designing or selecting an assessment must understand the learning targets, or the assessment has little chance of reflecting student achievement of the intended learning.

**How: Appropriate Assessment Method**

The different kinds of assessments in use in schools fall into different categories: selected response, essay, performance assessment, and personal communication. These four methods are not interchangeable; quality assessment demands that teachers select the method that will provide the best information for the intended purpose and measure the intended learning most accurately. Some assessment methods are a better match than others for certain kinds of learning targets. We illustrate this match in Table 4.1.
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Table 4.1 Best Matches Between Learning Targets and Assessment Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TARGET TO BE ASSESSED</th>
<th>SELECTED RESPONSE</th>
<th>ESSAY</th>
<th>PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT</th>
<th>PERSONAL COMMUNICATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KNOWLEDGE MASTERY</td>
<td>Multiple-choice, true-false, matching, and fill-in items can sample mastery of elements of knowledge</td>
<td>Essay exercises can tap understanding of relationships among elements of knowledge</td>
<td>Not a good choice for this target—three other options preferred</td>
<td>Can ask questions, evaluate answers, and infer mastery, but a time-consuming option</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REASONING PROFICIENCY</td>
<td>Can assess application of some patterns of reasoning</td>
<td>Written descriptions of complex problem solutions can provide a window into reasoning proficiency</td>
<td>Can watch students solve some problems or examine some products and infer about reasoning proficiency</td>
<td>Can ask student to “think aloud” or can ask followup questions to probe reasoning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SKILLS</td>
<td>Can assess mastery of the knowledge prerequisites to skilful performance, but cannot rely on these to tap the skill itself</td>
<td>Can observe and evaluate skills as they are being performed</td>
<td>Strong match when skill is oral communication proficiency; also can assess mastery of knowledge prerequisite to skilful performance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABILITY TO CREATE PRODUCTS</td>
<td>Can assess mastery of the knowledge prerequisite to the ability to create quality products, but cannot use these to assess the quality of products themselves</td>
<td>Can assess both proficiency in carrying out steps in product development, and attributes of the product itself</td>
<td>Can probe procedural knowledge and knowledge of attributes of quality products, but not quality of product</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In addition, there are standards for quality that pertain to each individual method. We don’t believe the majority of our readers aspire to be test developers; therefore, we’ll share what you in your roles as parents and community members might want and need to know about each method.
How Much: Adequate Sample of Achievement

This standard for quality requires that assessments be designed to gather the right amount of information about the learning to be measured. Does the assessor have enough information to draw confident conclusions about students’ achievement on each of the content standards? How much information is enough? These are the questions educators must know how to answer when attending to sampling issues.

How Accurate: Avoid Sources of Bias and Distortion

Everything up to this point can be carried out well—clear purpose, clear targets, appropriate assessment method, and the right amount of information—and things can still go wrong! Results can be made inaccurate in a number of ways. Educators call these sources of bias and distortion.

An assessment is considered biased when students’ scores are altered by factors that don’t have a direct connection to the achievement being assessed. Sources of bias include the following (Stiggins 2001):

- Conditions in the assessment environment (a fire alarm during a timed test, missing materials, noise distractions)
- Conditions within the student (lack of reading skill, poor health, lack of test-taking skills, tendency to “freeze” on tests)
- Problems with the assessment itself (vague or missing directions, poorly worded questions, culturally biased questions)
Understanding School Assessment

It is the teacher's job to identify and eliminate sources of bias and distortion whenever possible, and to use assessment results appropriately or disregard them altogether when there is evidence that the results are inaccurate.

These five standards are used to judge the quality of all forms of assessment. Educators who are assessment literate think through each one as preparation for developing or selecting any assessment they give.

Methods of Assessment

Did you have a favorite type of test or assessment when you were in school? A preference for true-false questions over essay questions, for example? This is what we mean by the term methods—the different ways used in school to evaluate learning. There are four basic categories of assessment methods: selected response, essay, performance assessment, and personal communication. As you read through the explanation of each, think about which of these you have experienced in your school career.

Selected Response Tests

Selected response test items are used to measure students' knowledge and reasoning proficiencies. They have one correct answer or a limited number of correct answers, and may be multiple-choice, matching, fill-in-the-blank or short answer, or true-false questions. Examples of the kinds of learning appropriately assessed by selected response items include knowledge of correct grammar and parts of speech, the structure of the U.S. government, and choosing which operation to use to solve math problems. Standardized tests use this method to a large extent because it is easy to administer and inexpensive to score.


**Essay Questions**

*Essay questions* are also used to measure students’ knowledge and reasoning proficiencies. To perform well on an essay test question, students must answer the question asked and provide the information required. Each correct response may not look exactly the same, but all correct responses share common characteristics, which depend on the question asked. Responses with some, but not all, of these characteristics receive partial credit. Essay questions are often worth more than one point on a test, to reflect both their relative importance to the test and to allow for partial credit.

**Performance Assessment**

*Performance assessment* can be used to measure students’ reasoning proficiency, ability to perform skillfully, or ability to create a quality product. Examples of learning targets best measured by performance assessment include giving an oral presentation, writing a research paper, setting up and conducting a science experiment, and properly operating a particular device or tool. In a performance assessment students are given a *task*—an assignment—and *criteria*—requirements that describe the elements of quality needed for the particular performance or product.

For example, your ninth-grade child may be responsible for mastering the following learning target: *The student speaks effectively to various audiences and purposes*. The *task*, or
assignment, may be to prepare and deliver a three-minute oral presentation to the class on a specified topic. The criteria for judging the quality of the presentation may describe (1) the content, (2) the organization of the content, (3) the delivery—volume, eye contact, and so forth—and (4) the grammar. So, the criteria define what we mean by “speaks effectively.” In this case, the expanded description of the criteria would mean the student does the following:

- Selects ideas that are interesting to the audience and important to the topic
- Organizes the ideas logically, with an inviting introduction and a satisfying conclusion
- Delivers the speech with appropriate voice volume, rate, and articulation
- Uses actions (arm movements, walking around) to enhance meaning
- Uses correct pronunciation and grammar

**Personal Communication**

*Personal communication* is another way to determine students’ knowledge and reasoning proficiencies. This method of assessment is just what it seems: the teacher asks a question or engages in a dialogue with the student, and listens to determine the quality of the responses. Assessments in the primary grades rely heavily on this one-on-one method.

Table 4.2 presents examples of each of the four assessment methods.
### Table 4.2 The Four Assessment Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>METHOD</th>
<th>WHAT IT MEASURES</th>
<th>EXAMPLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| KNOWLEDGE | Learning Target: Knows why United States was colonized                        | Why did colonists migrate to the United States?  
|         |                                                                                 | a. To escape taxation  
|         |                                                                                 | b. For religious freedom  
|         |                                                                                 | c. For adventure  
|         |                                                                                 | d. More than one of the above  
|         | Learning Target: Identifies placement of instruments in an orchestra             | In what section of the orchestra is the kettle drum found?  
|         |                                                                                 | (Stiggins 2001, p. 142)                                                                                                                                                                          |
| REASONING | Learning Target: Infers                                                         | As employment increases, the danger of inflation increases.  
|         |                                                                                 | a. True, because consumers are willing to pay higher prices  
|         |                                                                                 | b. True, because the money supply increases  
|         |                                                                                 | c. False, because wages and inflation are statistically unrelated to one another  
|         |                                                                                 | d. False, because the government controls inflation  
|         |                                                                                 | (Stiggins 2001, p. 142)                                                                                                                                                                          |
| REASONING | Learning Target: Classifies                                                      | Given what you know about animal life of the arid, temperate, and arctic regions, if you found an animal with the following characteristics, in which region would you expect it to live?  
|         |                                                                                 | (A description of the animal's characteristics is inserted here.)  
|         |                                                                                 | a. arid region  
|         |                                                                                 | b. temperate region  
|         |                                                                                 | c. arctic region  
|         |                                                                                 | (Stiggins 2001, p. 285)                                                                                                                                                                          |
Table 4.2 The Four Assessment Methods (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>METHOD</th>
<th>WHAT IT MEASURES</th>
<th>EXAMPLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ESSAY</td>
<td><strong>KNOWLEDGE</strong>&lt;br&gt;Learning Target: Understands the water cycle</td>
<td>Describe how evaporation and condensation operate in the context of the water cycle. Be sure to include all key elements in the cycle and how they relate to one another. (Stiggins 2001, p. 163)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>REASONING</strong>&lt;br&gt;Learning Target: Evaluates</td>
<td>Some argue for and some against irrigating deserts to grow food. Take a position on this issue and defend it. Make explicit the criteria you are using as the basis for your position and be sure to apply them logically. (Stiggins 2001, p. 287)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT</td>
<td><strong>REASONING</strong>&lt;br&gt;Learning Target: Uses scientific thinking process to conduct investigations</td>
<td>Task: Students are presented with two seemingly identical glasses of soda, but one is the diet version. They are to identify which is which. Criterua: The teacher observes as each student proceeds, and uses criteria to evaluate the student’s level of proficiency with applying the scientific method. (Stiggins 2001, p. 288)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>SKILL</strong>&lt;br&gt;Learning Target: Reads aloud with fluency</td>
<td>Task: Student reads text aloud. Criterua: Teacher listens as each student reads and uses criteria to evaluate the student’s level of oral reading fluency.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2 The Four Assessment Methods (Continued)
**Table 4.2** The Four Assessment Methods *(Continued)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>METHOD</th>
<th>WHAT IT MEASURES</th>
<th>EXAMPLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **PERFORMANCE ASSESSMENT**    | **PRODUCT**<br>Learning Target: Writes a compare/contrast essay               | Task: Students write an essay that compares and contrasts major advantages and disadvantages of three forms of business: proprietorships, partnerships, and corporations.  
Criteria: Teacher uses criteria that describe a quality compare/contrast paper to evaluate the essay. Criteria focus on content and organization of the ideas. |
| **PERSONAL COMMUNICATION**    | **KNOWLEDGE**<br>Learning Target: Knows the steps of the writing process       | Teacher asks individual students to explain the steps of the writing process.                      |
|                               | **REASONING**<br>Learning Target: Draws conclusions                            | Teacher asks individual students to explain why a conclusion is correct or incorrect.              |
|                               | **SKILL**<br>Learning Target: Uses communication strategies and skills to work effectively with others | Task: Students are given a problem to solve as a group.  
Criteria: Teacher observes group interactions and evaluates each individual’s performance using criteria that reflect effective communication skills, e.g., acknowledges others’ points of view, makes individual contributions, extends the contributions of others. |
Which Method Is Best?

There is no one “best” assessment method; each one can be used well or poorly. The method used depends, for the most part, on the kind of learning target to be assessed. Let’s look at a few examples of this idea.

Suppose the list of learning expectations for your child’s second-year Spanish course includes the ability to speak Spanish conversationally in a limited set of contexts, such as when asking directions, purchasing items, and conversing with a host family. Could the teacher assess your child’s achievement on this learning target with a multiple-choice test? With an essay question? The answer to both of these questions is “No.” A multiple-choice or fill-in-the-blank item could test students’ knowledge of vocabulary, which is certainly necessary to holding a conversation. In an essay question, the students could write out their part of the dialogue; knowing what to say is also necessary to the conversation. However, if the learning target calls for students to speak conversationally, they must actually engage in a conversation in Spanish to demonstrate the extent to which they have mastered this learning target. The teacher must use a performance assessment to get the achievement information.

Without information provided by selected response and essay tests, we may not get an accurate picture of the knowledge base and reasoning proficiencies we want our children to have. Yet we know the purpose of education is not to master content purely for the sake of knowing it. We want our children to be able to apply that knowledge to contexts and situations they will encounter in life beyond school, whether they choose to venture into further education or the job market. Therefore, students must have opportunities to learn how to perform skill-
fully with knowledge and to demonstrate their achievements in our K–12 schools. That calls for performance assessment.

As an example, read through this partial list of learning targets for an elementary school science unit, “The Physics of Sound,” and think about how each might be assessed:

1. Learn vocabulary associated with the physics of sound.
2. Understand that sound is produced by vibrating objects.
3. Understand the relationship between the pitch of a sound and the physical properties of the sound source (i.e., length of vibrating object, frequency of vibrations, and tension of vibrating string).
4. Compare methods to amplify sound at the source and at the receiver.
5. Use scientific thinking processes to conduct investigations and build explanations: observing, communicating, comparing, and organizing.

A teacher who wants to assess students’ achievement on these learning targets will have to use more than one assessment method. The first three learning targets could be measured accurately and efficiently with selected response test items. The fourth learning target could be measured well either with selected response test items or with an essay question. The last learning target asks students to conduct investigations and create explanations, which requires performance assessment.
Issues of Quality

Selected Response Tests

We often think of selected response testing as the traditional, tried-and-true method of assessment. Most of us are familiar with it. Did you know that in the 1930s and 1940s selected response tests were the wave of the future, only used in the classroom by the most progressive teachers? Far from being tried and true, they were the innovation; the traditional methods before this scientific breakthrough were essay and performance assessment. Most of us also regard selected response tests as objective, because the scoring is straightforward: an answer is either right or wrong. That much is true; the scoring is the objective part.

However, selected response testing is just as subjective as any other method. Subjectivity comes in when choosing what to put on the test that most closely matches the intended learning. Selected content might vary because the actual instruction varies from class to class, depending on the curriculum, as well as on the prior knowledge and interests of the particular group of students. Therefore, test content must vary accordingly, if it is to measure what students are responsible for learning.

Even though selecting test content is somewhat subjective, there are limits to legitimate choices. Have you ever taken a test and wondered why in the world the teacher included a certain question? Or encountered an item representing trivia from the caption of an illustration in the text? The questions on the test should relate directly to the main content categories and patterns of reasoning taught. When a selected response test is carried out well, the general content of the test comes as no surprise to the attentive student.
The individual items on a selected response test must also adhere to standards of quality. Well-written questions maximize the chances that students who know the information get them right and students who do not know the information get them wrong. Well-written questions should indicate who knows the information and who doesn’t.

Let’s look at an experience one of the authors (Steve) had as a student, to illustrate two problems with selected response test quality:

I remember sitting in a university class completing a matching test where we were asked to select the letter in front of one word in the righthand column and place it in the blank in front of a phrase in the lefthand column. I noticed that if I read down the left column, the letters in the answer blanks spelled out predictable words and phrases. A few other students had figured out the same thing and were nervously glancing around, smiling, and shaking their heads in disgust. I exited that class with a distrust of tests, and for a short time, looked for hidden tricks on subsequent tests. The most frustrating part, however, was the low level of knowledge required to do well on the test, even without the predictable answer pattern. I’d prepared to demonstrate a deeper level of competence, certain I was going to have to write, explain myself, and defend my answers. This was not an opportunity to demonstrate what I had learned—it was a meaningless exercise.

Steve’s university experience illustrates two problems, one with test content and the other with item writing. He encountered a basic knowledge test, which did not match or measure the level of learning expected from the course. And, anyone who figured out the pattern of correct responses could have scored
Understanding School Assessment

highly on the test without having learned the content. The instructor would have had equally valid information to use for course grades if he had just thrown the numbers in the air and randomly assigned them. Even if the items had been written correctly, because of the content mismatch the test would still have been a waste of everyone’s time and university resources.

Performance Assessment

High-quality performance assessment requires that students clearly understand both the task—the assignment—and the criteria—the description of quality they are to aim for. Let’s look to a problem from the other author’s (Jan’s) classroom teaching experience to highlight issues of quality in a simple performance assessment:

One year while teaching sixth grade, I held a scheduled conference with a parent who questioned a report card grade of “C” I had given her son in handwriting. I explained it by saying his handwriting was readable, but he was not forming his letters very well. Her response hit home. She delivered it politely, but the gist of it was, “How can you grade something you don’t teach? How did you determine his grade was a ‘C’ in handwriting? How does my son know what’s expected? Does he have opportunity to practice to get better in class? If he’s supposed to practice at home, does he know what to do?”

Although a handwriting grade might seem somewhat insignificant, the incident points out serious problems that can be lurking in any performance assessment. The first has to do with learning targets. We sixth-grade teachers were required to grade handwriting on the report card, but we had no curriculum saying
what to teach, and no materials to teach or assess it. We should have questioned this, but we didn’t. The parent, however, rightly did.

The second problem gets more to issues of performance assessment quality. Handwriting, as with most other products or skills we judge with performance assessment, cannot be marked right or wrong—there is no answer key for grading it. It requires a description of quality. These descriptions of quality are commonly called criteria, rubrics, or scoring guides. To establish criteria for evaluating handwriting, first we would need to differentiate levels of quality—“Excellent,” “Acceptable,” “Close to Acceptable,” and “Needs Major Work,” for example. Then we would need to create a separate description for each level. What does excellent handwriting look like? What does acceptable (or “adequate” or “meets the standard”) handwriting look like? We cannot evaluate handwriting, or any skill or product, fairly without such a scale of descriptions.

A third problem arises when we don’t have samples of quality at each level, both for the assessors to use when they make their judgments, and also for students as they prepare their work. The student who received a “C” in handwriting benefits as a learner when he can (1) see examples of good and not-so-good handwriting, (2) match his own handwriting to an example to see where he is now, and (3) work with his teacher to set goals for improvement.
What to Look for

Although it is not our job as parents and community members to audit classroom assessments for quality, there are certain things we can keep an eye out for without needing to be test development experts. We can check for balance. Does the teacher use more than one assessment method? Or, are all assessments of one kind (all selected response tests, or all performance assessments)? This is not always cause for concern, but it should cause us to look more closely at the learning targets. We can look for commonsense matches between assessment method and learning targets. For example, in mathematics, the ability to select and implement a strategy to solve a problem is an important learning target. So, in mathematics classes, we should see evidence of performance assessment, where students must choose and use an appropriate strategy to solve specific problems. We can also ask if the collection of assessments conducted during the year reflect all of the important aspects of the target. If the learning target is “writes coherently,” do the assessments only test for correct grammar, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation? Or, is student writing also evaluated for other important elements of quality, such as ideas and content, organization, and word choice?
Formative Assessment and Student Involvement Within Each Assessment Method

Each assessment method—selected response, essay, performance assessment, and personal communication—can be used in a summative way to measure achievement at the end of learning. Each can also be used diagnostically, as a pretest, to determine specific learning needs in advance of teaching. But if our goal is to improve student learning, each must be used formatively in the classroom as well, to promote achievement during learning. What does that look like for students in the classroom?

First, teachers explain the learning targets in ways that help students understand what they are expected to know and be able to do. For example, today, from 9:00 to 9:45, your fourth grader is learning math, or more specifically, decimals. To be exact, the class is working on page 152 in their math books. At the outset of the lesson, your son’s teacher tells the class, “Today we will be learning how to read and compare decimals. We are going to learn how to say them correctly and how to put them in order from least to greatest and greatest to least.”

Second, students discuss models of performance so that they understand the level of achievement they are to aim for. For example, in preparation to write a science experiment report, eighth graders are reading various examples of hypotheses (from a similar, but different, experiment), discussing them, and using a scoring guide to evaluate them for the characteristics of a good hypothesis. They then write a short description in their own words of what a good hypothesis does.
Third, students understand the assessment plan—when and how each learning target will be assessed, and how the information will be used (for diagnostic, formative, or summative purposes). For example, at the beginning of a unit on the Civil War, tenth-grade students receive a calendar that lists the learning targets for the unit, shows when each will be assessed, and indicates the purpose for each assessment event—diagnostic, formative, or summative. These purposes are explained to students as “pretest,” “progress check,” and “for a grade.”

Fourth, students have opportunities to practice, receive feedback, and use that feedback to improve their learning, before the summative assessment. For example, in a seventh-grade literature class, one of the learning targets is to compare and contrast characters from two different texts. The teacher has decided to assign a compare–contrast paper as part of a summative assessment. Along the way, students will write a shorter compare–contrast paper, receive specific feedback from both teacher and peers regarding strengths and weaknesses, and revise their papers based on that feedback.

Fifth, students learn to identify their own strengths and set goals for improvement, using specific terms relating directly to the intended learning targets. For example, fifth-grade students review their progress in reading comprehension by looking through a portfolio of their recent assignments. The collection includes evidence of their ability to summarize text, interpret unfamiliar vocabulary, and make inferences and predictions based on the reading. Here’s an excerpt from a student’s reflection on her learning: “I have learned how to make inferences this quarter. An inference is where you figure out something that the story suggests, but doesn't say outright. I used to just guess, but now I look for clues in the story. For next quarter I am going to work on writing summaries. I am going
to work on only including the most important information. My summaries have too much extra stuff in them.”

These five steps illustrate the practices advocated by Black and Wiliam (1998) and introduced in Chapter 2 as being so powerful in bringing about higher levels of achievement. Think back to the oral presentation example described earlier. Now imagine yourself as a ninth grader learning how to give oral presentations. If you are like the majority of us, this is not a pleasant thought. But what if, rather than being given the assignment and some time to prepare individually, you had the opportunity to go through the five steps discussed here? Chances are, you would have felt more in control of the conditions of your success and more confident when it came your turn to get up in front of the audience. Chances are also good that you would have performed well.

Helping with Homework

Homework is one of the constants in our lives as parents—a direct connection between school and home that provides us a glimpse of what our children are learning. As schools raise standards and high-stakes tests become more common, many teachers and schools are increasing the amount of homework assigned as a way of helping students perform better on state tests. Increased homework requires increased vigilance on our part as parents in ensuring it is assigned for the right purpose and is matched to students’ needs, abilities, and ages. Many schools and districts have policies that spell out the purpose of homework, provide guidelines on the amount of homework to be assigned, and explain the basis for evaluating homework and its relationship to calculating report card grades. We deal with the report card issue in more detail in Chapter 6.
In the end, it’s likely that for every parent who thinks there’s too much homework there’s another who thinks there isn’t enough. But as with so many things, it is the kind of homework, rather than the amount, that counts.

**The Purpose of Homework**

Recently, our daughter was assigned a task to be completed at home—the Pet Project, in which she was to collect and display on a poster interesting facts about her cat. Our first thoughts were, “What can we do to help her?” Or, put another way, “How can we avoid a late night the evening before it’s due?”

To know what help is appropriate, we need to know the assignment’s purpose. The teacher can include a note to parents explaining why students are doing the task, or students can write the note themselves, thereby increasing the chances that both they and their parents understand the reason. When
parental help is not appropriate, it is still critical that students understand the reason for the assignment and see a link to the important learning targets for the class.

Homework has many legitimate purposes (Guskey 2002b):

- To practice skills presented that day
- To give students time to conduct independent research
- To review notes in preparation for future work or assessments
- To develop research and study techniques
- To foster self-discipline and responsibility

A secondary goal of homework can be to increase communication between school and home. It can serve to inform us about what students are learning, especially when assignments involve us in the work. For example, students may be required to interview parents, they may be assigned a topic to explore in tandem with a parent, or parents may be asked, as a part of the assignment, to check students’ work (Guskey 2002b). These opportunities allow us to let our children know how important their work is to us.

Whatever the purpose, parents and students both need to know the assignment’s goal.

**Productive Homework Help**

On any homework, what support is most productive? It can be as simple as valuing homework by making sure sufficient time is set aside each evening, without other activities interfering. In doing so, we communicate that homework is part of the respon-
sibility of learning. Or, support can be as “hands on” as showing your child how to “solve for X.” Whether or not the purpose or parameters for your involvement come home with the assignment, there are several steps you can take to get the most out of homework time at your house.

**Consider the purpose for the homework.** This will help both you and your child know what kind of help will be most in keeping with the reason the teacher assigned the homework in the first place. If it is not obvious from the assignment, ask, or have your child ask the teacher for an explanation—a polite version of, “Why are we doing this?” (“Because I said so” may stand in for an answer at home, but it is not sufficient in the case of homework.)

**Ensure understanding of the learning expectations.** You can ask if your child understands the intended learning—“I am doing this project to learn ______.” If he or she isn’t clear, and you can’t figure it out from what comes home, encourage your child to ask the teacher for clarification. Children can direct their own work much better if they understand the intended learning targets.

**Plan your help accordingly.** Information about purpose and learning expectations will guide your decisions about what help to give. For example, if our daughter’s teacher intends to use the Pet Project mentioned previously as evidence of our child’s ability to choose interesting details to share, we may help her think of what is most interesting or unusual about Bob the cat, but we’ll be careful not to supply the details for her. If she is to use her gathered facts as the text for an oral presentation, we may suggest she practice using the information on her poster as talking points, and we may help her rehearse.
Don’t over-help. Then, we need to be careful not to over-help. Projects—or any homework—provide us an opportunity to work with our children, but we need to be aware of the goal of the assignment. If, for example our daughter’s teacher assigned the Pet Project as a report, chances are she has assigned it to help students become better writers. We must be vigilant in asking ourselves, “Is the goal to produce good writing or to produce a good writer?” If the goal of the Pet Project is to produce good writing, we should get the child out of the way, because we (in theory, anyway) can do it better without her. And then let’s be honest about who did the work! (If we contribute to the assignment, we should identify the work that is ours so the teacher doesn’t think it represents what our child knows. Even if the work would get a higher grade with our contributions, our child won’t be proud of what she didn’t do.) On the other hand, if the goal of the Pet Project is to produce a good writer, then we must let our daughter do the work. The person who holds the pencil does the learning.

The Homework–Assessment Connection

Remember, the kind of help we give, should our children want or need it, is governed by the reason for the homework. Is it to practice what they learned in class? This use of homework can help students remember concepts and skills introduced in the lesson that day. If your children are struggling with homework that is practice, it’s fine to help them, or show them how to do it, without doing the work for them. To maintain the integrity of their work and their sense of accomplishment, we can encourage our children to mark the problems we helped with: “I did ten of these by myself and two of them with help from my dad.” (We got this idea from our daughter, whose first spoken phrase in life
was, “Do by self.”) It also provides good feedback to the teacher regarding how well students understood the day’s lessons.

When homework is for practice, students should receive timely feedback on the assignment that lets them know what they did well and what they need to work on. Otherwise, what is the contribution of homework to learning? In general, such assignments should not be figured into the report card grade. Factoring every piece of work, including the practice pieces, into the final grade penalizes the student who has much to learn, and learns it! (We take up this topic further in Chapter 6.)

Sometimes teachers assign tasks as homework that they will use as formative assessment. If this is the case, tread lightly in the helping department. When the purpose of the assignment is to gather information about students’ achievement to plan further instruction or to have students self-assess, the work needs to be their own.

If the homework is a summative assessment, a term paper for instance, it is especially important to know what assistance is allowed. Then, beyond the parameters of what is allowed, our helping stance needs to be “hands off.” Our children do not become better learners (or honest citizens) when we do work for them. Besides, we parents already had our shot at eleventh-grade English—it’s their turn. In situations such as the term paper, productive help consists of making sure our children have access to the resources they need and guaranteeing undisturbed homework time in the evenings.
Chapter 4 — Important Ideas

- Educators who are assessment literate use five standards of quality to plan and give any assessment. They determine the purpose, clarify the targets, select the method, sample appropriately, and control for bias and distortion.

- When classroom assessment is done well, teachers use an array of methods, depending on the learning targets to be assessed. They consider which method will give the most accurate picture of student achievement on the particular learning targets, and also which method will be most efficient, that is, which will take the least amount of time.

- Each assessment method can and should be used formatively, to increase students’ understanding of the achievement expectations and to build their confidence as learners.

- When helping with homework, we need to keep the purpose for the homework in mind. We as parents can play a productive part in homework completion, but we must be careful not to over-help.