

# WHAT STUDENT WRITING TEACHES US

**FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN THE WRITING WORKSHOP**

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# Defining Assessment in the Writing Workshop

**I**n the late 1980s, I studied modern dance at the Martha Graham School of Contemporary Dance in New York City. I had been teaching for three years, and I felt it was time to learn something new—not new teaching techniques, but something completely different in a brand-new environment. I purposely set out to learn something that would make me struggle. Though I was interested in dance, I had never taken classes until that year. A phone call to the Martha Graham School confirmed that they took beginners: I was assured there were no prerequisites. I spent six memorable weeks in the back of the dance studio, trying to hide behind twenty-five people younger and shorter than me, desperate to blend in even though I am 6’ 4”. I towered over everyone as I sought to learn the meaning of *struggle*.

And struggle I did. But I also learned about myself and about teaching. When I look back on my experiences at the dance studio, I admire my teachers for allowing me to stay. I was so clearly out of my league. Each day, my teachers

explained and modeled each move in great detail. Even though I rarely, if ever, produced a move that resembled what the teacher wanted, it was *clear* what was expected, and the teacher taught me to *practice* meaningfully so that I did improve. The standards were high, and they were never lowered for my benefit. I never reached the level of the other students—I remained a beginner for the entire six weeks—but I did make noticeable improvement, and I did make progress toward their very clear standards. I was never sent to a corner of the room to try out easier dance moves, nor was I ever told I couldn't try. I have never worked harder, and one day my teacher recognized me for my effort: "Many of you have talent in this room. But no one works harder than Mark." I have never been prouder.

Modeling, clear expectations, and meaningful practice toward a standard: these elements helped me to get better even though I knew I would never trade my teaching credentials for a career in dance. I began to see how the teaching techniques in the arts, much like the techniques of coaches in various sports, differ from typical classroom teaching, mainly because of how assessment is used. The teachers at the Martha Graham School engaged in effective assessment practices, whether they knew it or not, because they consistently clarified key learning targets, scaffolded support to meet the needs of each student, and monitored each student's growth. After the first few painful classes, I emerged from the studio each day a bit less sore and a bit more confident. I could feel my body slowly becoming more limber, and after a couple of weeks, I knew when I was not completing a move correctly even though it was nearly impossible for me to actually complete the move. In other words, I was self-assessing, and by the end of the summer I began to correct my own mistakes as I relied less and less on teacher feedback. Had the Graham School only been involved in "grading" or evaluating my actual performance, I certainly would not have received a passing grade. Yet I grew because I was in an environment rich with formative assessment.

### **Defining Formative Assessment**

High-stakes standardized testing captures so much attention in the media and in our schools that we often associate assessment with a final grade or

score. In Colorado, for example, the state test, given in the spring in grades three through ten, provides the only student performance data that is used to grade each school in our state. In such a system, it is hard to remember that assessment means so much more than a test score. We should use assessment data to learn how to grow, but since we don't even get our scores back until the following school year and we are never allowed to view the actual tests after students complete them, it is difficult to use our state test to meaningfully guide our instruction.

When many of us think back to our own experiences with assessment in English classes, our memories are probably full of “assign and grade” examples. We were assigned work, the teacher graded it, and we moved on to the next assignment. We did not learn from the letter grade at the top of the paper, even if it was good. I remember many times when I felt relieved to receive an A or a B, but I never remember feeling confidence as a writer if I did receive a high mark. If I received less than a B, I was disappointed, but I attributed this disappointment to some random method the teacher used to score my work: I did not think of grades as something I could control. High-stakes testing might be likened to this “assign and grade” mentality, just on a larger scale. Schools are “assigned” to administer the tests and then receive “grades” based on an average of all students' scores.

Final grades on papers and high-stakes testing showcase assessment as something that happens only at the end of an assignment or a course—summative assessment. But assessment can and should be so much more. As teachers of writing, we can monitor student progress during all parts of the writing process, even during the initial, idea-gathering stages, by thinking of assessment as something that can inform our instruction—formative, rather than summative, assessment. In fact, if we truly want to use assessment to guide our instruction, we should not wait until a piece of writing is “finished” in order to determine a logical instructional move. If our goal as writing teachers is to help our students improve, then waiting until the end is too late—in fact, “the end” should only happen when students literally leave our classrooms because of semester or year-end breaks.

Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, and Wiliam clarify the difference between formative and summative assessment in their article “Working Inside the Black Box” (2004):

*Assessment for learning is any assessment for which the first priority in its design and practice is to serve the purpose of promoting students’ learning. It thus differs from assessment designed primarily to serve the purposes of accountability, or of ranking, or of certifying competences. An assessment activity can help learning if it provides information that teachers and their students can use as feedback in assessing themselves and one another and in modifying the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged. Such assessment becomes “formative assessment” when the evidence is actually used to adapt the teaching work to meet learning needs. (10; emphasis mine)*

In order to adapt our teaching to meet students’ needs, we must consider how to effectively implement formative assessment, or assessment *for learning*. Summative assessment, as described in the article, is assessment *of learning*, which often leads to class ranks and a final score, and therefore provides limited opportunity for students to grow.

James Popham, the author of *Transformative Assessment*, brings students into the picture with his definition of formative assessment: “Formative assessment is a planned process in which teachers or students use assessment-based evidence to adjust what they are currently doing” (2008, 6). When a Title I reading teacher plans lessons *before* teaching to meet the needs of the students he greets every morning, he is using formative assessment. When a science teacher notices that students are ready to move more quickly through material *while she is teaching* and then increases the pace accordingly, she is involved in formative assessment. When a student is very clear about expectations for reaching a standard in an English classroom and adjusts his writing *after leaving class that day* to meet this standard, he is monitoring his own learning, and is therefore engaged in formative assessment.

When we break Popham’s definition apart a bit, we find some ways teachers can use the ideas of formative assessment to inform their teaching practices.

A key word in Popham’s formative assessment definition is *planned*. While formative assessment may seem to encourage teaching “on the fly,” what it really requires is clear expectations about what we want students to know and be able to do, and knowledge of strategies that will allow students to achieve these learning outcomes. Chapter 2 will provide more examples of how to plan effectively in the writing classroom so that formative assessment practices can be put to their best use.

Popham’s formative assessment definition asks teachers and students to “use assessment-based evidence,” and in the writing classroom this translates into feedback. One way the Graham School helped me to improve was the immediacy and clarity of the feedback provided. Teachers watched my performance every day, and they provided me with something specific to work on. They chose these goals carefully because they knew I could only handle small steps, and each goal was based on their high standards. Chapter 3 will examine feedback in the writing workshop through the lens of rubrics, conferences, and classroom discussions.

One of my favorite words in Popham’s formative assessment definition is *students*. Students must be involved in the assessment of their writing. While visiting classrooms in preparation for writing this book, I was impressed with how much our students can tell us about their own needs as learners. Throughout this book, you will read stories of kindergartners clearly describing their writing processes, in addition to excerpts from a middle school class discussion about the most effective settings for writing practice.

When we include students in our thinking about assessment, we are accomplishing so much. We are lifting the burden of “grading,” because if we are used to thinking of assessment *only* as grading, the mere inclusion of students in the process will surely make us think of assessment a little bit differently. We are also erasing the burden of being the expert in the room with all the answers. Natalie Goldberg, one of my favorite authors who gives advice to writers, ends one of her essays this way: “Finally, don’t listen to me. What do I know? Go out there yourself into the open page” (1991, 9).