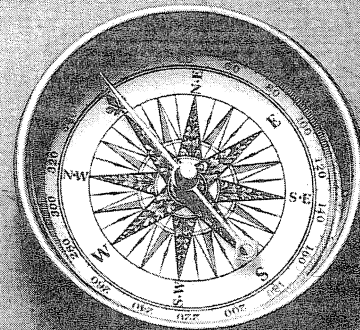


# 11 Preassessing in Order to Teach What Students Don't Already Know



*Preassessment is the linchpin of defensible differentiation.*—Roberts (2010, p. 10)

## Key Question

- What preassessment tools are both easy to administer and quick to use to garner student information?

In 2000, Julian Stanley wrote an article entitled “Helping Students Learn Only What They Don’t Already Know”—a title alone that tells us why preassessment is the natural and necessary step that follows planning a unit (you can’t preassess until you have planned what the students are to know and to be able to do). After all, if the student already knows or can do what you want the unit to accomplish, it presents a wonderful opportunity to allow him to learn about the same topic but at a more complex and in-depth level. Do you remember all of the times you have said, “I wish I had more time to teach . . .”? Preassessment allows you to find that desired time for one student, a few students, or all students. Of course, preassessment guides your decision about matching learning experiences to the interests, needs, and readiness of the learners.

Just think of what your perception would be if you went to see your physician, and she prescribed the same drugs to you that all patients got that particular day—after all, it was Tuesday, and that was what was planned for Tuesday. Of

course, that makes no sense at all, yet the one-lesson-fits-all-students approach to teaching follows the same logic. It doesn't work for all of the patients, and it doesn't work for all of the students. In fact, Reis and colleagues (1993) found that gifted elementary children knew more than half of the content when they started the year, leading the subtitle of their study on content to be *Why Not Let High Ability Students Start School in January?*

Preassessment information, including interest and learning preference inventories, proves to be important for knowing which questions, writing assignments, and reading options will allow each student to make continuous progress.

## Types of Preassessment

There are many ways to preassess what students know before teaching a unit. To do this routinely, the preassessment must be easy to use. That is, it must be easy in terms of creating the preassessment and tabulating the results. Here are examples of ways to try to gather information about what your students already know and are able to do.

### The T-W-H Chart

Let's start with a familiar way to preassess—the K-W-L Chart, but in this case it is called the T-W-H Chart (see Figure 7). The T column lets the student tell you what he thinks about the topic (not quite so specific as knowing about a topic). The W column allows him to tell you what he wants to know about the topic, and the H column provides the opportunity for the student to let you know how he would like to learn about the topic.

The T-W-H Chart garners a lot of information about each student's knowledge on the topic of study, as well as what about the topic interests him and how he would like to learn about the topic. Can you use all of the students' suggestions? Of course not. However, when you can use a suggestion about instruction from a reluctant learner, you have made an important connection that can motivate the child. Information you learn from the completed T-W-H charts can help you group children of like interests and similar levels of readiness. The charts can be sorted easily into three piles—those who know quite a bit about the topic, those who know a little, and those who are new to the topic. If you find out that none of the students are familiar with the topic, it is fair game to plan the same learning experiences for all children. You may find out that all or most students know a lot about the subject. However, it is far more likely that some students will have interests in the topic that vary from "very interested" to "unaware."

T - W - H CHART		
Topic/Unit _____	Name _____	
What do you Think about this topic?	What do you Want to learn about this topic?	How do you want to learn about this topic?

**Figure 7.** T-W-H Chart. Adapted from *Strategies for Differentiating Instruction: Best Practices for the Classroom*, 2nd ed., p.50, by J. L. Roberts and T. F. Inman, 2009, Waco, TX: Prufrock Press. Revised with permission.

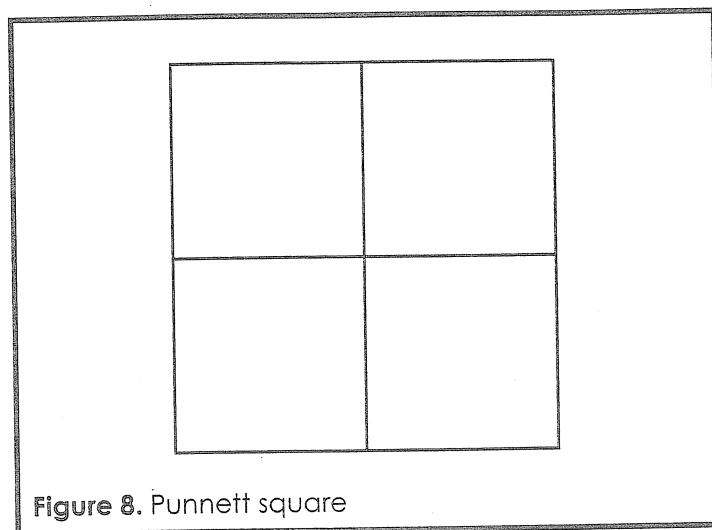


Figure 8. Punnett square

## Open-Ended Writing

Another easy way to preassess is to give the class 5 minutes to write about the topic they are to study. Open-ended writing can reveal a lot about what each student knows or does not know about the topic. A quick read of their responses tells you what each student brings to the new unit of study.

## End-of-the-Unit Assessment or End-of-the-Previous-Unit Assessment

Using assessments given at the conclusion of the unit or at the end of the previous unit can be informative as preassessments. The assessment given at the end of the previous unit works well as a preassessment (and takes no extra time) if the material to be learned is sequential.

## Punnett Square

The punnett square provides a quick way to see what the students in your class already know about a concept. In one quadrant the student provides his understanding of the definition of the concept, in another he writes an example of the concept, and in another he gives a nonexample of the concept. The fourth quadrant is where he provides any other information on the concept.

## Preassessing for Learning Styles

Preassessments can also be used to determine the learners' preferred ways of learning or their interests concerning a topic to be studied. The preassessment

## The Great Depression Preassessment

Circle all that apply.

- I have heard of the Great Depression.
- I have read some about the Great Depression.
- I have talked with relatives about the Great Depression.
- I have not yet been interested in the Great Depression.

Circle the response that best describes your experience interviewing people to get information.

- I enjoy interviewing to learn.
- I have no experience interviewing for a project but think I would like to give it a try.
- I have interviewed for a project but would prefer getting information another way.

Circle the aspect of the Great Depression that most interests you.

- Life in your town during the Great Depression.
- The life of a hobo during the Great Depression.
- The stock market crash of 1929.
- Other? You suggest a topic related to the Great Depression in the United States.

Circle the final product that you would prefer to complete to showcase what you have learned.

- A radio show
- A series of illustrations or graphs to accompany a report
- A monologue
- Other? Specify.

**Figure 9.** The Great Depression preassessment. From "Preassessment: The Linchpin for Defensible Differentiation," by J. L. Roberts, 2010, *The Challenge*, 24, p. 10. Copyright 2010 Center for Gifted Studies, Western Kentucky University. Reprinted with permission.

on the Great Depression (Roberts, 2010, p. 10) shown in Figure 9 is an example of this type of preassessment.

## Stoplight Questions

You can give young students the opportunity to color-code their answers using the colors found in a traffic light. Green means he definitely knows it, yellow says that he thinks it is correct but guessed, and red tells you that he has no idea. This coloring system works with young students and can be used with older ones as well.

## Five Most Difficult Questions

If you provide the students with the opportunity to answer the five most difficult questions in the unit and the student(s) can answer them with at least 80% accuracy, you have strong evidence that the student doesn't need to study the unit in the same way as students who don't have that level of understanding of the content or the demonstration of skills.

## Words From Students

Sometimes you can glean important information about what the child knows about a topic from her conversation. A new first grader who tells her teacher, "I really don't want to hurt your feelings, but we are doing kindergarten work" and a boy in kindergarten who correctly explains negative numbers are providing information about what they already know and can do. A middle school student who is discussing a book that the English teacher is surprised that anyone has read can alert the teacher that the child has advanced literacy skills. Clues appear all of the time, but you must be paying attention to what you hear from young people or observe them doing in order for this informal information to be useful and inform instructional decisions.

Jan Lanham describes important points that increase the effectiveness of preassessment.



## SURVIVAL SECRETS FOR PRETESTING

Jan Lanham

The use of student performance data is a foundation for appropriate instructional planning and differentiation for all students. Although it is only one type of performance data, a cornerstone of that data is the topic or unit pretest commonly administered to group students for instruction within the unit. After watching the administration of pretests across countless classrooms, some important practices to ensure effectiveness emerge:

1. *Identify unit/lesson skills and concepts.* Identify specific skills and concepts for the unit and design a pretest that looks similar to the posttest to identify student levels of awareness and mastery relative to those target skills and concepts. Select pretest items that will inform instruction (e.g.,

If students miss this question, what instruction is needed to make sure they can answer other questions like this?).

2. *Preteach.* It is important to spend some time "priming the pump" to ensure that the pretest data are accurate. For many content-related vocabulary terms and concepts, students may not have used those terms or procedures since the same unit last year, but they did master it when it was taught, so they do not need to go back to the very beginning. Spending a class period or two preteaching the skills, vocabulary, and concepts in the unit proves valuable to generating the most accurate data for grouping students relative to their content readiness. For students who need multiple repetitions, preteaching is one more repetition. For students who were just "rusty," preteaching refreshes their memories and allows them to more accurately show what they know.
3. *Minimize the pretest threat.* Help students understand that the pretest is a strategy to validate what students know. Projecting a message that student time is valued is often a powerful motivator. Make sure students know that the pretest is not related to a grade, but is a single piece of information to help inform instruction. Pretest data can be used as pre-post comparisons to help students see how much they have improved, but they should not ever be used to negatively impact grades.
4. *Use the data for instructional groupings and differentiation.* Analysis of pretest data should be conducted in order to identify students with common instructional needs, to identify unit concepts that are already mastered by most of the group, and to create purposeful targeted groupings that provide for appropriate access to the level and pace of instruction needed for each student. The data can then be used to adjust the depth and complexity of instruction, of activities, and of student products based on that data analysis.

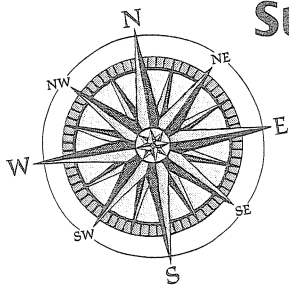
Pretesting is one of the most important tools for diagnostic differentiation of instruction.

Jan W. Lanham, Ph.D.  
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Nelson County Schools  
Bardstown, KY



## Conclusion

One further recommendation about preassessment is that you keep the students' individual preassessments. They give you a way to talk with the students about their growth in learning over time. They also let you show parents why their children are doing specific assignments, so you can discuss the match between the assignments and the interests, needs, and readiness of the child. Overall, preassessment is a valuable tool in planning and differentiating instruction for gifted learners.



## Survival Tips

- Learn as much as you can about your students. It will make your students feel valued, and it will help you match instruction to the student to enhance learning.
- The preassessment sets the starting point, but the outstanding teacher establishes the final destination.
- The teacher needs to inform parents that the purpose of preassessment is to see what the child already knows so time isn't wasted teaching those concepts and/or skills. Teachers need to know that students are not expected to answer all of the questions correctly on a preassessment; rather, it is a way to plan learning experiences that will match the student's readiness to learn certain skills and about particular topics. Otherwise, parents may be anxious when they hear that their children had an assessment (test) and that they didn't know the answers to most of the questions that were asked.

## Survival Toolkit

- *Byrdseed Gifted: Differentiating Within a Gifted Classroom* (<http://www.byrdseed.com/differentiating-within-a-gifted-classroom>): This blog entry shares one teacher's use of pretests to create groups in his class and provides a helpful explanation of how preassessment can be used in the classroom.
- *Differentiation Tips for Teachers: Practical Strategies for the Classroom: Part I: Preassessment* ([http://www.nagc.org/uploadedFiles/Articles/Differentiation\\_Pt1-ChallengeWinter05.pdf](http://www.nagc.org/uploadedFiles/Articles/Differentiation_Pt1-ChallengeWinter05.pdf)):



This article overviews the need for teachers to employ preassessment as a differentiation tool in their classrooms.

- *Preassessment* (<http://daretodifferentiate.wikispaces.com/Pre-Assessment>): This wiki provides links to a variety of preassessment tools and articles on the topic.
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