Put Your Students to the Test

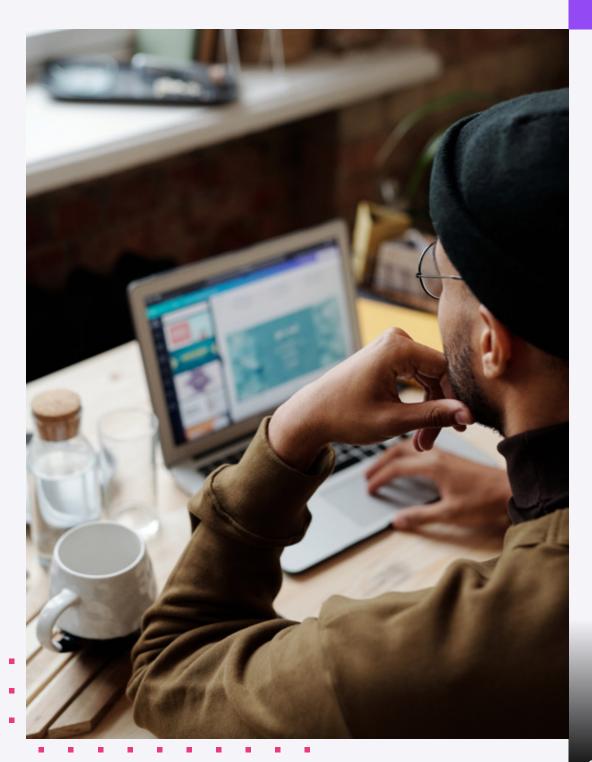


25+ Effective Ways to Assess and Grade

5 Flexible Assessments **13 Equitable and Authentic Assessments** 21 **Innovative Assessments** 31 Taking Cheating Out of the Equation 37 Final Thoughts

Faculty have long favored the traditional written test to measure student learning. The bad news? In recent years, and especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, it's become clear that there's a disconnect between testing methods and students' expectations of their learning experience.

Today's learners want assignments that let them show what they've learned using different methods and formats. If there was ever a time to let go of 'make or break' high-stakes tests, it's now.



What exactly does an effective assessment experience look like today?

For starters, students want to be in the driver's seat. They value getting to decide when, where and how they are assessed. They've also come to expect transparent grading structures.

Going deeper, clear ties to the world around help keep students engaged during testing—they want to understand how they'll use your course material in their future careers. Just as important is regular feedback. Balancing high-stakes tests with informal pulse checks is essential to ease anxiety and help students absorb more of your material.

"It is a delicate dance of flexibility, compassion, normalcy, and compliance." 1

¹ Jankowski, N.A. (2020). Assessment During A Crisis: Responding to a Global Pandemic. National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment. https://www.learningoutcomesassessment.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2020-COVID-Survey.pdf

Assessments shouldn't be daunting for you or your students.

With a little experimentation, incorporating student needs and bringing a timely, accessible and career-ready spin to your course, you'll set yourself up for success.

In this guide, we offer more than 25 strategies to make your assessments more appealing to your diverse student body—while maintaining academic integrity.



Flexible Assessments

Flexibility. It's become a buzzword in higher education. The move to online learning—whether hybrid or 100 percent remote—forced educators to rethink how, where and when testing takes place. At the time, these changes may have seemed like temporary adjustments to support student wellbeing. But today, more options for assessment format and grading structures are what students have come to expect.

Accessibility is at the heart of flexible assessments. Rather than a cookie-cutter approach to testing, educators now present information in various ways, tailor their lessons to match areas of interest and give students greater control over when and how they demonstrate their knowledge.



<u>Alanna Gillis</u>, Assistant Professor of Sociology at St. Lawrence University, shares how using flexible assessment due dates can lead to higher quality work.

Nine flexible assessment ideas

To help students see real value from your teaching and testing cycle, we've rounded up several ideas for your next set of diagnostic, formative and summative assessments.

During class	After class
Flexible formative assessments	Flexible summative assessments
Unessay: Give students a say in how they are assessed. For instance, students can make a short video or narrated slide deck about a topic of their choosing.	Epic finales: Ask students to share their research findings, course learnings and self-reflections using creative presentations.
	Flexible formative assessments Unessay: Give students a say in how they are assessed. For instance, students can make a short video or narrated slide

Mind mapping:

Use this visual-heavy tool to help students connect ideas. You may ask students to group related components of your topic that they've gathered from the media, other courses and their own interpretations.

Exit ticket:

Ask students to respond to a question before leaving class.
Questions could include "how will what you learned today be useful outside of this class?" or "in 50 words or less, summarize today's lecture."

Open-book online exam:

Allow students to complete your test with course resources at their disposal. An open-book test with challenging application problems can also reduce cheating.

Anticipation guides:

Students are presented with several statements about key topics presented in the assigned chapter(s). They can then choose to agree or disagree, stimulating curiosity before they plunge into the assigned readings.

Student-generated quiz questions:

Present students with a topic and ask them to devise quiz questions and sample answers. This method requires students to hone in on key elements that indicate their level of comprehension.

Creative portfolio:

Ask students to reflect upon the knowledge they've gleaned throughout the semester using various mediums. Students may submit media, infographics, one-pagers and audio files.

Flexible assessment techniques you can use today

Giving students more control over their learning doesn't mean you have to give up yours. You can still maintain a high degree of academic excellence and achieve your learning objectives. How? Vary your timelines, grade weight and assessment tools based on student needs.

Consider trying out these techniques in your next course.

Timelines

Allow students to choose their own deadlines from a set of options or within a set of criteria

Let students pick a presentation topic and a time from a predefined list of dates

Create an online test that can be written across a 48-hour window

Weight

Drop students' lowest quiz score from their final grade

Allow students to complete two smaller assessments or one larger assessment

Facilitate the same assessment twice — once in small groups and once individually — and count the higher mark towards students' final grade

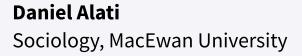
Tools & platforms

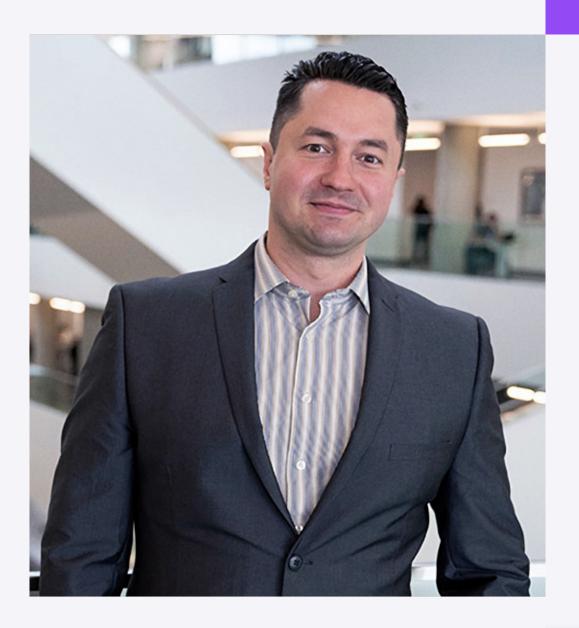
Using a platform that doesn't require an answer to all quiz questions — or only requiring answers to 75 percent of your quiz

Adapt a free or low-cost testing platform, or one that can be covered with financial aid

Use an assessment app that is compatible on both desktop and mobile and can be integrated with your learning management system Professor Spotlight:

Making assessments match student needs





The Challenge

Running online exams presented several challenges for Daniel Alati, Assistant Professor of Sociology at MacEwan University. At the top of the list was managing student accommodation requests without spending hours replying to emails and coordinating with campus accessibility services.

The Solution

Alati took advantage of Top Hat Test to ease student anxiety throughout several uncertain semesters during the 2020–2022 academic years. He can now set custom due dates and exam times for individual learners, without additional administrative work. Plus, autograded questions gave students a real-time look into their progress. Alati found marking traditional, graded questions was far more efficient in a digital format. Academic integrity was also top of mind for Alati. Top Hat Test allowed him to customize where and when students wrote their test, which not only reduced instances of cheating, but gave students the flexibility they desired.

The Result

A more flexible approach to test taking has led to greater student satisfaction and accommodation. As a result, Alati has noted minimal drop rates in his courses and high levels of satisfaction on student course surveys.

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Free template:

Exit ticket

Exit tickets are a type of formative assessment given to students at the end of class. They're used to see how well students understand the material and enable instructors to pivot their planning for their next lesson based on results.

Get access to a free exit ticket template with:

- Sample questions you can use to assess learning and support course planning
- Four exit ticket variations depending on your teaching goal
- Customizable fields to use across all of your courses

DOWNLOAD NOW

Equitable and Authentic Assessments

Equity-minded instructors check their biases.

They tailor their assessments to students from marginalized communities. And they do whatever it takes to minimize financial, cultural and academic barriers.

That's where authentic assessments come in. These assessments don't just measure the knowledge students have acquired. They serve as an indicator of how students will apply that knowledge. Authentic assessments are designed to prepare students for an evolving employment landscape, ensuring they develop the skills needed to solve pressing, real-world problems.



<u>Jesse Stommel</u>, co-founder of Hybrid Pedagogy and the Digital Pedagogy Labs, provides tips on how to design assessments that respond to student needs.

Nine authentic assessment ideas

Authenticity makes all the difference in helping students see value in their learning. Below you'll find our top assessment ideas for shaking up the status quo.

Before class	During class	After class
Authentic diagnostic assessments	Authentic formative assessments	Authentic summative assessments
Trial & error learning: Before introducing a new topic or learning unit, ask students to develop a hypothesis and anticipated results. Encourage students to think about how they might draw upon existing knowledge and non-academic concepts to support their argument.	Writing for publication: Ask students to write an op-ed or short story for a publication of their choosing. You might also ask students to edit a news story with several grammatical mistakes to help them hone their editing skills.	Case study: Depending on your field of study, ask students to develop a media kit (Communications), business plan (Marketing, Economics) or prescribed health care treatment (Nursing, Health professions). This could be a great assessment to break into smaller pieces.

Brochure:

Ask students to create an advertisement or brochure promoting a single aspect of your curriculum. You might challenge students further by asking them to design their work for a K-12 audience with little prior knowledge. Use the gaps in their comprehension to inform your future lessons.

Website development:

Give students a relevant topic and ask them to build a proposal for a website. Depending on your discipline, students may produce web copy for the home page (Marketing, Business) or share sample code for a page of their choosing (Computer Science).

Proposal:

Give students a chance to prepare a document they will likely create in their careers. Offer a scenario and ensure they outline the problem, opportunity, background, scope and tactics required to solve the challenge.

Learning inventory:

Get a handle on how students learn best and the supports they need to thrive in your course. Using survey questions, ask students about their study habits, note taking abilities and assessment preparation.² Use these insights to make your future assessment process more equitable.

Podcast:

Provide students with two-to-three sample topics and ask them to prepare a three-minute audio podcast discussing the topic of their choice. Get students to think further by asking them to market the podcast to an audience who holds no prior knowledge about the topic.

Role plays:

Students take on the role of a character or prominent figure in a relevant environment. Ask students to imitate this character in a specific scenario. This activity works well in pairs or small groups.

² Inventory of College-Level Study Skills. (n.d.) Indiana University South Bend. https://www.iusb.edu/students/academic-success-programs/academic-centers-for-excellence/study-skills.html

Designing with equity and authenticity

The Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning at Indiana University, Bloomington,³ details overused traditional testing techniques and what authentic alternatives can look like in your own course.

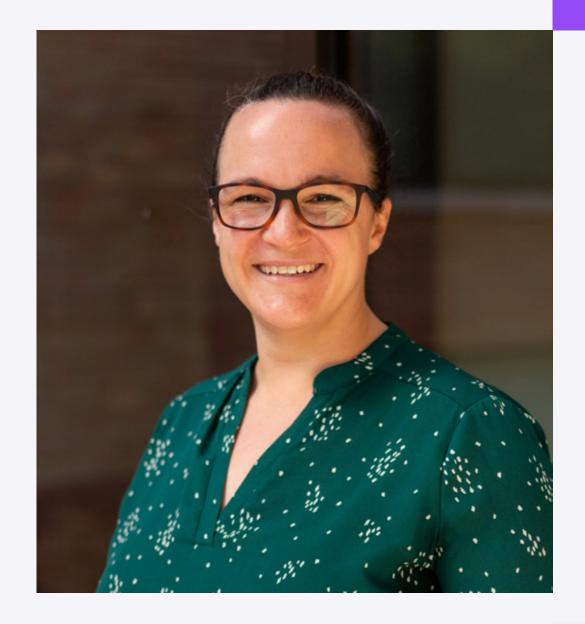
Traditional tests	Authentic alternatives
Require correct response	Let students justify how they arrived at a solution
Test goals and purpose are unknown to the student in advance	Clarity on test goals and purpose is provided to students in advance
Focus only on theoretical concepts	Focus on applying knowledge to scenarios students are likely to encounter out of the classroom
Involve 'yes' or 'no' responses and those that can be easily scored	Involve complex tasks where questions may be open for interpretation
Account for a significant portion of students' final grades & are a single snapshot of student progress	Account for four or five smaller tasks and promote an iterative learning process

³ Authentic Assessment (n.d.). Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning. https://citl.indiana.edu/teaching-resources/assessing-student-learning/authentic-assessment/index.html

Professor Spotlight:

Spreading out testing to boost understanding

Elizabeth SargentBiology, Georgia Southern University



The Challenge

Elizabeth Sargent, Biology Lecturer at Georgia Southern
University, wanted to reduce the pressure that came with highstakes testing. She also believed relying on a single exam wasn't
a measure of true understanding or effective in identifying
where students were struggling. Her evolving philosophy: quiz
students early and often, using several different approaches to
ease nerves and make learning more meaningful.

The Solution

Sargent spread multiple, lower stakes assessments across a four-week period in the lead up to exams. She used Top Hat to deliver pre-lecture quizzes, case study homework assignments and group exams, providing variety in testing methods and allowing students to build on their learning over time.

The Result

Creating a more collaborative and supportive testing environment has led to increased student outcomes. Sargent has seen a steady decline in drop, fail and withdrawal (DFW) rates along with improved participation and attendance scores. *Free template:*

Equitable assessment rubric

Want to add a dose of equity and authenticity to your course assessments but don't know where to start? Melissa Ko, Assessment & Curriculum Design Specialist at the University of California, Berkeley, has created a rubric to help you "score" your assessments during the planning phase.

DOWNLOAD MY RUBRIC

CHAPTER 3

Innovative Assessments

Unlike traditional tests, innovative assessments include prompts or questions that are more complex—allowing students to submit answers in different ways as opposed to relying exclusively on written responses.

Innovative assessments are designed with skills and competencies at the core. The ultimate goal is to get students to grasp how their learning can be applied to the world around them, the workplace and higher levels of education.⁴

⁴ National Research Council. (2010). Best Practices for State Assessment Systems, Part I: Summary of a Workshop. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/12906.

Nine innovative assessment ideas

The most innovative, compelling assessments will stay with students once they leave your course. Consider using some of the options below.

During class	After class
Innovative formative assessments	Innovative summative assessments
Illustrated quote: Choose a key quote from your textbook and ask students to depict their interpretation using imagery. Go one step further and ask students to share their work with a partner and compare both images.	Free choice project: Provide students with a rubric built around specific skills and ask them to demonstrate these skills using any medium. For example, students could choose role plays, create their own website, or run a political campaign.
	Innovative formative assessments Illustrated quote: Choose a key quote from your textbook and ask students to depict their interpretation using imagery. Go one step further and ask students to share their work with a

3-2-1 countdown:

Ask students to note three things they don't already know about the topic you're about to introduce, two things that they want to learn about the topic, and one thing they would like to start doing with what they've learned.

Shark tank:

Get students to invent a new product or service related to an area of your curriculum. Students then "pitch" their idea to the class, honing their presentation and creativity skills.

Community service:

Ask students to dedicate a set number of hours towards volunteering at a location relevant to your discipline. For example, History majors could volunteer at a local museum. This assessment allows students to explore potential career paths as well.

Micro theme:

Ask students to produce a succinct, written essay using only a single cue card. The goal is for students to retrieve information on your course material in an organized way.

Explain it to a famous person:

Ask students to explain today's lesson to someone famous using analogies or terminology that would make sense to that person. For example, Economics students could practice having a conversation on cryptocurrency with Elon Musk.

Social platform:

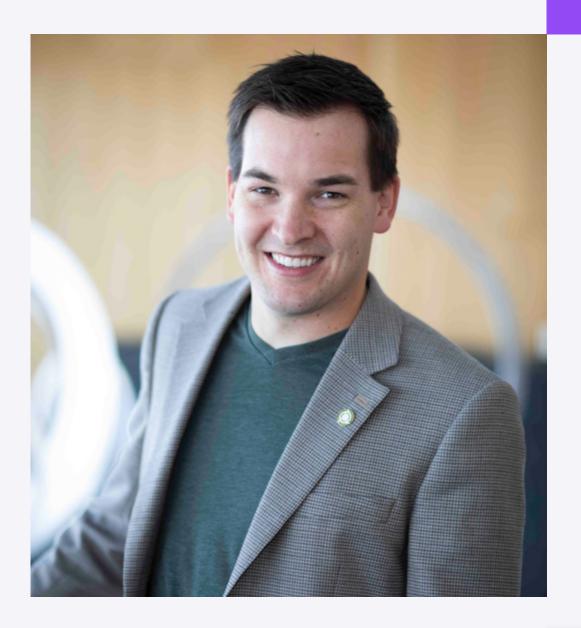
Give students an opportunity to convert your course curriculum — and the knowledge they've gathered throughout — into a social media handle. Ask students to write a set number of posts discussing various topics of your course supporting different media.

Professor Spotlight:

Creating a safe space for student feedback

Luke Green

Communications Studies, St. Cloud Technical & Community College



The Challenge

<u>Luke Green</u>, Instructor of Communications Studies, struggled to find learning materials that would allow for interaction and iterative feedback in his Introduction to Public Speaking course. His students weren't able to fully understand non-verbal facial cues in a static textbook. Aside from giving direct feedback — intimidating for both giver and receiver — students didn't have a way to request and review commentary on their speeches from their peers.

The Solution

Green co-authored his own Top Hat textbook, Introduction to Public Speaking, which made the process of facilitating peer feedback far less daunting. Rich with media, his textbook allows students to watch videos on how to effectively deliver speeches before practicing themselves. Paired with Top Hat's poll and discussion tools, students can now leave anonymous feedback on their peers' speeches — reducing the tension that once came with peer critiques.

The Result

Since introducing Top Hat in his course, Green saw a four percent increase on final grades and an eight percent increase on his instructor evaluation scores. Plus, his students love the ability to provide constructive feedback to one another in a safe and supportive environment.

Innovative grading techniques

Faculty who adopt innovative assessment solutions need to also think through how to best grade their students. We know traditional grading is among the most painstaking responsibilities of teaching today. In reality, many students may feel confused or surprised to receive a letter grade at the end of an assessment.

The following grading techniques⁵ are designed to give students greater clarity and autonomy over their educational journey. More importantly, they promote ongoing feedback and trust.

⁵ Ashe, D., TenHuisen, M., and Reilly C. (2020). *Alternative Grading Strategies*. University of North Carolina, Wilmington. https://uncw.edu/keepteaching/documents/alternativegradingadapt2020july7.pdf

Ungrading

This model replaces letter grades with frequent feedback and self-reflection. Example: Ask students to develop a portfolio, encompassing several high-quality items they produced for your course, along with a short letter that reflects on their biggest takeaways.

Specifications grading

All assignments and tests are graded on a pass/fail basis.

Providing clear criteria to students per letter grade is an essential element of this approach. Example: After earning at least three "Excellent" scores on their work, students get a 'B' grade. After earning at least five "Excellent" scores, they receive an 'A.'

Contract grading

This grading method favors the process in getting from point A to B as opposed to the final outcome or result. Instead of giving students letter grades after each assessment, students are given a single grade at the end of the semester based on agreed-upon factors such as attendance, reading completion, participation scores and meeting a specific bar for assignments and interactions.

Single-point rubric

An alternative to systematic grading, this rubric breaks aspects of any assignment into categories. Without using grades, faculty can weigh in on things that worked well and things that could be improved upon for each category. The benefit? Students get the space they need to process feedback, which lowers the stress that can come with traditional grades.

Free template:

Single-point rubric

Reduce the pressure that can come with traditional grading for both you and your students. Download this sample single point rubric to clearly identify student strengths while leaving room for candid feedback on different areas of their work.

DOWNLOAD MY RUBRIC

Taking Cheating Out of the Equation

Fear of failing your course.

Fear of losing scholarships or financial aid.

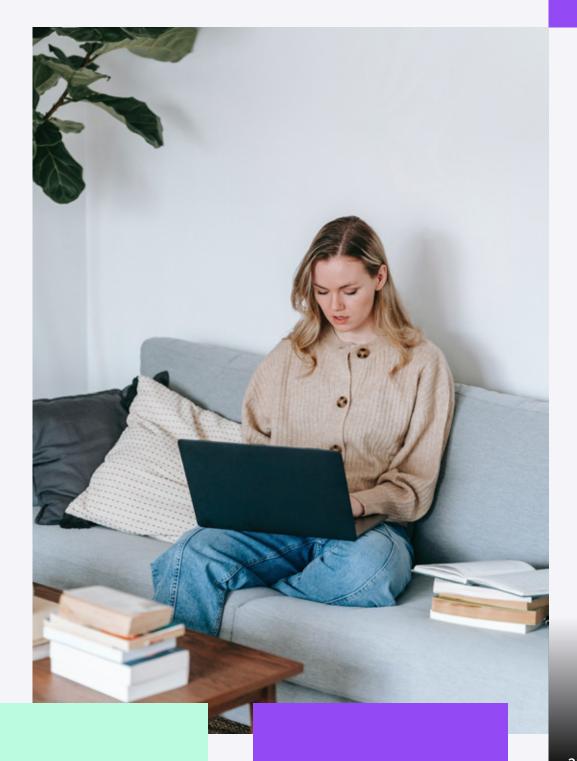
Fear of potentially having uncomfortable discussions with parents.

All are real scenarios that many students might try to get out of by cheating.

Why do students cheat?

There's a clear correlation between traditional testing methods and cheating. The single, standardized test administered at the end of the semester pits students against one another, pressuring them to put academic integrity on the back burner to get ahead of peers.

Before exploring ways to reduce cheating, it's important to understand why it occurs in the first place.



Pressure to achieve

Students internalize the external pressure to maintain a high standard of academic excellence. They sacrifice academic integrity in order to get ahead.

Unclear expectations

The criteria for what constitutes 'cheating' has become increasingly blurred. For example, to what extent is collaborating online deemed breaking academic standards? Students may engage in behavior indicative of cheating without even realizing it.

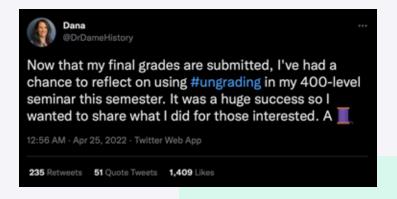
Little to no sense of belonging

When students feel distant from their professor or peers, they're more likely to engage in academic dishonesty. If students don't have any buyin throughout your course and see your assignment as a 'box to check,' you may be creating the conditions for cheating to occur.

4 ways to reduce the chance of cheating

Some factors that cause cheating may be out of your control. But setting up fair, flexible and equitable assessment conditions can reduce nerves and foster a sense of trust and transparency.

Here are four simple techniques you can use to create a community-first approach to testing.



Dana Wessell Lightfoot,

Associate Professor of
History and Department
Chair at the University of
Northern British Columbia,
shares how ungrading
helped improve engagement
and trust among students.

1

Use multiple versions of an exam

Shuffle the order that your quiz questions appear if you're running an in-person quiz. Doing so will make it more challenging for students to peek at their neighbors' responses.

2

Use open-book testing

When students know that they have access to their textbooks and online study materials, they're less likely to cheat. Use challenging application questions — versus true or false questions — to get students to critically analyze what they've learned.

3

Test students more often

Smaller, frequent quizzes that test students in a low-pressure environment aren't just more in line with learning science best practices, they're proven to reduce cheating. Consider swapping two high-stakes exams for four-to-five low-stakes quizzes spread throughout the semester.

4

Use testing windows

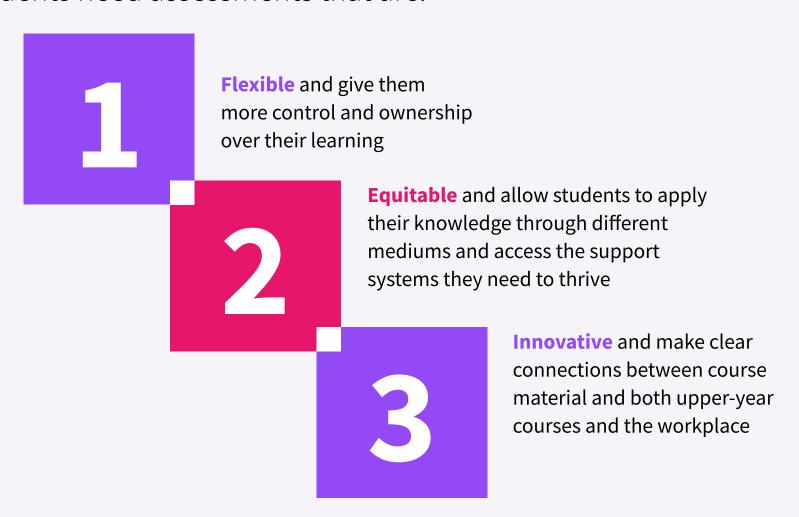
Requiring students to complete an assessment within an hour may increase stress for some. Instead, leave your online test open for two days or over the weekend to let students optimize their test-taking environment.

Final Thoughts

The 2020 and 2021 academic years have had their fair share of teaching hurdles.

Among the biggest lessons learned: it's time to turn the page on traditional testing methods. If higher education is to engage and retain students, faculty need to rethink the role that assessment plays in the classroom.

Students need assessments that are:



Students haven't just called for a change to assessment format. They've also advocated for more transparent grading structures that promote fairness and trust. Adjusting your approach to assessments doesn't have to be a daunting undertaking.

Take small steps using the strategies in this guide and seek out support from your institution's Center for Teaching and Learning. We can't wait to see the impact you'll make on your students for many semesters to come.



We give educators the flexibility to deliver personalized, meaningful and equitable learning experiences.

EXPLORE TOP HAT TODAY