



Checking for Understanding: Key Assessment for Learning Techniques

When we check all students' levels of understanding throughout each lesson, it sets the tone that everyone's thinking is important and necessary, and we forward the learning and engagement of all. Some techniques are too time-consuming to use as quick pulse checks, but using these key techniques together in all lessons allows us to track learning and adapt instruction appropriately on the spot.

In All Lessons, Teachers:

Ground the lesson in the learning target. This means they:

- Post the target in a visible, consistent location
- Discuss the target at the beginning of class with students, having students put the target into their own words, explain its meaning, and explain what meeting the target might look like
- Reference the target throughout the lesson
- Return explicitly to the target during the debrief, checking for student progress

Use Cold Call. This means they:

- Name the question before identifying students to answer it
- Call on students regardless of whether they have hands raised, using a variety of techniques such as random calls or tracking charts to ensure all students contribute, name sticks or name cards
- Scaffold the questions from simple to increasingly complex, probing for deeper explanations
- Connect thinking threads by returning to previous comments and connecting them to current ones. In this way, listening to peers is valued, and even after a student's been called on, he or she is part of the continued conversation and class thinking

Use No Opt Out. This means they:

- Require all students to correctly answer questions posed to them
- Always follow incorrect or partial answers from students by giving the correct answer themselves, cold calling other students, taking a correct answer from students with hands raised, cold calling other students until the right answer is given, and then returning to any student who gave an incorrect or partial answer for complete and correct responses

Use guided practice before releasing students to independent application. This means they:

- Ask students to quickly try the task at hand in pairs or in a low-stakes environment
- Strategically circulate, monitoring students' readiness for the task and noting students who may need re-teaching or would benefit from an extension or more challenging independent application
- Use an appropriate quick-check strategy (see below in Tools/Protocols section) to determine differentiation or effective support during independent application time

End with an effective debrief. This means they:

- Return explicitly to the learning targets (both academic and character/habits of work)
- Elicit student reflection towards the learning target(s), probing for students to provide evidence for their own and/or class progress
- Celebrate or have students celebrate individual, small group or whole class successes
- Identify or have students identify goals for improvement around the target(s)

Quick--Check Tools and Protocols

The following tools and protocols promote engagement by checking for all students' understanding and by reflecting on and emphasizing effective work habits.

Go-around

When a one- or two-word answer can show understanding, self- or group assessment, or readiness for a task, teachers ask students to respond to a standard prompt one at a time, in rapid succession around the room.

Whiteboards

Students have small white boards at their desks or tables and write their ideas/thinking/ answers down and hold up their boards for teacher and/or peer scanning.

Hot Seat

The teacher places key reflection or probing questions on random seats throughout the room. When prompted, students check their seats and answer the questions. Students who do not have a hot seat question are asked to agree or disagree with the response and explain their thinking.

Fist-to-Five or Thumb-Ometer

To show degree of agreement, readiness for tasks, or comfort with a learning target/concept, students can quickly show their thinking by putting their thumbs up, to the side or down; or by holding up (or placing a hand near the opposite shoulder) a fist for 0/Disagree or 1-5 fingers for higher levels of confidence or agreement.

Glass, Bugs, Mud

After students try a task or review a learning target or assignment, they identify their understanding or readiness for application using the windshield metaphor for clear vision. Glass: totally clear; bugs: a little fuzzy; mud: I can barely see.

Red Light, Green Light

Students have red, yellow, and green objects accessible (e.g. popsicle sticks, poker chips, cards), and when prompted to reflect on a learning target or readiness for a task, they place the color on their desk that describes their comfort level or readiness (red: stuck or not ready; yellow: need support soon; green: ready to start). Teachers target their support for the reds first, then move to yellows and greens. Students change their colors as needed to describe their status.

Table Tags

Place paper signs/table tents in three areas with colors, symbols or descriptors that indicate possible student levels of understanding or readiness for a task or target. Students sit in the area that best describes them, moving to a new area when relevant.

Sticky Bars

Create a chart that describes levels of understanding, progress or mastery. Have students write their names or use an identifying symbol on a sticky note and place their notes on the appropriate place on the chart.

Learning Line-ups

Identify one end of the room with a descriptor such as “Novice” or “Beginning” and the other end as “Expert” or “Exemplary”. Students place themselves on this continuum based on where they are with a task or learning target. Invite them to explain their thinking to the whole class or the people near them.

Human Bar Graph

Identify a range of levels of understanding or mastery (e.g. beginning/developing/ accomplished or Confused/I’m okay /I am rocking!) as labels for 3-4 adjacent lines. Students then form a human bar graph by standing in the line that best represents their current level of understanding.

Admit and Exit Tickets

Any relevant questions, prompts, or graphic displays of student thinking can be captured on a small sheet of paper and scanned by the teacher or other students to determine a student’s readiness for the next step or assess learning from a lesson. Teachers may use admit slips as a “ticket to enter” a discussion, protocol or activity. These may also be used as “tickets to leave.”

Presentation Quizzes

Whenever peers present, other students may think they are not responsible for the information. Pair student presentations and sharing with short quizzes at the end of class.

Catch and Release

When students are working on their own, they often need clarification or pointers so that they do not struggle for too long of a period or lose focus. A useful ratio of work time to checks for understanding or clarifying information is seven minutes of work time (release), followed by two minutes of teacher- directed clarifications or use of one of the quick-check strategies (catch).

Four Corners

“Four Corners” is an interactive way for students to demonstrate their thinking, or solidify new information, about a topic.

Procedure:

1. Determine a question for students to consider
2. Create 4 choice sheets, each with a different word or phrase that responds to the question
3. Post each of the 4 choice sheets in a different corner (or area) of the room
4. Pose the question to students, and direct them to respond, or ‘vote,’ by moving to one of the four corners
5. Once students are in corners, ask them to talk with other students in their corner about why they chose that response

Milling to Music

“Milling to Music” is a Checking for Understanding Technique where students can share their thinking, class work, or homework in an interactive way with their peers. This activity is similar to Musical Chairs, except there are no chairs and no one gets ‘tagged-out.’ While the music is playing, students should dance around to move throughout the room; when the music stops, each student will share his/her thinking or work with the student closest to her/him. Have students do this twice, so they have the opportunity to share with two peers.