

ALIGNMENT

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

By the end of this module, you should be able to define alignment for the purpose of these modules and explain why it is important. You should also be able to explain how to “unpack” a standard to understand its content and use the assessment blueprint to document the skills embedded within it.

KEY CONCEPTS

Alignment

For the purpose of this series of modules, alignment describes the degree to which the content of an assessment is aligned with the content of the standards you intend to measure and what you plan to teach in the classroom. We define content in these modules as the core concepts and procedures in a standard, assessment or assessment item.

This alignment of standards to assessments and instruction ensures that the assessment measures what you want students to know and be able to do.¹ If the content in an assessment is different from the content in the standards and skills a teacher intends to measure, she may unintentionally measure her students’ ability to do something else. For example, if a teacher were to write an assessment item to measure her students’ ability to add fractions, she could unintentionally measure her students’ advanced reading ability if she uses vocabulary that is well above grade level.

How to Unpack a Standard

To ensure alignment, you can study the content in the standard that students need to master and then address that content in your assessments and instructional plans. One way to study a standard is to unpack it into the skills embedded within it to fully understand what constitutes mastery of the standard.² Some standards contain just one skill. Other standards address a range of skills.

Unpacking the standards allows you to “call out” or identify all the skills that you will need to teach and measure. It is key to your ability to write or select assessments that are aligned with standards.

How to Design Aligned Assessment Items

Let’s take a look at two assessment items and discuss the alignment of their content with a third-grade standard that contains one skill: Interpret whole-number quotients of whole numbers.

Here is an item that is not well aligned with the content of the standard.

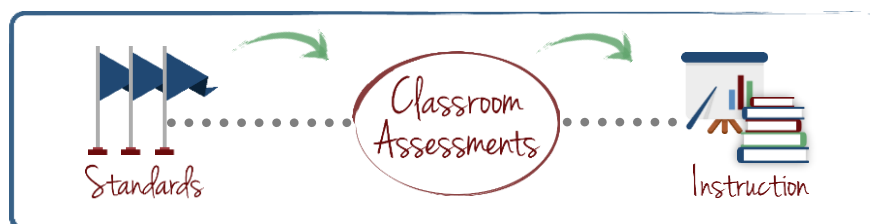
What is $12 \div 5$?

This item *is not* well aligned with the standard’s content because the standard states that students should be able to work with *whole-number quotients of whole numbers*, in other words, division problems in which the numbers in both the problem and the answer are all whole numbers. A problem that involves decimals (the answer to $12 \div 5$ is either 2.4 or 2 with a remainder of 2) is beyond the scope of this standard.

Here is an item that *is* well aligned with the content of the standard.

What is $12 \div 3$?

This item is well aligned with the content of the standard because it asks students to work with the whole-number quotient of whole numbers. (The answer is 4.)



CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

Assessment Items

1. Why is alignment critical to a well-designed assessment? What might happen if an assessment item is not aligned in terms of content?

2. Consider whether the assessment item is aligned with the content in this writing standard from Hawaii: Create an organizational structure that lists reasons and provide reasons that support the opinion.³

Read the paragraph and complete the task that follows it.

Children should choose their own bedtime. There are things to do, and most have homework. Some people need more sleep, but children like talking to friends. The time to go to bed should be children's decision when they are tired they go to bed earlier. There are activities to go to, so children learn to be responsible.

Rewrite the paragraph by organizing it correctly and adding ideas that support the opinion that is given.

Answers

1. Why is alignment critical to a well-designed assessment? What might happen if an assessment item is not aligned in terms of content?

Alignment is critical to a well-designed assessment because it ensures that an assessment measures what teachers intend it to measure. If the content in an assessment is different from the content in the standards and skills a teacher intends to measure, she may unintentionally measure her students' ability to do something else. For example, if a teacher were to write an assessment item to measure her students' ability to add fractions, she could unintentionally measure her students' advanced reading ability if she uses vocabulary that is well above grade level.

2. Consider whether the assessment item is aligned with the content in this writing standard from Hawaii: Create an organizational structure that lists reasons and provide reasons that support the opinion.⁴

Read the paragraph and complete the task that follows it.

Children should choose their own bedtime. There are things to do, and most have homework. Some people need more sleep, but children like talking to friends. The time to go to bed should be children's decision when they are tired they go to bed earlier. There are activities to go to, so children learn to be responsible.

Rewrite the paragraph by organizing it correctly and adding ideas that support the opinion that is given.

The item is well aligned to the standard. The standard includes two skills: Create an organizational structure that lists reasons and provide reasons that support the opinion. The item asks students to reorganize the paragraph, which measures mastery of the first skill. It also asks students to add ideas that support the opinion that is given, which measures mastery of the second skill.

¹ Kansas State Department of Education, "Assessment Literacy Project" and Ohio Department of Education, "Assessment Literacy: Identifying and Developing Valid and Reliable Assessments" (2013).

² Moody, Michael, and Jason Stricker, *Strategic Design for Student Achievement* (2008).

³ Hawaii Department of Education, "Language Arts Grade 3 Common Core Standards."

⁴ Ibid