

# FIRST YEAR CORE COURSE LEADERS' COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE TOOLKIT

## FIRST YEAR COURSE LEADERS TOOLKIT ITEM

*First assessment items*

THE USQ  
CoPs PROJECT

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and  
Faculty of Business CoP

<http://www.usq.edu.au/cops>

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### Topic: First assessment items

#### Thinking about your first assessment items

##### What is the intended outcome?

To design first assessment items that build a clear picture of existing student knowledge and skills, and/or provide an appropriate platform for basic knowledge and skill development at both the course and discipline level.

##### What is the established practice?

Many course leaders already use one or a combination of testing, diagnostic, developmental and low-weighted first assessment items. However, others rely on more standard means of assessment such as higher weighted tests, exams and higher weighted, stand-alone assignments that focus on content knowledge.

##### What are the advantages for both teachers and students in considering first assessment items?

The assessment strategies listed here help teachers by providing a clearer picture of student learning levels, and strategies for improving student learning outcomes for major assessment items within their course. Consideration of first assessment items helps students by providing opportunities to understand and develop foundational knowledge and skills in a way that is appropriately targeted and relatively low-risk.

#### Background

Initial experiences of the learning and teaching environment are important for students. Add to this the generally accepted assertion that assessment is a key element in determining students' experience of their courses and it becomes clear why course leaders carefully consider first assessment items in first year.

#### Challenge

The challenge for first year course leaders is to design and implement first assessment items that either establish current levels of student learning, or begin the development of academic skills in a way that allows students to successfully make the transition to learning in the higher education context. Given the importance of building student confidence in the initial weeks of their university experience, assessment items ideally offer a realistic, attainable challenge for first year students.

## **What kinds of first assessment items can we use?**

Some CoP members use their first assessment items to ascertain current levels of student knowledge: both in terms of disciplinary and skills-based learning. These items can take the form of [skills inventories](#), [tests](#) or [diagnostic items](#) that focus on one key component of the major course assessment. First assessment items such as these are formative because students receive some initial feedback, which allows them to improve their performance in subsequent course assessment tasks.

Many CoP members design their first assessment items to be more manageable and less risky for students. Some provide [scaffolded assessment](#) that is supported by teaching and resources, which serve as a 'safety net', and also reduces the number of steps students are required to go through for completion. Scaffolding consists of learning and teaching activities that are designed to support students in their development of knowledge and skills; it builds on what students already know, using support and feedback from teachers and peers. Others use lower weighted assessment so students can learn from it without risk of overall failure. [Assessment items](#) can be designed to help students become familiar with disciplinary practices, norms and conventions.

Many of these assessment tasks are developmental: they are designed to help students build the comprehension and other skills they will need to successfully complete their major assignment. These assessment items place feedback at the centre of the student learning process.

### **Key points for first assessment items**

- First assessment items should present a realistic challenge for first year students that achieves learning aims with a relatively low risk
- First assessment items should be weighted so students can learn from mistakes without jeopardising their overall course grade
- First assessment items can provide teachers with information about students' current knowledge and skills, as they relate to major assessment tasks
- First assessment items can build student engagement levels with course content, readings and materials, whether in hard copy or online
- First assessment items can be designed to build student knowledge and skills, with the aid of feedback, to prepare them for subsequent, more heavily weighted items.

### **Final Word**

The staff approaches here represent key aims of first assessment items. This includes both assessing student entry-level knowledge and skills, and developing foundational disciplinary knowledge and academic literacies to facilitate student transition. However, first assessment items ideally help students begin their transition to higher education by providing realistic challenges that are relatively low-risk.