Tips for Evaluating Student Work

Topics:

- Marking for Grades K-6 and General Tips
- How to Design Tests
- Marking Projects
- An Example Test (Grade 2 level: science/weather unit)

Marking for Grades K-6 and General Tips

Here are some points to consider:

1. The public school system uses letter grades for report cards (e.g. A+, B, C-) for K-6. (You could to do the same rather than being concerned with calculating objective and numerical percentages for this younger stage of a child's education.)
2. Keeping a "portfolio" (e.g. a box for each year of schoolwork per student) can be an acceptable way to prove (if needed) what the child has learned and how his or her skills have progressed over the year at home. (Actually, a portfolio shows more than just keeping a record of numbers. It is also easier and less time consuming than keeping a "teacher's journal/diary" of daily accomplishments or filing daily or weekly test results in every subject.) The other advantage about keeping a portfolio is that it is so real and honest that it shows whether or not you are accomplishing much of value. If not much of worth is done during the year, a portfolio will also show the poor quality of your home school. (Of course, the child's abilities need to be kept in mind and therefore, portfolios for major disabilities or long-term illness situations will perhaps reflect a smaller portfolio.) Tests and notebooks as well as photos of models and field trips, small projects, other schoolwork, and record sheets would be parts of a portfolio. "Rule of thumb": a good size of box to contain 1 to 3 grades would be about 60cm x 30cm x 30cm (depending on your curriculum choices and the number of bulkier projects that are stored as opposed to just photographed). Medium-sized plastic totes are also good. As the years go on, an older student can practice organizational skills

over the summer and go through the boxes again to lessen the amount to more important items for long-term storage (e.g. throwing away most drill sheets, math exercise workbooks but keeping creative writing stories, science projects, etc.).

3. Evaluate your child's work for the sake of the child – his or her growth in learning, sense of accomplishment (encouragement), and need for improvement (humility). "Fear of others" is not a good reason to keep on giving lots of tests. Even though some locations require periodic testing (e.g. annual standardized testing), you will not "ruin" a child if he or she is not given weekly marks throughout the year. If you don't think that weekly tests are working in your home school, eliminate most or all of them without the guilt (skip over those pages in a resource) and simply keep a portfolio of your child's other work. (Call it a "project-based" style if what is evaluated are primarily projects instead of tests.)
4. Each big topic could be evaluated in all 3 of these ways:
    a. an oral presentation
    b. a hands-on project/model building/art/invention or a write-up of a demonstration/experiment and
    c. a written test or a written summary of something he or she learned.

    (This is a suggestion often also seen in Ministry of Education standards.)

5. Some people promote the idea that only "objective testing" is needed and that it is the best evaluation method since it is "unbiased". However, I would strongly disagree with this. Don't be afraid of subjective evaluations just because you are the "loving mom" (or "loving dad") who would be of course, biased in your opinions – a good parent will not seek to reward mediocre work when they know the child could do better. Instead they will point out things for improvement. (A good mom wants that child to improve and grow up properly even more than a caring classroom teacher would.) And a loving parent won't be harsh with a child who tries his or her best. Learn by practice/experience to give honest, encouraging, subjective reports and you'll gain respect from those you teach. Like any other teacher, you may sometimes make errors in judgement but this is still something you and your child can learn from.
6. Both the "real world of work" and schools evaluate the skills and knowledge of a person with a variety of both objective and subjective methods such as:
    a. tests
    b. projects (both the assigned and independent types)

c. general daily work (e.g. Can he or she understand the material and show it by completing work in a reasonable time with few or no mistakes and minimal help from the teacher? Does a notebook reflect if lessons are done and complete?)
d. conversations… retelling what he or she has done or learned recently (e.g. at the lunch table).

Therefore, strongly consider preparing your child for what is beyond your home by evaluating a student's work by using a *variety* of evaluation methods – in other words, don't rely on just "tests/quizzes/exams" to get a mark. And don't limit your curriculum choices based on whether or not the resource has "chapter tests and answer keys" included in it. Many good resources do not come with "tests and answers" and some books that do have "tests and answers" don't teach as much useful content or problem-solving or thinking skills as what it should be.

7. There can be other disadvantages to ONLY using objective tests to get a mark:
    a. Since it is routine-type of work, just having drills, tests, and quizzes can be boring for students.
    b. Tests can stifle opportunities for being ingenious or going beyond in further research of topic or application of knowledge. It can lower experience/practice of problem-solving skills and having to think for answers. (Employers want "problem-solvers", not just those who can regurgitate facts. While the goal of education need not be "just preparing for a career, a major part of schooling (including home schooling) is preparing for adult work situations.)
    c. Testing alone does not help prepare a student for the "real world" as much as experiencing subjective evaluations in addition to objective tests.
    d. Testing may not show a true picture of what some students can do or understand (e.g. those whose strength is not written work). Standardized tests, in particular, can discourage those "square pegs" who do not fit into "round holes". Children who may indeed be very brilliant and gifted, may have poor written test results and then conclude that they are "failures".
    e. Tests are sometimes designed in such a strange way of asking questions that it can confuse some students unnecessarily. The student may indeed know the answers well but are confused by the format or wording as to

what exactly is being asked. (Not all test questions are designed to really effectively evaluate what a child knows.)

f. For the teacher, tests can be more time-consuming and more tedious to mark than listening to a verbal presentation or looking at a model or other kind of project. Marking papers and creating tests can take time away from family time and personal time (just ask any schoolteacher!) Home educators should not need to mark oodles of test papers since, unlike classroom teachers, they LIVE with their students and interact with them much more and closer and therefore should have a better general idea of whether or not their children have grasped something well enough to move on or if they need more review. (Tests ARE helpful for classroom teachers who do not know if all or how many students have understood enough of the lessons to move on.)

Having said the above cautioning against the dependence of test scores only…

HOW DOES A TEACHER DESIGN A GOOD TEST? WHAT ARE SOME "RULES OF THUMB" FOR GRADES K-6?

To come to the following conclusions, I have looked through what schoolteachers (both within my own family and those who taught me in public school) designed for their students. There is a general consistency as to what a test looked like from grade to grade. There is also a general reasonableness to the tests as to both the length and frequency of tests (they were NOT every week in most subjects) and the variety of formats used in asking students to provide answers on the lessons they learned. I also have read in a teacher's college textbook from the 1950's/60's of general suggestions as to size of print, etc.

1. Tests – one per topic/unit of study (e.g. "Fractions", "Addition", "The Human Body", "Rocks and Minerals", "Time", "Short Vowels", "Punctuation", "Parts of Speech", "Mapping Skills") (Note: for older grades, such as Grade 7-12, more details are taught so more tests may be designed such as "The Digestive System", "The Musculoskeletal System" rather than one general one on the human body.)
2. One page per grade for primary level (e.g. Grade 2 = 2 pages). After that 2-4 pages for older grades of handwritten size of print.
3. Amount of print per page? Size of print on a page should be appropriate to grade level (e.g. Grade 1 and 2 = 18 pt. regular font size such as Arial or Times New Roman or slightly big hand printing). Our teachers used to hand print or hand write our tests when we were in school (rather than typing them – at least

until upper grades). To do similar, put a normal piece of lined paper under a blank white page and write every other line (or for upper grades, on every line).

4. Paper? Bright white paper with black letters are the hardest to read (even though it is also likely the least expensive). (The contrast can bother some children more than others.) Cream paper or pastel paper is nice with black ink (but avoid the bright neon tones and dark colours). If you need to use white paper, consider having the letters in dark purple, green, blue, red, or brown ink instead of black if your student struggles with black on white. (There is an easy way to change the colour like this if you have a black and white resource and a computer.) Just one colour (instead of rainbow colours) is sufficient and helps a child focus on the page's work without being too distracted.
5. Variety of formats: Pick 3-6 of these types of formats per test. And use no more than 2-4 formats per page. (To teach students how to answer a variety of types of questions, in the past, we have sold a helpful reproducible book called Test-Taking Strategies (REM167) published by Remedia Publications for grades 4-8+. That ISBN # is 0-15617-51162-7).
    a. Fill-in-the-blank
    b. True/False
    c. Underline (or circle or colour) the correct answer
    d. Multiple Choice (in these questions, 1-2 statements are close to the correct answer but not exactly right, 1 statement is far-fetched/silly, and 1 is correct. The rule of "pick C or the longest answer" no longer seems to be as popular for exams so it would be best not to teach your child that "rule".)
    e. List this number of _____:
    f. Draw or sketch a diagram of _____:
    g. Make a graph showing _____:
    h. Calculate _____:
    i. Match column A with column B
    j. Short answer questions (answer in a sentence or a paragraph, depending on the level and amount of information). Using complete sentence(s),
        i. describe _____:
        ii. define _____:
        iii. explain how (or why) _____:
        iv. write about one example of _____:
6. Do not crowd every possible question into a test and make sure the student has sufficient room to answer neatly in their size of handwriting. Unless the format is

already a "column format" (e.g. "matching"), keep all test questions in a single column.

7. Amount of warning? Short "pop quizzes" are fine occasionally. Otherwise, one school day ahead for a notice for an upcoming test should be sufficient. Studying long or late at night should not be needed, especially at this age.
8. Drills: tests such as math drills should have a similar size print as tests involving words. (Sometimes, you may even want the size slightly bigger for numbers.) Written drills of 1-2 minutes can accomplish better review than 5 minute ones (which can become boring and blurry partway through the drill). Flashcard speed drills may work for some students but for some children, it is better to slow down to a reasonable speed and take the "flash" (i.e. suddenness, pressure, panic/fear/nervousness) out of the flashcard drills. (Posting flashcards in a pocket chart on a wall and pointing to them may be less stressful for such students.)
9. Consider keeping back a review page from a daily workbook (if the format is similar) and use it like a test.
10. Exams…reviewing an entire half-year or year of work in one test (e.g. history and science topics)… these are not recommended until later grade levels (i.e. Grade 9+). "Review tests" that simply test skills that are used on a daily or weekly basis throughout the year are OK if you really think they are needed but generally, you should not need to worry about review tests or exams since you already likely know if your child practices the skills or constantly "forgets". If a skill is seemingly "lost", reteach it and watch for improvement in regular schoolwork. (Retesting will not show anything more than what the regular schoolwork will show and so, in my opinion, is futile in evaluating if the skill is finally "caught" or not.)

MARKING PROJECTS

1. Time/Punctuality: Was it done on time?
2. Neatness: in written work, diagrams, charts, etc. (proper use of eraser, ruler, margins, spacing between words, capitalization, punctuation)
3. Content: Is this a reasonable amount of work given the size and type of the assignment?
4. Research:
    a. Sources: consider both the variety and number of sources looked at (suggestion: 1-2 sources per grade level i.e. 6-12 sources in a large Grade 6 project). Sources include information books, personal interviews, encyclopaedia articles, accurate website articles, newspaper clipping, etc.
    b. Plagiarism: did the student summarize information in own words or just copy out the sentences from another source? (It should be in own words with a few quotations or none at all.)
    c. Effort: How in-depth did the student research? Were the sources at or above their regular reading level? Did the student "go beyond" the basics in gathering the details if they are beyond primary grade levels?
5. Originality: inventions and/or own ideas or designs
6. Display and Creativity: use of colour, fonts/lettering, visuals (does the project include visuals such as pictures, graphs, etc.)
7. Application: Can the student verbally explain what he or she learned and how to apply this to future study or practical work?
8. Improvement: Does the student know what could make the project better?

Joy's suggested marking for projects if you are not giving a general "letter" grade and want it broken down into specific sections of work (based on the above 8 points).

1. ___/5 (minus 1 mark per day late)
2. ___/15 (minus ½ marks for obvious mistakes or grade as per general appearance)
3. ___/10 (according to what was expected and clearly assigned)
4. ___/2, ___/5, ___8 (6/8 would be an example of "good", 8/8 is excellent)
5. ___10
6. ___/30
7. ___/10
8. ___/5

Total: ____/100 (A+= 90-100, A=80-89, B=70-79, C=60-69, D=below 60)

Here is an example of a test at a grade 2 level, based on these principles:

An Example Test: Grade 2 Level

A Weather Test – 2 pages

(Note to teacher: If desired, you may also provide a word bank here of correctly spelled words.)

Fill in the blank:

Smoke and chemicals in the air can become _____ and _____ _____.

When water droplets rise up into the sky on a warm, sunny day, this is called _____.

Air that is moving is called _____.

Circle the correct answer:

A bright, clear day shows that the air pressure is high/low.

Water droplets on plant leaves show transpiration/evaporation.

Snow, rain, and hail are called condensation/precipitation.

We live in a tropical rainforest/temperate climate.

Draw and label 3 types of clouds: cumulus, cirrus, and stratus

Draw lines to match these temperatures:

30˚C	the boiling point of water
0˚C	a cool spring day
100˚C	a hot summer day
-25˚C	a cold winter day
6˚C	the freezing point of water

List 3 kinds of wild weather storms: _____

_____

_____

Draw and colour a rainbow below (with the colours in order).