

Task Development Guidelines with Engagement Considerations for Item Writers

Engagement is strongly related to student performance on assessment tasks, especially for students who have been typically less advantaged in school settings (e.g., English Language Learners or students of historically marginalized backgrounds) (Arbutnot, 2011; Darling-Hammond et al., 2008; Walkington, 2013). In the traditional assessment paradigm, however, engagement has not been a goal of testing and concerns about equity have focused on issues of bias and accessibility. A common tactic to avoid bias has been to create highly decontextualized items. Unfortunately, this has come at the cost of decreasing students' opportunities to *create meaning* in the task as well as their motivation to *cognitively invest* in the task thereby undermining students' opportunities to adequately demonstrate their knowledge and skills. These task development guidelines offer ways to incorporate engagement considerations to performance tasks (and their associated classroom activities and aligned rubrics) to support students' ability to create meaning and cognitively invest in the task. These guidelines specifically aim to help item writers by designing performance tasks that are engaging to all students, of diverse socioeconomic, cultural, and language backgrounds.

It may not be feasible for the performance task you design to include all the dimensions. However, paying careful attention to the ways in which student engagement is fostered in a task is likely to affect how students approach and complete the task. A task, for example, may incorporate Autonomy, Authenticity, and Higher Order Thinking Skills, but it may not meet the bar of Relevance for all students. Yet, by providing students with opportunities for Autonomy, Authenticity, and Higher Order Thinking Skills, the task becomes one that students would find more engaging.

SCALE

Stanford Center for
Assessment, Learning,
& Equity

scope
Stanford Center for
Opportunity Policy in Education

Stanford Center for
Opportunity Policy
in Education

edpolicy.stanford.edu
@scope_stanford

Engaging tasks generally incorporate at least 3 of these engagement dimensions and must include both task features.

Engagement Dimensions/ Task Features (TF)	Ways to Incorporate Engagement Dimensions into Performance Tasks		
<p>1. Clear Purpose (TF): The task is coherent and clearly stated upfront (rather than waiting for the culminating prompt to state the overall task purpose)</p>	The purpose of the performance task is clear to students from its introduction;	Yes	No
	AND it is clear that each of the items are intended to help students complete the overarching task. (The performance task should have one overarching task, rather than an assortment of items with a common theme, say a variety of math items associated only by a theme or setting.)		
<p>2. Relevance: Answers the question, why does the educational content <i>matter</i> to students? and provides students with a reason for doing the task</p> <p>(Question the relevance of the task if the context is largely known primarily to upper-income students, because then it would not be a meaningful context to which <i>all</i> students can relate.)</p>	Connect the task/topic/context to students’ lived experiences, interests, or prior knowledge;	Yes	No
	OR identify the prior knowledge, familiarity, or experience that is expected, implied, assumed, and/or required of the task;		
	OR personalize the task context to the students;		
	OR explicate background knowledge with definitions of key terms associated with the context by activating students’ prior knowledge or building background knowledge through the classroom activity or in the task itself. This background knowledge should include introduction to and definition of key terms, especially for students who may be English Language Learners.		
<p>3. Authenticity: Requires students to solve real-world problems that have value beyond school.</p>	Emphasize real-world connections;	Yes	No
	OR provide opportunities for students to demonstrate original applications of knowledge and skills used in the real world;		
	OR incorporate a variety of information sources and stimuli that are representative of artifacts used in the world beyond the classroom;		
	OR provide opportunities for students to communicate their knowledge to an audience beyond the teacher, classroom, and school by incorporating simulations or plausible scenarios in which the students assume a role of an actor. The task should explicitly state what is expected of students (e.g., “write a letter to your mother explaining which is the best product and include three reasons with evidence”). Care should be taken to ensure that the role and scenario are age and developmentally appropriate for students.		
<p>4. Autonomy: Invites students to choose or self-initiate an action.</p>	Provide students with opportunities to make procedural decisions and choices such as handling and manipulating instructional materials and ideas;	Yes	No
	OR require students to justify and explain their answers or compare and contrast competing ideas in order to provide cognitive choices in the task such as choosing which side of an argument they wish to argue for/against.		

• Task Development Guidelines with Engagement Considerations for Item Writers •

Engagement Dimensions/ Task Features (TF)	Ways to Incorporate Engagement Dimensions into Performance Tasks		
<p>5. Higher Order Thinking Skills: Requires students to employ their higher order thinking skills rather than simple recall</p>	Invite students to engage with challenging tasks that ask students to analyze and interpret information beyond simple recall ;	Yes	No
	OR offer students the opportunity to interpret and analyze information represented in multiple formats ;		
	OR invite students to employ their higher order thinking skills to argue for or against an issue, question, or stance ;		
	OR provide students the opportunity to grapple with complex information to choose which side of an issue for which they would like to argue ;		
	OR require students to justify and explain their answers or compare and contrast competing ideas;		
	OR invite students to demonstrate their understanding in multiple ways .		
<p>6. Clear Expectations (TF): The expectations for their work product are described with an explanation for how to do well</p>	The task describes what is expected of students' work products , specifying the audience and format of work product (e.g., "write a letter to your school principal with your recommendation.");	Yes	No
	OR the task describes how students will be evaluated ;		
	OR the task describes to students how to do well . For example, the task may describe a high-scoring or exemplary work product to communicate clear expectations.		
<p>7. Collaboration: Invites students to work together in pairs or small groups to share ideas, ask questions, and build on each other's ideas</p>	Explicitly instructs students to "talk with a neighbor" in the classroom activity;	Yes	No
	OR explicitly instructs students to discuss in their small groups (and provide a structure for such group interaction, e.g., with roles) in the classroom activity;		
	OR uses the task scenario to situate students in a plot where they collaborate with another student, a family member, a coach, etc.;		
	OR incorporates the use of technology to allow students to conduct collaborative work online.		

Engagement Dimensions/ Task Features (TF)	Ways to Incorporate Engagement Dimensions into Performance Tasks		
<p>8. Self-Assessment: Permits students to monitor and evaluate their work prior to submission</p>	Remind students throughout the performance task to check their work and to make sure that all items of the performance task work together;	Yes	No
	OR incorporate ways for students to check for reasonableness ;		
	OR use computer-testing technology with the capability to provide auto-feedback to students (e.g., if the answer should be in numeric form and students enter letters, a pop up can inform them of the incorrect format of the response);		
	OR permit students to review and revise their answers as they progress through the task components.		
<p>9. Overarching Engagement Question: After completing the checklist, consider this question: Why would students find this task engaging?</p>	<p>The task must be one that students would want to do. By incorporating various task features outlined in this tool, the task should be able to answer to the question, “Why would students find this task engaging?” The task must also be age appropriate and accessible to the diversity of students who will be completing the performance task.</p>		

References

- Arbutnot, K. (2011). *Filling in the blanks: Understanding standardized testing and the black-white achievement gap*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Barron, B., Pearson, D. P., et al. (2008). *Powerful learning: What we know about teaching for understanding*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Walkington, C. A. (2013). Using adaptive learning technologies to personalize instruction to student interests: The impact of relevant contexts on performance and learning outcomes. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 105(4), 932-945.

The Authors

Soung Bae is a Senior Research and Policy Analyst at the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education

Kari Kokka is a Math Research Associate at the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning, and Equity



Stanford Center for
Opportunity Policy
in Education

edpolicy.stanford.edu
@scope_stanford



Stanford Center for
Assessment, Learning,
& Equity