

TEST DEVELOPMENT



Test development

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International tests such as IELTS and TOEFL are high quality tests that provide reliable and useful results. Achieving this level of quality is very time consuming and expensive.

Major test development can be thought of as a cycle consisting of several phases. Having decided why we need a new test and what kind of test it's going to be, we begin with a *planning phase* to identify the potential candidates and test users.

Then comes the *design phase* when the test specifications, text features and the range of topics are developed and sample materials are written.

In the *development phase*, these materials are trialed and feedback is collected from everyone who's been involved. This often leads to changes that can mean a return to planning and/or design to try to get it right.

Once the specifications have been agreed and finalized, we enter an *operational phase* which involves the construction and administration of a complete test.

In the *monitoring phase*, performance on the new test is reviewed and all materials are revised and updated to make sure they continue to match the original aim. This completes the *test development cycle*, though evidence from this stage will contribute to any potential future changes to the test.

So how does this relate to classroom tests? Well, in fact, there's almost no difference between the way a teacher should develop a classroom test and the way a major test is produced. The stages of development are the same, although of course the content will be different.

In terms of *planning*, teachers often produce tests for specific classes following a schedule that's set by their employer, so the difference between a classroom test and a major international test is simply one of content, timing, format and of reporting.

Teachers know their students very well so they don't need to write a long list of their characteristics in the *design phase*. But it's still a good idea to develop a profile of a class that can be updated every year, if for no other reason than it will make it easier to write a similar test again later. Briefly note their personal information, such as age or class level. Then consider what they know about the topic and whether they all have roughly the same background knowledge or if it's quite varied. Of course it also helps to estimate how strong or weak the group's language is.

Most teachers have never seen a test specification and you may be wondering what use it is. For classroom tests, it's to help you remember all the things you need to take into consideration in your test *development*, because you need to make quite a lot of decisions about your test. It's not a bad idea to make a table to include all the information you need. For example, what's the purpose of the test? Which skills and language elements do you want to test? What are the time constraints?

Then think about test organization. How many sections should it have? How long should they be? Which test methods, such as multiple choice or gap-fill are you going to use for each section? How many items do you need for each section? Are they all going to count equally or are some are going to get more marks? Of course, there are many other questions that can be asked, and the more detail that's recorded, the easier it will be to replicate the test for another class.

Next look at the *operational* issues. Make notes about the test administration. For example, is the timing OK – do they have enough or too much time? Are the instructions clear? Do the students need to ask for clarification? If there are any problems, it's a good idea to make a note of them and what you said to clarify them.

Once students have taken your test, it's useful to perform some basic analysis, as sensible teachers re-use tests over a number of years and need to know that the test parts are working well. Even for quizzes, it's still a good idea to make sure that no question is too easy or too difficult because these might not tell us very much about the student's ability. It's also a good idea to review the test content, the specifications and the administration because a test that's been *monitored* like this can form the basis of a test bank that can be dipped into over and over again.

So if you follow all these stages, you'll create a test that gives you reliable and useful information about your students' ability. And that information will help **you** to help **them** learn more effectively, which is surely what we all want.