

What Makes Assessment Tasks (More or Less) Complex?

“**Cognitive rigor** encompasses the complexity of the content, the cognitive engagement with that content, and the scope of the planned learning activity. **Cognitive demand** describes the potential range of mental processing required to complete a given task, within a given context or scenario (Hess, 2018, p. 462).”

Determining the intended cognitive demand of a task designed for instruction or assessment requires more than simply identifying the “verbs” and the “nouns” of the learning outcome. Teachers must consider the reasoning and decision making required to complete a task successfully. Tasks that ask students to perform a memorized procedure in a routine manner lead to one type of opportunity for student thinking; tasks that require students to think conceptually and that stimulate students to make deeper connections lead to a different set of opportunities for student thinking. During instruction, the cognitive demand of highly complex tasks can be lessened using strategic scaffolding strategies without significantly changing what is being assessed. This might include strategies such as, “chunking” texts for a reading assessment, group data collection for a science investigation, and facilitated discussions as a pre-writing activity.

What is strategic scaffolding?

Scaffolding is the purposeful use of supports to achieve a balance between cognitive complexity and student autonomy, as the overall cognitive demand of the task increases. Strategic scaffolding uses intentional steps designed into the instruction that ensure that all students can eventually complete the same complex task independently. The primary difference between scaffolding and differentiating is that differentiating means different – different assignments, different options, student choice. Differentiation is achieved by changing the content, the process skills, and/or the products of learning.

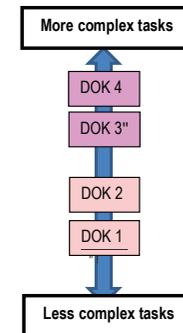
Scaffolding – such as using mentor texts, graphic organizers, providing additional background knowledge can become a bridge, making complex texts/ content /concepts more accessible. Scaffolding can also be used to support executive functioning, facilitate processing content, and bridge connections to deeper thinking/big ideas in more complex tasks. Different scaffolding strategies can be used at each DOK level, for different purposes.

A 3-Step Analysis Process for Assignments and Assessment Tasks

1. DETERMINE CONTENT “DIFFICULTY”: **Question #1: How complex is the content?**
Easier to learn/do/read/understand—OR—Harder to learn/do/read/understand?



2. ESTABLISH TASK COMPLEXITY & DEPTH (DOK):
Question #2: How complex is the task?



3. CONSIDER SUPPORTS: **Question #3: Should I reduce the cognitive demand?**
 Will Strategic Scaffolding create a “bridge” - making content more accessible; or supporting executive function/processing of content?

