Choosing the Right Item Bank—Why Bigger Isn’t Always Better

In today’s educational marketplace, many different formative assessment options claim to improve instruction and ensure student success. Districts and teachers have their pick of assessment items, all supposedly of high quality and standards-aligned. It can be overwhelming to know what characteristics are most important to choose from.

How do you know for sure that an assessment item bank contains really good items? You know, the kind of items that were built on the current standards and that provide real evidence of student learning. Even if you already have and use an item bank, do you know if items within the bank are of the highest quality?

We encourage you to reevaluate your item bank and make sure that it truly benefits you and your students. Learn how to separate the best of item banks from the rest.

**Quality over quantity.** Any educator looking for assessment content that supports instruction may think, “I have an existing item bank for my assessment needs—I don’t need anything else.” What could you possibly need that you don’t already have? The answer is simple: you probably have **more** than you need. Your purchasing criteria may have included the need for p-values and item statistics, or you may have chosen one bank over another based on sheer size. Among thousands of items, some of them may not have a high level of quality. They may not benefit your students—particularly ELL students—or provide you with useful information that will positively impact your teaching.

**What’s important when considering an item bank? 5 key factors can help you choose a quality item bank.**

1. **Look for a bank that provides variety, and doesn't contain “cloned” items.** As a teacher, the data you receive is the most important factor to improve instruction and identify gaps. Many large item banks seem to be a good value because of their size, when in fact many of the items are clones of one another—
slight variations of copies, all measuring similar content and skills. Cloned items will dilute teaching and learning in multiple ways:

- **Limited to low-level items.** It’s easy to reproduce items that are at DOK-1 or lower levels of cognitive complexity, but you’ll struggle to find higher-complexity items that provide the rigor expected by summative tests.
- **Wasted classroom time.** You’ll test students more than necessary with items that seem the same to them—which is less engaging and cuts into valuable class time.
- **Weak results.** These cloned items don’t provide the discrimination that you need to obtain quality data that shows evidence of learning.

2. **Look for authentic passages and graphics.** Be sure your item bank offers permissioned passages. Permissioned passages are ones that use text from a previously published, authentic source. In addition, permissioned passages provide evidence that the text of the associated items has been reviewed and edited by teachers or professional editors. In contrast, non-permissioned (commissioned) passages are usually written by test developers, and may not go through the same rigorous scrutiny as permissioned test content.

3. **Avoid standalone reading items.** Good reading items are text-dependent and support instruction at a higher text-complexity level. These items require students to use the text to find or infer the answers and to use textual evidence as support for meeting the expectations of other grade-level standards. Text-dependent items drive students back to the original text. Reading items that are not linked to text don’t assess the depth and breadth of the standards at each grade level, and miss out on the intent of scaffolding a student’s learning over time.

4. **Watch out for retrofitted items.** You will also want to ask if the items in your item bank have been back-aligned to national or state-specific standards. Item banks that have older items written to previous standards may have been edited to force-fit the standards. As a result, they don’t encompass the full intent of College and Career Readiness, Common Core standards, or summative tests. On the other hand, quality math items, for example, will exhibit alignment to the full intent of standards by eliciting direct, observable evidence of the degree to which a student can independently demonstrate the targeted standard(s). Look for an item bank built specifically to the standards you need.

5. **Explore the item-development process.** As an example of a rigorous item-development process, take a look at how Measured Progress produces and reviews assessment items.
All Measured Progress items go through a strict content development process. Trained in evidence-centered and universal design processes, professional item writers review all items to ensure quality before being released.

End Your Search with Measured Progress

If you’re struggling to find a high-quality item bank, we have a solution. Unlike the larger item banks that don’t meet the need for quality, the Measured Progress Formative Content Bank is stocked with items that are never cloned, are 100% built to College and Career Readiness standards, and support students in demonstrating high levels of rigor. With no clones, you’re guaranteed unique items that go through a thorough, rigorous item-development and review process.

High-quality items assess a broad range of skills but can also be used to target a particular cluster or standard. Our items require students to apply previously learned knowledge and skills and integrate content from other subject areas. We integrate mathematical and literary practices with the expectation that students will use higher-order thinking skills.

These high-quality items will elicit evidence of student understanding through immediate feedback; and identify gaps, monitor growth, inform instruction and measure performance. Further, new items are added regularly to our bank so teachers receive the latest in technology-enhanced items and performance tasks, in addition to thousands of math and reading items for grades 1–12.

Does your item bank meet your needs? When it comes time for you to rethink your item bank, ask the following questions:

- Are all of the items unique? Avoid clones.
- Are reading passages authentic as evidenced by permissioned use?
- Are the items developed to College and Career Readiness or state-specific standards, and not retro-fitted?
- How rigorous is the item-development and review process?
- Do items elicit the evidence required by the standard and help with student learning progression?

When other item banks come up short, turn to the Measured Progress Formative Content Bank. Learn more at www.measuredprogress.org.