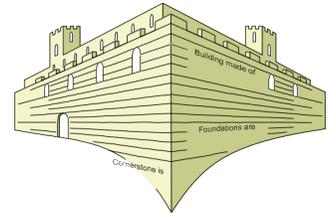# CORNERSTONE TASKS

Definition

Cornerstone tasks are curriculum-embedded that are intended to engage students in applying their knowledge and skills in an authentic and relevant context. Like a cornerstone anchors a building, these assessments are meant to anchor the curriculum around the most important performances that we want learners to be able to do (on their own) with acquired content knowledge and skills. They honor the intent of the Standards, within and across subject areas, instead of emphasizing only the tested (a.k.a. "eligible") content.

Purpose

Effective cornerstone tasks:

- are *curriculum embedded* (as opposed to externally imposed);
- *recur over the grades*, becoming increasingly sophisticated over time;
- establish *authentic contexts* for performance;
- assess *understanding* and *transfer* via genuine performance;
- *integrate 21st century skills* (e.g., critical thinking, technology use, teamwork) with subject area content;
- evaluate performance with established *rubrics*;
- engage students in *meaningful learning* while encouraging the best teaching;
- provide content for a student's portfolio (so that they graduate with a *resume of demonstrated accomplishments* rather than simply a transcript of courses taken).

Example

After investigating a current political issue, write a letter to a public policy maker regarding the official's position on a current political issue. Your letter should present your opinion and attempt to persuade the public policy maker to vote accordingly. This public policy maker is opposed to the student's position. (Students will be provided documentation of public policy maker's position and background information. Students will be given a choice of several situations if they do not propose an issue.)

Cornerstone Tasks

In education, what we choose to assess and how we assess it makes concrete what we value and what our goals really mean in practice. For example, if we say that we value critical thinking in History, how will we assess for it? What does critical thinking look like as a specific task in 10th-grade US History or 5th-grade Geography? The curriculum must answer these questions. To signal that content should be viewed as a resource, we must ensure that curriculum is designed backward from key assessment tasks. In other words, the evidence that we collect signals to students what is most important for them to learn and how to learn. If we do not assess it, it's seen as unimportant. A school or district that values understanding and transfer signals that these goals are important through the assessments it embeds within the curriculum.

Currently, few schools or districts have a robust assessment system that is designed from the start to align closely with standards, program goals, or long-term mission. In part, this is because few educators have been adequately trained to design valid assessments of broader, long-term goals. Moreover, the great majority of classroom- and district-level assessments tend to focus on content mastery and lower-order cognitive processes on Bloom's Taxonomy, not on understanding and performance on complex tasks that demand transfer.

Yet it is just these latter kinds of assessments that are needed to provide evidence that students truly understand and can apply their learning. Accordingly, we recommend that educators identify cornerstone performance assessments, of increasing complexity and reflecting authentic contexts, to anchor the curriculum. Just as an anchor prevents boats from aimless drift, these assessments are designed to prevent "curriculum drift" by focusing content instruction around important recurring performances. For it is only when students are able to apply their learning thoughtfully and flexibly to a new situation that true understanding of the content is demonstrated. When we call for authentic application, we do not mean recall of basic facts or mechanical "plug in" of a memorized formula. Rather, we call for students to transfer -- to use what they know in a new and realistic situation.

Some of the cornerstone assessments will reflect recurring performances, such as those seen in the secondary writing examples from Greece, NY (see Figure 4.x). Certain program areas, such as athletics, writing and world languages, are familiar with recurring performances, where the same genres or performance situations keep occurring over time. What changes are the complexity and open-endedness of the performance demands, and expectations for the learners. Other cornerstone tasks are more specific to the content goals for a course or unit.

Cornerstone are substantive in nature and require students to apply factual knowledge, concepts, and skills along with higher-order thinking (e.g., evaluation) and habits of mind (e.g., persistence) in order to achieve successful results. They are thus markedly different from the de-contextualized, selected-response items featured on most standardized accountability tests.

Authentic transfer tasks such as these serve more than just a means of gathering assessment evidence. These tasks are, by design, "worth teaching to" since they embody worthy learning goals and accomplishments by design. Additionally, they provide meaningful and concrete learning targets for students when presented at the beginning of a course or a unit. Greater transparency in assessment is needed if important performance standards are going to be met. Students must know the tasks to be mastered well in advance, and those tasks must repeatedly recur, if they are to master them – just as happens in the wider world, where test secrecy would be foolish if not downright immoral.

Examples of Recurring Cornerstone Tasks

[Science]

Upper Elementary/Middle School

The Pooper Scooper Kitty Litter Company claims that their litter is 40% more absorbent than other brands.

You are a Consumer Advocates researcher who has been asked to evaluate their claim. Develop a plan for conducting the investigation. Your plan should be specific enough so that the lab investigators could follow it to evaluate the claim.

High School

Design an investigation to answer the question, *How much does it cost to take a shower?*

Identify the variables that must be considered and then develop a plan for conducting the investigation. Your plan should be specific enough so that other investigators could follow it and answer the question.

[Social Studies]

Upper Elementary/Middle School

You have an idea that you believe will make your school better, and you want to convince school leaders that they should act on your idea. Identify your audience (e.g., principal, PTSA Board, students) and:
  • Describe your idea.
  • Explain why & how it will improve the school.
  • Develop a plan for acting on your idea.
Your idea and plan can be communicated to your target audience in a letter, e-mail, or presentation.

High School

After investigating a current political issue, prepare a position paper/presentation for a public policy maker (e.g., Congress person) or group (e.g., school board, legislative committee). Assume that the policy maker or group is opposed to your position. Your position statement should provide an analysis of the issue, consider options, present your position, rebut opposing positions, and attempt to persuade the public policy maker or group to vote accordingly.

Your position can be communicated in a written report, via a web blog, or delivered as a presentation.

Transfer Goals and Cornerstone Task Ideas:
Health and P.E. and the Arts

	Task Ideas
Make healthful choices and decisions regarding diet, exercise, stress management, alcohol & drug use, etc.	
Engage in healthful activities and behaviors to promote wellness throughout one's life, and encourage others to do so.	
Create artistic expressions through various forms: o **Media (e.g., pastel, photography)** o **Genre (e.g., jazz music, modern dance)** o **Styles (e.g., impressionism, cubism)**	
Create artistic expressions for various audiences and purposes, including to: o **Entertain (e.g., tell a story)** o **Evoke Emotion** o **Commemorate** o **Persuade** o **Challenge (e.g., the status quo)**	
Respond to artistic expressions through: o **Global understanding** o **Interpretation** o **Critical Stance** o **Personal Connections**	