

You Don't Have to Grade Everything

*A working guide to formative and summative assessment in the ASL classroom
— what to grade, what to leave alone, and how to answer the pushback.*

Grade proficiency. Don't grade the path to proficiency.

Practice is the path.



Only the last box needs a score. *The first four are where the learning happens.*

HOLDS / THE MATH COMPARISON

No math teacher grades problems 1–20 *and* the test on the same material. That counts one skill twice, and it punishes the exact thing that builds competence: repetition with mistakes in it.

Students need room to be wrong on the way to being right. A gradebook that records every early attempt takes that room away.

BREAKS / WHERE ASL DIFFERS

A math student can self-check against an answer key. An ASL student practicing alone cannot see that a handshape is drifting, that their signing space has shrunk, or that they're mouthing English the whole time.

Thirty unsupervised minutes can entrench an error instead of building a skill. The fix isn't more grading — it's more practice in front of you or a peer, with fast correction. That's a scheduling problem, not a grading problem.

THREE MODES If your program is built on ACTFL, here is the mapping. Assess **interpretive** (receptive), **presentational** (rehearsed expressive), and **interpersonal** (spontaneous, two-way). Everything else in the week is practice feeding those three.

Two Piles

Most of the week belongs in the first one.

FORMATIVE

Practice

Feedback only. No points, or completion credit at most.

- Anything on the day it's introduced
- Vocabulary drills, warm-ups, sign of the day
- Partner and small-group signing time
- Receptive drills — especially fingerspelling and numbers
- Rough-draft videos and rehearsals
- Free, unstructured conversation
- Peer feedback rounds
- First attempts at any new structure: classifiers, rhetorical questions, role shift, spatial referencing

SUMMATIVE

Graded

Scored against a rubric students saw in advance.

- A prepared signed narrative, dialogue, or presentation at the close of a unit
- Receptive comprehension — you sign or show video, they demonstrate understanding
- An unrehearsed interactive exchange with you or a partner
- Deaf culture and community knowledge
- A portfolio in which the student selects their strongest samples
- Reassessments, on the same rubric as the original

When Someone Says...

Answers for the department meeting.

“They won’t practice unless it’s graded.”

Accountability comes from structure and visibility, not points. Hold practice in class, and put an unrehearsed component in every summative — that can’t be crammed for.

“If it isn’t graded, it doesn’t count.”

It counts — it decides whether they pass the assessment. Same accountability, one week later, attached to something worth measuring.

“Isn’t this lowering the bar?”

The reverse. Grading first attempts mostly measures who arrived with prior exposure — a CODA, a heritage signer, a transfer student.

“I feel like I’m not doing my job.”

Grading everything doesn’t add learning — it delays feedback. A student corrected in the moment learns more than one handed a rubric eleven days later.

NOT-SAME-DAY	Never assess a skill the day you teach it. Teach, practice, give feedback, practice again — then assess.
GRADE-THE-TARGET	Grade what the unit was about, not everything you can see. A trained eye catches every error at once and it is tempting to mark them all. Don't dock points for a handshake from two units back.
SPLIT-RECEPTIVE-EXPRESSIVE	Keep two lines in the gradebook, not one. Receptive skill outpaces production. Averaging them hides both the real strength and the real need.
WORDS-NOT-NUMBERS	Formative feedback gets language, not a score. "Not yet / getting there / got it," a checklist, or thirty seconds of live correction. Once a number appears, students stop reading the words.
WEIGHT-SUMMATIVE	Practice shouldn't sink or float a grade on its own. Formative at 0–20% and summative at 80% or more is a common split. Whatever you choose, let the proficiency measure be the one that counts.
REASSESS-ALLOWED	Let students test again. If you're measuring mastery, the date a student reaches it is not the grade.
ONE-VIDEO-GRADED	Assign many videos. Grade one per unit. Self-review is the only way a student ever sees their own signing. Assigning it costs nothing; grading all of it costs your weekends.
COACH-EARLY-GRADE-LATE	Go easy on non-manual markers at first. Facial grammar is bound up with self-consciousness and is usually the last thing to loosen. Coach it hard from day one; put it on the rubric later.
NOT-A-PERSONALITY-GRADE	Watch what "participation" is actually measuring. Extroverts win that category every time. Score observable behavior instead: stayed in the target language, gave a partner usable feedback.

The short version: practice is where learning happens, and assessment is where you find out whether it did. Keep those two jobs separate and the grading load takes care of itself.