Alternatives to Traditional Exams
Rethinking Assessment for Authentic Learning

Purpose: Alternative assessments can foster deeper student engagement, real-world skill-building, and more accurate representations of what students know and can do, especially in the age of AI. To make the most of these options, it's important to plan ahead, clarify your goals, and select formats that align with your course's purpose.

1. **Align Assessments With Real-World Goals**

   a. Before choosing or designing an alternative, ask yourself:

      i. What should students be able to do, now and in the future, as a result of your course? Describe behaviors and skills, not just knowledge. For example: "Communicate scientific findings to the public" instead of "Understand science communication."

      ii. At what level should they perform? Do they need to memorize, apply, analyze, or create? Pick a format that makes students demonstrate these actions.

      iii. In what context? Will they use books or the internet? Will they write, speak, or present visually? Model your assessment on real-life expectations.

2. **Variations Within an Alternative: The Poster Session Example**

   a. One alternative assignment, like an academic poster, can focus on many skills:
      i. **Summarizing:** Students write headings and concise text.
      ii. **Visualizing:** Use graphs, charts, or images.
      iii. **Persuasion:** Emphasize design and clarity.
      iv. **Presenting:** Provide an oral defense and respond to Q&A.
      v. **Critical Thinking:** Have students peer review each other's posters.

   b. Choose required elements based on the skills you want to see.

3. **Alternatives to and Variations on Traditional Exams**

    a. **Before Exams**
        Students create study aids (e.g. crib sheets, flashcards), which can count for part of their grade.

    b. **Open-Book or Option-Based Exams**
        Allow referential materials or question choices.

    c. **Staged or Multiple Exams**
        Replace one high-stakes test with several smaller ones.

    d. **Oral Follow-Ups**
        Have students verbally explain selected answers for depth.

    e. **Retakes**
        Permit students to redo sections for partial credit, focusing on improvement.

4. **The 24-Hour Open Format**

    Give students a realistic, time-flexible, take-home assessment:

    a. Assign tasks that mirror real-world tasks—case analyses, executive summaries, critiques, recommendations, or data reviews.

    b. Ensure that performance can be partial—avoid all-or-nothing grading.

5. **Creative and Applied Projects**

    a. **Term Projects**
        Assigned earlier and scaffolded with milestones, encourage synthesis:

    b. **Written Work**
        Research papers, annotated bibliographies, executive summaries.

    c. Media
Recorded presentations, websites, videos, performance, art or design projects.

    d. Portfolios
Collections of work with reflective commentary.

    e. "In Character" or Roleplay
Journal entries, legal briefs, debates, or simulated reports.

6. **Cumulative & Reflective Assessment**

    a. Deepen learning by building on smaller tasks:

        i. Ongoing Entries
Blogs, vlogs, podcasts, reflection journals, or portfolios

        ii. Final Reflection
Summative entry connecting course-long growth

        iii. Direct Observation

            1. Some skills are best demonstrated live or via recording:

            2. Lab demonstrations, debates, performances

            3. Fieldwork, internship reviews, or real-world consultation

7. **Criteria and Rubrics for Clarity**
Alternative assessments often require clearer expectations:

        i. Draft and pilot your criteria
Have a colleague review for loopholes.

        ii. Use rubric-based grading
Make sure students know what success looks like.

Instructor Planning Guide

1. **Course Goals:** What do I want students to be able to do by the end of the course?

2. **Assessment Format:** What assessment format best aligns with my goals?

3. **Skills and Modalities:** What key skills or modes of expression (e.g., writing, speaking, designing) will students use?

4. **Scaffolding and Timeline:** How will I break the assessment into manageable steps throughout the term?

5. **Authenticity and Integrity:** How will I confirm that student work is original and thoughtfully completed?

6. **Rubrics and Clarity:** Have I created a clear rubric of what success looks like?

7. **Reflection:** How will students reflect on their learning or process?

8. **Canvas Setup:** Is the assessment correctly entered and weighted in Canvas?

9. **Accessibility:** Have I considered different student needs for assessment design?

Instructor Checklist

☐ I have aligned the assessment with course goals and real-world skills.
☐ I have selected an assessment format that encourages authentic learning.
☐ I have scaffolded the assignment with checkpoints or drafts.
☐ I have created and shared a clear grading rubric.
☐ I have built in opportunities for student reflection.
☐ I have considered academic integrity and process verification.
☐ I have included self and/or peer evaluation (as appropriate).
☐ I have entered the assessment in Canvas with appropriate weight.
☐ I have reviewed DCE grading policies and confirmed deadlines.

Resource: [Exam Types and Policies](#) (Harvard DCE)