

Reporting Test Scores

Question: *Test takers want to have as much information as possible about their performance on an examination. Despite what information an organization provides, test takers generally will ask for more. How is information best provided and what information should be included?*

Answer: The decision about what information to provide is best made prior to administering the examination. In fact, part of the implicit contract a test sponsor has with test takers is to tell test takers what scoring information will be provided to them as well as when that information can be expected. Test takers should know before the test administration when to expect to receive their scores and what format the scores will take.

Most important is that score information be provided to test takers in an easily understandable way. Remember that most test takers want simple explanations; therefore the use of complicated formulas, technical jargon and sophisticated rules about the scores should be avoided. Simple wording is best – use simple wording or graphical presentations that explain the test taker's performance on the examination. It is often advisable to include additional explanatory information as part of the score report or as a separate document that the test taker might access prior to the examination. Basic guidelines to consider in reporting test scores include:

- Use simple wording free of technical language or jargon
- Make very clear the test taker's pass/fail status
- Use graphics that provide another medium by which test takers can understand their performance
- Release scoring information in a timely manner
- Set test takers' expectations prior to the examination administration for when score information will be available

Despite receiving a passing or failing score on an examination, test takers frequently ask for more information. There are many approaches organizations can use to report test scores from the most simple of reporting only a "pass" or "fail" result to a more complex approach where scores for each content area are provided. Each approach has advantages and disadvantages. For most testing applications, examinations are designed only to identify whether a test taker is a "master" or a "nonmaster" depending on whether that test taker's score meets the criterion for pass or fail that has been established in a formalized standard setting process. Few examinations are developed according to the stringent process that would allow test takers' scores to be spread along a continuum.

While a pass or fail result provides test takers with the basic information about level of competence, many organizations elect to provide additional information about individual performance that can help test takers know how they performed in major content areas. There are varying opinions as to whether this diagnostic information should be provided to all test takers or only to test takers who fail the examination. One argument for restricting diagnostic information to only candidates that fail is the potential for test score misuse. Since few examinations are developed in ways that can accurately provide performance rankings among candidates, providing that level of detail to passing candidates may give information that could be inappropriately used. Suppose Test Taker A and Test Taker B both receiving a passing result, but Test Taker A scores higher on a specific content area than Test Taker B. A potential employer might decide to hire Test Taker A over Test Taker B even though both test takers met the passing standard and scored a passing result. This would be an example of test score misuse.

Many organizations do provide some level of diagnostic information, which is most appropriate for a test taker who does not achieve a passing result. The purpose of providing diagnostic information is to give the test taker information that can be used to help the test taker remediate performance and to guide future study plans. The argument for not providing this information to test takers who have passed the examination is twofold. First, if the test taker has passed the test there is no need for remediation, since it is unlikely that most successful test takers will continue to study the material once a credential has been earned. Second, since most examinations are not developed with the rigor needed to place performance along a continuum but are developed to indicate a pass or fail status, providing any other information to a passing test taker may lead to misuse of test scores.