

Four Depth of Knowledge Levels for Mathematics

Level 1 (Recall) includes the recall of information such as a fact, definition, term, or a simple procedure, as well as performing a simple algorithm or applying a formula. That is, in mathematics a one-step, well-defined, and straight algorithmic procedure should be included at this lowest level. Other key words that signify a Level 1 include “identify,” “recall,” “recognize,” “use,” and “measure.” Verbs such as “describe” and “explain” could be classified at different levels depending on what is to be described and explained.

Level 2 (Skill/Concept) includes the engagement of some mental processing beyond a habitual response. A Level 2 assessment item requires students to make some decisions as to how to approach the problem or activity, whereas Level 1 requires students demonstrate a rote response, perform a well-known algorithm, follow a set procedure (like a recipe), or perform a clearly defined series of steps. Keywords that generally distinguish a Level 2 item include “classify,” “organize,” “estimate,” “make observations,” “collect and display data,” and “compare data.” These actions imply more than step. For example, to compare data requires first identifying characteristics of the objects or phenomenon and then grouping or ordering the objects. Some action verbs, such as “explain,” “describe,” or “Interpret” could be classified at different levels depending on the object of the action. For example, if an item required students to explain how light affects mass by indicating there is a relationship between light and heat, this is considered a Level 2. Interpreting information from a simple graph, requiring reading information from the graph, also is a Level 2. Interpreting information from a complex graph that requires some decisions on what features of the graph need to be considered and how information from the graph can be aggregated is a level 3. Caution is warranted in interpreting Level 2 as only skills because some reviewers will interpret skills very narrowly, as primarily numerical skills, and such interpretation excludes from this level other skills such as visualization skills and probability skills, which may be more complex simply because they are less common. Other Level 2 activities include explaining the purpose and use of experimental procedures; carrying out experimental procedures; making observations and collecting data; classifying, organizing, and comparing data; and organizing and displaying data in tables, graphs, and charts.

Level 3 (Strategic Thinking) requires reasoning, planning, using evidence, and a higher level of thinking than the previous two levels. In most instances, requiring students to explain their thinking is a Level 3. Activities that require students to make conjectures are also at this level. The cognitive demands at Level 3 are complex and abstract. The complexity does not result from the fact that there are multiple answers, a possibility for both levels 1 and 2, but because the task requires more demanding reasoning. An activity, however, that has more than one possible answer and requires students to justify the response they give would most likely be a Level 3. Other Level 3 activities include drawing conclusions from observations; citing evidence and developing a logical argument for concepts; explaining phenomena in terms of concepts; and using concepts to solve problems.

Level 4 (Extended Thinking) requires complex reasoning, planning, developing, and thinking most likely over an extended period of time. The extended time period is not a distinguishing factor if the required work is only repetitive and does not require applying significant conceptual understanding and higher-order thinking. For example, if a student has to take the water temperature from a river each day for a month and then construct a graph, this would be classified as a Level 2. However, If the student is to conduct a river study that requires taking into consideration a number of variables, this would be a Level 4. At Level 4, the cognitive demands of the task should be high and the work should be very complex. Students should be required to make several connections—relate ideas within the content area or among content areas—and have to select one approach among many alternatives on how the situation should be solved, in order to be at this highest level. Level 4 activities include designing and conducting experiments; making connections between a finding and related concepts and phenomena; combining and synthesizing ideas into new concepts; and critiquing experimental designs.