Guide on Biases and Barriers in Assessments

Personnel Psychology Centre

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A fair assessment is inclusive, accessible and measures what is intended.

# Purpose of the guide

This practical guide is for human resources specialists and hiring managers. It explains how to conduct an evaluation to identify, remove or mitigate biases and barriers in your assessment. Reasonable efforts must be made to remove or mitigate the impact of biases or barriers on members of equity-seeking groups.

* See the amendments (not yet in force) to the [*Public Service Employment Act*](https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/p-33.01/nifnev.html)

Use this guide and Related tools to evaluate your assessment methods well in advance of conducting your assessments. This will ensure you have enough time to apply the right strategies for a fair assessment.

To learn more about fair assessments, see the [Public Service Hiring Guides](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-service-commission/services/public-service-hiring-guides.html), the Public Service Commission (PSC) [Guides and Tools](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-service-commission/services/appointment-framework/guides-tools-appointment-framework.html) and [Resources on Fair Assessments (on GCconnex)](https://gcconnex.gc.ca/file/view/102748916/resources-on-fair-assessments-docx-resources-on-fair-assessments-1-docx?language=en).

Use this guide to support the Government of Canada’s commitment to an inclusive public service.

# Definition of biases and barriers in assessments

**Bias:** Any beliefs or assumptions in the context of an assessment method or its application that results in an over- or underestimation of the qualifications of individuals from equity-seeking groups due to factors unrelated to the qualifications being assessed in an appointment process.

**Barrier:** A barrier refers to anything related to the assessment method or application of an assessment method that hinders the full and equal opportunity of members of equity-seeking groups to fully demonstrate their qualifications for a position in an appointment process.

# Guiding principles

Follow these 6 principles to promote a fair assessment: Awareness of Self and Others, Accessibility, Validity and Reliability, Flexible Standardization, Transparency and Fairness. These principles apply to all parts of the assessment method and its application, including the:

* Assessment tool
* Administration process
* Rating system
* Related communications

## Principle 1: Awareness of self and others

People are naturally subject to bias. Biases are shortcuts our brain uses to process information and respond. These shortcuts are shaped by personal values and experiences, and they influence how we see and interact with others. They are, however, prone to error.

Why is awareness of self and others important?

* Bias can shape how we judge a candidate
* Bias has a negative impact on members of equity-seeking groups
* Bias occurs more often when we are tired or make judgments based on first impressions

Where to start?

* Learn about [equity, diversity and inclusion](https://www.noslangues-ourlanguages.gc.ca/en/publications/equite-diversite-inclusion-equity-diversity-inclusion-eng) and reflect on personal biases that may impact your judgment of others
* Learn about biases and barriers within your department or agency from employment systems reviews, surveys, audits, reports, publications and data
* Engage with Employee Diversity Networks to learn of lived experiences in assessment
* Learn to spot [common rating errors](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-service-commission/services/public-service-hiring-guides/appointment-processes-how-conduct-interviews.html#n37) in yourself and others
* Commit to self-reflection exercises and learning
* Have the courage to approach others if they are being biased

Awareness requires constant self-reflection, desire to learn, and courage to change.

## Principle 2: Accessibility

Accessibility is about the ease of interaction between a person and the assessment. People should be able to perform at their best without barriers related to technology, scheduling, language, or any other factor unrelated to the assessment.

Why is accessibility important?

* Encourages people to apply and succeed (helps prevent people from screening themselves out)
* Allows people to show their true performance
* Produces more accurate and reliable results for equity-seeking groups

You can improve accessibility by:

* Being proactive in supporting practices of [inclusion by design](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-service-commission/services/public-service-hiring-guides/guide-assessing-persons-disabilities/guide-assessing-persons-disabilities-determine-implement-assessment-accommodations-appendix-1-think-inclusion-design.html) and choosing accessible assessment options
* Examining each aspect of the development and administration of the assessment
* Asking yourself whether the assessment is in [plain language](https://www.canada.ca/en/treasury-board-secretariat/services/government-communications/canada-content-style-guide.html#toc6), neutral, adaptable, and inclusive for different equity-seeking groups
* Learning more about accessibility and available tools, such as the [Digital Accessibility Toolkit](https://a11y.canada.ca/en/guides/) and the [Government of Canada Workplace Accessibility Passport](https://www.canada.ca/en/government/publicservice/wellness-inclusion-diversity-public-service/diversity-inclusion-public-service/accessibility-public-service/government-canada-workplace-accessibility-passport.html)
* Being explicit and facilitating an open discussion about the type of assessment and work accommodations available
* Providing [assessment accommodations](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-service-commission/services/assessment-accommodation-page.html) in a timely manner

Design to allow more people to show their true performance.

## Principle 3: Validity and reliability

A fair assessment measures the qualifications it intends to measure with accuracy (validity) and consistency (reliability).

Why are validity and reliability important?

* A valid and reliable tool allows for a good evaluation of merit
* A valid tool directly measures the qualifications that are needed for the job
* A reliable tool produces comparable results across time, different assessment environments and different assessment boards

You can improve validity and reliability by:

* Looking for and evaluating criteria (behaviours, skills, abilities, etc.) that are job relevant
* Selecting an appropriate assessment method and seeking expert assistance, as required
* Staying alert. Limit fatigue on candidates and assessors
* Reducing administration errors (incomplete instructions, inconsistent timing)
* Providing a comfortable testing environment free of distractions
* Ensuring consistent use of the rating system across assessment boards

Measure the qualifications with accuracy and consistency to improve selection decisions.

## Principle 4: Flexible Standardization

When standardizing an assessment, the same method is used in the exact same way for each person. This could include using the same instructions, test content, administration, and rating system. However, treating everyone the same should not prevent some people from being able to perform at their best.

Why is standardization important?

* Promotes fairness by minimizing biases that are not related to the assessment
* Reduces variations in testing conditions to better capture and compare performance
* Helps preserve validity and reliability by keeping testing conditions consistent

You can show flexibility in standardized assessments by:

* Proposing flexible schedules. This will give people more opportunities and a better chance to prepare
* Using multiple assessment tools to measure a single qualification. This will give you additional sources of information about performance
* Showing flexibility by treating assessment accommodations case-by-case, while still keeping standardization in the nature and level of the qualification being assessed
* Offering diverse options and non-traditional assessment methods. This can create more opportunities for people to perform at their best (see the guide on [Flexibility in Assessment](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-service-commission/services/appointment-framework/guides-tools-appointment-framework/flexibility-in-assessment.html#t2))

Standardization can strengthen flexible approaches in assessment.

## Principle 5: Transparency

People perform at their best when they understand what is being assessed and how they will be rated. Be mindful that selection decisions can be challenged. Documenting and communicating the reasons behind each decision (for example, choice of assessment method or pass mark) can help ensure integrity and transparency.

Why is transparency important?

* Increases trust in the staffing process
* Helps new and external candidates understand the complex assessment process
* Promotes a positive assessment experience and reduces test anxiety

What information to communicate to candidates?

* Information about the assessment (qualifications being assessed, type of questions and duration)
* Tips on how to prepare and how to structure responses
* Type of flexibilities available that don’t require assessment accommodations (change in administration date, different response formats)
* Type of assessment accommodations that might help reduce specific barriers (use of assistive technology, additional breaks) and how to ask for them
* Ways to ask for more information (during an orientation session, reading information package, etc.)
* Reasons why a certain approach is taken if there is minimal flexibility. For example, explaining the use of a standardized written exam to assess many people

Be explicit and proactive. Tell candidates what to expect.

## Principle 6: Fairness

The goal of an assessment is to give everyone the chance to perform at their best. Fairness is a fundamental concept that is considered from the start of an assessment process. The [inclusive appointment lens](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-service-commission/services/appointment-framework/federal-public-service-inclusive-appointment-lens.html) and [fairness review checklist](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-service-commission/services/public-service-hiring-guides/enhance-fairness-reduce-bias-assessment-tools.html) can help you build fairness into each step of the process.

Why is fairness important?

* Gives equal opportunity to all candidates, including members of equity-seeking groups
* Fosters trust in the staffing process and promotes a positive assessment experience
* Supports the legal defensibility of an assessment

You can show fairness by ensuring that:

* All candidates are given a fair opportunity to demonstrate their qualifications
* The qualifications assessed are those required for the position
* The various ways people learn and perform on the job are considered when choosing or designing an assessment
* The assessment method provides valid and reliable measures of the qualifications
* The administration of the assessment and its rating system aim to be impartial and unbiased

Give everyone a chance to fully demonstrate their qualifications.

# Steps to conduct an evaluation of biases and barriers

This section outlines 3 steps which can be used to evaluate any assessment method and its application.

* **Step 1:** Describe the assessment method
* **Step 2:** Identify potential biases and barriers
* **Step 3:** Take action to mitigate biases and barriers

The evaluation of biases and barriers must be conducted **before** using an assessment method. You can use this guide and Related tools to conduct and document your evaluation of biases and barriers.

Note, the guide and Related tools present some, but not all, biases and barriers that may occur in assessments. Other biases and barriers may exist, and some strategies may not be suitable for all situations. Users need to use professional judgment for their individual methods or processes.

## Step 1: Describe the assessment method

Describe the assessment method that you will use. You can consult the [inclusive appointment lens](https://www.canada.ca/en/public-service-commission/services/appointment-framework/federal-public-service-inclusive-appointment-lens.html) when describing your assessment. For each assessment method, consider the:

* Six Guiding principles and how they can be applied
* Qualifications being assessed and how they will be evaluated
* Administration process
* Rating system and how decisions are made
* People involved in the different stages of the assessment, that is, the planning, administration and scoring

## Step 2: Identify potential biases and barriers

Identify sources of potential biases and barriers in your assessment and all related material.

Where to find biases and barriers in an assessment?

* Information provided to candidates prior to the assessment
* Instructions and questions
* Rating guide
* Assessment board training
* Administration manual
* Any other related materials

Look for biases and barriers that may occur during:

* Planning (for example, qualifications are too narrow or the language is too technical)
* Administration (for example, limited preparation time or untimely assessment accommodations)
* Scoring (for example, unstructured rating process or homogenous assessment board)

See a list of common biases and barriers in the Tool on Biases and Barriers in Assessments. Additional lists can be found in the tools specific to screening, written exams, interviews and reference checks.

## Step 3: Take action to mitigate biases and barriers

Once you have identified the potential biases and barriers, reasonable efforts must be made to remove or mitigate their impact. You need to use professional judgment when applying these strategies to individual methods or processes.

Reflecting on the 6 Guiding principles may assist you in identifying and mitigating biases and barriers. You can also gain different perspectives by involving colleagues, assessment specialists or representatives of equity-seeking groups.

Consider different actions you can take during:

* Planning (for example, build diversity and inclusion into the work plan and review material for accessibility and fairness concerns)
* Administration (for example, create flexible schedules, give ample preparation time and the same instructions to everyone)
* Scoring (for example, rate performance immediately after the assessment and review borderline ratings with others)

See a list of common strategies in the Tool on Biases and Barriers in Assessments. Additional lists can be found in the tools specific to screening, written exams, interviews and reference checks.

Once you have completed your evaluation and have made reasonable efforts to remove or mitigate biases and barriers, you are well equipped to conduct the assessments of your candidates. Consider putting in place strategies to deal with any testing issues, test incidents or unforeseen biases and barriers. As the hiring manager, maintain communication with your human resources specialist responsible for the process to act promptly if new issues arise. You may also integrate a mechanism to gather feedback after the assessments (from candidates, board members, etc.) to learn and share about how to conduct fair assessments.

## Related tools

We recommend using the PSC’s Tool on Biases and Barriers in Assessments for any assessment method used for personnel selection. It will take you through the 3 steps for conducting an evaluation of biases and barriers. Plus, if you are doing screening, written exams, interviews or reference checks, then you may add one of these additional tools to your evaluation:

* Tool on Biases and Barriers in Screening
* Tool on Biases and Barriers in Written Exams
* Tool on Biases and Barriers in Interviews
* Tool on Biases and Barriers in Reference Checks