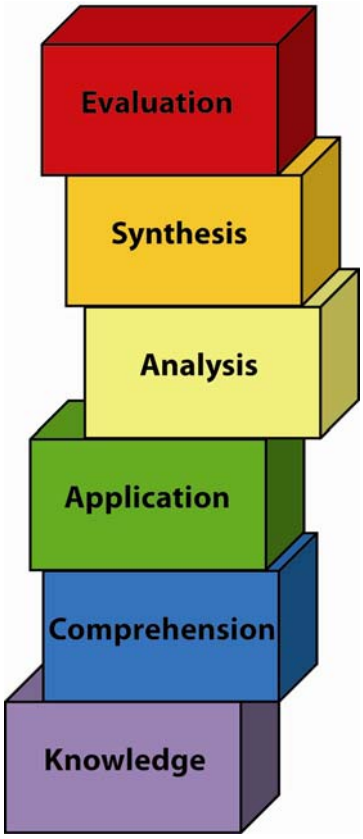
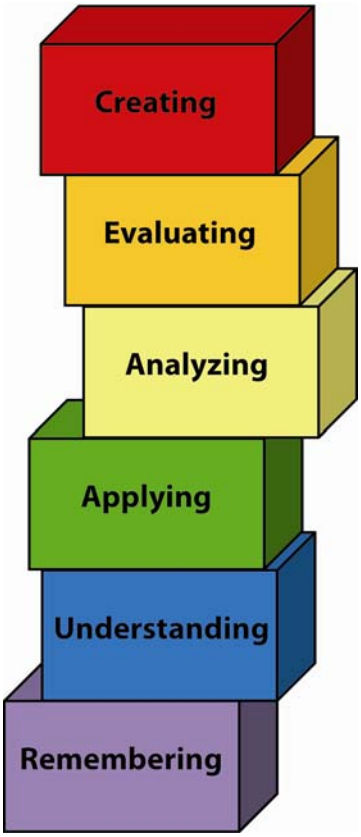
Understanding Depth of Knowledge and Cognitive Complexity

One model for classifying thinking into cognitive levels of complexity is Bloom's Taxonomy. Bloom's Taxonomy was first presented in 1956 through the publication, *The Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, The Classification of Educational Goals, Handbook I: Cognitive Domain.* This taxonomy identifies six levels within the cognitive domain, from the simple recall or recognition of facts, at the lowest level, through increasingly more complex levels, to the highest level which is classified as evaluation.

During the late 1990s, the original Bloom's Taxonomy was revised (Anderson and Krathwohl, 2001). In the 2001 version of Bloom's Taxonomy, the names of the six major cognitive process categories or levels were revised to indicate action (verbs) rather than non-action (nouns) as noted in the graphic below.



Bloom's Taxonomy (1956)



Revised Taxonomy (2001)

More recently, Webb's Depth-of- Knowledge Levels have also been used in the review of items for cognitive demand. Webb's Depth of Knowledge was created by Norman Webb from the Wisconsin Center for Education Research. Webb's definition of depth of knowledge is the degree or complexity of knowledge that the content curriculum standards and expectations require. Therefore, when reviewing items for depth of knowledge, the item is reviewed to determine whether or not it is as demanding cognitively as what the actual content curriculum standard expects. In the case of the Wisconsin Forward Exam items, the item meets the criterion if the depth of knowledge of the item is in alignment with the depth of knowledge of the Wisconsin State Standards.

Webb's Depth of Knowledge includes four levels, from the lowest (basic recall) to the highest (extended thinking). Verb examples that represent each level in Webb's Depth of Knowledge can be found in the information that follows. However, verbs alone do not describe the depth of knowledge. Rather, depth of knowledge also focuses upon how well the students need to know the content before they can respond to a given item.

Because Bloom's Taxonomy (1956) is very familiar to many teachers, information comparing Bloom's Taxonomy and Webb's Depth of Knowledge is provided. The comparison serves as a "bridge" for teachers to understand Webb's Depth of Knowledge as compared to Bloom's Taxonomy.

Depth of Knowledge Guidelines for Mathematics Items

The information below provides a definition of the four depth-of-knowledge levels. The charts at the end of the section also provide a comparison between Bloom's Taxonomy and Webb's Depth of Knowledge for mathematics. Included are examples of verbs (i.e., the action).

Definitions of Webb's Depth of Knowledge

Level 1 (Recall) requires 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 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) requires the engagement of some mental processing beyond a habitual response. A Level 2 item requires students to make some decisions as to how to approach the problem or activity, whereas Level 1 requires students to 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 one step. For example, to compare data requires first identifying characteristics of objects or phenomena 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, interpreting information from a simple graph, or reading information from the graph, are also at 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 at Level 3. Level 2 activities are not limited only to number skills, but may involve visualization skills and probability skills. Other Level 2 activities include noticing or describing non-trivial patterns; 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 at 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 at 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 deciding which concepts to apply in order to solve a complex problem.

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 and projects; developing and proving conjectures; making connections between a finding and related concepts and phenomena; combining and synthesizing ideas into new concepts; and critiquing experimental designs.

Note: Multiple-choice and constructed-response items can be written at a depth-of-knowledge Level 4; however, to design an item in this format is difficult, as it would require research, investigation, and application, often over an extended period of time (e.g., performance-based tasks; portfolios; research studies/projects).

(Webb, N. 1997, 1999, 2002, 2005, 2006)

Bloom's Taxonomy

Categories (1956)	Definition	Examples of Action Words*
Knowledge	Student remembers, or recalls appropriate previously learned information.	define; identify; name; select; state; order; (involves a one-step problem)
Comprehension	Student translates, comprehends, or interprets information based on prior learning.	convert; estimate; explain; express; factor; generalize; give example; identify; indicate; locate; picture; (involves two or more steps)
Application	Student selects, transfers, and uses data and principles to complete a task or problem with minimum directions.	apply; choose; compute; employ; interpret; graph; modify; operate; plot; practice; solve; use; (involves three or more steps)
Analysis	Student distinguishes, classifies, and relates assumptions, hypotheses, evidence, or structure of a statement or question.	compare; contrast; correlate; differentiate; discriminate; examine; infer; maximize; minimize; prioritize; subdivide; test
Synthesis	Student originates, integrates, and combines ideas into a product, plan, or proposal that is new to him or her.	arrange; collect; construct; design; develop; formulate; organize; set up; prepare; plan; propose; create experiment and record data
Evaluation	Student appraises, assesses, or critiques on a basis of specific standards and criteria.	appraise; assess; defend estimate; evaluate; judge; predict; rate; validate; verify

Webb's Depth of Knowledge

Categories	Definition	Example of Action Words*
Recall	Student recalls facts, information, procedures, or definitions.	define; identify; name; select; state; order; one step
Basic Application of Skill/Concept	Student uses information, conceptual knowledge, and procedures.	apply; choose; compute; employ; interpret; graph; modify; operate; plot; practice; solve; use; two or more steps
Strategic Thinking	Student uses reasoning and develops a plan or sequence of steps; process has some complexity.	compare; contrast; correlate; differentiate; discriminate; examine; infer; maximize; minimize; prioritize; subdivide; test
Extended Thinking	Student conducts an investigation, needs time to think and process multiple conditions of the problem or task. (The item/task generally requires several days or weeks to complete.)	arrange; collect; construct; design; develop; formulate; organize; set up; prepare; plan; propose; create experiment and record data

*Some action words (verbs) can be classified at different depth-of-knowledge levels depending on the context of the item and the complexity of the action.

Science Depth of Knowledge

Note: "Knowledge" can refer both to content knowledge and knowledge of scientific processes. This meaning of knowledge is consistent with the *National Science Education Standards* (NSES), which terms "Science as Inquiry" as its first Content Standard.

The information below provides a definition of the four depth-of-knowledge levels. The charts at the end of the section also provide a comparison between Bloom's Taxonomy and Webb's Depth of Knowledge for Science. Included are examples of verbs (i.e., the action).

Definitions of Webb's Depth of Knowledge

Level 1 (Recall) requires the recall of information, such as a fact, definition, term, or a simple procedure, as well as performance of a simple science process or procedure. Level 1 only requires students to demonstrate a rote response, use a well-known formula, follow a set procedure (like a recipe), or perform a clearly defined series of steps. A "simple" procedure is well defined and typically involves only one step. Verbs such as "identify," "recall," "recognize," "use," "calculate," and "measure" generally represent cognitive work at the recall level. Simple word problems that can be directly translated into and solved by a formula are considered Level 1. Verbs such as "describe" and "explain" could be classified at different depth-of-knowledge levels, depending on the complexity of what is to be described and explained.

A student answering a Level 1 item either knows the answer or does not: that is, the item does not need to be "figured out" or "solved." In other words, if the knowledge necessary to answer an item automatically provides the answer to it, then the item is at Level 1. If the knowledge needed to answer the item is not automatically provided in the stem, the item is at least at Level 2. Some examples that represent but do not constitute all Level 1 performance are as follows:

- Recall or recognize a fact, term, or property.
- Represent in words or diagrams a scientific concept or relationship.
- Provide or recognize a standard scientific representation for simple phenomenon.
- Perform a routine procedure, such as measuring length.

Level 2 (Skills and Concepts) requires the engagement of some mental processing beyond recalling. The content knowledge or process involved is **more complex** than in Level 1. Items require students to make some decisions as to how to approach the question or problem. 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 one step**. For example, to compare data requires first identifying characteristics of the objects or phenomena and then grouping or ordering the objects. Level 2 activities include making observations and collecting data; classifying, organizing, and comparing data; and organizing and displaying data in tables, graphs, and charts. Some action verbs, such as "explain," "describe," or "interpret," could be classified at different depth-of-knowledge levels, depending on the complexity of the action. For example, interpreting information from a simple graph, which requires reading information from the graph, is a Level 2. An item that requires interpretation from a complex graph, such as making decisions regarding features of the graph that need to be considered and how information from the graph can be aggregated, is at Level 3. Some examples that represent but do not constitute all of Level 2 performance are as follows:

- Specify and explain the relationship between facts, terms, properties, or variables.
- Describe and explain examples and non-examples of science concepts.

- Select a procedure according to specified criteria and perform it.
- Formulate a routine problem, given data and conditions.
- Organize, represent, and interpret data.

Level 3 (Strategic Thinking) requires reasoning, planning, using evidence, and a higher level of thinking than the previous two levels. The cognitive demands at Level 3 are complex and abstract. The complexity does not result only from the fact that there could be multiple answers, a possibility for both Levels 1 and 2, but because the multi-step task requires more demanding reasoning. In most instances, requiring students to explain their thinking is at Level 3; requiring a very simple explanation or a word or two should be at Level 2. An activity that has more than one possible answer and requires students to justify the response they give would most likely be a Level 3. Experimental designs in Level 3 typically involve more than one dependent variable. 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 non-routine problems. Some examples that represent but do not constitute all Level 3 performance are as follows:

- Identify research questions and design investigations for a scientific problem.
- Solve non-routine problems.
- Develop a scientific model for a complex situation.
- Form conclusions from experimental data.

Level 4 (Extended Thinking) requires high cognitive demands and complexity. Students are required to make several connections—relate ideas within the content area or among content areas—and have to select or devise one approach among many alternatives to solve the problem. Many on-demand assessment instruments will not include any assessment activities that could be classified as Level 4. However, standards, goals, and objectives can be stated in such a way as to expect students to perform extended thinking. "Develop generalizations of the results obtained and the strategies used and apply them to new problem situations," is an example of a grade 8 objective that is a Level 4. Many, but not all, performance assessments and open-ended assessment activities requiring significant thought will be Level 4.

Level 4 involves complex reasoning, experimental design and planning, and probably will require an extended period of time either for the science investigation required by an objective, or for carrying out the multiple steps of an assessment item. However, 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 is asked 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 activity. However, if the student conducts a river study that requires taking into consideration a number of variables, this would be a Level 4. Some examples that represent but do not constitute all Level 4 performance are as follows:

- Based on data provided from a complex experiment that is novel to the student, deduct the fundamental relationship between several controlled variables.
- Conduct an investigation, from specifying a problem to designing and carrying out an experiment, to analyzing its data and forming conclusions.

Note: Multiple-choice and constructed-response items can be written at a depth-of-knowledge Level 4; however, to design an item in this format is difficult, as it would require research, investigation, and application, often over an extended period of time (e.g. performance-based tasks, portfolios, research studies/projects).

(Webb, N. 1997, 1999, 2002, 2005, 2006)

Bloom's Taxonomy

Categories (1956)	Definition	Examples of Action Words*
Knowledge	Student remembers, or recalls appropriate previously learned information.	identify; recall; observe; recognize; use; calculate; measure; order
Comprehension	Student translates, comprehends, or interprets information based on prior learning.	explain; interpret; describe; classify; identify; recognize; predict
Application	Student selects, transfers, and uses data and principles to complete a task or problem with minimum directions.	apply; classify; experiment; interpret; use; order; calculate
Analysis	Student distinguishes, classifies, and relates assumptions, hypotheses, evidence, or structure of a statement or question.	analyze; order; explain; classify; arrange; compare; contrast; infer; calculate; categorize; examine; experiment; question; test
Synthesis	Student originates, integrates, and combines ideas into a product, plan, or proposal that is new to him or her.	combine; arrange; rearrange; modify; invent; design; construct; organize; predict; infer; conclude; create; experiment and record data
Evaluation	Student appraises, assesses, or critiques on a basis of specific standards and criteria.	Evaluate; measure; explain; compare; summarize; predict; test decide; rate; conclude

Webb's Depth of Knowledge

Categories	Definition	Examples of Action Words*
Recall	Student recalls facts, information, procedures, or definitions.	Identify; recall; observe; recognize; use; calculate; measure; order
Basic Application of Skill/Concept	Student uses information, conceptual knowledge, and procedures.	explain; interpret; describe; classify; identify; order; recognize; predict; apply; use; calculate; organize; estimate; observe; collect; and display data
Strategic Thinking	Student uses reasoning and develops a plan or sequence of steps; process has some complexity.	analyze; order; explain; classify; arrange; compare; contrast; infer; interpret; calculate; categorize; examine; experiment; question; predict; evaluate; test
Extended Thinking	Student conducts an investigation, needs time to think and process multiple conditions of the problem or task. (The item/task generally requires several days or weeks to complete.)	combine; arrange; rearrange; propose; evaluate; modify; invent; design; construct; organize; predict; infer; conclude; evaluate; create; experiment and record data

*Some action words (verbs) can be classified at different depth-of-knowledge levels depending on the context of the item and the complexity of the action.

English Language Arts Depth of Knowledge

Note: The levels are based on Valencia and Wixson (2000, pp. 909–935).

The information below provides a definition of the four depth-of-knowledge levels. The charts at the end of the section also provide a comparison between Bloom's Taxonomy and Webb's Depth of Knowledge for English Language Arts. Included are examples of verbs (i.e., the action).

Definitions of Webb's Depth of Knowledge

Level 1 requires students to receive or recite facts or to use simple skills or abilities. Oral reading that does not include analysis of the text, as well as basic comprehension of a text, is included. Items require only a shallow understanding of the text presented and often consist of verbatim recall from text, slight paraphrasing of specific details from the text, or simple understanding of a single word or phrase. Some examples that represent but do not constitute all Level 1 performance are as follows:

- Support ideas by reference to verbatim or only slightly paraphrased details from the text.
- Use a dictionary to find the meanings of words.
- Recognize figurative language in a reading passage.

Level 2 requires the engagement of some mental processing beyond recalling or reproducing a response; it requires both comprehension and subsequent processing of text or portions of text. Inter-sentence analysis of inference is required. Some important concepts are covered, but not in a complex way. Content curriculum standards and items at this level may include words such as summarize, interpret, infer, classify, organize, collect, display, compare, and determine whether fact or opinion. Literal main ideas are stressed. A Level 2 item may require students to apply skills and concepts that are covered in Level 1. However, items require closer understanding of text, possibly through the item's paraphrasing of both the question and the answer. Some examples that represent but do not constitute all Level 2 performance are as follows:

- Use context cues to identify the meaning of unfamiliar words, phrases, and expressions that could otherwise have multiple meanings.
- Predict a logical outcome based on information in a selection.
- Identify and summarize the major events in a narrative.

Level 3 requires deeper knowledge. Students are encouraged to go beyond the text; however, they are still required to show understanding of the ideas in the text. Students may be encouraged to explain, generalize, or connect ideas. Content curriculum standards and items at Level 3 involve reasoning and planning. Students must be able to support their thinking. Items may involve abstract theme identification, inference across an entire passage, or students' application of prior knowledge. Items may also involve more superficial connections between texts. Some examples that represent but do not constitute all Level 3 performance are as follows:

- Explain or recognize how the author's purpose affects the interpretation of a reading selection.
- Summarize information from multiple sources to address a specific topic.
- Analyze and describe the characteristics of various types of literature.

Level 4 requires higher-order thinking and deep knowledge. The content curriculum standard or item at this level will probably be an extended activity, with extended time provided for completing it. The extended time

period is not a distinguishing factor if the required work is only repetitive and does not require the application of significant conceptual understanding and higher-order thinking. Students take information from at least one passage of a text and are asked to apply this information to a new task. They may also be asked to develop hypotheses and perform complex analyses of the connections among texts. Some examples that represent but do not constitute all Level 4 performance are as follows:

- Analyze and synthesize information from multiple sources.
- Examine and explain alternative perspectives across a variety of sources.
- Describe and illustrate how common themes are found across texts from different cultures.

Note: Multiple-choice and constructed-response items can be written at a depth-of-knowledge Level 4; however, to design an item in this format is difficult, as it would require research, investigation, and application, often over an extended period of time (e.g. performance-based tasks, portfolios, research studies/projects).

(Webb, N. 2005; Valencia and Wixson, 2000)

Bloom's Taxonomy

Categories	Definition	Examples of Action Words*
Knowledge	Student remembers, or recalls appropriate previously learned information.	define; identify; name; recall; recognize; select; tell
Comprehension	Student translates, comprehends, or interprets information based on prior learning.	describe; distinguish; explain; identify; indicate; interpret; locate; recognize; restate; summarize
Application	Student selects, transfers, and uses data and principles to complete a task or problem with minimum directions.	apply; choose; demonstrate; determine; interpret; inform; select; show; use
Analysis	Student distinguishes, classifies, and relates assumptions, hypotheses, evidence, or structure of a statement or question.	analyze; characterize; compare; contrast; discriminate; distinguish; explain; infer
Synthesis	Student originates, integrates, and combines ideas into a product, plan, or proposal that is new to him or her.	compose; create; develop; formulate; generalize; organize
Evaluation	Student appraises, assesses, or critiques on a basis of specific standards and criteria.	assess; conclude; convince; defend; evaluate; explain; justify; predict; prove; support

Webb's Depth of Knowledge

Categories	Definition	Examples of Action Words*
Recall	Student recalls facts, information, procedures, or definitions.	define; identify; locate; name; recall; recognize; sequence; tell
Basic Application of Skill/Concept	Student uses information, conceptual knowledge, and procedures.	apply; compare; comprehend; identify; describe; determine; infer; interpret; predict; summarize; use
Strategic Thinking	Student uses reasoning and develops a plan or sequence of steps; process has some complexity.	analyze; cite evidence; compare; contrast; draw conclusions; explain; generalize; infer; interpret; evaluate; recognize; summarize; support
Extended Thinking	Student conducts an investigation, needs time to think and process multiple conditions of the problem or task. (The item/task generally requires several days or weeks to complete.)	describe and illustrate; evaluate; examine and explain; analyze; synthesize

*Some action words (verbs) can be classified at different depth-of-knowledge levels depending on the context of the item and the complexity of the action.

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