

# Maxim



## **Linking Functional-Contextual Assessment to the Instructional Process**

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# Introduction

## **Standardized measurement continues to be the most prevalent means of assessment in our schools. Why?**

There are several factors that may be contributing to this:

- **Numbers:** There is a certain comfort in numbers that are believed to convey truth and absolute meaning. Everyone presumes they truly understand the meaning of 85% or an IQ score of 100. However, if you hand someone an assessment portfolio, he/she may struggle with summing it up neatly and quickly. You cannot determine a score from a portfolio or a narrative report.
- **Standardized assessment:** This has been the method of choice for so long that many educators and parents are reluctant to move into the arena of the unknown. When there tends to be more questions than answers, is it easier to do what has always been done? We certainly cannot be expected to create these new assessment strategies on our own!
- **Time:** Most parents and educators already have very busy schedules — time is a precious commodity. Any new enterprise will initially require more time and effort. When that happens, something else must give. Are we already asking too much of everyone? Are alternative assessment strategies really going to make that big a difference?

**While these are common concerns in reference to functional-contextual assessment strategies, there are equally compelling rebuttals.**

- Although reporting a fact in terms of “numbers” can sometimes give us absolute meaning, this is not always the case. For example, if we are told it is 2:00 PM in Washington D.C., we know exactly what that means. However, if we are told that Sara has an IQ of 46, we really cannot attach much meaning. This is due to the fact that there are too many variables that come into play. For instance, 1) What assessment instrument was used?; 2) Who was the evaluator and what training/expertise did that person possess?; 3) What was Sara’s/the examiner’s state of physical and mental health that day?; 4) What prior experiences did Sara bring to the assessment session that would allow her to attach meaning to the tasks required of her?; and 5) most importantly, What does “46” mean in relation to the real world?

An IQ number may give us a very general idea of the person’s intellectual functioning in a sterile environment. It tells us nothing of how or what individuals do in the context of their day-to-day lives. Perhaps it is best stated by Shafik Ansante, “Instead of thinking about ‘how smart a person is’, shouldn’t we be asking ‘how is a person smart?’.”<sup>1</sup>

- The old adage, “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” can certainly provide us food for thought. Is the current assessment system “broke”? One needs only to attend a few IEP meetings to answer this question. Seldom are functional-contextual assessments presented to supplement and support standardized data, nor is there a direct link between assessment and the instructional process.

Time has always been and always will be a critical issue! There is neither research nor preferred practices to support the notion that one person (parent or educator) must be the expert in conducting functional-contextual assessment strategies. The idea of moving beyond standardized assessment and the “staple-method of collaboration”<sup>2</sup> requires carefully planned teamwork. We all agree that no one person has the time or energy to effectively accomplish meaningful assessment. We must look to the many individuals who interact with the student regularly, such as, parents, siblings, friends, bus drivers, teachers, paraeducators, therapists, peers in school clubs and activities, church members, and more, to provide unique perspectives.

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<sup>1</sup> Shafik Ansante, Son, Husband, Father, Community Organizer (1947 - 1996)

<sup>2</sup> staple method of collaboration refers to the practice of each professional (teacher, psychologist, educational diagnostician, speech pathologist, occupational therapist, etc.) completing an independent assessment report and presenting it in isolation to the IEP committee; reports are then stapled together and placed in the student’s file

**Today there is growing discussion concerning functional-contextual assessment. However, there is a need for a universal definition.**

Functional-contextual assessment refers to data collection strategies that involve:

- interacting with and observing the student
- during natural, everyday activities
- in their natural social and learning environments
- using typical materials
- with people who are naturally in that environment at that time.

The data collected are then analyzed along with traditional standardized assessment data and reported in a comprehensive individual assessment report (CIA). The goal of functional-contextual assessment is to provide on-going meaningful information that links to the instructional process.

With more and more parents and educators requesting that functional-contextual assessment become a part of the comprehensive individual assessment (CIA) in accordance with IDEA 1997, the processes and tools in this guide have been developed to facilitate these efforts.

# Definition of Functional-Contextual Assessment

Interpretation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1997 and evolving consensus among assessment personnel leads us to the following definition and explanation of “functional-contextual assessment”.

Functional-contextual assessment identifies and documents the skills and abilities of a student and the context in which these skills are evident. This process will guide future instruction to promote independence. It is differentiated from functional analysis of behavior that examines the “function” a behavior serves for a student (e.g., task avoidance, gaining attention, sensory input/output).

In **Maxim**, functional-contextual assessment refers to data collection strategies that involve:

- interacting with and observing the student
- during natural, everyday activities
- in his or her natural social and learning environments
- using typical materials
- with people who are naturally in that environment at that time.

The data collected are then melded with traditional standardized assessment data and reported in a comprehensive individual assessment report (CIA). The goal of functional-contextual assessment is to provide on-going meaningful information that links to the instructional process.

## **We developed Maxim . . .**

believing that parents and educators possess the knowledge and understanding of individual students. They have the capabilities of readily providing functional-contextual assessment information. However, they may not have experience in assembling, maintaining and reporting this information in a way that is accessible and understandable to others. They may also require the tools and processes needed to link functional-contextual assessment to the instructional process.

There is a growing awareness of the need to assess and document students’ progress for instructional purposes and accountability. The processes and tools outlined in **Maxim** will 1) assist in ensuring that data are collected that lead to meaningful instruction and documentation of student progress; and 2) ensure teams are meeting IDEA 1997 requirements.

# Intended Purposes, Use and Potential Benefits of Maxim

## Intended Purposes

- To provide a framework by which appraisal and instructional personnel and family members can gather meaningful, functional-contextual information for assessment purposes and link that information to the development of the IEP and implementation of the instructional process;
- To focus appraisal and instructional personnel and family members on student information beyond standardized test scores and age/grade equivalents;
- To assist assessment teams in developing a collaborative approach to the evaluation and instruction of students with disabilities.

## Intended Use

**Maxim** is meant to be used by an assessment team as part of an on-going, collaborative approach to link functional-contextual assessment to the instructional process for students with disabilities. The data collected through this framework will not be solely contingent upon standardized test scores or age/grade equivalents. It is intended to be used by a variety of individuals (e.g., educational diagnostician, speech pathologist, classroom teacher, parent, paraeducator, occupational therapist, physical therapist) in a variety of environments (e.g., classroom, cafeteria, P.E., playground, home, community).

It is also intended that all members of the assessment team will collaborate to develop one Comprehensive Individual Assessment (CIA) report which will contain specific information regarding the student's abilities, skills and needs and give specific recommendations for access to the general curriculum, instruction and needed services. These recommendations will lead to a collaborative Individual Education Program (IEP) for the student.

## **Potential Benefits**

The use of **Maxim** will lead to

- the development of instructional goals and objectives that are meaningful to the student and based on current data;
- decisions regarding access to the general curriculum;
- an increase in collaboration between family and school;
- a bank of instructional strategies found to be effective with the student by family and school for use with future goals;
- student strengths and abilities emphasized and built upon; and
- an increase in the family's involvement in their child's education.

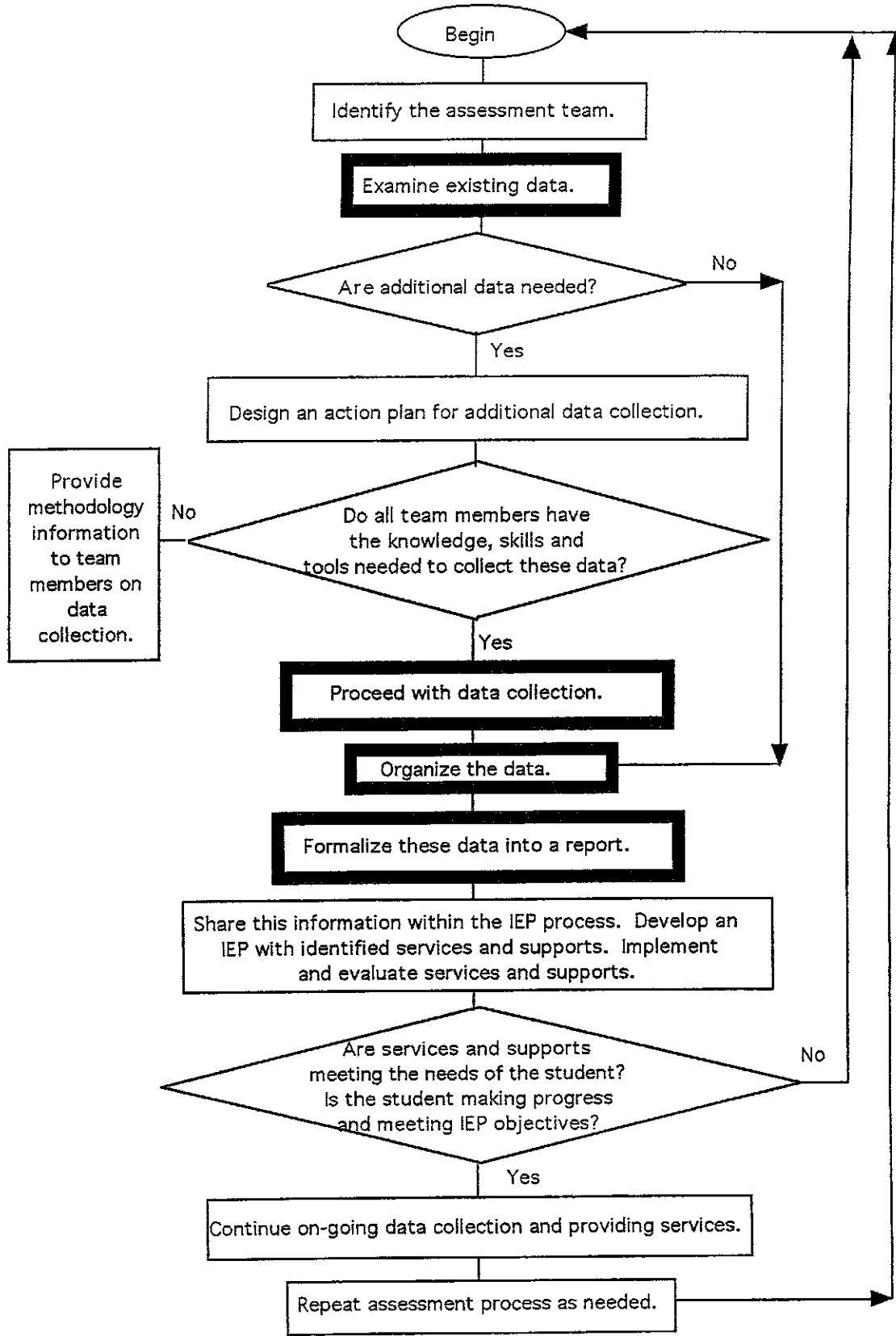
# **Description of Contents**

This assessment guide provides both processes and tools for collecting, maintaining and sharing meaningful, functional-contextual assessment information that links to the instructional process. The contents of this guide are organized in the following sections:

- I. Data Examination**
- II. Data Collection**
- III. Data Organization**
- IV. Comprehensive Individual Assessment Report**
- V. Resources**

The following flowchart has been developed to suggest the logical sequence of events for conducting functional-contextual assessment. It should be noted that this flowchart is a continuous loop — without “end” — to reflect that assessment is an on-going process throughout a student's school experience and beyond. It is the authors' desire that information gathered on a student using processes such as those in **Maxim**, assist any related service/community service personnel involved in the student's life after leaving school (e.g., supported employment coach, social worker, case manager).

# Linking Assessment to the Instructional Process Flowchart





# Functional-Contextual Assessment Process Rubric

Assessment is the pivotal component of any student's educational program. Therefore, each step in the functional-contextual assessment process must be given careful attention by the assessment team. A rubric has been included in **Maxim** to guide the "meta-assessment" (or "assessment-of-the-assessment process").

A rubric is a tool used for evaluating a performance or product. The rubric answers the question: "What does mastery and the varying degrees of mastery at this task look like?" Typically, a rubric contains a rating (e.g., inadequate, adequate, exemplary; 0-4; unsatisfactory, satisfactory, exceptional) for different traits or dimensions to be examined or assessed. Within these ratings are specific descriptions of expected performance for each trait or dimension.

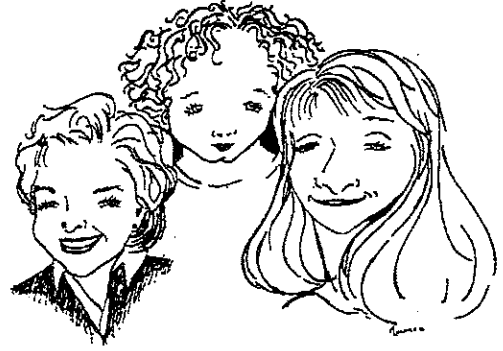
The rubric contained within this guide (see Resource section) is designed to give assessment teams feedback on the process of functional-contextual assessment and the products developed (assessment portfolio/comprehensive individual assessment report). At different points throughout this guide, the assessment team will be prompted to use the rubric to closely examine their progress using ratings of exemplary, adequate and inadequate.

Teams who rate their progress in the adequate or inadequate levels should use this information as a questioning device to make any necessary changes in their assessment process.

**Refer to the Functional-Contextual Assessment Process  
Rubric in the Resource section for closer examination.**



# About the Authors



## **Mary Fitzgerald, M.Ed.**

*M.Ed. - Special Education/Reading; B.S. - Mental Retardation/Psychology*

Since 1983, Mary has worked as classroom teacher, educational diagnostician, collaboration facilitator, staff developer, university instructor and author. Mary has focused on assessment issues concerning students with moderate to severe disabilities for most of her professional career. It has been through these experiences that she developed and used functional-contextual assessment processes and tools. Mary has presented this topic to parent support groups, school districts and educational service agencies and at local, state and national educational conferences.

## **Marlene Johnson, Ed.D.**

*Ed.D. - Curriculum & Instruction; M.Ed. - Learning Disabilities; B.S. - Special Education/Mental Retardation*

As a special education teacher, research associate, teacher/program supervisor, and staff developer, Marlene has first-hand experience in the assessment and instructional processes. Her knowledge of the design and implementation of curriculum and instruction provide insight into the task of linking functional assessment to the instructional process.

## **Mary Lasater, Ed.D.**

*Ed.D. - Curriculum & Instruction; M.Ed. - Mental Retardation; B.F.A. - Secondary Art Education*

Based on eight years of experience as a teacher in both general and special education classrooms, Mary has first-hand knowledge of meaningful assessment of all levels of learners. Since 1993, Mary has worked as a staff developer and co-author of numerous LRC training modules, and has taught graduate level courses in special education, including data-based instruction, which utilizes assessment procedures for determining what, and how to teach individual students.

## Functional-Contextual Questions

### Communication

- how does the student generally make him/herself understood (speech, gestures, graphic cues, etc.)
- how does the student respond to different forms of communication
- what kind of information does the student communicate spontaneously
- how does the student communicate his/her likes or dislikes
- how does the student gain the attention of others
- how does the student communicate choices
- how does the student express future goals
- what opportunities are most effective in increasing the student's independence when communicating (i.e., nonverbal, verbal, gestural, or physical prompts)

What additional questions would you add?

### Physical/Motor

- how does the student move in a variety of environments (i.e., familiar, unfamiliar, small, open)
- are there any learning implications related to the student's vision and hearing
- are there any necessary medical interventions that may affect learning
- how does the student maintain attention (i.e., stamina, eye contact, alertness)
- how does the student perform written tasks (i.e., holds writing tool, writes legibly, adjusts to writing space)
- how does the student grasp and release objects
- how does the student respond to different positioning and adaptive equipment
- how does the student physically explore objects and materials
- how does the student access transportation to leisure or work activities (i.e., public or personal mode of transportation, routes, fares, time schedules)
- what opportunities are most effective in increasing the student's physical independence (i.e., nonverbal, verbal, gestural, or physical prompts)

What additional questions would you add?

### Social/Emotional

- how does the student respond to adults (i.e., directions, praise, redirection, criticism, assistance)
- how does the student spend his/her free time (i.e., alone and/or with others)
- how does the student interact with peers (i.e., begins interactions, avoids confrontations, sustains interactions in one-on-one, small group, large group)
- how does the student relate to others (i.e., shares experiences, gains attention, expresses ideas, makes requests)
- how does the student interact with family members
- how do others react to the student's social interaction style
- does the student demonstrate any repetitive behaviors that interfere with his/her learning and/or social interactions

- in what leisure activities does the student participate (i.e., sports, organized groups, church activities)
- how does the student contribute his/herself to the community (e.g., school, church, charity organizations)
- does the student exhibit any other significant behaviors that appear to affect his/her social/emotional independence (note the time, the activity, the response of others, the response of student to others)
- what opportunities are most effective in increasing the student's social/emotional independence (i.e., nonverbal, verbal, gestural, or physical prompts)

What additional questions would you add?

### Academic Achievement

- how does the student primarily receive instruction (i.e., teacher, co-teacher, paraeducator, parent, sibling, peer)
- how does the student respond to various instructional techniques and strategies (i.e., cooperative learning groups, individual assignments, individual or class projects)
- how does the student demonstrate problem-solving strategies (i.e., tasks and events)
- how does the student respond to various strategies to increase learning independence (i.e., nonverbal, verbal, gestural, or physical prompts)
- how does the student begin and finish tasks (i.e., responds to time limits, familiar/unfamiliar tasks, filtering out distractions)
- how much time does the student demonstrate in attempting to try an unfamiliar routine or task
- how does the student accept adult/peer help
- how does the student demonstrate organizational skills (state of materials, keeps track of assignments/ tests/projects, has supplies and books)
- how does the student use technology (i.e., computer, calculator, voice output devices)
- how does the student transition between tasks (i.e., responds to closure directions, put things away, prepares for new tasks)
- how does the student react to noise levels (i.e., quiet or loud)
- how does the student react to lighting (low or bright) or temperature (cold or warm)
- how does the student respond to choice-making opportunities
- how does the student respond to different types of instructional materials
- what average length of activity does the student respond to best
- does the student prefer any type of activities and/or materials

What additional questions would you add?

# Rubric

## Functional Assessment Process

**Exemplary**

Assessment Team	<p>The assessment team actively includes all key people at each stage in the process. This includes family members, teachers, paraeducators, therapists and others. All team members assume responsibilities for examining current data, collecting additional data, organizing and reporting data.</p> <p>Team members who are new to the process are given all needed information and training to ensure active participation throughout the process.</p>
Examination of Current Data	<p>A formal structure is used and adequate time is allocated for the team to examine current data and make decisions for additional data collection.</p>
Collection of Data	<p>The team develops an action plan detailing who, what, where and when for data collection. Team members are well prepared with knowledge, tools and processes to collect functional, meaningful data.</p>
Organization of Data	<p>Team members honor the established time line and complete data collection. A team process is utilized to examine this data, make recommendations for the student's instructional program and prioritize these recommendations.</p>
Comprehensive Individual Assessment Report	<p>This report reflects collaborative efforts with information included from all relevant disciplines. The CIA also contains information on specific skills exhibited and recommendations for the instructional program including access to the general education curriculum.</p>
Links to the Instructional Process	<p>Individual education program reflects collaborative efforts with goals included from all relevant disciplines ensuring the student access to general education curriculum.</p>

# Rubric

## Functional Assessment Process

### Adequate

Assessment Team	Most key people are involved in the process (this includes parents, teachers, paraeducators, therapists, etc.). Not all team members are able to participate in all meetings and staffings.
Examination of Current Data	Current data are pulled together for examination and team members have input into what additional data are needed; this is not necessarily done at a meeting with everyone in attendance.
Collection of Data	An action plan for data collection is developed; this is completed by at least the assessment team leader with input from other team members. The team leader ensures that all team members have the tools and processes to collect needed data (i.e., forms are copied and distributed).
Organization of Data	Team leader collects data and gets input from team members on significant behaviors and skills, recommendations, etc.
Comprehensive Individual Assessment Report	The team leader drafts the report utilizing the information obtained during the previous step in the process (organization of data). Reference is made to supplemental reports, such as speech and language, occupational/physical therapy reports. The report contain information on specific skills exhibited and recommendations for the instructional program.
Links to the Instructional Process	The individual education program is developed with input from all relevant disciplines; however, some disciplines may develop separate goals and objectives.

# Rubric

## Functional Assessment Process

**Inadequate**

Assessment Team	School personnel follow traditional assessment procedures and include family members for interviews and in the IEP meeting to share assessment results. Additional potential team members, such as paraeducators, are not utilized.
Examination of Current Data	Forms are completed (appropriate boxes are checked and filled in) to indicate what data are currently available; however, no examination of content takes place.
Collection of Data	Traditional assessment personnel utilize checklists and other traditional formats to collect data. Teachers and parents are provided with formats to report information.
Organization of Data	Traditional assessment personnel ensure that all required paperwork is completed and submitted within the identified timeline.
Comprehensive Individual Assessment Report	Traditional assessment personnel generate separate reports for each relevant discipline. There is little, if any, link between the reports and information contained within.
Links to the Instructional Process	Student goals and objectives are not individualized nor based upon assessment data. IEP reflects program goals and objectives (i.e., most students in the program have identical or similar goals and objectives).