HomeworkCoach

Informal Working Memory Assessment Script for Coaches

This script helps you identify a student's working-memory limits in real time—how many steps they can hold, how interruptions affect them, how stress changes performance, and how familiarity with material frees up cognitive space.

Note: You do **not** need to do this assessment all at once. Build it into your lessons.

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1. Three-Step Direction Test

Coach says:
"I'm going to give you a three-step direction. Listen first, then do it."

Steps:

1. Give a simple three-step instruction (e.g., "Open your planner, find Thursday, write 'math test' on it").
2. Ask: "Can you repeat the steps back to me?"
3. Have them carry out the steps without repeating yourself.

What to observe:

- How many steps they recall.
- Whether they forget the middle step.
- Whether they ask for repetition.
- Whether they need the steps written down.

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2. Pre-Task Planning Check

Coach says:
"Before you start, talk me through your plan. What steps will you take?"

Steps:

1. Choose a multi-step task (math problem, paragraph, study plan).
2. Let them explain their plan out loud.

3. Prompt gently if needed:
    - "What happens after that?"
    - "Is there anything you need to do first?"

What to observe:

- Whether they can sequence steps.
- Whether they lose track mid-explanation.
- Whether they rely on vague language ("I'll just do it").

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3. Interruption Recovery Test

Coach says (after they begin a task):
"Quick question—what class is this for again?" or
"Can you look at this formula sheet for a second?"

Steps:

1. Let them work for 30–60 seconds.
2. Introduce a brief, natural interruption.
3. Say: "Okay, go ahead and keep working."

What to observe:

- Whether they resume smoothly.
- Whether they forget what they were doing.
- Whether they restart from the beginning.
- Whether written work helps them re-orient.

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4. Mid-Problem Tracking Check

Coach says:
"As you work, tell me what you're doing and why."

Steps:

1. Have them think aloud during a multi-step task.

2. Watch for pauses, confusion, skipped steps, or jumping ahead.
3. If they stall, ask:
    - "What was the last thing you did?"
    - "What's the next step supposed to be?"

What to observe:

- Where they lose the thread (beginning, middle, end).
- Whether they skip or repeat steps.
- Whether a written checklist improves performance.

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5. Stress-or-Speed Sensitivity Check

Coach says:
"Let's do a few at a relaxed pace first."
Then:
"Now let's pretend this is a timed quiz. You'll have two minutes."

Steps:

1. Have them complete a short task at normal pace.
2. Repeat a similar task with mild time pressure.
3. Compare accuracy, pacing, and emotional response.

What to observe:

- Drop in accuracy or completeness.
- Signs of freezing, rushing, or giving up.
- Whether extra time or chunking reduces the drop.

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6. Familiar vs. Unfamiliar Material Check

Coach says:
"We're going to try two similar tasks—one with material you know well, and one that's newer."

Steps:

1. Choose one familiar and one unfamiliar domain.
2. Give similar types of tasks in both.
3. Ask afterward:
    - "Which one felt harder to keep track of?"
    - "What made it harder?"

What to observe:

- Higher step capacity with familiar material.
- Whether low automaticity is eating up working-memory space.
- Where skill-building (not just strategy) is needed.

Putting It All Together

After running several of these checks, write a short profile:

"This student holds 2–3 steps reliably, loses track when interrupted, and shows a big drop under time pressure. They handle more steps in familiar math, suggesting automaticity is a major factor. They benefit from written steps, visual anchors, and reduced rushing."

This profile gives you a clear, actionable picture of the student's working-memory landscape. Keep these points in mind every time you work with your student.