

1. Criterion-referenced tests and Norm-referenced tests

A primary goal of testing is to collect information to make better decisions. Depending on the kinds of decisions that need to be made, different types of information may be needed. This difference in the type of decision to be made forms the basis for two major types of tests – criterion-referenced tests (CRTs) and norm-referenced tests (NRTs). In criterion-referenced testing, the goal is usually to make a decision about whether or not an examinee can demonstrate mastery in an area of content and competencies. Oftentimes, the area of content and competencies being assessed is job-related; most certification and licensure exams are CRTs. In norm-referenced testing, the goal is usually to rank the entire set of examinees in order to make comparisons of their performances relative to one another. Many standardized educational tests are NRTs. The two types of tests differ in several additional important ways, including their comparison targets, the average item difficulty of the exams, the resulting examinee score distributions, and the types of scores typically reported.

2. Certification and licensure tests

Certification and licensure tests have a number of elements in common with one another, along with a few important differences. Both types of tests are criterion-referenced tests (CRTs) and both are used to measure the knowledge and skills related to particular occupations. While the terms are not used with complete consistency, the term certification most often refers to a voluntary exam program sponsored by an agency related to the occupation, for the purpose of measuring professional competency. In contrast, the term licensure usually refers to a government-sponsored program that an individual is legally required to complete before he or she can be employed in the occupation. The two types of tests may also differ in terms of their overall test purposes and in the additional requirements the sponsoring agency may have for the candidates.

