

## How to Understand and Use National Percentile Scores

Most published tests provide a scale a parent uses to assign grades such as "A's", "B's" and "C's." The letters, as you know, represent a level of achievement such as superior, above average, and average respectively. Typically, earning a grade of "A" means your score fell between 90 and 100 percent, a "B" between 80 and 89 percent, and so forth. In schools, a grade is sometimes determined on the basis of how a student performed on a test relative to how other students performed on the same test. The National Percentile score on an achievement test works this way.

The National Percentile score (NP) typically follows the Raw Score (RS) as you look across the page of an achievement test report from left to right. Once again it will be helpful for you to reference our sample report ([click here to view](#)) as I explain this score. On our sample report, the first subtest is Reading. Across from this test title is 20/32. This is the Raw Score. The score next to this is 34 which is the National Percentile. It is right below the letters NP which represent the National Percentile.

The National Percentile score ranks raw scores from highest to lowest and shows where an individual's raw score falls in comparison. The lowest score that is reported is 1; the highest is 99. Here's how the scale breaks down:

- 1- 4: lowest
- 5-10: low
- 11-22: well below average
- 23-40: slightly below average
- 41-59: average
- 60-77: slightly above average
- 78-89: well above average
- 90-95: high
- 96-99: highest

A common misconception is to confuse a percentile rank with a percentage. The confusion shows up in the question, "Why, if I got a perfect score answering every question correctly is my percentile rank a 100? Again, a percentile is a comparison of one particular student's performance to a sampling of other students. Thinking of this score in terms of a bell-shaped curve helps to visualize it. The 34 on the sample report tells us that this student's score for this subtest was better than 34 percent of students nationwide who took the same test.

The value of a national percentile rank is that it is based on a national sampling of student performance rather than simply a smaller and local one. Smaller samplings may reflect state or regional populations. They are often less helpful and can even be misleading. In other words, consider a student whose intelligence and performance is in the "average range." Compare his or her test performance to a group of "high-octane, over-achiever types" and where do you think his percentile rank would be? Near or at the bottom. Likewise, compare him or her to a group of students for whom education is unimportant and who could care less about learning, and the percentile rank will likely be near the top. I say likely because some "under achievers" are really smart but are bored by the instructional setting in which they find themselves. The basic principle is, the larger the number of students your student is compared to, the more realistic the picture the test will present of your student's performance and standing.

In my next article I'll comment on Normal Curve Equivalents and Stanines. I know, sounds real exciting...but it's helpful to know.

Thanks for Reading,  
Curt Bumcrot, MRE

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