

BELOW AVERAGE

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology, Statistics, Education Measurement

1. Core Definition and Nomenclature

The concept of **Below Average** functions as a descriptive classification across various quantitative domains, denoting a range of performance or ability that deviates negatively from the established norm or mean within a defined population. Fundamentally, it describes outcomes, scores, or measurements that fall significantly short of the expected standard, yet typically remain above the threshold defined for severe deficiency or clinical impairment. In statistical terms, this classification often encompasses the performance band that is approximately one standard deviation below the mean, placing it clearly outside the central cluster of typical results, but not necessarily in the extreme tail of the distribution. This designation is crucial in educational and psychological testing, providing a standardized, neutral metric for performance evaluation when compared to age- or grade-level peers, ensuring objective assessment rather than subjective judgment.

The preference for the term **Below Average** stems from a historical movement within psychological and educational assessment toward more precise and less stigmatizing nomenclature. Historically, related performance ranges were often described using terms like "low normal" or "dull normal," which carried inherent pejorative connotations and lacked the clinical and statistical neutrality required for professional diagnosis and intervention planning. By adopting the statistically grounded descriptor "Below Average," practitioners emphasize the deviation from the statistical mean rather than focusing on an inherent personal deficit. This linguistic shift reflects a commitment to minimizing stigma while maximizing the utility of the classification for identifying specific needs, such as requirements for academic support or targeted psychoeducational interventions.

Defining "average" is central to understanding "below average." The average, or mean, is established by administering standardized tests to large, representative samples of the population, thereby creating a benchmark against which all subsequent scores are measured. When an individual's performance is labeled **Below Average**, it signifies that their performance places them in the lower quartile of the norming group, suggesting a measurable disparity in skill acquisition, intellectual speed, or overall capability relative to their peers. This distinction is vital, particularly in developmental psychology, as it aids in differentiating typical developmental variability from performance gaps that require formal attention and resource allocation to prevent widening achievement gaps in later life.

2. Statistical Foundation: The Normal Curve

The definition of **Below Average** is inextricably linked to the principles of the Normal distribution, or the Gaussian curve, which governs the distribution of many human traits, including height, reaction time, and intelligence. The Normal curve is symmetric, with the majority of scores clustering around the central mean (the 50th percentile). In this model, the average range is defined as the central cluster, typically encompassing one standard deviation both above and below the mean (approximately 68.2% of the population). The **Below Average** range therefore begins where the typical or average range ends, extending further down the left tail of the curve, generally covering performance that is statistically significant but not severely pathological.

Specifically, in standardized assessment scales--such as those used for intelligence testing--the mean is conventionally set at 100, and the standard deviation (SD) is set at 15. Under this model, the average range is typically considered 85 to 115. The **Below Average** classification captures the next contiguous statistical band, corresponding to scores typically ranging from 80 down to 70. This range is statistically defined as scores falling between the approximately 9th and 25th percentiles. Scores below 70 usually cross the clinical threshold for Intellectual Disability, highlighting the importance of precise statistical boundaries in classifying ability. Understanding the percentile rank provides a clearer picture: an individual scoring at the 16th percentile is exactly one standard deviation below the mean, placing them at the upper boundary of the Below Average designation depending on the specific scale used.

The precise statistical cutoff for **Below Average** can vary slightly based on the specific psychometric instrument and the context (e.g., academic scores vs. cognitive scores). However, the principle remains consistent: it represents a systematic negative deviation from the statistical norm that is measurable and replicable. The use of standard scores and standard deviations allows for direct comparisons across different populations and different types of tests, lending empirical weight to the classification. Without this rigorous statistical underpinning, performance assessments would rely on arbitrary thresholds, undermining the validity and reliability of educational and psychological interventions predicated on these classifications. Furthermore, this statistical methodology ensures that the classification is relative to the norming group, recognizing that "average" is a fluid concept defined by contemporary population performance.

3. Historical Evolution of Intellectual Classification

The historical treatment of the **Below Average** range mirrors the broader evolution of psychometric theory, moving from early, often judgmental labels toward modern, statistically grounded descriptors. Early attempts to classify intellect, particularly those following the pioneering work of Alfred Binet and Theodore Simon in the early 20th century, focused heavily on identifying individuals requiring special educational placement. However, the initial terminology used to describe the lower end of the ability spectrum was frequently imprecise and highly stigmatizing, blending clinical observation with moral judgments. Terms such as "feeble-minded," "dullard," or

the aforementioned "dull normal" were commonplace, reflecting a lack of sensitivity and statistical refinement in classifying cognitive differences.

A significant shift occurred with the development and popularization of standardized intelligence testing, particularly the Wechsler Scales (WAIS and WISC) beginning in the mid-20th century. David Wechsler introduced a deviation IQ scale, setting the mean at 100 and utilizing the standard deviation of 15, establishing the categorical ranges we use today. This standardized approach necessitated clearer, statistically defensible classifications, leading to the gradual phasing out of ambiguous terms like "dull normal." The emerging field of clinical psychology demanded terminology that reflected quantitative findings rather than qualitative observations, paving the way for the adoption of objective, descriptive categories like **Below Average** or Low Average.

The transition to modern nomenclature was driven not only by statistical rigor but also by ethical considerations in clinical practice. Professionals recognized the profound impact that diagnostic labels have on self-identity, educational opportunities, and societal perception. The explicit goal was to use language that facilitated resource provision without assigning unnecessary social stigma. By classifying performance as **Below Average** (often spanning the 80-90 IQ range), clinicians could accurately identify a group of individuals who required targeted support--such as slower instructional pacing or remedial assistance--without grouping them with those who met the criteria for severe Intellectual Disability (IQ below 70), thus ensuring a more nuanced and humane approach to psychoeducational categorization.

4. Application in Intellectual Functioning (IQ 80-90)

In the realm of cognitive assessment, specifically utilizing measures of the Intelligence quotient (IQ), the **Below Average** range is typically delineated by scores falling between 80 and 90. This specific range is sometimes referred to as "Low Average" on the Wechsler scales. Individuals scoring within this band possess sufficient cognitive ability to function independently in society, yet they often demonstrate measurable difficulties in processing speed, abstract reasoning, and complex academic tasks when compared to the general population. This classification is clinically significant because it helps explain persistent academic struggles that cannot be attributed solely to learning disabilities or environmental factors.

Individuals with cognitive functioning in the 80-90 IQ range usually successfully navigate primary education but often encounter increasing challenges as academic demands escalate, particularly in middle school and high school where abstract thought, rapid information processing, and independent organization become critical. While they are fully capable of learning, their learning curve may be flatter, requiring more repetition, concrete examples, and specialized instructional modifications than their average-scoring peers. Critically, this group falls into a diagnostic gray area; they are too high-functioning to qualify for services designated for intellectual disability, yet

their cognitive profile may still prevent them from achieving academic success without substantial accommodations and support, leading to a recognized service gap in many educational systems.

The specific profile of someone classified as **Below Average** often involves relative weaknesses across several cognitive domains, including working memory, long-term retrieval, and processing speed, while usually maintaining adequate verbal comprehension skills. Understanding this specific profile is essential for designing effective interventions. For instance, a child with an IQ of 85 struggling with mathematics may not benefit solely from standard tutoring, but might require instruction broken into smaller steps, reduced cognitive load during tasks, and increased time for completion. The 80-90 range thus represents a population segment with distinct instructional needs that are highly dependent on early identification and tailored educational planning to ensure successful integration into professional and community life.

5. Educational and Academic Assessment

In educational settings, the designation **Below Average** is broadly applied to standardized academic performance, not just cognitive scores. When evaluating subject mastery or overall grade performance, a student's standing is considered below average if their test scores, grade point averages, or performance on standardized proficiency exams fall into the lower quartile relative to their grade-level or age-level peers within the district or national norming sample. This classification is a critical trigger for Response to Intervention (RTI) models, mandating that the school system investigate potential underlying causes and implement tiered support strategies to close the achievement gap.

The implications of an academic classification of **Below Average** are far-reaching. It signals to educators and parents that the current instructional methodology may not be adequately meeting the student's needs, necessitating a review of curricular content, teaching methods, and environmental factors. For example, if a large percentage of a school cohort scores **Below Average** in reading comprehension on state assessments, it suggests a systemic instructional deficiency. Conversely, if an individual student consistently scores below average, it triggers an evaluation to determine if the underperformance is due to motivational issues, specific learning disabilities (like dyslexia), or underlying global cognitive differences (the 80-90 IQ range).

Furthermore, in the context of high-stakes testing, the designation of performance as **Below Average** determines access to advanced placement courses, entry into selective academic programs, and, often, qualification for financial aid or scholarships based on merit. The classification is inherently comparative; it places the individual or group in the lower tier of measured ability or achievement. Educational psychologists stress that while the label is descriptive of performance, it must never be treated as prescriptive of potential. Targeted educational strategies, such as intensive remedial reading programs, small-group instruction, or

the provision of assistive technology, are designed specifically to move students out of the **Below Average** category and closer to the mean, demonstrating the dynamic nature of this classification in educational development.

6. Key Characteristics of the Below Average Range

Slower Processing Speed: Individuals often exhibit measurably slower cognitive processing speed compared to the average population, requiring more time to encode, analyze, and retrieve information, which impacts performance on timed tasks and complex assignments.

Need for Concrete Instruction: Learning is significantly facilitated by the use of concrete examples, hands-on activities, and structured, explicit instruction, often demonstrating difficulty grasping abstract or highly theoretical concepts without significant scaffolding.

Academic Vulnerability: While capable of acquiring skills, individuals in the **Below Average** range are highly vulnerable to falling behind in subjects requiring cumulative knowledge and complex problem-solving, such as advanced mathematics and critical analysis of literature.

Adequate Adaptive Functioning: Unlike individuals with Intellectual Disability, those in the 80-90 IQ band typically maintain strong adaptive skills, including social competence, self-care, and practical reasoning, enabling successful independent living in adulthood.

Preference for Structured Environments: Optimal performance is achieved in environments that provide clear expectations, predictable routines, and minimal ambiguity, as higher-order executive functions (planning, organization) may be relatively weaker.

7. Ethical and Societal Implications

The application of the **Below Average** label carries significant ethical and societal weight. While the term is statistically neutral, its sociological impact often translates into lowered expectations, which can lead to the "self-fulfilling prophecy." If educators, parents, and even the individual internalize the classification as a fixed limitation rather than a descriptor of current performance, opportunities for growth and challenge may be inadvertently restricted. Societal perceptions often correlate average or above-average intellectual ability with worthiness and success, making the **Below Average** label a potential source of internalized shame or external marginalization if not handled sensitively and professionally within psychoeducational contexts.

Furthermore, the classification impacts resource allocation. In educational systems facing budgetary constraints, resources are often prioritized for individuals with diagnosed learning disabilities or Intellectual Disability, sometimes leaving the high-incidence, but less severe, **Below Average** group underserved. This resource gap means that many individuals who require mild but consistent academic support to reach proficiency are overlooked, perpetuating cycles of underachievement. Ethical practitioners must advocate for comprehensive services that recognize the specific needs of this population, ensuring that a purely statistical classification does not result

in the denial of necessary support.

In the broader societal context, performance classified as **Below Average** can affect economic trajectories. While individuals in this range are fully capable of maintaining employment, they may face barriers to entry into high-skill, highly competitive professions that demand rapid cognitive manipulation or advanced degrees. Societal structures must acknowledge and adapt to the diverse range of human capabilities, ensuring that educational and vocational training systems are flexible enough to accommodate different learning speeds and cognitive profiles. The ethical mandate is to use the classification descriptively--to understand learning differences--rather than restrictively--to limit future potential.

8. Criticisms of Standardized Classification

Despite the statistical rigor underlying the **Below Average** classification, it is subject to ongoing criticism, primarily centered on the inherent limitations and cultural biases of the standardized testing used to establish the average itself. Critics argue that standardized IQ and achievement tests often fail to adequately measure ability across diverse cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds. A score classified as **Below Average** might reflect a lack of exposure to the dominant cultural knowledge base or limited access to high-quality educational resources, rather than an inherent cognitive limitation. This environmental bias means the classification may disproportionately affect minority or low-income populations, raising serious concerns about equity and fairness.

A core philosophical debate revolves around the nature of intelligence itself. If intelligence is viewed as a multifaceted construct encompassing emotional intelligence, creativity, and practical wisdom (as proposed by theorists like Gardner), then a single composite score used to define the **Below Average** range provides an incomplete and potentially misleading picture of an individual's overall capabilities. Critics assert that overreliance on the 80-90 IQ metric neglects latent talents and strengths that fall outside the traditional academic domain, leading to an overly reductionist view of human potential and skill set.

Finally, the very act of categorization is scrutinized. Labeling a person as **Below Average** risks reifying a fluid concept into a fixed identity. While classification is necessary for resource allocation, the potential for harm due to misinterpretation or misapplication of the label remains a significant concern. Modern psychological practice emphasizes the need for comprehensive assessment that integrates standardized scores with qualitative data, behavioral observations, and adaptive functioning reports. This multi-modal approach aims to ensure that the **Below Average** designation serves as a starting point for understanding individual needs, rather than as a final, immutable judgment of intellectual capacity.

9. Further Reading

[Intelligence quotient \(IQ\) - Wikipedia](#)

[Normal distribution - Wikipedia](#)

[Standard deviation - Wikipedia](#)

[Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale \(WAIS\) - Wikipedia](#)

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