



# Differentiated Instruction

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In any classroom, students will have a range of abilities, needs and interests. Differentiated instruction is any instructional strategy that recognizes and supports individual differences in learning. Differentiated instruction maximizes learning by considering students' individual and cultural learning styles, recognizing that some students will require adjusted expectations, and offering different ways for students to explore curriculum and demonstrate learning (as well as accepting that these different methods are of equal value). With differentiated instruction, the teacher aims to create learning situations that match students' current abilities and preferred learning styles while stretching their abilities and encouraging them to try new ways of learning.

Planning for differentiated instruction involves making informed decisions about the learning environment, instructional time, content, materials and resources, instructional strategies and evaluation procedures. A proactive, flexible and student-centered approach is the key to providing instruction that maximizes opportunities for all students to learn. Consider the following issues and strategies in planning for students with diverse abilities and needs. For a checklist of ideas, see [Instructional Planning Guide for Differentiation](#).

## Learning Environment

The learning environment includes the overall layout of the classroom, the way you use that space, and elements such as lighting. Although some aspects of the learning environment will be beyond the individual teacher's control, it is possible to make alterations to help ensure the classroom is supportive and comfortable for all students.

Consider the following sample strategies.

- Vary the places in which learning can occur; for instance, some concepts may be better learned in a laboratory or an outdoor setting rather than a classroom.
- Permit a student to work in a quiet, uncrowded corner of the room, or even in the hall outside the room (but do not isolate a student against his or her will).
- Make use of headphones, carrels or screens, modified lighting, alternative desks, or other items to promote learning for individual students; for example, some students may be better able to concentrate with a light on their desk.

- Use alternative seating, or stand close to students who need extra help.
- Identify classroom management procedures that would make the learning environment more safe or supportive.

## Learning Activities

Varying learning activities is an important way to provide appropriate opportunities for all students to explore concepts. This may involve adapting how students participate, providing adapted equipment or materials, or varying the degree of structure or open-endedness of the tasks. Collaborative learning activities, tiered assignments, learning centres, learning logs, individual goal-setting, changing the pace or delivery of instruction, and using visual and verbal cueing are examples of differentiating process so that all students can be active participants in the classroom. Supporting differentiated instruction also involves using time flexibly by building in opportunities to address individual interests and needs, and allowing different students to work at different speeds.

Consider the following sample strategies.

- Use a combination of individual, paired, small group and whole class activities, and a variety of methods for determining pairings and groupings.
- Provide opportunities for a range of skills such as discussion, writing, drawing and viewing.
- Alternate quiet and active times.
- Plan transitions to ensure a smooth flow from one activity to the next.
- Allow some students to work at an assignment for only a short period of time and then move on to another; allow other students to stick with an assignment until they feel satisfied.
- Allow some students more time to complete written assignments.
- Identify which students require structure, and provide them with detailed schedules and advanced warning of major changes to routine.
- Build in time to respond to student needs, to opportunities in the community and to events happening in the world, province, city or town.
- Use an interdisciplinary emphasis and timetable around major school events to create greater student and staff involvement.
- Consider ways to activate, clarify and extend prior knowledge, and to help students make connections between what they know and what they will be learning.
- Consider extension activities that allow students to reinforce, extend and apply their learning in a variety of contexts.

- Identify in advance alternative activities to use if students need a change in pace or a refocusing of attention.

## Presentation

The way you present information and ideas is an essential part of teaching. Varying presentation methods to meet the different abilities and learning styles of students in the classroom will enhance students' understanding and interest.

Consider the following sample strategies.

- Make use of peer assistants, volunteers or two or more teachers teaching cooperatively.
- Minimize copying by providing information or instructions on worksheets or handouts.
- Provide material in manageable chunks; e.g., consider fewer mathematics problems on a page, shorter tasks, a few questions at a time, specific questions to guide reading, or advanced organizers.
- Repeat instructions and provide in various formats (e.g., oral, written, taped).
- Have students repeat instructions.
- Make use of diagrams, illustrations, concrete materials and multimedia technology to explore and illustrate concepts.
- Make use of overhead projectors, flipcharts, different coloured chalk and pens, cue cards.
- Use students in presentation.
- Make use of webs and outline charts.
- Use computer tutorials and computer-assisted instruction to provide individual practice.
- Identify keywords, concepts and questions, and plan a variety of ways to introduce and reinforce these ideas, e.g., keywords on the board, printed instructions, labelled diagrams on the board, highlighted words or passages in textbooks or on a large computer screen.

## Resources and Materials

Research supports the importance of varying teaching tools to respond to student needs. This may include varying the formats, the reading level of the materials, or the use of technology.

Consider the following sample strategies.

- Provide parallel resources at different reading levels.
- Use a combination of print and nonprint materials (e.g., films, audiotapes and dramatic presentations).
- Use teacher-made and student-made resources.
- Access community resources (e.g., local newspaper or radio station, local historian).
- Consider providing alternative or adapted materials for individual students, including:
  - alternative modes of student materials (e.g., dictating to a scribe, tape recording, drawing pictures, enlarged or reduced materials, computers, calculators, manipulatives, overlays for textbook pages)
  - adapted devices (e.g., erasable pens, spell checker)
  - line indicators, sections on paper, graph paper or raised line paper
  - window cards (so that only one word or line is exposed at a time when reading) or small flashlight to follow a line across
  - worksheets with more white space for answers; highlighted or colour-coded directions and keywords; or less information on a page.
- Allow students to use computer tools (e.g., word processors, spreadsheets, graphics).
- Use new book formats such as CD-ROM or downloadable storybooks in which the size of text and pace of presentation can be controlled by the student.
- Use CD-ROM encyclopedias, which make it easy to locate information without applying skills related to alphabetical order.

## Assignments and Assessment

Differentiating instruction can occur through varying the type and complexity of the products that students create to demonstrate their learning. Students working below grade level may have different or reduced performance expectations from their grade-level peers. As well, allowing students choices for demonstrating their knowledge accommodates differing student abilities, interests and learning styles. It is important to differentiate the type of assignments and tasks, rather than just the quantity.

Consider the following sample strategies.

- Provide assignment options (e.g., radio broadcasts, character letter exchange, letters to authors, different endings to stories, critiques, displays or models, crossword puzzles, filmstrips, dramatic presentations, visual timelines, puppet shows).
- Allow students additional class time to complete written assignments.
- Allow students to take oral exams instead of written ones or to use a scribe.
- Allow students to answer fewer questions.
- Allow a group of students to create a video or other product to demonstrate learning.
- Allow students to complete assignments and exams using computers.

# Instructional Planning Guide for Differentiation<sup>1</sup>

As you design a learning activity consider students' individual needs and learning profiles to determine the accommodations, modifications and adaptations that will be necessary for success.

## Topic or Key Concepts

- **Identify the topic or key concepts of the learning activity.**
  - Consider how the activity has been designed to motivate and engage student interest.
  - Determine how to present overviews of learning activity.
  - Ensure that the learning activity provides opportunities for students to relate the key concept or topic to their own experiences or understanding.
  - Build-in opportunities to make connections between what the students know and what they are learning.

## Outcomes

- **Determine the outcomes that students can reasonably accomplish.**
  - Select fewer outcomes, partial outcomes, or outcomes from a different grade level if necessary.
- **Determine what the students will be able to demonstrate as a result of this learning activity.**
  - Consider the accommodations, modifications and adaptations necessary to ensure student success in achieving all or part of the outcomes.

## Assessment

- **Decide what evidence will show whether the students have achieved the outcomes.**
- **Determine the best way for students to demonstrate their learning.**
  - Provide assessment options for students to “show what they know.”
- **Make necessary preparations for alternative testing procedures, resources and materials.**
  - Does the student need ...
    - \_\_\_ a tape recording of the test
    - \_\_\_ a scribe to write down their ideas or answers
    - \_\_\_ the test questions read aloud
    - \_\_\_ a time extension
    - \_\_\_ fewer questions?
- **Record important assignment and text due dates on a master calendar and have students transpose these dates into their agenda.**
  - Show students how to plan for longer assignment by “back-planning” on a calendar.
  - Show students how to study for an up-coming test.
  - Provide students with a study guide of important skills and concepts.

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1. From Calgary Learning Centre (Calgary, AB: 2003)

## Instructional Planning Guide for Differentiation (continued)

- **Determine the focus of the assessment for evaluation purposes.**  
For example, if you are evaluating students on their understanding of the content of material, do not penalize for spelling errors or missing punctuation.
- **Select or develop rubrics, exemplars and checklists to support student evaluation.**
- **Provide immediate, specific and constructive feedback.**
  - Emphasize the quality of work and perseverance rather than the quantity.
- **Provide opportunities for student self-reflection and self-evaluation.**
  - Consider necessary alternate assessment options to accommodate different learning styles, interests or strengths.
  - Share assignment criteria lists, checklists, standards and exemplars with students.

### Learning Activities

- **Select appropriate instructional strategies and learning activities that will create opportunities for students to successfully achieve the target outcomes.**
  - Decide how students will apply their learning.
  - Ensure opportunities for students to use different learning modalities; e.g., visual auditory.
  - Present and support key concepts and instructions using demonstration, oral and written steps, exemplars of completed assignments.
  - Break down assignments or tasks into smaller, more manageable parts.
  - Give clear, concrete instructions
    - \_\_\_ provide a visual reference of the sequence of key steps in completing the assignment
    - \_\_\_ provide a checklist of assignment parts for students to self monitor as tasks are completed
    - \_\_\_ support written instructions with picture prompts or highlight directions using a colour-coding system
    - \_\_\_ tape record directions or lectures for playback
    - \_\_\_ repeat instructions
    - \_\_\_ have students recall instructions in sequence.
  - Model and demonstrate to ensure understanding of directions.
  - Check in with student regularly to check on task understanding and to provide feedback and clarification on specific aspects of the assignment.
  - Highlight key points of lesson orally and visually.
  - Select extension activities that will reinforce and extend learning.
  - Write assignments and homework on chart or blackboard. Ensure that students write down assignments in their agenda.
  - Help students stay on task by employing a cueing strategy.
- **Consider how the students will be organized for instruction and the type of groupings that will be most effective (partner, small group, large group).**
  - Use flexible grouping to determine the best fit for a particular activity. Decisions about grouping students may be based on the following factors depending on the end goal including learning profile, interest, readiness, need.

## Instructional Planning Guide for Differentiation (continued)

### Resources

- **Decide on the resources that will be used for the learning activity including oral, print, media texts and community resources.**
  - Locate necessary materials and resources to support different reading levels, learning styles and student needs.
  - Consider using a graphic organizer to present information.
- **Prepare resources to assist students with learning difficulties.**
  - Rewrite materials at a lower reading level.
  - Provide an advanced organizer for note-taking; e.g., fill-in-the-blank or cloze style.
  - Highlight passages of text.
  - Reformat handouts and tests as necessary. For example, provide lines for written responses, put one question per page, rewrite questions or information at a lower reading level, enlarge print and spacing between lines of print.
  - Determine web-based supports (e.g., simulations)
- **Ensure that students have the assistive tools and devices to support their learning style or needs.**
  - \_\_\_ highlighters, calculators, post-it notes, ruler, markers, erasable pens, adapted scissors, graph paper, special lined paper, pencil grip, date / number line taped to desk
  - \_\_\_ a copy of the lecture notes
  - \_\_\_ enlarged or reduced text
  - \_\_\_ scribe
  - \_\_\_ tape recording
  - \_\_\_ picture prompts
  - \_\_\_ manipulatives
  - \_\_\_ overlays
  - \_\_\_ computers.

### Timeline

- **Determine an approximate timeline for the learning activity.**
  - Determine whether there is a need to compact or extend the study based on student interest or needs.
- **Consider the pace of the learning activity and the needs of the students.**
  - Consider ways to change the pace and allow students to focus on task for more condensed periods of time if necessary.
  - Prepare an assignment sheet with task increments and timeline to guide student's completion of the assignment.
  - Provide opportunity for frequent breaks if necessary.
  - Provide time warnings for task completion.
  - Extend deadlines for those students who require more time to complete assignments.

## Instructional Planning Guide for Differentiation (continued)

### Learning Environment

- **Consider the classroom environment and individual student work space.**
  - Provide a quiet work station like a study carrel or corner of the classroom.
  - Plan seating arrangements for those students with attention issues considering traffic patterns and overt distractions; e.g., windows, door, hallway, computer.
  - Partner students with a peer for support and guidance.
- **Consider the organization of notebooks, textbooks, materials and supplies.**
  - Provide an alternate place for students to keep books and supplies; e.g., storage tub or book bins.
  - Create a system for colour-coding notebooks.
  - Provide a consistent place to hand in assignments.