

A High Achiever...	A Gifted Learner...	A Creative Thinker...
Remembers the answers.	Poses unforeseen questions.	Sees exceptions.
Is interested.	Is curious.	Wonders.
Is attentive.	Is selectively mentally engaged.	Daydreams; may seem off task.
Generates advanced ideas.	Generates complex, abstract ideas.	Overflows with ideas, many of which will never be developed.
Works hard to achieve.	Knows without working hard.	Plays with ideas and concepts.
Answer the questions in detail.	Ponders with depth and multiple perspectives.	Injects new possibilities.
Performs at the top of the group.	Is beyond the group.	Is in own group.
Responds with interest and opinions.	Exhibits feelings and opinions from multiple perspectives.	Shares bizarre, sometimes conflicting opinions.
Learns with ease.	Already knows.	Questions: What if...
Needs 6 to 8 repetitions to master.	Needs 1 to 3 repetitions to master.	Questions the need for mastery.
Comprehends at a high level.	Comprehends in-depth, complex ideas.	Overflows with ideas--many of which will never be developed.
Enjoys the company of age peers.	Prefers the company of intellectual peers.	Prefers the company of creative peers but often works alone.
Understands complex, abstract humor.	Creates complex, abstract humor.	Relishes wild, off-the-wall humor.
Grasps the meaning.	Infers and connects concepts.	Makes mental leaps: Aha!
Completes assignments on time.	Initiates projects and extensions of assignments.	Initiates more projects that will ever be completed.
Is receptive.	Is intense.	Is independent and unconventional.
Is accurate and complete.	Is original and continually developing.	Is original and continually developing.
Enjoys school often.	Enjoys self-directed learning.	Enjoys creating.
Absorbs information.	Manipulates information.	Improvises.
Is a technician with expertise in a field.	Is an expert who abstracts beyond the field.	Is an inventor and idea generator.
Memorizes well.	Guesses and infers well.	Creates and brainstorms well.
Is highly alert and observant.	Anticipates and relates observations.	Is intuitive.
Is pleased with own learning.	Is self-critical.	Is never finished with possibilities.
Gets A's.	May not be motivated by grades.	May not be motivated by grades.
Is able.	Is intellectual.	Is idiosyncratic.

Identification of gifted students is clouded when concerned adults misinterpret high achievement as giftedness. High-achieving students are noticed for their on-time, neat, well-developed, and correct learning products. Adults comment on these students' consistent high grades and note how well they acclimate to class procedures and discussions. Some adults assume these students are gifted because their school-appropriate behaviors and products surface above the typical responses of grade-level students.

Educators with expertise in gifted education are frustrated trying to help other educators and parents understand that while high achievers are valuable participants whose high-level modeling is welcomed in classes, they learn differently from gifted learners. In situations in which they are respected and encouraged, gifted students' thinking is more complex with abstract inferences and more diverse perceptions than is typical of high achievers. Articulating those differences to educators and parents can be difficult.

In 1989, Janice Szabos published a comparison of the bright child and the gifted learner. Her comparison helps to delineate differences between the two groups and provides a useful format for discussions. However, some of the items listed in the comparison are questionable. For example, the gifted learner is credited with having wild, silly ideas. In reality, it is creative thinkers who exhibit the ideas often called wild or silly; not all gifted learners demonstrate that aspect of the creative process. As a second example of concern, Szabos lists bright children as enjoying straightforward, sequential presentations. This behavior seems more associated with learning preferences than with ability. Arguably, some gifted learners also enjoy straightforward, sequential presentations, but their questions and responses to such a presentation may dramatically differ from the questions and responses of bright children. As a final example, Szabos' comparison states that gifted learners prefer adults while bright children enjoy peers. This statement has negative connotations leading to the stereotype that gifted learners are so out of sync with society and have such poor social skills that they can only communicate with adults. In reality, gifted learners seek idea-mates rather than age-mates. They enjoy the company of peers when the peer group understands the shared ideas.

Responding to those concerns, a three-way comparison of a high achiever, a gifted learner, and a creative thinker is proposed for you to consider and ponder. No column is intended to be mutually exclusive. For example, a high achiever might also be a creative thinker, and a gifted learner might also be a creative thinker; a creative thinker might also be a high achiever, and a gifted learner might also be a high achiever. This three-column comparison emerged over several years while working with students representing all three of these groups. Hundreds of teachers and students reviewed and discussed the items as the comparison developed.

These students and teachers found the following cartoons helpful in understanding the comparison since high achievers, gifted learners, and creative thinkers co-exist in many classrooms. In the first cartoon, the teacher announces an assignment, and the high achiever quickly tries to determine what the teacher most wants so he can please and satisfy the teacher's intentions: "What do you really want?" The gifted learner ponders what to do that would most interest her as she learns: "What I would like to do is..." Simultaneously, the creative thinker's mind begins to race with all of the diverse and varied possibilities that could be explored:

