

Differentiating Instruction: Meeting Students Where They Are

No two students enter a classroom with identical abilities, experiences, and needs. Learning style, language proficiency, background knowledge, readiness to learn, and other factors can vary widely within a single class group.

Regardless of their individual differences, however, students are expected to master the same concepts, principles, and skills. Helping all students succeed in their learning is an enormous challenge that requires innovative thinking.

What is differentiated instruction?

Differentiated instruction is an instructional theory that allows teachers to face this challenge by taking diverse student factors into account when planning and delivering instruction.

Based on this theory, teachers can structure learning environments that address the variety of learning styles, interests, and abilities found within a classroom.

How does differentiated instruction work?

Differentiated instruction is based upon the belief that students learn best when they make connections between the curriculum and their diverse interests and experiences, and that the greatest learning occurs when students are pushed slightly beyond the point where they can work without assistance. This point differs for students who are working below grade level and for those who are gifted in a given area.

Rather than simply "teaching to the middle" by providing a single avenue for learning for all students in a class, teachers using differentiated instruction match tasks, activities, and assessments with their students' interests, abilities, and learning preferences.

What Differentiated Instruction Means for Teachers	
Teachers DO	Teachers DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• provide several learning options, or different paths to learning, which help students take in information and make sense of concepts and skills.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• develop a separate lesson plan for each student in a classroom.
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• provide appropriate levels of challenge for all students, including those who lag behind, those who are advanced, and those right in the middle.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• "water down" the curriculum for some students.

Laying the Foundation for Differentiated Instruction

Differentiated instruction does not happen by accident. It requires planning, commitment, and acknowledgment of the fact that diverse abilities, experiences, and interests have a tremendous impact on student learning. If you are considering using differentiated instruction in your classroom, the three steps below provide a place to start.

1. Get to know your students.

- Identify the level at which individual students are working in your subject area. Standardized test scores and other information found in student records can help determine this information.
- Administer a [learning style inventory](#) to determine how your students best learn. An instrument can be obtained through the guidance department at your school.
- Determine student interests. On a regular basis, ask students to identify topics that interest them and activities that occupy their non-school time.

2. Identify areas of your curriculum that could be adapted to differentiated instruction.

- Study the instructional goals and objectives for your subject established by your state's department of education. Identify the major concepts, principles, and skills students should learn.
- Choose one or two broad concepts or skills that lend themselves to being taught at different degrees of complexity.
- Brainstorm ideas for activities, tasks, and assessments that address a specific concept or skill. Ideas should cover a range of learning preferences, abilities, and interests.

3. Examine your role as teacher in the differentiated classroom.

- Brainstorm ways to vary your instructional delivery methods. Target auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learners in your approaches.
- Develop a general plan for facilitating time, space, and materials in your classroom. On any given day, not all students will be working on the same assignment at the same time. You must have a plan for student access to necessary materials, where individuals or groups will work, and how much time can be allotted to specific tasks.
- Identify alternative methods of assessing student performance and understanding. Assessment results should increase teacher understanding of students' abilities, interests, and needs, and should be incorporated into future planning.

Strategies for Successfully Implementing Differentiated Instruction

Instruction can be differentiated based on three general areas. These areas include:

- the content of instruction
- the processes and techniques used to help make sense of a given topic
- the products produced by students that demonstrate their learning

The chart below shows general strategies that can be applied in most classrooms. After studying the chart, review the subject-specific articles to find how differentiated instruction can be applied in your specific subject area.

Strategies for Differentiating Instruction	
Based on Content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilize pre-tests to assess where individual students need to begin study of a given topic or unit. • Encourage thinking at various levels of Bloom's taxonomy. • Use a variety of instructional delivery methods to address different learning styles. • Break assignments into smaller, more manageable parts that include structured directions for each part.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose broad instructional concepts and skills that lend themselves to understanding at various levels of complexity.
Based on Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide access to a variety of materials which target different learning preferences and reading abilities. • Develop activities that target auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learners. • Establish stations for inquiry-based, independent learning activities. • Create activities that vary in level of complexity and degree of abstract thinking required. • Use flexible grouping to group and regroup students based on factors including content, ability, and assessment results.
Based on Product	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use a variety of assessment strategies, including performance-based and open-ended assessment. • Balance teacher-assigned and student-selected projects. • Offer students a choice of projects that reflect a variety of learning styles and interests. • Make assessment an ongoing, interactive process.