



Launching young readers!

Reading Rockets

Differentiated Instruction for Reading

By: [Access Center](#)



Differentiated instruction is based on the premise that instructional approaches should vary and be adapted in relation to individual and diverse students. This brief looks at how differentiation strategies applied to reading can be designed to help students learn a range of skills including, phonics, comprehension, fluency, word prediction, and story prediction.

What Is differentiated instruction?

Differentiated instruction, also called differentiation, is a process through which teachers enhance learning by matching student characteristics to instruction and assessment. Differentiated instruction allows all students to access the same classroom curriculum by providing entry points, learning tasks, and outcomes that are tailored to students' needs (Hall, Strangman, & Meyer, 2003). Differentiated instruction is not a single strategy, but rather an approach to instruction that incorporates a variety of strategies.

Teachers can differentiate content, process, and/or product for students (Tomlinson, 1999). Differentiation of content refers to a change in the material being learned by a student. For example, if the classroom objective is for all students to subtract using renaming, some of the students may learn to subtract two-digit numbers, while others may learn to subtract larger numbers in the context of word problems. Differentiation of process refers to the way in which a student accesses material. One student may explore a learning center, while another student collects information from the web. Differentiation of product refers to the way in which a student shows what he or she has learned. For example, to demonstrate understanding of a geometric concept, one student may solve a problem set, while another builds a model.

When teachers differentiate, they do so in response to a student's readiness, interest, and/or learning profile. Readiness refers to the skill level and background knowledge of the child. Interest refers to topics that the student may want to explore or that will motivate the student. This can include interests relevant to the content area as well as outside interests of the student. Finally, a student's learning profile includes learning style (i.e., a visual, auditory, tactile, or kinesthetic learner), grouping preferences (i.e., individual, small group, or large group), and environmental preferences (i.e., lots of space or a quiet area to work). A teacher may differentiate based on any one of these factors or any combination of factors (Tomlinson, 1999).

How is it implemented?

Implementation looks different for each student and each assignment. Before beginning instruction, teachers should do three things:

1. Use diagnostic assessments to determine student readiness. These assessments can be formal or informal. Teachers can give pre-tests, question students about their background knowledge, or use KWL charts (charts that ask students to identify what they already **K**now,

- what they **Want** to know, and what they have **Learned** about a topic).
- Determine student interest. This can be done by using interest inventories and/or including students in the planning process. Teachers can ask students to tell them what specific interests they have in a particular topic, and then teachers can try to incorporate these interests into their lessons.
 - Identify student learning styles and environmental preferences. Learning styles can be measured using learning style inventories. Teachers can also get information about student learning styles by asking students how they learn best and by observing student activities. Identifying environmental preferences includes determining whether students work best in large or small groups and what environmental factors might contribute to or inhibit student learning. For example, a student might need to be free from distraction or have extra lighting while he or she works.

Teachers incorporate different instructional strategies based on the assessed needs of their students. Throughout a unit of study, teachers should assess students on a regular basis. This assessment can be formal, but is often informal and can include taking anecdotal notes on student progress, examining students' work, and asking the student questions about his or her understanding of the topic. The results of the assessment could then be used to drive further instruction.

What does it look like for reading?

Differentiation strategies applied to reading can be designed to help students learn a range of skills including, phonics, comprehension, fluency, word prediction, and story prediction. The chart below offers a variety of strategies that can be used.

Strategy	Focus of Differentiation	Definition	Example
Tiered Assignments	Readiness	Tiered assignments are designed to instruct students on essential skills that are provided at different levels of complexity, abstractness, and open-endedness. The curricular content and objective(s) are the same, but the process and/or product are varied according to the student's level of readiness.	Students with moderate comprehension skills are asked to create a story-web. Students with advanced comprehension skills are asked to re-tell a story from the point of view of the main character.
Compacting	Readiness	Compacting is the process of adjusting instruction to account for prior student mastery of learning objectives. Compacting involves a three-step process: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (assess the student to determine his/her level of knowledge on the material to be studied and determine what he/she still needs to master; create plans for what the student needs to know, and excuse the student from studying what he/she already knows; and create plans for freed-up time to be spent in enriched or accelerated study. 	A student who can decode words with short vowel sounds would not participate in a direct instruction lesson for that skill, but might be provided with small group or individualized instruction on a new phonics skill.

Interest Centers or Interest Groups	Readiness Interest	Interest centers (usually used with younger students) and interest groups (usually used with older students) are set up so that learning experiences are directed toward a specific learner interest. Allowing students to choose a topic can be motivating to them.	<p>Interest Centers: Centers can focus on specific reading skills, such as phonics or vocabulary, and provide examples and activities that center on a theme of interest, such as outer space or students' favorite cartoon characters.</p> <p>Interest Groups: For a book report, students can work in interest groups with other students who want to read the same book.</p>
Flexible Grouping*	Readiness Interest Learning Profile	<p>Students work as part of many different groups depending on the task and/or content. Sometimes students are placed in groups based on readiness, other times they are placed based on interest and/or learning profile.</p> <p>Groups can either be assigned by the teacher or chosen by the students. Students can be assigned purposefully to a group or assigned randomly. This strategy allows students to work with a wide variety of peers and keeps them from being labeled as advanced or struggling.</p>	The teacher may assign groups based on readiness for phonics instruction, while allowing other students to choose their own groups for book reports, based on the book topic.
Learning Contracts	Readiness Learning Profile	<p>Learning contracts begin with an agreement between the teacher and the student. The teacher specifies the necessary skills expected to be learned by the student and the required components of the assignment, while the student identifies methods for completing the tasks.</p> <p>This strategy:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. allows students to work at an appropriate pace; 2. can target learning styles; and 3. helps students work independently, learn planning skills, and eliminate unnecessary skill practice. 	<p>A student indicates that he or she wants to research a particular author. With support from the teacher, the student determines how the research will be conducted and how the information will be presented to the class.</p> <p>For example, the student might decide to write a paper and present a poster to the class. The learning contract indicates the dates by which each step of the project will be completed.</p>
Choice Boards	Readiness Interest Learning Profile	<p>Choice boards are organizers that contain a variety of activities. Students can choose one or several activities to complete as they learn a skill or develop a product.</p> <p>Choice boards can be organized so that students are required to choose options that focus on several different skills.</p>	<p>After students read <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>, they are given a choice board that contains a list of possible activities for each of the following learning styles: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile. Students must complete two activities from the board and must choose these activities from two different learning styles.</p>

* More information about grouping strategies can be found in *Strategies to Improve Access to the General Education Curriculum*. Available at http://www.k8accesscenter.org/training_resources/curricular_materials.asp

Access Center. (2004). *Differentiated Instruction for Reading*. Washington D.C.: Author.

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