



## Differentiation for Writing

### 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 write persuasive paragraphs, some of the students may learn to use a topic sentence and supporting details, while others may learn to use outside sources to defend their viewpoints. 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 the steps in the writing process, one student might create a graphic organizer, while another student verbally answers the teacher's questions about the process.

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 **W**ant to know, and what they have **L**earned about a topic).

2. 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.
3. 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 Writing?**

Writing instruction can be differentiated to allow students varying amounts of time to complete assignments, to give students different writing product options, and to teach skills related to the writing process. The chart below offers a variety of strategies that can be used.

<b>Strategy</b>	<b>Focus of Differentiation</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Example</b>
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 writing skills are asked to write a four-paragraph persuasive essay in which they provide a thesis statement and use their own ideas to support it. Students with more advanced skills are asked to research the topic in more depth and use substantive arguments from their research to support their thesis.

Strategy	Focus of Differentiation	Definition	Example
Compacting	Readiness	Compacting is the process of adjusting instruction to account for prior student mastery of learning objectives. Compacting involves a three-step process: (1) 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; (2) create plans for what the student needs to know, and excuse the student from studying what he/she already knows; and (3) create plans for freed-up time to be spent in enriched or accelerated study.	Rather than receiving additional direct instruction on writing a five-sentence paragraph, a student who already has that skill is asked to apply it to a variety of topics and is given instruction on writing a five-paragraph essay.
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.	Interest Centers - Centers can focus on specific writing skills, such as steps in the writing process, and provide examples and activities that center on a theme of interest, such as sports or movies.  Interest Groups – When writing persuasive essays, students can work in pairs on topics of interest.
Flexible Grouping*	Readiness Interest Learning Profile	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. 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.	The teacher may assign groups based on readiness for direct instruction on the writing process, and allow students to choose their own groups and methods for acquiring background information on a writing topic (i.e., watching a video or reading an article).

\* 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](http://www.k8accesscenter.org/training_resources/curricular_materials.asp)

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Learning Contracts	Readiness Learning Profile	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. This strategy (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.	A student indicates an interest in writing a newspaper article. The student, with support from the teacher, specifies the process by which he or she will research newspaper writing and decides how to present the final product. For example, the article could be published in the school newspaper or shared during a writer's workshop.
Choice Boards	Readiness Interest Learning Profile	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. Choice boards can be organized so that students are required to choose options that focus on several different skills.	Students in an elementary school class are given a choice board that contains a list of possible poetry writing activities based on the following learning styles: visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile. Examples of activities include, cutting out magazine letters to create poems, using a word processor, or dictating a poem into a tape recorder and transcribing it. Students must complete two activities from the board and must choose these activities from two different learning styles.

