

# How to Succeed at Differentiated Reading Instruction, Part 1

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By Jill Jackson

It's funny. I travel all over the country with my team, and we often hear from educators, "You know, things are different around here ..."

They will share a story or a sticky spot, or a reason why something isn't working. The real deal? The story, sticky spot, or reason is typically the same as the one we heard the week before in a totally different region!

What you are struggling with is probably very similar to what others are struggling with. We have spent a lot of time in recent years perfecting the art and science of implementing core reading programs in elementary schools and systematic, explicit interventions in K-12. Folks have done a fantastic job, and many who have never seen great success with struggling students are experiencing unprecedented results.

The really cool thing? Nothing has changed, except for the teaching. And that change has made all the difference in the world for students.

But where so many continue to struggle is when the instruction goes "off script." In other words, when we have delivered the grade-level material, and students still need a leg up into or beyond that grade-level content. This "off script" teaching is differentiated instruction. We are diagnosing the needs of all kids (even the benchmark and advanced kids who get lost in the shuffle) and prescribing and delivering instruction in ways that a scripted program is limited.

Core instruction is made more powerful by daily differentiated instruction. We don't lose our minds and get away from explicit instruction, but we do *open* our minds and look at what students need skill-wise, right here and right now.

Differentiated instruction is where our professional judgment and expertise come into play—big time. It takes highly skilled teachers to effectively prescribe and deliver small-group instruction that makes a difference in getting students up to benchmark.

So, let's step back for a minute and look at where differentiated instruction typically gets off track. This helps us get on the *right* track!

**It's common that differentiated instruction that's not working so well is suffering from a lack of focus in planning.** The teacher is winging lessons or focusing on "teachable moments." The time in the group is never-ending (I call this the "life sentence of small groups"—it's never going to end!), and there is little to no monitoring of individual lessons and weekly check-outs to make sure that students are actually learning what the teacher is delivering. Just because kids are in a small group doesn't mean that they're learning the right stuff. Attendance doesn't equal mastery. If it did, I wouldn't need to write this blog post.

**It's common that differentiated instruction that's not working so well is suffering from a lack of oomph.** The teacher is struggling to gain and maintain behavior control or is having trouble keeping positive and highly motivating to kids. I understand that when you're working with the most struggling kids, they often come with a host of (learned or masking) behaviors that can get in the way of instruction. And I get that they take lots of patience. But I also know that without oomph or verve or whatever adjective you want to use to describe a fun, swiftly moving lesson, kids lose interest—and the lessons flop. And then we sometimes start to blame the kids, which is not going to fix the problem ... ever.

**It's common that differentiated instruction that's not working so well is focused so much on filling a gap with a supplemental program** that we forget it's our jobs to teach the kids, not just teach the program. Those who know me know that I am a huge supporter of explicitly taught, research-based core and supplemental programs in reading. BUT one thing I can't support is blind teaching of those programs. What does this look like/sound like? It sounds like this: "Well, I taught it, so I'm not quite sure why they didn't learn it. It was all delivered right to them!" The real deal? It doesn't matter what we're teaching if they're not picking it up. The effectiveness of our teaching in small groups is not accomplished by what we delivered, but by what they mastered. So this "I delivered it" thinking has to be altered.

So, how do we make sure that our differentiated instruction is first-class instruction, focused on what kids really need and resulting in kids hitting the benchmark at record rates?

It all comes down to the **Three Ps**:

1. **Placement**
2. **Planning**
3. **Performance**

Let's talk **Placement** first.

In a grade level or department, you must first establish what criteria you will use to determine who goes in what group. For example, will you use unit tests, diagnostic tests, weekly tests, or progress monitoring tests and benchmarks to determine who will go where? Will you use a combination of all of these data points? The criteria are essential in ensuring that we're not grouping kids based on gut-checks. When criteria are not set or are set teacher by teacher, kids are put into groups based on behaviors (issues or nonissues) and past performance ("She is a low student" or "Oh, no, he does not need to be in the low group; he's higher than this test is showing"), rather than actual need right at this moment.

So, once we sort kids according to the criteria, we know that when we're talking about "the strategic group," for example, we're talking about the same kids. This helps with planning and reflecting on the lesson and sorting the data in the end. We can get stuck on this process of sorting students into skill-need groups, but the party hasn't even started! We've got to get on to designing the instruction!

When you place kids in a group by common criteria, you then have to make a decision about how long you want to keep them in that group before making any adjustments. I typically look at 4 to 6 weeks (not necessarily scientific, but a pretty reasonable, realistic period of time) as the length of time that students will for sure stay in that group before we analyze the data for re-sorting purposes.

I find that when we're too eager to move kids, we end up moving them out of the group or up into another group based on one data point rather than looking at the trend of data for that student. Students will often end up back where they started because we didn't build in time for skill maintenance.

I also encourage you to focus not only on growth, but also maintenance of growth and benchmark status. If the instruction is working, let it do its work and don't rush students out of the group until the instruction has "stuck." *However*, if you find that it's taking all year for instruction to "stick," then we've got another problem (refer back to the beginning of this blog!).

Once we have sorted our kids by the common criteria and chosen a re-sorting date so that they don't get life sentences in small groups, we're well on our way!

I really do recommend that you look at the setup to differentiated instruction before you look at what you're teaching during that time; so much of the cleanup of our practices can be done in the Placement area. It's a quick fix-up typically!

Your homework?

- Meet with your grade-level/department colleagues and walk through your current criteria for small-group placement
- Analyze if your criteria is teacher-by-teacher or if you have a common standard for who goes where
- Start to look at all of your data points and analyze what data you currently have (and I'm sure you have PLENTY!) that will help you make future small-group instructional decisions

Up next for us? Join me next week as we uncover Step 2 (Planning) and Step 3 (Performance). We're on our way to massively transforming our practice!

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# How to Succeed at Differentiated Reading Instruction, Part II

Posted on [November 27, 2012](#) by [Ed View 360](#)

**By Jill Jackson**

And they say teaching is easy. Whoever said that needs to be ... talked to!

While teaching is by no means easy, we do need to focus on simplifying our practices down to what really matters and what really gets results. If you know me, you know I'm pretty bare bones in terms of what we need in order to make our students successful. And simplifying differentiated instruction practices is a great place to start!

In Part I of this blog post, we analyzed how to have immediate, massive, widespread success with differentiated instruction—without losing our marbles! We looked at the Three Ps as a way to organize and execute our differentiated instruction plans:

1. **Placement**
2. **Planning**
3. **Performance**

Refer back to last week's blog for the nitty gritty of **Placement**.

Now, onward and upward—into **Planning** for differentiated instruction.

Once we have the right criteria to determine who needs to go into what group, we have to establish a *purpose* for the instruction in that group.

And here's where we often get off track: we go too big! We have lofty goals like "increase fluency" or "build comprehension" or "increase vocabulary." Well, I don't know about you, but I want to do this for *all kids*, so what makes this group different? Plus, if you are attempting to do something so broad, how on earth will you measure whether you've been successful? How will you know what's working and what needs to be altered ... or dumped?

To cut through the differentiated instruction noise, you must get specific. Like, really, really specific. More specific than you think you need to be. In fact, think about what you want to accomplish and chop it in half. Then chop it in half again.

Let me give you an example:

Instead of "This group needs to improve comprehension," my focus would be: "The kids in this group need to focus on retelling the who/what/when/where/why of new text after a first read. We will focus on stopping at the end of each chunk of text (narrative and informational) and retell the most important parts. By the end of four weeks, these students will be able to read a new piece of narrative text and informational text and correctly retell the most important parts."

See how focused that is? I could get lost in wanting to “improve comprehension.” I could bring out 100 different story maps and 100 different games for asking questions, and 100 different reading techniques. But if, at the end of it all, the students haven’t learned how to *do something specific*, I have to question whether their time in my targeted small group was valuable to them.

Let me give you another example:

Instead of “This group needs to improve vocabulary knowledge,” my focus would be: “I will work with students to preview new text (narrative and informational) to look for unknown words. We will organize those words in a ‘need to tell’ list (where I will teach directly those words and their meanings) and a ‘need to figure out’ list, where we will use context clues. I will model how to use context clues for new words on two words every day, and then they will practice with at least two words after that.”

So ... super focused is the name of the game! At the end of six weeks in that small group, I should be able to give kids a previously unseen piece of text at or about grade level, and they should be able to use context clues to uncover the meanings of those words. With anything less focused than that, I have no idea what we’ve accomplished—and that ends up biting me in the end.

Think you’re done? Not so fast! We’ve got to focus on the #1 thing that we have full control of *and* that has huge impact: **Performance**.

And I’m not talking about the students’ performance; I’m talking about yours/mine/ours!

I find that many times we are so focused on what kids are doing that we forget to plan for, execute, and reflect on *our* performance. Here is a short list of the items you need to consider during differentiated instruction:

- Have I created a motivation system that keeps kids engaged and interested?
- Do I have a solid small-group management and behavior system?
- If someone were watching me, would they say that I have a swift pace that keeps kids interested?
- Am I well-prepared and not wasting even a second of instructional time on teacher-prep tasks?
- Am I confident in my content?
- Do I enjoy the content? After all, excitement and enjoyment are contagious!
- Do I finish the lessons in the time that I allotted, or am I chronically taking longer/shorter than planned?
- Am I a great motivator of kids? Do they enjoy coming to my group?

The bottom line? Our performance is directly related to theirs!

The final analysis of how to massively improve performance during differentiated instruction? It's all about getting the right kids in the right place (**Placement**). Then we've got to prepare the proper lessons to teach (**Planning**). Then our responsibility to our students is to analyze our own teaching (**Performance**).

Your homework? Why not video-tape your small-group instruction? OK, calm down; it's for your eyes only! Then watch the video and analyze the above bulleted list to see if you can start by improving your performance. In fact, you don't need anything else to get started on strengthening that area.

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## Adolescent Literacy, Part II: Content Literacy and the Common Core

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By **Joan Sedita**

### PART 2

A major tenet of the Common Core State Standards for literacy in grades 6-12 is that content teachers outside of the English/Language Arts classroom emphasize literacy in their planning and instruction. One of the architects of the six major Common Core literacy shifts (Coleman, 2011) is that students should learn through domain-specific texts in science and social studies classrooms. Rather than referring to the text, they should be expected to learn from what they read. The title of the literacy standards, *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects*, makes it clear that content teachers are key to ensuring that students have college- and career-ready literacy skills at graduation.

The most recent research on effective instruction for improving the literacy skills of adolescent students supports this emphasis on content literacy instruction. In the report *Academic Literacy Instruction for Adolescents*, Dr. Joseph Torgesen and colleagues (2007) noted that, in order to meet adolescent literacy goals, all teachers must be involved, especially since most middle and high school students spend most of their time in content-area classes and must learn to read expository, informational, content-area texts with greater proficiency. The report states: "Although reading strategies might be taught explicitly in a designated reading support class, students are unlikely to generalize them broadly to content areas unless teachers also explicitly support and elaborate the strategies' use with content-area texts" (p. 12).

*Reading Next* (Biancarosa & Snow, 2006) identifies 15 elements of successful programs designed to improve adolescent literacy achievement in middle and high schools. Six of these elements directly address content literacy instruction: direct, explicit comprehension instruction; effective instructional

principles embedded in content; extended time for literacy; text-based collaborative learning; diverse texts; and intensive writing.

In 2008, the Institute of Education Sciences published the practice guide *Improving Adolescent Literacy: Effective Classroom and Intervention Practices* (Kamil et al.). The goal of the guide was to present specific and coherent evidence-based recommendations that educators can use to improve literacy levels among students in Grades 4–12. The report made five recommendations about improving practice, three of which directly address content literacy instruction: (1) provide explicit vocabulary instruction, (2) provide direct and explicit comprehension strategy instruction, and (3) provide opportunities for extended discussion of text meaning and interpretation.

Regarding content writing instruction, *Writing Next* (Graham & Perrin, 2007) summarized the results of a large-scale statistical review of research into the effects of specific types of writing instruction on adolescents' writing proficiency. The report identified 11 elements of effective writing instruction, all of which represent instruction that can be embedded in content classroom instruction for all students: (1) writing strategies, (2) summarizing, (3) collaborative writing, (4) specific product goals, (5) word processing, (6) sentence combining, (7) prewriting, (8) inquiry activities, (9) process writing approach, (10) study of models, and (11) writing for content learning.

### **Content Literacy Alignment to Common Core State Standards**

It is important to note that the Common Core literacy standards *complement* rather than replace content standards in subject areas. Content teachers need to keep literacy achievement goals in mind along with coverage of content information. Which Common Core literacy standards are most associated with content literacy instruction? That is, which 6-12 literature and informational text standards should content teachers be most focused on? Here are my suggestions:

#### *Reading Standards*

- #1 & #2: Students should be able to determine what texts say explicitly and to summarize them, make logical inferences, and cite textual evidence to support conclusions.
- #4: Students should be able to interpret words and phrases as they are used in text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings.
- #5: Students should be able to analyze the structure of text, including how sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of text affect meaning.
- #8: Students should be able to synthesize and compare information from print and digital sources and critically evaluate the reasoning and relevance of text evidence.
- # 10: Students should be able to read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently.

#### *Writing Standards*

- #1, #2, & #3: Students should be able to write effective arguments, informative text, and narratives.
- #4, #5, & #6: Students should be able to use the writing process and make their writing appropriate to varying task demands, purposes, and audiences.
- # 10: Students should write routinely over extended and shorter time frames.

#### *Language Standards*

- #4: Students should be able to determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases by using context clues, analyzing meaningful word parts, and reference materials.
- #5: Students should demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.
- #6: Students should acquire and use accurately a range of general academic and domain-specific words and phrases sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level, and demonstrate independence in gathering vocabulary knowledge.

In addition to the specific standards listed above, I think it is also important for content-area teachers to understand the focus of the Common Core on making sure students develop comprehension skills to understand steadily increasingly complex texts. Students must learn to read and learn from complex text because this is the demand that will be placed on them in college and career. For too many years, content teachers have avoided using text as the vehicle to learn information because student literacy skills were not sufficient. I like to use the metaphor that content teachers have been *giving the students fish*, but not *teaching them how to fish*. It is important for content teachers to understand that the Common Core asks that they not simply use more complex text but rather do the more difficult task of teaching students how to read and understand subject-area text.

[Joan Sedita](#) is a founding partner of [Keys to Literacy](#), a literacy professional development organization that focuses on adolescent literacy. She is also author of [The Key Comprehension Routine](#) and [The Key Vocabulary Routine](#).

#### [About Joan Sedita](#)

Books by Joan Sedita: [Keys to Literacy](#)

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