

Differentiated Literacy Centers

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New York • Toronto • London • Auckland • Sydney
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Teaching
Resources

This book is dedicated to my mother, Barbara Lea Taylor, a fellow writer, whose poetic fluency continues to be an inspiration to me.

I would also like to thank Mildred Nelson, Phyllis Phillips and the teachers of Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools for their constructive feedback and collegial support at the many literacy centers workshops, who recognized the need and helped develop the format for this book.

To my editors, thank you for persevering through the mountain of center activities in my initial drafts to bring this book forward in such a teacher-friendly format.

Finally, a thank you to my family for your understanding of the time I have needed to devote to my research and writing.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction to Differentiated Literacy Centers

To open this book, I begin with a bit of a confession—I was not always successful at structuring my literacy centers to best support all of my students. It took a close look at the center activities I assigned, the procedures I expected students to follow, and my teaching around the center work before I understood how my “one-size-fits-all” approach was leaving some students unsupported and others unchallenged. This book is the result of years of changes that helped me create a literacy center program that truly supports standards-based reading and writing instruction and meets student needs. It is my intention that this guide helps you to create both an effective and easy-to-manage centers program that supports each and every student on his or her literacy journey.

How Much Time Were My Students Actually Reading and Writing at Literacy Centers?



Students are often off-task when center activities are not differentiated.

Scenario 1:

Brittney at My Traditional Literacy Centers

5 minutes: Brittney stands by the shelf of book tubs, picks up the book *More Spaghetti, I Say* from the H tub, puts it back, picks up another book. Then she repeats this with two more selections. Brittney finds a chair at the Reading Center area.

4 minutes: Brittney flips through her book and then reads it.

2 minutes: She looks at what the others in her team are doing and asks Tamika what they are



supposed to do when they've read their book. Tamika points to the form in the tray.

3 minutes: Brittney takes a form, looks at it, and then looks at the sheet that Jayden is writing on next to her. She draws a picture.

4 minutes: She begins to talk to Jayden, asking him if he likes her picture and continues talking off-topic.

1 minute: Brittney begins to copy Jayden's writing, but he tells her she should be writing about her own book.

1 minute: She begins to write "I like . . ." and stops as the signal sounds for tidy-up time.

Total Minutes: 20 Reading: 4 Writing: 1 On Task: 9 (includes selection of materials)

Where It All Began

Our school literacy team was examining ways to increase the time students were reading and writing each day in our classrooms. We already had 150 minutes dedicated to literacy instruction each day: sixty of these were allotted for teacher-managed small-group instruction alongside student-managed literacy centers; the remaining time was devoted to read-alouds, shared reading, word study (decoding and spelling), and writer's workshop. Surely we offered our students ample opportunity for extended periods of reading and writing each day! Our observations and assessment of students in small-group instruction demonstrated that this instructional time was well spent, but we questioned just how many minutes our students were actually engaged in reading and writing at the literacy centers while we worked with those groups. Were we maximizing this time for student-driven learning?

To determine whether this was the case in my own classroom, I decided to block off one day of small-group instruction so that I could observe and track the number of minutes a specific student spent engaged in reading and writing. For this purpose, I chose one of my struggling readers, Brittney. You read the summary of this observation in Scenario 1. But Brittney wasn't an anomaly. Further observations showed that many of my students were having trouble managing their time and



The Florida Center for Reading Research defines differentiated instruction as “matching instruction to meet the different needs of learners in a given classroom that includes small groups and increased practice opportunities in the form of reading centers.” (2006)

completing their work during literacy centers. I discovered that students were:

- spending more time browsing the reading materials than reading them.
- unsure how to respond to their reading.
- drawing and talking off-task.
- depending on directions from and/or copying the work of other group members.

Comfort Zone Meets the Zone of Proximal Development

This lack of productivity was not what I had envisioned for the literacy centers in my classroom. I realized that behind the management challenge was an instructional one: students with more advanced literacy skills were completing activities in their comfort zone, while struggling students were not able to keep up. Few students were working in their zone of proximal development, the level of challenge at which learning takes place (Vygotsky, 1978). The more advanced students were *not getting the challenge they needed to grow and my struggling readers were leaving tasks unfinished, or relying on their peers* to “get them through” the activities without developing an understanding. Either way, they were not maximizing their literacy center time, and this was precious learning time that none of us could afford to waste.

I was familiar with the concept of tiered assignments in which the same task is presented at varying levels of challenge to ensure success for all students. Why could I not use the same data I used to guide my small-group instruction to plan tiered activities for my literacy centers so they would be more closely aligned with student need? The direction was clear, but I wasn’t sure how to make this manageable, given an already overloaded work schedule. The challenge was to plan and prepare multilevel activities for the literacy skills I was teaching, in a way that would be sustainable throughout the year. I set out on a creative journey (the part I do so love as a teacher), and the culmination is the book you hold in your hands.



Differentiated Literacy Centers in Action

Scenario 2:

Brittney at My Redesigned Differentiated Literacy Centers

2 minutes: Brittney takes her book box from the bookshelf. She walks to the Comprehension Center area, takes a seat, and looks around at the other team members.

4 minutes: Brittney reads her book *Robert and the Rocket*.

1 minute: She picks up the green-colored (beginning level) task card with picture-cued sentence starters and reads the prompts.

1 minute: Brittney chews the top of her pencil for a moment. She flips through the pages of her book again, looking at the pictures.

3 minutes: She writes a sentence in her centers notebook “I see . . .”

1 minute: Brittney stops writing and looks at the card with sentence cues again.

3 minutes: Brittney writes a second sentence “I wonder . . .”

1 minute: She reads her writing to herself.

4 minutes: Brittney asks Jayden if he will be her thinking partner, reads her sentences to him, talks about a part she has read, and shows him a picture in the book. Then she listens to Jayden read his questions about *Shipwreck Saturday* and they talk about the story.

Total Minutes: 20 Reading: 7 Writing: 5 On-Task: 17



Time spent reading and writing dramatically increases when activities are differentiated.

What’s the difference between Scenarios 1 and 2? Nearly double the time spent reading and so much more time spent writing! Time on-task increased dramatically when Brittney was provided with the following:


- Her own box of reading materials at her independent level, selected during morning routines and during guided reading. *Students now spent more time actually reading and responding during center time because they were able*


to focus on a few preselected books, rather than browsing leisurely through book tubs. By having these books ready to go, Brittney was ready to go, too.





Student book boxes containing independent level text provide a source of ready-to-go reading materials.


I Wonder


I wonder who . . . 

I wonder what . . . 

I wonder where . . . 

I wonder why . . . 

I wonder when . . . 

I wonder how . . . 

SEE PAGE 100

- Picture-cued differentiated tasks that supported her response to the reading. *Often the hardest part for my struggling students is getting started—writing those first words. The picture-cued, open-ended sentence starters made a huge difference in helping students like Brittney produce a focused response—and giving more advanced readers the opportunity to engage in a higher-level response.*
- Teacher modeling along with ample opportunity for students to discuss their understanding of a strategy. *I began to integrate pair-share activities throughout the day during read-alouds, shared reading, and classroom discussion of content material. Oral discussion of the reading became an important element of the literacy centers, as well. Expressing her ideas aloud and responding to the questions and comments of her peers during center time was critical to Brittney’s success in processing her learning. (See Providing an Appropriate Level of Support in Chapter 2 for more on this topic.)*

We know that in order to close the achievement gap for students like Brittney, it is critical that they receive ample explicit instruction and time to engage in authentic reading and writing. When we make fundamental changes, such as the ones above, to our literacy centers, the amount and quality of reading and writing practice increases dramatically, taking students who struggle much farther along the path to literacy, while also helping their more skilled peers push ahead.



How Does Differentiation Work With Literacy Centers?

To achieve the changes demonstrated in Scenario 2, I had to do some strategic planning and restructuring of my original literacy centers. The differentiated literacy centers (DLCs) I developed contain reading and writing activities that directly support whole-class and small-group instruction. Each center offers multilevel literacy activities that are assigned to individuals and groups of students based on their demonstrated (data-based) need in order to strengthen specific skills and strategies. Differentiated center tasks also take into account student interests and the level of support students require in order to complete their literacy assignments; see Table 1.1 for a comparison of differentiated learning centers and traditional ones. The ultimate goal of DLCs is to support an easy-to-manage, success-oriented literacy program.

“Differentiation involves responsive teaching and scaffolding students’ learning . . . When you differentiate instruction you operate with the premise that all children learn at different paces and in different ways . . . Our curriculum tells us what to teach, but it is differentiation that guides us in how to teach.”
(Drapeau, 2004)

What’s Different About Differentiated Literacy Centers?	
Traditional Literacy Centers	Differentiated Literacy Centers
• Activities are based on whole-class instruction.	• Activities are based on student assessment data.
• Differentiated resources are not available.	• Students work with multilevel resources.
• Students may become bored or frustrated.	• Students are engaged in their learning.
• Individual levels of support are not part of the center design.	• Levels of support based on student need are incorporated into the design of each center.
• One level of response is provided for each activity.	• Tiered activities include varied responses for each skill or strategy.
• Students may select activities that are outside their instructional zone.	• Students follow a simple coding system to select activities within their instructional zone.



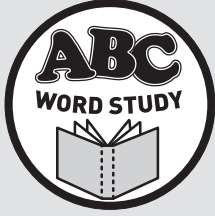


The Structure of DLCs

We begin with setting up three core, yearlong centers that develop skills in the key literacy areas: comprehension, fluency, and word study (phonemic awareness, phonics, high-frequency words and vocabulary), as shown below.

Providing Visual Structure

Icons representing each center can be used as labels to help you and your students easily find center materials and work spaces, and keep them organized. Reproducible icons are provided on page 57.

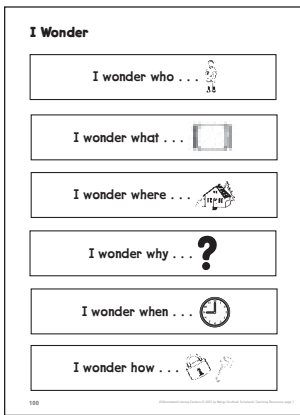
Three Core Literacy Centers	
Center	Purpose
<p>Reading Comprehension</p> 	<p>Students will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice and apply modeled comprehension strategies during independent reading of leveled text • Demonstrate understanding of skills and strategies using multilevel responses • Deepen their comprehension through writing in response to reading
<p>Fluency</p> 	<p>Students will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop fluent reading strategies using independent-level text • Increase reading accuracy, rate, use of expression, and meaningful phrasing during oral reading • Participate in repeated readings within collaborative and self-monitoring formats
<p>Word Study</p> 	<p>Students will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acquire an understanding of how words work through multisensory practice and the use of tactile materials • Transfer phonics skills to reading and spelling new single-syllable and multisyllabic words • Achieve automaticity in recognizing and spelling irregular high-frequency words

Next, we make sure that these centers reach the range of learners in our classrooms. The resources in the following chapters help you develop a menu of tasks that vary in difficulty for each of the three core centers. Being familiar with both the multilevel activities and the materials they require is key to your success—these are described briefly in the next section.

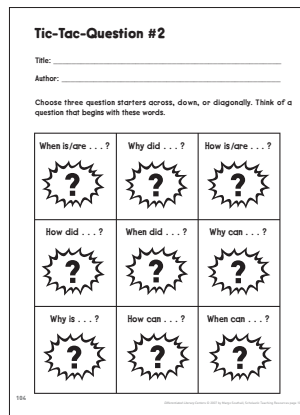


Multilevel Center Activities

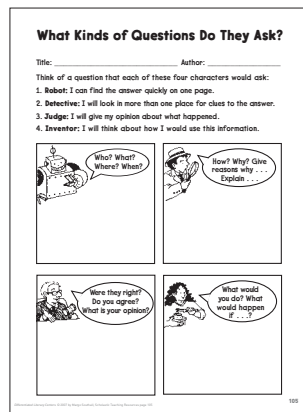
Multilevel center activities are strategy-based tasks designed at three levels of challenge: beginner, intermediate, and advanced. By using these tiered center activities, teachers enable students with different learning needs to apply the same key skills and strategies but at varying levels of complexity and open-endedness (Tomlinson, 1999). For example, three students at the comprehension center may all work on a questioning activity, yet each one will be reading a different leveled text and completing an activity page that has been designed to meet his or her needs, based on assessment.



Beginner



Intermediate



Advanced

Students work on the same questioning strategies but complete tasks that are appropriate to their skill level.

Differentiated Literacy Center Materials

Reading materials, activity sheets, graphic organizers, and other learning materials such as word cards all need to be differentiated



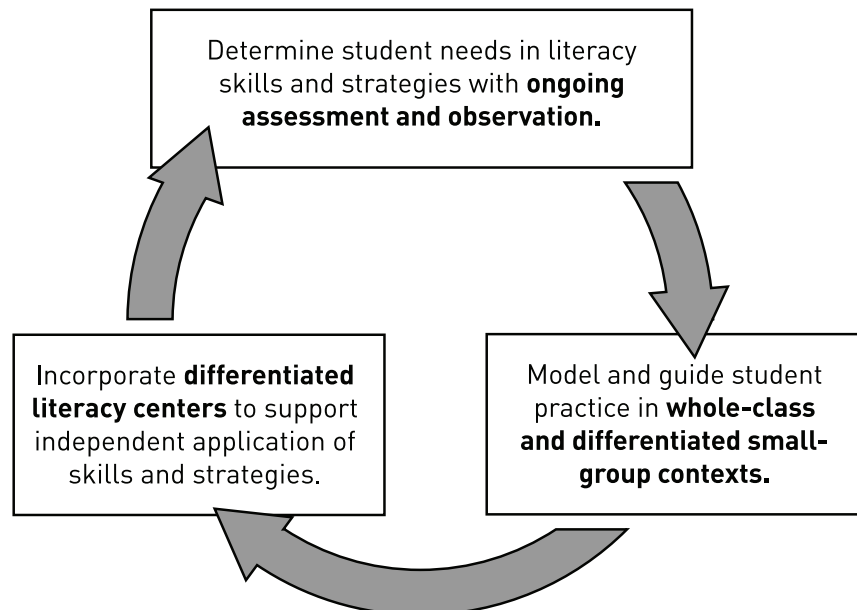
Color Coding Your Materials

An easy way to organize and store multilevel activities is to color code your materials, using green for Beginner level, yellow for Intermediate and red for an Advanced level of challenge. See Chapter 3 for more details and other management ideas.

for the three levels of activities. Reading materials should be provided at each student's independent reading level (95–100 percent accuracy rate for fiction, 97–100 percent for nonfiction). You can select from the alternative task cards, student prompts, recording forms, and suggested manipulative materials in the following chapters to meet the needs of students who struggle with reading or require additional support with organizational skills. In this way, you can modify tasks while still allowing students to participate in the same activity as their peers. These modifications maintain students' self-esteem and support their engagement and motivation.

How Do Differentiated Literacy Centers Support My Instruction?

The three core centers address the essential skills and strategies as identified by the National Reading Panel (2000). These include phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (see page 10 for an overview of the centers). Differentiated literacy centers are part of the daily instructional cycle as we assess, plan, and implement instruction according to our curriculum. They provide opportunities for students to practice skills and strategies at their level and based on their needs. The figure below illustrates how DLCs can support your daily instruction.





A differentiated classroom meets the learners at the point of need on a continuum of literacy learning and provides developmentally appropriate learning activities based upon ongoing assessment and an understanding of how our students learn. By using the organizational guidelines for determining student need provided in Chapter 2, together with the center resources included in the following chapters, you will be able to implement a differentiated literacy center program that addresses demonstrated student needs within a multilevel classroom. In this way, every student may be both challenged and supported within a differentiated instructional framework.

How do you pull together differentiated literacy centers, remain sane, and have a life outside of school? Here is my advice—discussed in detail in the coming chapters—for maintaining your sanity:

Select sustainable formats and activities; avoid the one-time wonders (“I’m done!”). (Chapters 3 through 6)

Address the needs of every student with multilevel tasks. (Chapter 2)

Never add a center activity without teacher modeling and guided student practice. (Chapters 3, 4 through 6)

Include activities designed to support the literacy skills you teach (whole class, small group). (Chapters 2, 4 through 6)

Track center work with a simple system and hold students accountable. (Chapters 2 and 3)

Follow these steps, and . . .

You will make differentiated instruction a reality without adding to your workload!