

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

Designing Instruction Proactively for Learner Variability

UDL is a Tier 1 instructional framework that proactively removes barriers through intentional lesson design and supports all learners in accessing grade-level content.



Engagement

The **WHY** of Learning

How will students engage with the learning?



Representation

The **WHAT** of Learning

How will students access the content?



Action & Expression

The **HOW** of Learning

How will students show what they know?



Learner Variability

Learner variability recognizes that students differ in their strengths, needs, experiences, interests, and ways of learning. UDL helps educators anticipate this variability by proactively designing flexible pathways for students to access, engage with, and demonstrate learning in ways that benefit all learners.

- What strengths can be leveraged or needs that require support?
- What interests can increase student motivation?
- What background does the student have that can shape understanding?
- What are the different ways that information can be processed and ideas expressed?



Learning Goal

UDL supports lesson internalization by helping educators design instruction that moves learners from access to understanding and, ultimately, to greater independence.

- What do I really want students to understand by the end of this lesson?
- How will I know they've reached that goal?
- Am I focused on the learning outcome, not just the task?



Anticipate Barriers

Barriers often exist in instruction, materials, or environments, not in students.

- Which aspects of this lesson might be challenging for some students?
- Where might students need additional support to stay on track?



Flexible Pathways

UDL intentionally supports goal setting, planning, self-monitoring, and independence.

- How can students connect to the learning and stay engaged?
- What supports will help students access the content or ideas?
- What different ways could students show their understanding?



Assess

UDL ensures assessments measure mastery of standards by allowing flexible expression without reducing rigor.

- What evidence showed that students understood the goal?
- Which supports helped students access or demonstrate learning?
- Where did barriers still exist that I could reduce next time?

Look-Fors: What UDL Could Look Like in a Classroom

- activate and build background knowledge through meaningful and relevant learning experiences
- participate through discussion, collaboration, or exploration
- remain engaged in the learning task
- access content through visuals, models, text, or discussion
- receive scaffolded support for key vocabulary or complex ideas
- connect new learning to prior knowledge
- demonstrate understanding in multiple ways
- use tools to organize and communicate thinking
- revise responses based on feedback

The goal of UDL is learner agency.

Students who understand how they learn, make meaningful choices, and take ownership of their progress.

UDL and specially designed instruction (SDI) work together.

UDL strengthens Tier 1 instruction for all learners, while SDI provides individualized, IEP-aligned instruction, reducing the impact of the disability.

Reducing Barriers Through Instructional Design

Barriers exist in instruction, materials, and environments, not in students. Once you anticipate barriers during planning, how do you design instruction that reduces those barriers?



Engagement

Anticipated Barrier

- **Difficulty connecting** experiences or interests to the lesson
- **Losing focus** during longer teacher-directed instruction or reading tasks
- **Different levels** of interest or background knowledge related to the topic

Educators Might Consider

- **Connecting the lesson** to real-world examples, current events, or students' local community
- **Incorporating discussion**, partner work, or brief interactive activities
- **Providing choice in examples**, case studies, or topics students explore



Representation

Anticipated Barrier

- **Instruction** is delivered above independent reading level
- **Visual supports** for new information included in an Individualized Education Program (IEP)
- **Emergent bilingual students** may need support with academic vocabulary
- **Difficulty processing** complex or abstract information

Educators Might Consider

- **Providing audio supports**, visuals, guided notes, or teacher modeling to support comprehension
- **Incorporating diagrams**, graphic organizers, or visual models when introducing new concepts
- **Previewing key vocabulary** using visuals, examples, or translated supports ahead of the lesson
- **Breaking complex concepts** into smaller steps or use visual models to illustrate relationships



Action & Expression

Anticipated Barrier

- **Difficulty expressing** understanding through writing alone
- **Support required** to organizing thinking
- **Additional time** or scaffolding needed to complete written responses

Educators Might Consider

- **Allowing students** to demonstrate understanding through oral explanation, visuals, or multimedia
- **Providing sentence stems**, outlines, or graphic organizers
- **Allowing flexible response formats** and provide structured supports



For additional information, please refer to the [UDL Implementation Guide](#).
[UDL Implementation Guide for Educators in Texas](#) | [Texas SPED Support](#)