

This article is excerpted from [Differentiated Literacy Centers](#) by Margo Southall.

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. The ultimate goal of DLCs is to support an easy-to-manage, success-oriented literacy program.

What's Different About Differentiated Literacy Centers?

Traditional Literacy Centers

1. Activities are based on whole-class instruction.
2. Differentiated resources are not available.
3. Students may become bored or frustrated.
4. Individual levels of support are not part of the center design.
5. One level of response is provided for each activity.
6. Students may select activities that are outside their instructional zone.

Differentiated Literacy Centers

1. Activities are based on student assessment data.
2. Students work with multilevel resources.
3. Students are engaged in their learning.
4. Levels of support based on student need are incorporated into the design of each center.
5. Tiered activities include varied responses for each skill or strategy.
6. 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.

Three Core Literacy Centers



Reading Comprehension

Students will:

- 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



Fluency

Students will:

- 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



Word Study

Students will:

- 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

Multilevel Center Activities

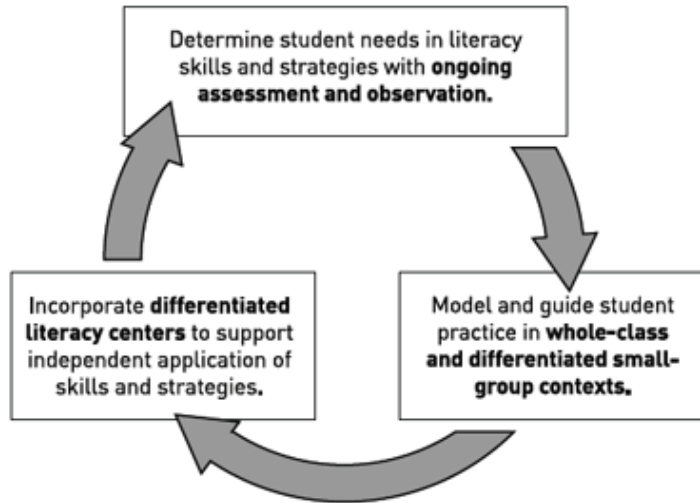
Multilevel center activities are strategy-based tasks designed at three levels of challenge: beginner, intermediate, and advanced. By using these tiered center activities, teachers enable students with different learning needs to apply the same key skills and strategies but at varying levels of complexity 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.

Differentiated Literacy Center Materials

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

<http://www.scholastic.com/teachers/article/how-does-differentiation-work-literacy-centers>