

Lesson Design

Lesson Planning Steps and Descriptions

Goals and Expectations

Begin by identifying a clear, meaningful learning goal. It should align with either a content or methods standard and be appropriately challenging for your learners. Think about what success will look like for all students, and consider how you'll define and support mastery for diverse learners.

Activating Prior Knowledge

Activating prior knowledge is a powerful way to support understanding and long-term learning. When students can connect new information to what they already know, their brains are better able to organize and retain the material. Even just five minutes spent making these connections can increase engagement and boost stamina, because the learning feels more relevant and accessible. By building on what's already established in students' minds, we help create meaningful pathways for deeper understanding.

Consider Barriers

Before drafting your lesson plan, take time to thoughtfully consider any potential barriers your students might encounter. These barriers could relate to how content is presented, how students are expected to engage with the material, or how they're asked to demonstrate their understanding.

Reflect on the following questions:

- What are the diverse backgrounds, strengths, and interests of my students, and how might these influence their engagement with the lesson?
- Are there elements of the lesson that could be inaccessible to some students due to differences in language, background knowledge, physical or cognitive abilities, or learning preferences?

As you plan, consider how small but intentional changes could make a significant impact. For instance:

- How can I introduce more choices in how students access or engage with the content? Providing options can empower students and enhance their involvement in the learning process.
- Would utilizing specific tools—such as graphic organizers, visual supports, or audio versions of texts—help remove obstacles for some learners? These supports can assist in making content more accessible.
- Might adjusting my pacing or providing examples before independent work increase clarity and reduce confusion? Clear guidance can help all students feel more confident in their understanding.

This proactive step is not about lowering expectations; it's about designing with flexibility in mind so every learner has a meaningful way to connect with the lesson. By identifying and addressing potential barriers early in the planning process, you're fostering a more equitable and supportive learning environment for all students.

Presenting Information

All learners perceive and process information in different ways, so it's essential to plan lessons with multiple pathways for access. As you design instruction, consider how students will engage with the content: Can they hear it, read it, see it visually represented, or interact with it in a hands-on way? Also, think about what tools or supports can be made available to increase access for all learners. Providing key terminology and vocabulary up front can further support understanding, especially for students who may need additional language or decoding support. Consider whose perspectives are represented in the lesson, and explore opportunities to include additional viewpoints to deepen understanding and foster a broader, more authentic view of the content.

Student Engagement and Practice

Providing time for students to practice the skills they are learning—or to engage with material in hands-on, meaningful ways—is essential for strengthening neurological connections. Research shows that when learners are given opportunities to actively practice a skill, retention can increase by up to **75%**, according to the [National Training Laboratories' Learning Pyramid](#). As you plan for student engagement, consider offering choices in how students interact with the material, who they collaborate with, and even where they sit or work within the classroom. These options help students feel more ownership over their learning and can boost motivation. Also consider what scaffolds might be necessary to ensure all students can access the material—this might include graphic organizers, sentence starters, manipulatives, or visual supports. Providing universally available tools helps normalize support and fosters independence for all learners. Finally, think about how you can incorporate exploration, play, and collaboration. These elements not only support engagement and creativity but also help cultivate a sense of joy and curiosity—key drivers for long-term learning and student well-being.

Assessment and Expression

As you plan how to assess student learning, ensure that the assessment aligns directly with your lesson goal. If the lesson takes place over multiple days or is part of a longer unit, think about both formative and summative assessment opportunities. Consider how you can give students some choice in the assessment process—this can boost engagement, allow students to demonstrate their understanding in ways that work best for them, and foster a stronger sense of ownership and agency over their learning. Also, reflect on what tools students will be able to access during the assessment. These might include supports for organization or accessibility tools that do not compromise your ability to assess the intended learning. For example, if students are being asked to write, consider whether the goal is to assess their ability to construct a thesis or if handwriting is part of the standard being addressed. If the focus is on writing composition, allowing the use of speech-to-text tools can help ensure that all students have an equitable opportunity to demonstrate what they know.

Reflection and Closure

At the end of your lesson—or especially at the end of a unit—it’s essential to include time for reflection and closure. Reflection helps solidify learning by encouraging students to process what they’ve learned, make connections, and think metacognitively about their progress and strategies. Reflection helps increase retention, builds growth mindset and also helps strengthen neurological pathways by giving the brain time to consolidate new information. Pairing time for reflection at the end of a lesson with opportunities to activate prior knowledge at the beginning helps students create and strengthen neural connections more efficiently and effectively. This two-part strategy supports deeper learning by anchoring new information to existing knowledge and then reinforcing it through meaningful review. Even brief moments—just 5–10 minutes—spent on connection and reflection can significantly boost retention and comprehension. These moments of closure and reflection not only help wrap up the learning experience meaningfully but also foster emotional connection, self-awareness, and deeper engagement with future learning.

Teach and Reflect

After the lesson, take time to reflect on how it unfolded. How well did students progress toward the learning goal? Which design elements supported their success, and which could be improved? Were there opportunities for both you and your students to pause and reflect during the lesson? Use these insights to inform and strengthen your future lesson planning.