

# Comparison of Specially Designed Instruction, Differentiated Instruction, & Universal Design for Learning



Specially Designed Instruction (SDI), Differentiated Instruction (DI), and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), are three important, but often misunderstood, approaches to meeting the diverse learning needs of students. Since these concepts share common goals and practices, they are sometimes used interchangeably, which can create confusion for educators and school teams.

This resource is designed to clearly outline the distinctions among SDI, DI, and UDL by comparing their purposes, instructional applications, and the level of individualization required. The goal is to support educators in understanding how these approaches work together to ensure all students, and especially students with disabilities, receive meaningful access to grade-level instruction.

	<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Who It Applies To</i>	<i>When It Is Used</i>	<i>Instructional Methods and Strategies</i>	<i>Delivery and Environment</i>	<i>Key Distinctions</i>
<b>Specially Designed Instruction (SDI)</b>	Provide individualized instruction aligned to a student's IEP.	Only students with disabilities with IEPs	Based on individual needs of a student with an IEP	Explicit, systematic, intensive instruction aligned to needs identified in the IEP	Delivered by qualified personnel; individualized routines	Individualized and legally required
<b>Differentiated Instruction (DI)</b>	Adjust instruction for groups of students based on interests, readiness, or learning preferences.	Groups of students, with and without IEPs	During instruction	Tiered tasks, scaffolded supports, flexible grouping	Flexible groups and pacing	Responsive for groups
<b>Universal Design for Learning (UDL)</b>	Design instruction proactively so all students can access and engage in grade-level learning from the start.	Every student, with and without IEPs	During lesson design	Multiple means of engagement, representation, action/expression	Flexible, barrier-free design	Proactive for all

*Put simply — SDI delivers individualized instruction to meet the unique needs of a student with special education services; DI provides targeted adjustments for groups based on data; and UDL designs instruction so all students can access learning.*