

English Language Arts



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“The classroom must be a place where literacy becomes inescapable because it is not only the password to connecting and making sense of the world, it is ultimately key to making the world a better place.”
– Hill, 2006. p. 392.

Language arts instruction offers numerous opportunities to differentiate instruction. This chapter highlights research-supported best practices that foster student success in reading, writing and other language arts, and explores how these practices can support or be enhanced by differentiation. The chapter focuses on the context of the language arts program but many of the approaches discussed also apply to language tasks in other subject areas. This chapter also looks at best practice for assessment in language arts, and explores how this type of assessment supports differentiation.

Differentiating instruction in reading

Teachers can naturally differentiate reading instruction within the following best practices:

- promote frequent and varied reading
- teach skills for reading
- teach strategies for reading
- emphasize textual details
- offer varied options to extend text.

While these practices emphasize reading outcomes, many of the strategies relate to other language arts as well, as students typically participate in writing, speaking, listening, viewing and representing activities to develop reading skills related to comprehension.

Promote frequent and varied reading

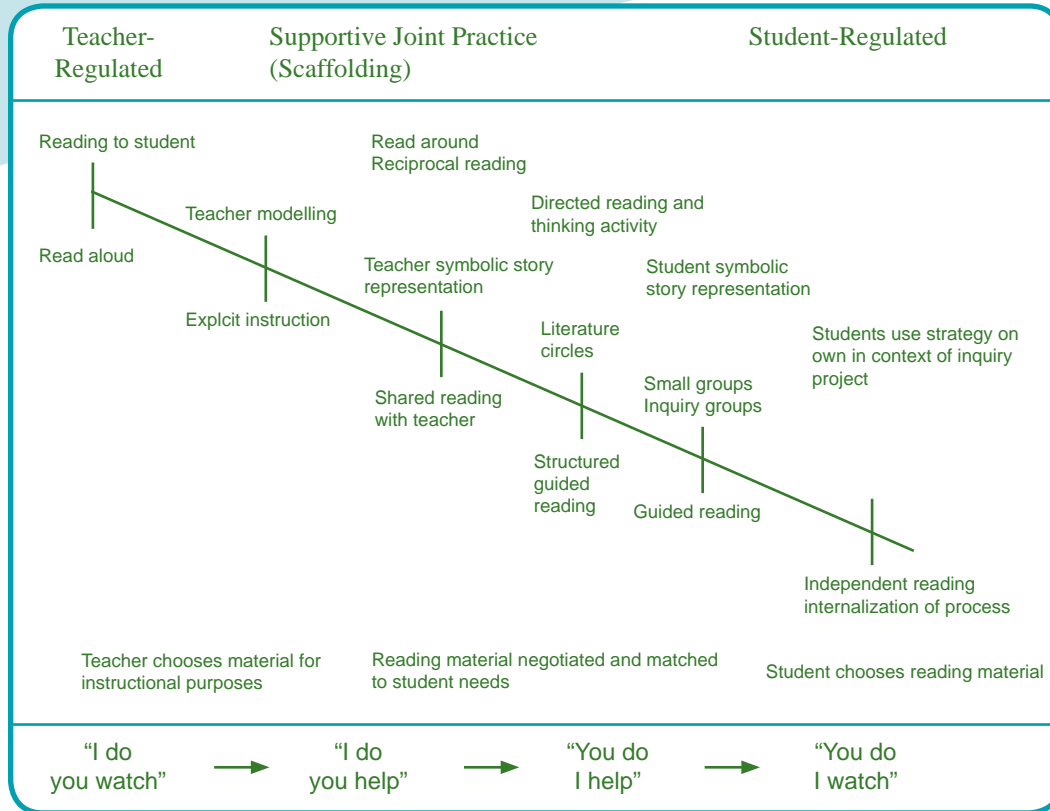
Research tells us that students need to read frequently to become skillful readers. The following chart illustrates how instructional practices that encourage frequent reading can be excellent opportunities to differentiate instruction.

Instructional Practice	Opportunities to Differentiate
<p><i>“Read-alouds”</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read aloud to students frequently. • Model and discuss how reading provides insight and enjoyment. <p><i>Independent reading</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create class time for independent reading. • Challenge students to read at home for information and enjoyment. <p><i>“Read-alongs” or “shared reading”</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage students to follow and join in the reading of a text by a competent reader. • Have a large or small group read a text together. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose reading material to appeal to a wide range of student personal and cultural experiences. • Include informational and practical text in read-alouds. Some students, often boys, prefer practical, “how-to” texts to literary texts. • Invite students to respond to read-alouds in a variety of ways. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that the classroom and library book collection includes both literary and informational texts at varying levels of difficulty. • Include audio books as part of the collection, especially for students reading below grade level. By following print as they listen, students learn to identify words and to comprehend. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a risk-free environment so students of varied abilities feel comfortable to join in. • Follow up with differentiated assignments. For example, one group of students might work on identifying word families in the text while another group composes a story related to the text.



Consider ways to scaffold instruction for students by using a mix of these instructional practices in combination with varied-level texts. The following diagram illustrates ways of scaffolding reading.

Ways of Scaffolding Readers¹



Teach skills for reading

Skills refer to what students must be able to demonstrate, such as identifying the author’s purpose, a protagonist’s motive or a character’s dominant trait. Strategies refer to the know-how used to complete tasks. Most outcomes in the language arts program of studies are skills; however, the program also highlights strategies, with an emphasis on students discovering different strategies that work best for them. The next section of this chapter will consider strategies as critical components to differentiating instruction to meet a wider range of student needs.

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Instructional Practices	Opportunities to Differentiate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plan reading assignments to focus on specific learning outcomes. Students should know and be able to explain what skills they are expected to learn or demonstrate for each reading assignment. Use writing, speaking, listening, viewing and representing tasks to develop skills related to reading. For example, to work on identifying and assessing a response to a conflict, students could dramatize a story’s conflict, visually illustrate the conflict, write a monologue to indicate the character’s response to the conflict, and debate whether the character’s choices to resolve the conflict were justified. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have individual students or groups of students work on different skills within a selected text. Use ongoing assessment. Have the class work on a selected skill (e.g., inference of main ideas) within different texts of varying difficulty and interest levels. Many reading materials are coded according to grade-level difficulty and interest. Suggest and assign varied activities related to student learning preferences. For example, students who learn visually might illustrate the conflict, learners who are more kinesthetically strong might present a dramatization, and others who are strong auditory learners might share their written monologue in a small group and discuss different interpretations of the character’s response to the conflict.



Teach strategies for reading

Students need to understand that strategies and skills are intertwined. Students who can identify the strategies they use to complete a learning task complete the task more skillfully. The following chart presents effective instructional approaches for teaching students reading strategies, along with related approaches for differentiation.



Instructional Practices

- Model strategies and create opportunities for students to identify strategies they might use before, during and after reading a selected text. For example, pre-reading strategies include:
 - build/recall prior knowledge
 - review purposes for reading
 - predict content
 - list questions to be answered by the text.
- Emphasize that individual readers use different strategies. Students should discover and use strategies that work best for them.

Opportunities to Differentiate

- Use a “think-aloud” approach to explore strategies and response options students might use. Challenge students to identify their own preferred strategies and response options for selected texts.
- Emphasize the value of strategies that appeal to a variety of learning styles and intelligences. For example, during reading strategies encourage students to:
 - predict what might follow or ask questions as you read
 - chunk the text by looking for periods, question marks, exclamation points, as well as paragraphs or stanza breaks in poems
 - visualize as they read—make a movie in their minds
 - link the text to personal experience; for example, if you are reading about friendship, consider familiar experiences about friendship that connect to the text
 - check when something doesn’t make sense
 - paraphrase or summarize the text.
- Discuss the options available within selected strategies such as:
 - discussing ideas and responses with others
 - preparing a chart or a sketch
 - writing a journal entry or list of questions
 - using graphic organizers
 - role-playing or dramatizing.

Instructional Practices	Opportunities to Differentiate
<p>The “Unfolding Method”</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Ask students to cover a selected text with a piece of paper. Direct them to uncover only the title and illustrations and to listen carefully to your instructions for uncovering the remaining text. 2. Ask students to note background knowledge, to make predictions and to ask questions related to the title and illustrations. 3. Direct students to uncover the first chunk of text, often a complete sentence or a paragraph. Challenge students to use during-reading strategies. 4. Continue to lead the students through unfolding chunks of text. As you work through the unfolding, ask students why you unfolded the part that you did. Emphasize the importance of looking for meaningful chunks as you read. 5. Before unfolding the final chunk, students make a final prediction about what the text will include. Discuss how the final chunk often emphasizes a key point, presents a surprising twist or presents a character’s or writer’s reaction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During each phase of reading, describe a variety of strategies that could be used and discuss the value of these strategies. • As students work through each chunk of text, focus them on visualizing by asking them to note, diagram or chart what they saw. Students also can talk about, write about, chart or diagram predictions, summaries and questions. Use this opportunity to discuss the power of the strategies and response options in figuring out the meaning of an unfamiliar text. • Encourage students to select response modes that work best for them. • Challenge students to try at least one new response mode to build their strength in all learning styles and intelligences.



Emphasize textual details

Many students will benefit from prompts to attend to the detail in texts that they read. This attention to detail is critical to successful reading. Consider the following strategies to differentiate instruction while encouraging attentive reading.

- **“Split page”**

Students draw a vertical line down the centre of their page to create a split page. In the first column, students write their first answer or interpretation. In the second column, students write their revised interpretation or answer. The following example represents a high school student’s initial answer and the reconsidered answer that followed after re-reading a poem.

Title: “Freedom” by Louis Dude

Question: What does the poem suggest about freedom?

First answer

We like freedom.

Revised answer

We resent being told what to do even if we would choose to do what we’re told.

This approach can be differentiated by exploring with students options that help them refine their interpretations beyond checking the text, such as:

- discussing answers with a partner or small group
- preparing an oral interpretation or dramatization of the text before revising the answer
- preparing a sketch or visual interpretation of the text before revising/refining the response.

- **Graphic organizers**
Many learners benefit when they use graphic organizers to organize information and explore meaning in a text. The following two examples illustrate possibilities.

“Sequence charts”

Title of Text: “Seven Years War in North America”

French Advantage

1. French defeat British at Fort Oswego 1756	2. French defeat British at Fort Henry 1757	3. French defeat British at Ticonderoga 1758
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British Advantage

4. British defeat French at Louisburg and Fort Frontenac 1759	5. Wolfe defeats Montcalm on Plains of Abraham 1759
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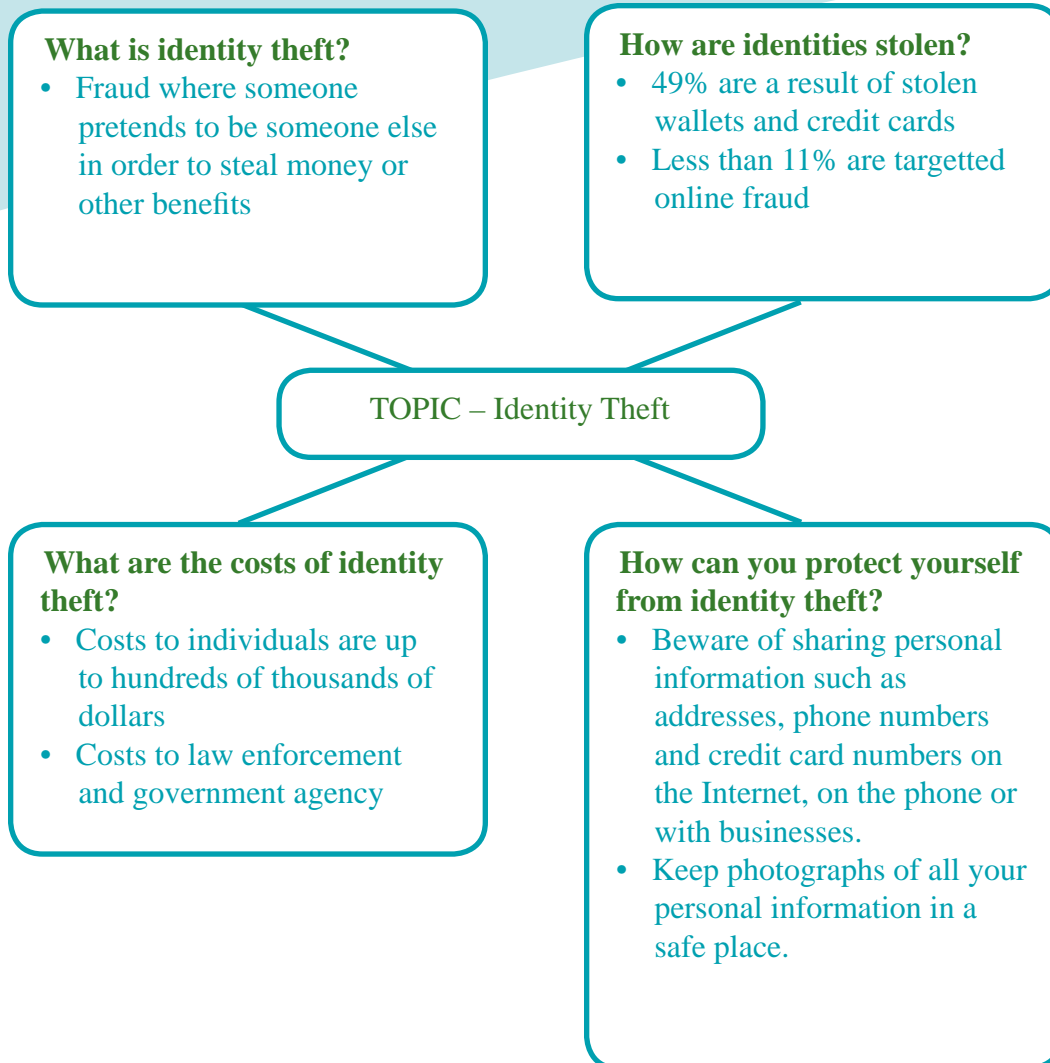


“Thought webs”

The graphic on the following page illustrates a visual technique that encourages attention to details of text as students completed research about identity theft. As students use print, human and media resources to complete their research, they seek information related to four specific questions:

1. What is identity theft?
2. How are identities stolen?
3. What are the costs of identity theft?
4. How can you protect yourself from identity theft?

To differentiate, teachers can offer students the option of either creating an outline or identifying another strategy they can use to gather, organize and present information.



Offer varied options to extend text

One of the most powerful ways to develop and refine comprehension of a text is to do something with it—perform it, transform it or write about it. Extension activities can be differentiated by creating a range of options to meet the diverse needs, strengths and interests of students. The following examples illustrate possibilities.

Oral interpretation of text

Individually or in a group, students prepare an oral interpretation of a selected text.

- Students make a thoughtful determination about the most climatic point in the text for emphasis in the oral interpretation.
- Students decide about variations in the speed and the volume of their reading of the text.
- Students respect punctuation cues; e.g., pausing at commas, stopping at periods, showing appropriate tone for question marks and exclamation points.

Written extension of text

Students use the content of a text to inspire their own writing. Options could include:

- interview scripts with a character
- diary entries
- editorials
- descriptions of settings
- recollections of people inspired by the text
- a letter to express their response to the text
- sequel chapters
- original stories or poems on the theme explored in the text.

Visual extension of text

Students create visual representations. Possibilities could include:

- slide shows
- sketches
- cartoon versions
- book jackets
- games
- time lines
- maps
- collections of objects important in the text.

Artistic extension of text

Students use the arts to explore and reinterpret the text. Possibilities could include:

- dramatic performances
- songs or raps
- dances
- multimedia presentations.

In all of these extension activities, teachers challenge students to explain how their written, oral or visual interpretation connects to specific detail in the texts that inspired the extension. In relating speaking, listening, viewing, representing and writing extensions to specific textual details, students refine their comprehension of the text.

Differentiating instruction in writing

As teachers engage students in writing tasks, they can differentiate instruction by:

- promoting writing to learn and communicate
- engaging students with a range of writing genres and tasks, and related planning strategies
- creating opportunities for students to learn and use a range of drafting and revision strategies.

Promote writing to learn and communicate

Since students need practice to become more skillful, frequent writing is critical to becoming a skillful writer. One way to encourage frequent writing is to explore the question about why we write. Most students understand that people write to communicate. But they need to know that we also write to learn, to explore and to develop understanding. To encourage writing to learn, teachers across subject areas often include forms of journal writing or exploratory writing. Such writing focuses on risk taking and working through ideas rather than on correctness and conventional forms. Exploratory writing naturally incorporates opportunities for differentiation.

The following forms of exploratory writing provide opportunities for differentiation.

Learning logs

Students write to deepen their learning of a specific topic or experience. Teachers prompt students to write about their current understandings, their own uncertainties and their questions. By inviting students to discuss current understandings with partners and groups, to dramatize their concepts before they write and to incorporate visual illustrations in their writing, teachers differentiate instruction.

Personal responses to literature

Personal responses to literature focus on connections between one's life and a literary text as well as one's personal experience of a text. Students comment on likes, dislikes, current understandings, uncertainties, questions, predictions and judgements. To differentiate, teachers provide varied opportunities for students to discuss the text and to create oral interpretations (such as a song, poem or dramatic piece) or visual representations (such as a visual art piece or multimedia presentation) as a way of responding.

Journals

Journal writing creates choice about what students write. While learning logs and personal responses to literature are more connected to learning content, journal writing allows students to write about experiences of personal importance and significance. Teachers encourage students to consider the voice that is appropriate to their writing. A differentiated approach could include opportunities for discussion, role-playing and visualizing before writing, and for incorporating visual representations into the writing.

Engage students with writing variables and planning strategies

Writing variables provide a framework for writing to communicate. “R.A.F.T.S.” is an acronym for writing variables—Role, Audience, Format, Topic and Strong Verb.

Explanation	Examples
R–ROLE From whose point of view am I writing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• self• character in a story• parent• friend• historical or political figure• author
A–AUDIENCE To whom am I writing? What is my relationship to the audience?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• self• friend• parent• author• politician• company• editor
F–FORMAT What particular writing form is appropriate or assigned?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• letter• story• song• newspaper advertisement• business letter• diary entry• eulogy
T–TOPIC What am I writing about?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• friendship• job application• favourite activities• junk food• rights and responsibilities
S–STRONG VERB What is my purpose or what are my purposes? What do I wish to achieve in my writing?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• explain• condemn• describe• argue• deny• complain• thank• brag• commend



R.A.F.T.S. offers several advantages. It helps the writer to focus, to discover ideas and to capture appropriate voice. For example, students might be required to write a business letter (form) from the role of the president of the school council (audience) inviting her to speak at the graduation ceremony to offer advice to graduates (topic and purpose). R.A.F.T.S. offers natural opportunities for differentiation when teachers prompt individual students to choose different roles, audiences, formats, topics and purposes in their writing tasks.

Many students have a limited sense of possibilities beyond brainstorming and will need to learn a range of prewriting strategies that fit the R.A.F.T.S. variables and match their individual strengths, interests and learning preferences. Students will use a different prewriting strategy for story writing than they will use for description. The following table illustrates potential strategies for typical writing forms.

Format	Prewriting Strategy	Opportunities to Differentiate
Story/ Narrative	<p>Students review critical story elements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • central character • setting • conflict • resolution of conflict • central character’s final reaction. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students use discussion, role-playing, diagramming and note taking to review story elements represented by “somebody,” “wanted,” “but,” “so,” “then.” <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify your central character (“somebody”). 2. Think about where and when your story takes place, and your character’s goal (“wanted”). 3. Identify the major problem or conflict your character must deal with (“but”). 4. Identify how the major conflict is resolved (“so”). 5. By presenting how your character reacted to the conflict and its resolution, you imply your story’s theme (“then”).

Format	Prewriting Strategy	Opportunities to Differentiate
Description	Students note the details that convey a dominant emotional response.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage students to use direct observation. For example, instead of students recalling a soccer game, ask them to observe a game with notepad in hand. Students might discuss observations or sketch observations as part of their written notations. Students then note dominant emotional responses. Individual students will identify different emotional responses and will note different details. This will help them achieve an individual voice in their writing.
Explanations/ Exploratory Writing	Students organize relevant information under major subtopics related to their topic and purpose.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenge students to identify approaches that work best for them in selecting topics and subtopics and in locating relevant information for subtopics. Some students will prefer outlines while others will prefer thought webs to organize content.



Writing exemplars show rather than tell. Exemplars can help students learn about different formats, especially when the exemplars represent work of writers at a similar grade level or age. By examining exemplars of any selected writing form—eulogy, song lyric, editorial, position paper, business letter or other form—students may work on their own or in groups to create a graphic organizer or other planning strategy that works for the particular writing task.

Create opportunities for students to learn and use a range of drafting and revision strategies

In drafting, the writer’s major focus is on keeping the flow going. The following suggestions apply when students are having a difficulty with a certain aspect of the writing process.

- Students may need to revisit their prewriting work to change plans or to gather further information.
- Writers often benefit from talking to someone about what they are trying to write.

- Students should place a check mark above sentences that seem unclear and an “S” above spelling uncertainties. They should keep drafting and leave these concerns until later when they are ready to move on to revising.
- Writers sometimes benefit from reading through everything that they have drafted to consider “what next” options.
- With some texts, especially explanations, it often is easier to begin with the second paragraph and to write the introductory paragraph last.
- Write on every second line or double space to make revisions easier. If students are using word processing, they need to save drafts.

Engage student writers in discussions and conferences about the drafting strategies that work best for them. Different students will have different preferences. Actively using criteria or questions to judge texts of their own or others will help students write more effectively.

Before reading and assessing student writing, teachers can guide students to review for criteria using prompts such as the following.

- I changed this sentence for clarity ...
- I added the following detail to strengthen my writing ...
- My introduction created interest by ...
- I used the following transition techniques ...
- Three precise and colourful words that I used are ...
- An effective short sentence is ...
- A sentence which begins with something other than the subject is ...
- I checked on the following matters of grammar/usage ...

While students may use checklists of selected criteria to report on their revisions, some students prefer to use highlighter pens or sticky notes. With the highlighter approach, students note key criteria on a piece of paper and establish colour-coding for each criterion. Students use the highlighter pen to mark parts of the composition that illustrate success with the criterion. With the sticky note approach, students write one revision criterion on each sticky note. They place the sticky notes in the margin of the composition and draw a line in pencil from the sticky note to the part of the composition that illustrates success with each criterion.

Language arts assessment

Best language arts assessment practice recognizes that assessment has purposes that extend beyond accountability. While teachers need to assess student achievement of outcomes, they also assess to instruct students and to help plan instruction. Teachers also use assessment to affirm students with positive comments and feedback, to celebrate success and to help students set personal goals. Best assessment practice involves students in self-assessment and in providing peer feedback. When students engage in assessment, they learn about what and how they are learning.

A balanced approach to language arts assessment includes:

- **observation**—informal, often rotationally planned
- **performance assessment**—learning task with specific criteria, often in the form of rubrics.

Using a variety of assessment approaches implies differentiated instruction. Teachers whose assessment guides planning are differentiating instruction. Grouping for instruction based on needs and interests of individual students flow from assessment. Teachers differentiate by highlighting varied assessment criteria for different students and by encouraging students to set individual learning goals. Informed by ongoing informal, observational assessment, teachers can provide ongoing differentiated instruction each day.

Rubrics are critically important in performance assessment. Teachers differentiate by highlighting varied criteria for students on selected rubrics. Students also can be involved in the creation of rubrics following study of an exemplar. Another possibility involves challenging students to examine a rubric developed by someone else, to paraphrase what each criterion means and to suggest additions, deletions or modifications to the rubric.

Exemplars are examples or illustrations of performances of various levels of quality. Exemplars can be:

- print samples
- artistic representations
- audiotape performances
- multimedia performances or presentations
- writing samples.

Exemplars help establish and communicate performance standards for a task, and communicate these expectations to students and parents. Exemplars complement rubrics by showing rather than telling. Students work more effectively with rubrics once they have first worked with corresponding exemplars.

From the perspective of differentiated instruction, exemplars allow teachers to show work that represents a reasonable goal for learners. Individual learners work with different exemplars with the focus on learning what will help the student achieve work of similar quality to the exemplar. Teachers who have worked with exemplars report steady improvement in student work. Students often seek to perform better than the work illustrated in the exemplar.

In collecting exemplars, respect jurisdictional and provincial privacy guidelines. Seek student and parental permission for use of exemplars. Use collected exemplars in subsequent years and present anonymously. Collect exemplars that represent grade-level expectations as well as exceptional performances for the grade level.