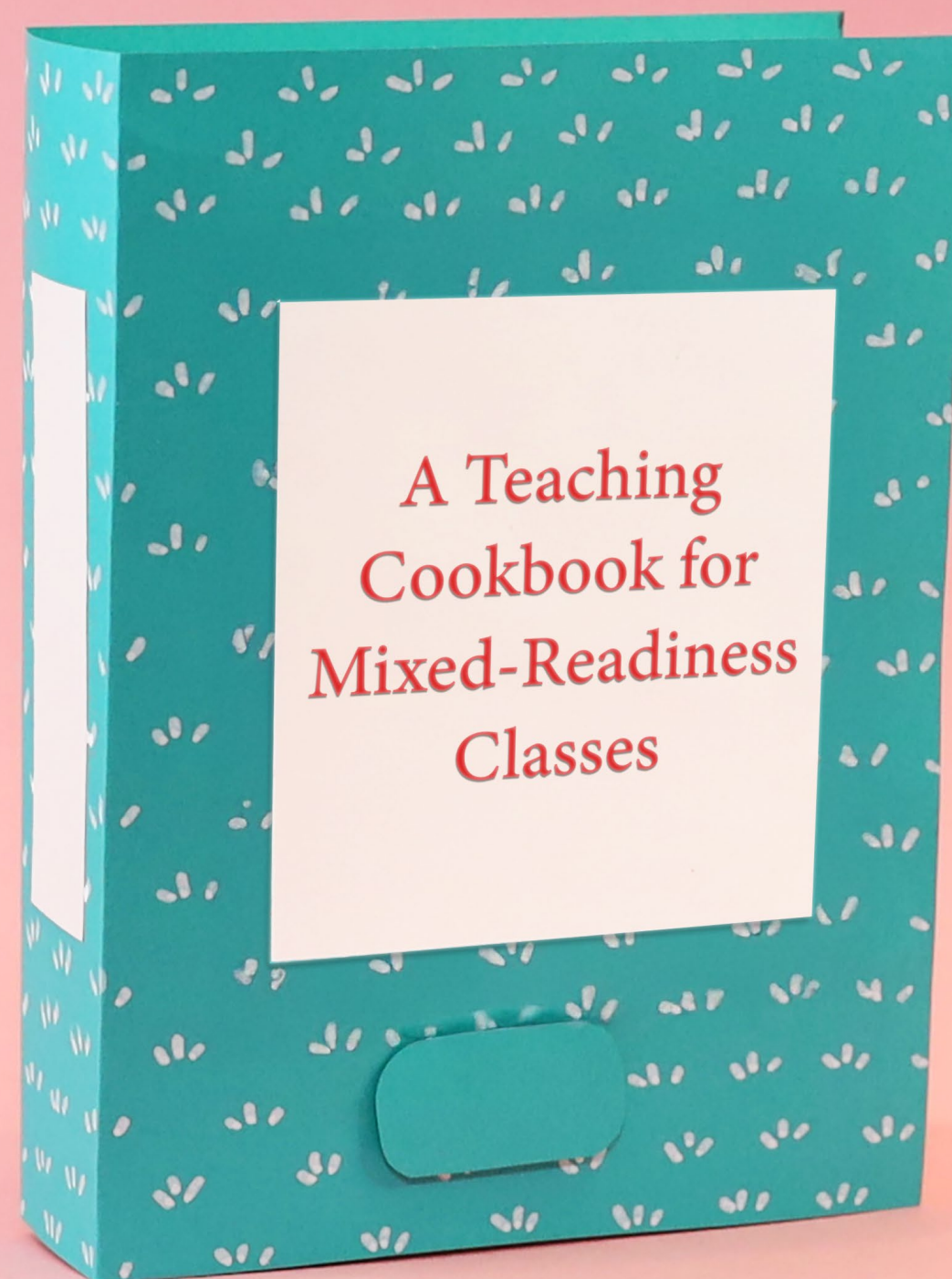


GUIDE

# Mastering the art of differentiation

nwea



“Learn how to cook—try new recipes, learn from  
your mistakes, be fearless, and above all have fun.”

— Julia Child



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## Julia Child and differentiation

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The chefs among us might recognize the nod to Julia Child’s Mastering the Art of French Cooking in our title. American-born Child set out to simplify the mystique around French fare, and in doing so, made accessible for American chefs what had previously seemed magical. Of course, when faced with Child’s chapter on spatchcocking a chicken, many readers still think, “How am I supposed to do this?”

Many teachers approach differentiation with a lot less messiness—indeed, many educators may be ready to write their own differentiation recipes. But in a new era of widening student achievement gaps, the urgent needs of diverse learners, and the emergence of AI might lead many teachers to ask for guidance in technique, timing, and taking action.

Like any good dish, successful differentiation isn’t just about having the right ingredients—it’s about a flexible, reliable base—something between a blueprint and a beloved family recipe—that educators can adapt, season to taste, and make their own.

***It sounds good in theory, doesn’t it?***

For many educators, the word differentiation feels less like a path to better instruction and more like a well-intentioned avalanche. It’s talked about in team meetings, cited in professional development sessions, and written into strategic plans—but often without enough clarity or support to make it feel doable in real classrooms with real students. How do educators actually implement differentiation at scale—without a flexible schedule, WIN time, or easy ways to regroup kids?

This guide aims to demystify differentiation and help everyone, regardless of limitations, move from theory to action. We’ll focus on what works, what doesn’t, and what’s sustainable.

Look for the **Support your teachers** boxes throughout for quick actions you can take to help differentiation succeed in your building.

## Differentiation: What it is (and isn't)

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“So, I’m supposed to design three versions of every lesson and run a learning lab by myself, right?”

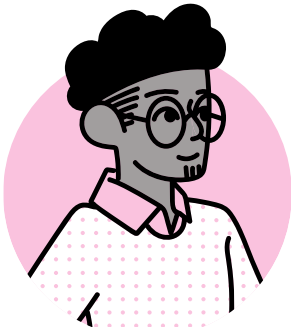
This is what differentiation can sound like when it’s handed down without a clear definition or real support. It feels like more prep, more grading, more pressure. It feels like asking teachers to clone themselves into a 1-on-1 tutor with each of their 30-plus students.

**So what is differentiation, when stripped of its emotional baggage?**



**LEADER SPEAK**

Differentiation is a student-centered instructional model that uses data and observation to strategically vary content, process, and product.



**TEACHER SPEAK**

It means adjusting what we teach, how we teach it, and how students show what they know—so more kids actually learn.



**And here's what it isn't, because it can't be...**

...three separate lesson plans every day

...tracking every student in a Google Sheet until midnight

...just "more work" for our high-flying students

**Differentiation cannot be a new, impossible bar that teachers fail to reach. What if, instead, differentiation is a mindset, a toolkit, and—when done well—a relief?**

Problems of  
practice: Sound  
familiar?

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Let's take a look at some hypothetical situations—the kinds of moments that bubble up in professional learning communities (PLCs), show up in classroom walk-throughs, and keep educators up at night. These situations come straight from classrooms—maybe even your own. Each one includes a challenge, a mindset shift, and concrete strategies to help differentiation feel more doable.

On the following pages, we break each one down, with strategies that are rooted in real classrooms, not wishful thinking.

# SCENARIO 1: A NEWCOMER ENTERS THE CLASSROOM, ALREADY FAR BEHIND

## Scenario

It’s October. Your class has finally settled into a rhythm. Then a new student arrives mid-week—a multilingual student who’s just moved from another district. You’re told they’re reading two grade levels behind, and the first thing they do is shut down during an independent reading block. The rest of the class is ready to move on, but you’re unsure how to catch this student up without leaving everyone else behind.

## Challenge

How do you integrate and support without sidelining the class?

## Stop telling yourself

“I can’t help them without failing everyone else.”

## Instead, reframe

You’re not failing anyone—you’re recalibrating. You don’t have to do it all at once. Small shifts in routines and relationships make a big impact.

## Strategize

You can provide much needed extra support to a new student without derailing your class—just a few small, realistic tweaks to routines and relationships can keep everyone moving forward:

- **Identify a launch point** using a mix of MAP® data and a quick reading conference. Scan goal areas for strengths and just-right next steps. No current MAP data? Have the student read a short, leveled passage aloud, then ask a few questions to check decoding and comprehension.
- **Pair the student with a peer buddy** during centers or small-group time—not just a strong academic peer, but someone empathetic and confident in routines.
- **Set short-term, visible goals for the student:** “Read five pages a day,” “Ask one question per lesson,” or “Write three vocabulary words by Friday.” Use sticky notes or visual trackers for reinforcement.
- **Use visuals, audio, and sentence frames** to support comprehension without overloading. If you have one, reach out to your literacy support team for help, or try the resources at [Florida Center for Reading Research](#).
- **Consider temporary coteaching or para support**, even if just during literacy blocks for two weeks.

**Support your teachers:** Can you shift schedules, even briefly, to provide short-term instructional support during newcomer onboarding?

# SCENARIO 2: A GROUP OF ADVANCED STUDENTS IS DISENGAGED

## Scenario

You notice the same handful of students always finishes tasks ten minutes early. At first, you’re thrilled by their speed—until you realize they’re spending that extra time distracting others or asking to “help you” as a way to stay busy. One even asked, “Why do we have to wait for everyone else to catch up?”

## Challenge

Fast-finishers shouting “I’m done!” distracts the class and highlights that they aren’t getting the nutrients they need. How do I add in more extensions?

## Stop telling yourself

“I must not have planned well enough.”

## Instead, reframe

You created a core lesson, a great launch point for the whole class. Adding options doesn’t mean you failed—it means you’re responsive.

## Strategize

Envelop your high-fliers in engagement-rich strategies without requiring you to design a completely new lesson:

- **Design tiered tasks** where every student starts with the core standard but can “level up” based on their interest or readiness. Example: In math, all students solve a real-world multiplication problem; those ready for more can tackle a budgeting challenge with multiple constraints.
- **Introduce “learning contracts”** where students help codesign their extension task or project alongside you. Make them take some ownership of their next step! This fosters both independence and accountability.
- **Create choice boards** with open-ended options for the students: record a video explainer, create a game, illustrate a concept in a comic strip, or pose a new challenge to peers.
- **Make reflection a habit:** Have advanced students journal weekly about their learning—what excites them, where they want to grow.

**Support your teachers:** Consider cross-grade enrichment partnerships. How can you build in time and structure for grades to work with each other, allowing for challenging exposure to above-grade-level content for those students who are ready?

## SCENARIO 3: SAME GROUPS, SAME OUTCOMES

### Scenario

A third-grade teacher notices something unsettling during reading rotations: the same students are always in the “red group,” and they know it. One student makes jokes about being in the “slow group,” while another stops trying altogether. Meanwhile, the “high group” always finishes early and gets restless. The teacher wants to break out of this pattern but isn’t sure how to regroup without throwing off the entire schedule.

### Challenge

Static groups reinforce labels and limit growth. What’s another realistic grouping scenario?

### Stop telling yourself

“If I change the groups, I’ll lose the structure my students (and I!) depend on.”

### Instead, reframe

Regrouping isn’t chaos—it’s alive. Kids adjust faster than we think, and flexible structures give them room to grow.

### Strategize

Make your groupings more flexible, inclusive, and dynamic:

- **Shift to skill-based, short-term groupings:** Instead of labeling students as “high” or “low,” group based on the week’s focus—like decoding multisyllabic words or finding main ideas in nonfiction.
- **Use “expiration dates”:** Without context, regrouping can feel confusing or even personal. Was it Milo’s test score? Sara’s behavior yesterday? Remove the guesswork. Post group names with an end date on a whiteboard or anchor chart to show that groupings are temporary and based on learning needs. This normalizes change, builds transparency, and keeps students from tying their identity to a color, number, or label.
- **Mix formats:** Try rotating task types each week—one week it’s a partner project, the next it’s a collaborative “teach-a-lesson” group, then a peer editing workshop. This lets different students shine in different ways.
- **Collect exit tickets or mini-assessments** to inform regrouping.

**Support your teachers:** Carve out time in PLCs for teachers to focus on learning from each other. Who already does this well, and can you elevate their voice? You can read more about the benefits of different grouping strategies—including what the research says—in this [blog post on Teach. Learn. Grow.](#)

## NOW IT'S YOUR TURN: REFRAME RECESS

### Just cook something: Make free time your differentiation experiment

Now that we've stepped through various specific scenarios that teachers may face in their classrooms, let's address something every teacher has experienced: the paralyzing effect of too many options.

Wanting to start a differentiation journey, but feeling the pressure of too many pathways before you? Take a few moments with the following scenario, and give yourself permission to be imperfect.

#### **Scenario**

You're sitting at your desk surrounded by curriculum guides, pacing charts, and a half-finished lesson plan. You're trying to figure out how to differentiate your next unit—wondering whether it's better to group by skill, interest, or readiness for this particular week in science, but also trying to remember which students need extra reading support and counting down the days until summer break.

Every idea feels too complicated. Too slow. Too heavy. And there's always next year.

#### **Challenge**

Overwhelm from trying to do it “right” prevents anything from getting off the ground.

#### **Stop telling yourself**

“If I can't get it perfectly tailored to this unit and these learners, it's not worth doing.”

#### **Instead, reframe**

You don't need a five-star meal—you just need reminding that differentiation can have very low stakes. What if you could practice differentiation without it being tied to a specific unit and instead just have “differentiation recess”?

Maybe we're not making beef bourguignon—but we can definitely whip up a grilled cheese sandwich.

# Strategize

- **Return to centers, no matter what age**—with LEGOs, crayons, play-dough. Give kids simple choices: read, write, talk, build.
  - Observe what kids do when they have the freedom to choose. You’re learning about their preferences and tendencies, and you’re building your tolerance for the choice-filled whirlwind differentiation can potentially be. Maybe you’ll like it.
- **Run a “choice-based recess” block** once a week: puzzles, sketching, math games, partner interviews, whiteboard storytelling. Then step back and observe: Who takes the lead? Who avoids decisions? Who pairs up quickly?
  - This kind of teacher data is vital to your ecosystem of information.
- **Reclaim 20 minutes of connection** with tech-free talk time or student-led games.
  - No headphones, no barriers. If they’re talking, you are too. If they’re playing a game, you are too. Differentiation relies on specific connections with students.
- **Try one flexible block per week:** Monday is whole-group, Tuesday is partner work, Wednesday is independent choice. Let patterns emerge.
  - You’ll quickly learn who likes what, and ideas for a future unit will naturally emerge.

- **Say out loud to your class:** “We’re going to try something new today. It might be a little messy, and that’s okay. I’m testing what works.”
  - Give students the credit they deserve. They understand risk-taking and will more likely support you when you name it. Maybe it won’t feel so “big” when it comes to making small instructional changes.

**Support your teachers:** Share this tip with your teachers! Reinforce that small experiments are signs of professionalism, not shortcuts. Reassure teachers that structured “recess” is a great way to practice the kind of organized chaos that differentiation can sometimes be! Give teachers permission to just cook something and reflect later. It’s better than staying stuck in the pantry.

Identifying best  
practices of  
differentiation

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Let's be honest: the phrase “best practices” can feel too vague—like a laminated poster in a room that hasn't seen students in years.

But real differentiation is gritty, flexible, and often imperfect. When it works, it's because the teacher has embedded a few steady practices into their weekly rhythm—not because they reinvented their approach every time the unit changed.

So instead of listing textbook ideals, here’s what differentiation actually looks like in classrooms where it’s working:

**1** **Short-term, purposeful grouping**  
Teachers who flexibly group students—and then regroup—based on evolving needs, not permanent labels, create room for real growth.

**Looks like:**

- Changing groups every 1-2 weeks based on a specific skill, like summarizing nonfiction or solving multistep equations.
- Letting students know when the groups will change: “These reading groups are just for this week. We’ll check in on Friday.”
- Ditching broad buckets like “low, middle, high” in favor of dynamic groups built around specific learning goals.

**Why it works:** It keeps grouping dynamic, responsive, and free from stigma. Students don’t internalize fixed roles.

**2** **Using student behavior as formative data**  
Not all data is in a spreadsheet. Some of the most useful differentiation insights come from watching what students do when they’re given choices.

**Looks like:**

- A choice-based “decompression” block—if you’re a middle- or high-school educator, and recess is a thing of the past—where students pick their task and partners while the teacher observes group dynamics, interests, and confidence. It’s important to consider avoiding technology, even headphones, in this block.
- Teachers jotting quick notes: Who gravitates to building tasks? Who avoids reading? Who becomes the leader?
- Informal checklists during centers or project time to track who’s thriving, struggling, or stalling.

**Why it works:** It moves differentiation out of abstract data analysis and into lived classroom experience.

How differentiation works in real classrooms, continued:

**3** **Offering choice without chaos**  
Teachers can’t design ten versions of every task, but they can offer smart, simple choices that invite autonomy without sacrificing structure.

**Looks like:**

- A choice board with 4-6 options tied to one standard: write it, draw it, act it, quiz a partner, explain it out loud, or apply it to real life.
- A “must-do” and a “may-do” list, to clarify which activities are core tasks and where student choice can influence their enrichment options.
- Centers where students rotate through different task types over the week: one hands-on, one reflective, one collaborative.
- Letting students pick a format (video, comic strip, essay) while holding them to the same learning goal.

**Why it works:** Choice fosters motivation—but structure ensures learning goals stay on track.

**4** **Embracing a “good enough” mindset**  
Some weeks, differentiation is robust and well-planned. Other weeks, it’s whipped together quickly. The best teachers adapt their expectations to match their bandwidth—and still give students meaningful options.

**Looks like:**

- Setting up three self-directed tasks and letting students rotate, even if the tasks are imperfect.
  - Bonus: Ask students to suggest these three tasks! Maybe one might be good, and you’ve invited students to take more ownership over their learning.
- Saying, “We’re trying something new today—it might get loud!” and rolling with it.
- Repurposing a task from last month with slight tweaks for student interests or reading levels.

**Why it works:** Trying something is better than waiting for perfect conditions. When you’re hungry, anything works.

## How differentiation works in real classrooms, continued:

5

### Grounding everything in clear, externalized learning goals

Whether it's a center, a project, or a tech-free work block, differentiation is only effective if it's tied to what students are *meant* to be learning.

#### Looks like:

- Always revealing the “why” behind what you’re doing. You could even let them read this article.
- Starting the week with “Here’s what we’re working on and why it matters.”
- Letting students pick the how, but not the what: “Everyone is practicing comparing fractions—you choose how to show it.”
- Using assessment data to isolate one power standard, then designing multiple access points to get there.

**Why it works:** Without clarity, differentiation can feel like busywork. Grounding it in goals makes it purposeful.

If differentiation still feels out of reach, remember this:

The “best” practice is the one you can do this week.

The magic comes from doing it again next week.


Teacher toolkit:  
Core supports for  
differentiation

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Let’s be real: differentiation can’t thrive on passion alone. It needs time, tools, and support structures. This section isn’t just for teachers—it’s also for leaders to ask: Are we creating the conditions where differentiation is possible?


Use the following as a gut-check list:



**Do I have opportunities to coteach or collaborate regularly?**

Even one coplanned lesson per week or occasional “group swap” with a teammate can ease the load, meet students’ unique needs, and allow for learning differentiation styles. If true coteaching isn’t feasible, can you coordinate flexible grouping across classrooms for a shared block?

**Leaders:** Is your master schedule designed for collaboration or just compliance?



**Do I have access to timely, readable, student-level data?**

Start small: Exit slips, running records, or the Class Profile report from MAP Growth™ can surface patterns worth exploring. And if your assessments are too broad to be actionable, ask for something better.

**Leaders:** Can you streamline access to key data reports and help teachers focus their lens? Prioritize the 1–2 reports that offer the clearest insight into instructional needs, like the MAP Growth Class Profile report or Learning Continuum, and plan PLC agendas that focus on these reports.

### Do I have supplemental resources beyond the core curriculum?

When the core text doesn't reach all learners, you need options: leveled readers, challenge tasks, project prompts. Ask yourself, "What do I already have that I'm allowed to adapt? What am I not allowed to change—and what can I supplement it with?"

**Leaders:** Are teachers empowered to use the curriculum as a tool, or are they stuck following it as a script? Do they have access to adaptive resources, like Personalized Path, that support Tier II, Tier III, and enrichment, all aligned to assessment data? What supplemental tools might help them truly differentiate?

### Do I have WIN time—or something like it—built into my schedule?

If not, carve out small pockets: a 20-minute Friday regroup, a choice-based Monday, a targeted pull-out Tuesday. WIN ("What I Need") time doesn't need a label to exist. It just needs intentionality.

**Leaders:** If WIN time isn't formalized, can you create schedule guardrails that allow for it—even unofficially?



# Bringing in AI: A new planning partner for differentiation

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## Let's address the elephant in the teacher workroom: AI

Maybe you've dabbled, and you feel a sense of shame at cutting corners. Maybe you're the ChatGPT guru who evangelizes its utility in every faculty meeting! Maybe you're skeptical, overwhelmed, or unsure how it fits into the realities of your classroom.

Fair. So let's establish: ***AI is not your new brain. It's your new assistant.***

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Used well, AI can reduce planning fatigue, spark creativity, and help you differentiate faster and smarter. It won't teach your students for you—but it can help you meet their needs without reinventing the wheel.

Think of it like an extra set of hands in your teaching kitchen: it won't tell you what's for dinner, but it will chop the carrots, wash the dishes, and suggest a new twist on an old recipe.

As Julia Child famously said, ***"No one is born a great cook; one learns by doing."*** The same is true here.



And if an AI kitchen assistant gave you more time to sit around the table, chatting with your guests, wouldn't you use it?

# How teachers are using AI to support differentiation

AI is at its best when it’s helping you take what you already know how to do—and just do it a little faster, a little easier, or with a new idea you hadn’t considered. Here are some ways to put it to work:

## FOR SMARTER PLANNING



### Design leveled texts or prompts

Input a topic and ask for versions at different reading levels—or with specific vocabulary constraints.



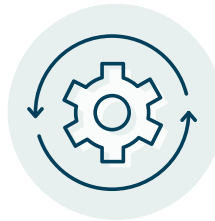
### Create student choice boards

Use AI to generate task ideas aligned to a learning goal—offering product or process variation.



### Isolate a power standard

Draft tiered activities to match varying readiness levels.



### Repurpose what you already have

Ask, “Can you make this reading passage simpler?” or “Can you turn this prompt into a partner task?”

## Upgrade a worksheet

Ask AI to rework a worksheet into something more open-ended, scaffolded, or challenging. Try the following prompt:

**“Context:** This worksheet is designed for a fourth-grade science unit on ecosystems. It includes vocabulary matching, short-answer questions, and a diagram labeling activity.

**Source:** [Paste the original worksheet content here]

**Expectations:** Return the three versions clearly labeled. Each version should be in a format ready to be copied into a document or LMS. Keep layout consistent across versions for ease of use. The three versions should be:

- 1.) Below grade level: Simplify language, reduce cognitive load, and provide scaffolding (e.g., sentence starters, word banks).
- 2.) On grade level: Maintain original rigor and format, but ensure clarity and alignment with grade-level standards.
- 3.) Enrichment level: Add open-ended questions, critical thinking tasks, or extension activities that deepen understanding.”

*Remember: AI, like any successful assistant, works best with context. If you'd like the worksheet to incorporate other aspects of today's learning, like a few new vocabulary words that aren't included, explain that in the prompt.*

FOR COMMUNICATION AND COACHING



**Generate sentence stems**

Students can complete their chosen sentences (or short paragraphs!) in goal-setting conferences. You can even stipulate “no boring or predictable starters,” like

*“If you had seen me at the beginning of the year, you would’ve noticed that I used to...”*

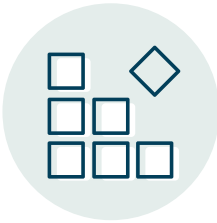
*“One thing that used to stress me out—but doesn’t anymore—is...”*

FOR INDEPENDENT & SMALL-GROUP WORK



**Design tech-free center activities**

Input your weekly goal and ask for task ideas that don’t require screens—like card games, role-play, or partner puzzles.



**Scaffold task directions**

Request versions of the same task with simplified language or visual supports for learners who need them.



**Create varied product formats**

Ask AI to suggest ways for students to demonstrate understanding: a comic strip, podcast script, diagram, mini-lesson, etc.



**Build rubrics or peer feedback checklists**

Quickly generate tools for self- or peer-assessment, aligned to your learning target.

## AI: “Over the counter” or “baked right in”?

Generative AI can save time and spark ideas, but the real value comes when it’s built into the materials you already use. HMH AI Tools on the Ed platform work within HMH curriculum, so the support you get is aligned, accurate, and ready for your students. As you plan ahead, look for tools that make teaching easier—not more complicated.

Learn more at [hmhco.com/ai-tools](https://hmhco.com/ai-tools).

## Tips for using AI thoughtfully

1. Keep your professional judgment front and center. Think of AI as a brainstorm partner, not a decision-maker.
2. Use it to reclaim time, not add complexity. If it’s taking you longer, it’s not helping.
3. Don’t be afraid to experiment. Try something small—reword a set of directions or build one extension task. Watch what happens.
4. Stay curious. AI is evolving quickly. You don’t have to master it—you just have to start where you are.

**Support your teachers** by normalizing trial-and-error with AI, offering basic training, and celebrating smart usage—not just flashy usage.

Differentiation may never be easy. But with AI in your corner, it can be lighter, quicker, and maybe—just maybe—a little more joyful.

After all, even Julia Child didn't expect perfection. She expected progress—and a willingness to try something new.

AI isn't a magic fix—but it can lower the entry barrier to creative, thoughtful differentiation. When in doubt, use it to reduce your mental load, not your professional judgment.





## Just cook something

Did you know Julia Child was more celebrated for her teaching than her cooking?

Great teachers aren't chasing perfection. They're swapping ingredients, testing flavors, and watching closely: Who needs spice? Who needs comfort? Who just needs a little more time to simmer?

And meanwhile, great leaders are behind them, stocking the pantry and cheering on the cooks.

Whether you're in the classroom or leading from the office, the goal isn't a five-star dish—it's a meal that feeds the learners in front of you.

**So this week, forget fancy. Just cook something.**



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