
DIFFERENTIATING FOR

➤ RIGOR

IN THE ELA CLASSROOM

by Lisa Van Gemert

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Differentiating a challenging course can confuse even experienced educators. How do we add rigor to something already rigorous? It can feel like gilding the lily. Yet, even in advanced courses, the students are different. They have different levels of ability, interest and preparation. Where there is need in students, there is opportunity for great teaching.



Hi, I'm Lisa Van Gemert. I'm an educator and professional development facilitator who focuses on the needs of gifted students. Like you, I've worked to make my ELA courses meet the cognitive needs of my students while still holding true to the lovely

sentiment expresses so eloquently by Michael Goldenberg in the quote to the right. In this short guide, I'm sharing how I've done that, and how you can, too. I'm including some of my favorite resources and introducing my tried-and-true way to encourage scholarship and disciplinarianism in students - the Student Extension Opportunity.

I created this especially for a workshop with teachers in my beloved Keller Independent School District in Keller, Texas, so a special shout out to my Keller friends.

Thank you so much for reading. I hope you'll let me know if you find it valuable and will share your ideas with me as well. I can be reached at lisa@lisavangemert.com.

In my own life, when I was most inspired by a teacher, it always involved a real dialogue, a looseness and a real caring and compassion. It was not without rigor, not without discipline, not without standards, but all that was done out of love.
- Michael Goldenberg

REMEMBER: It's DIFFERENTIATION, not MOREFORENTIATION

When we talk about differentiation and rigor, we don't just mean making students do more of the same work. Once, I talked with a little five-year-old girl who'd been so excited to go to school. She was now ready to drop out. Of Kindergarten. Why? Because when she finished her work early, which she nearly always did, the teacher had her erase her work and do the *same worksheet* over again. And again. And again. She repeated this process until the rest of the class was done.

Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? Yet, how different is that from giving students more of the same level of work? Some people think rigor in an ELA classroom looks like longer papers to write and harder books to read, but that's so last century. Rigor can be increased along with creativity and an invitation to explore the students' own interests. Come explore with me how to do that.

THE PROCESS

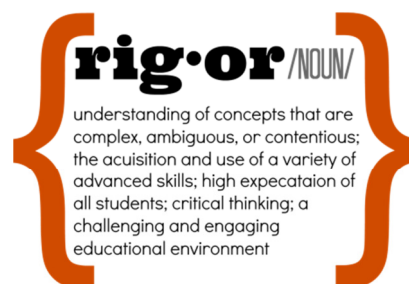
1. Look at each objective/task and decide if it can/should be differentiated by ability or interest. Not every objective/task needs to be differentiated in order to create a differentiated learning experience. Select those that lend themselves to it. (see Possibility Table on Page 3 for ideas)

- Write "DA" next to those that can/should be differentiated by ability.
- Write "IA" next to those that can/should be differentiated by interest.

2. Look at the rubric and consider how at least 25% of the criteria can offer extension (called Scholar Extension Opportunities or SEOs, explained in next paragraph - don't panic). Place an asterisk (*) next to the criteria that should have SEOs.

Make sure rubrics offer a range of points in each descriptor (see example below). This serves two purposes.

First, this is important to help distinguish between the varying levels of accomplishment that exist in a single descriptor (excellent, emerging, etc.). Also, it allows the teacher to give different point values to different sections of the same rubric, so that they can be weighted differently. For instance, you may wish to have grammar worth fewer points than organization.



Scholar Extension Opportunities (SEOs) are optional opportunities for students to extend their learning experience. They offer students possibilities to extend learning and can include creativity, product complexity, or audience expansion (including publishing). Teachers should familiarize themselves with the Torrance traits of creativity (fluency, flexibility, originality and elaboration) to include these in the rubric (see Resources on page 5).

3. Revise the rubric according to items 1 & 2 above (differentiate for ability or interest, add SEOs, and include a range of points in each descriptor).



Example of section of rubric before revision:

Development of Ideas: 7.14 (B) develop drafts by choosing an appropriate organizational strategy (e.g., sequence of events, cause-effect, compare-contrast) and building on ideas to create a focused, organized, and coherent piece of writing;

SCORE: _____

4 – Accomplished	3 – Satisfactory	2 – Basic	1 – Limited
Drafts are highly developed with an effective organizational strategy that is appropriate for the required task. All ideas are highly focused, organized, and coherent.	Drafts are substantially developed with a generally appropriate organizational strategy for the required task. All ideas are generally focused, organized, and coherent.	Drafts are somewhat developed with a somewhat appropriate organizational strategy for the required task. Ideas are only somewhat focused, organized, and coherent.	Drafts are minimal or underdeveloped with an inappropriate organizational strategy for the required task. Ideas are unclear, disorganized, and incoherent.



Rubric after revision:

This rubric is being revised to include three concepts:

- range of point possibility across a descriptor
- Scholar Extension Opportunity (SEO)
- Differentiation by ability (indicated by an asterisk, students selected by the teacher or who choose, may challenge themselves by using a particular organizational structure, Least-to-Most Important, that requires evaluation of the material, a higher thinking skill than some other structures, such as chronological order)

Development of Ideas: 7.14 (B) develop drafts by choosing an appropriate organizational strategy (e.g., sequence of events, cause-effect, compare-contrast) and building on ideas to create a focused, organized, and coherent piece of writing;

SCORE: _____

Scholar Extension Opportunity	Accomplished 10 9	Satisfactory 8 7 6	Basic 5 4	Limited 3 2 1
Create a 3 - 5 minute screencast tutorial on developing an effective organizational strategy	Drafts are highly developed with an effective organizational strategy that is appropriate for the required task. All ideas are highly focused, organized, and coherent. *Use Least-to-Most Important Organizational Strategy	Drafts are substantially developed with a generally appropriate organizational strategy for the required task. All ideas are generally focused, organized, and coherent.	Drafts are somewhat developed with a somewhat appropriate organizational strategy for the required task. Ideas are only somewhat focused, organized, and coherent.	Drafts are minimal or underdeveloped with an inappropriate organizational strategy for the required task. Ideas are unclear, disorganized, and incoherent.

Writing:

For writing, in addition to the Possibility Table below, the following options can increase rigor:

Constraint

- limit the number of words while keeping complexity & breadth (forcing writer to "write tight").
- require a certain method of organization, as used in example above
- require the use of a certain number of foreign language idioms
- invite writing in a certain meter or a prescriptive type of sentence arrangement (e.g., "In this first paragraph, write six sentences using these structures: complex, compound, complex, simple, simple, complex.")

Creativity

- change the perspective of the story (e.g., Cinderella to Step-mother)
- change a societal norm to alter the interpretation of character behavior (e.g., murder is now desirable, lying is acceptable, etc.)
- imitate the style of another author

Character Analysis:

- The psychomotor and Affective domains of Bloom's Taxonomy are particularly appropriate for character analysis.
- Use the Intensities analysis tool I developed with Ian Byrd of ByrdseedGifted.com found here bit.ly/intensities-writing.

Possibility Table for Differentiation Options

Differentiate the...	Possibilities (in top to bottom order of most-to-least complex)
Size of group	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Independent work (for GT students, work in pairs or groups may actually increase rigor) 2. Pairs or triads 3. Small groups (print out my <i>Grouping without Fear</i> handout at bit.ly/tagt-grouping for more info) 4. Teacher directed
Resources (quantity)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Multiple, self-discovered 2. Multiple, teacher-supplied 3. Limited or single, self-discovered 4. Limited or single, teacher-supplied
Resources (complexity)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Multi-media or requiring citation, self-discovered 2. Multi-media or requiring citation, teacher-supplied 3. Text only, above grade level 4. Text only, at grade level
Process	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Assignment takes place over an extended period of time AND has many steps AND has rapid pace 2. Assignment takes place over an extended period of time AND/OR has many steps AND/OR has rapid pace 3. Assignment takes place over a typical period of time, does not have many steps and is completed at a typical pace
Teacher Support	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. No questions after initial introduction 2. Restricted number of questions 3. Unlimited questions
Complexity of Thinking	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Use of Psychomotor or Affective sections of Bloom's in addition to: 2. Creation, Evaluation or Analysis levels of Bloom's (new) 3. Application, Comprehension or Knowledge levels of Bloom's (new) (find resources for other domains at bit.ly/bloom-psychomotor & bit.ly/bloom-affective)
Choice	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Menu of opportunity is given (see books by Laurie Westphal for menu ideas) 2. Teacher directs
Product	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Advanced skills needed 2. Real world application (including web-based publication) (these two may overlap) <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. Standard, on-level

GT students' perfectionism can be fueled by being allowed to ask as many questions as they want to ask. It can lead them to think that every step in the process has a "right" way. Because of this, withdrawal of support is appropriate for them in some instances. Be mindful of studentst with anxiety, whose approval seeking is affective, rather than cognitive.

Explaining Scholar Extension Opportunities (SEOs) to students

Teacher says:

On the internet, the most important thing for a website is being found by search engines like Google. Website developers spend a lot of time and money on what is called Search Engine Optimization to make it most likely their sites will appear at or near the top in web search. They are very careful about what words they use where, they use key words related to their topic, and they put descriptors on everything, including pictures, to make sure that they are not only on the internet but also visible there.



On the internet, it doesn't matter how good your website is or how wonderful the information it contains if people cannot find it.

The same is true to an extent in school. If you have a strong ability in an area, but you don't demonstrate it by optimizing your work, that ability may not show.

In this class, we have SEO just like the internet. You will be offered optional Scholar Extension Opportunities. You are the website, and the evaluator is Google. Your completion of SEOs in this class enables the evaluator, usually the teacher, to see your true ability and value in that area.

SEOs are always voluntary and optional. They are given no specific point value, as that is totally at the discretion of the evaluator. They may be extra credit on that assignment, or they may earn a bonus to be used later. They may not earn extra credit at all, but rather serve as an opportunity for you to show that you are a scholar.

Note: the last paragraph should be modified to teacher preference for how SEOs will be evaluated.

A Final Word:

I hope these ideas are helpful to you. If they are, feel free to share! The easiest way to make it work is to literally keep the Table of Possibilities on hand while you design the lesson plan. It makes the whole process plug-n-play (to an extent). If you have questions, I'm just an email away - lisa@lisavangemert.com.

Resources:

Websites:

rubistar.4teachers.org - Rubric creation site I like because it's free and easily mastered. You can make changes after you download the rubric, so it's very flexible. Create, store and share!

byrdseed.com - GT-specific website of my friend & partner in Giftedland, Ian Byrd

davestuartjr.com - ELA-specific website of Dave Stuart, a tremendously awesome guy who has no idea who I am (How is this possible, when I worship him so?)

Print Resources:

Writer's Toolbox - These are the handouts I wrote for teachers to share with students, including my *magnum opus*-like Transition Word Handout. Download it at bit.ly/toolbox-writers.

They Say, I Say: The Moves That Matter in Academic Writing by Gerald Graff & Cathy Birkenstein - I love this book on academic writing. Some say templates create formulaic writing, yet think of how artists learned by literally painting over great masters' art. It's okay. Find accompanying templates at bit.ly/theysay-templates & bit.ly/theysay-template2.