RESOURCES + MODELS

Universal Design for Learning in Writing Courses

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❶ WHAT IS UNIVERSAL DESIGN FOR LEARNING?

Developed from Universal Design (UD), an architectural movement from the 1960s, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) seeks to provide flexible learning environments that "give all individuals equal opportunities to learn." While the notion of "learning styles" that UDL was initially built on has been largely debunked, the root of UDL—increasing accessibility through design of education—remains powerful. UDL seeks to radically change pedagogy to make the classroom accessible for all learners: instead of offering individual accommodations for specific disabilities (e.g., providing extra time on tests for students with ADHD, or changing an audio essay assignment for a deaf student into a print-based one), UDL instead provides flexible strategies that allow students to learn, demonstrate competency, and become interested in classroom content in different ways. These strategies emerge from three core guidelines:

Universal Design for Learning Guidelines

These come directly from the CAST (Center for Applied Special Technology) website: https://udlguidelines.cast.org/.

Engagement ("WHY")	Representation ("WHAT")	Action & Expression ("HOW")
Provide options for **recruiting interest** • Optimize individual choice and autonomy • Optimize relevance, value, and authenticity • Minimize threats and distractions	Provide options for **perception** • Offer ways of customizing the display of information • Offer alternatives for auditory information • Offer alternatives for visual information	Provide options for **physical action** • Vary the methods for response and navigation • Optimize access to tools and assistive technologies
Provide options for **sustaining effort and persistence** • Heighten salience of goals and objectives • Vary demands and resources to optimize challenge • Foster collaboration and community • Increase mastery-oriented feedback	Provide options for **language and symbols** • Clarify vocabulary and symbols • Clarify syntax and structure • Support decoding of text, mathematical notation, and symbols • Promote understanding across languages • Illustrate through multiple media	Provide options for **expression and communication** • Use multiple media for communication • Use multiple tools for construction and composition • Build fluencies with graduated levels of support for practice and performance

Provide options for **self-regulation**	Provide options for **comprehension**	Provide options for **executive functions**
• Promote expectations and beliefs that optimize motivation • Facilitate personal coping skills and strategies • Develop self-assessment and reflection	• Activate or supply background knowledge • Highlight patterns, critical features, big ideas, and relationships • Guide information processing and visualization • Maximize transfer and generalization	• Guide appropriate goal-setting • Support planning and strategy development • Facilitate managing information and resources • Enhance capacity for monitoring progress

❷ HOW CAN UDL APPLY TO WRITING CLASSES?

One of the underlying principles of UDL is that if there is only one way to do something—interact with a text, demonstrate understanding of a concept, achieve the learning outcomes of a course—then it's fundamentally inaccessible. Some classes have genres that they must teach—a chemistry student must learn how to write a lab report, while an education student must learn how to write a lesson plan—but beyond learning genre conventions that are required for school and/or work, it's important to provide students with multiple options to engage with the content and provide evidence of their proficiency.

In a writing classroom, this means "opening up the definition of literacy practices so more students can participate" (Zoss et al., 2014, p. 60)—in short, broadening the types of writing work we ask our students to do. This doesn't mean doing away with essays, but rather integrating other modes of communication beyond solely linear, print-based alphabetic text compositions. Here are some ideas:

If you do this…	Maybe try out this!
Literary analysis essay	• Digital museum exhibit • TikTok summary and themes video • Tabletop game design
10-to–15-page research paper	• Hypermedia essay (Scalar, Adobe Spark) • Conference-style presentation slide deck and notes • Research poster
Literacy narrative	• Digital autobiography • Photo essay • Audio essay
Blue book or timed essay exams	• Infographic response to a set of questions • ePortfolio submission • Case-based learning or project
Reaction paper or written reading response	• Comic • Blog posts • Video response

	• Instagram carousel • Mind-mapping • "Making" or production project (collaging, sculpture, dioramas, etc.)

3 ASSESSING STUDENT WORK FROM MULTIPLE GENRES SIMULTANEOUSLY

It can seem tricky to teach and/or grade multiple different types of work simultaneously in the same class. How can you hold a standard essay alongside an infographic and a video and assess them all fairly? If providing students with a pre-determined set of genres to choose from, it can help to have lessons or process work prepared that walks them through similar components of each (e.g., gathering and summarizing sources together, creating data visualizations, supplementing claims with reasoning and evidence, etc.).

To assess these projects (and ensure that each type is meeting the learning outcomes for the course), it can help to create a flexible rubric. Here's an example of rubric criteria that could be used to grade not only an informative 5-to-7-page essay on a social issue, but also an informative video, audio essay, set of social media posts, or website:

- Is there an **introduction** which situates the issue and grabs the reader's attention?
- Is the **analysis** of the issue focused and targeted—does it inform a specific audience, addressing the "so what" factor?
- Does the writer appropriately pull from **at least 5 source texts**, providing quotes or paraphrases to support analysis?
- Is the **evidence well-integrated**, transitioning smoothly between ideas, and providing visuals or other aids to help facilitate the reader's understanding?
- Is the discussion of the issue **contextualized,** or well situated within the larger conversation in which it is involved?
- Does the project include **multiple persuasive appeals** to reach the intended audience?
- Is the project's **tone and formality** appropriate for its audience? Is it edited and polished to meet audience expectations?
- Does the project follow the **genre conventions** of the medium that the writer has chosen? Does it demonstrate deliberate organization? Is it formatted appropriately? Does it represent 5–7 pages of typewritten work (or equivalent)?
- Does the **reflective memo** accompanying the project effectively account for and justify the decisions made throughout the writing process, as well as all actors involved in the project?

4 STUDENT SELF-EVALUATIONS / REFLECTIONS

When assigning multimodal projects, it can be helpful to ask students to write a reflection or self-evaluation to accompany their final work. This gets students into the practice of evaluating their own work (something that will help them with tasks like performance reviews in the workplace), and also helps

"pull back the curtain" on how they are applying course lessons and concepts and the amount of labor that goes into their work.

Self-evaluations like these can be useful for assessing all writing projects but shed particularly helpful insights when those projects look "deceptively simple" or it is difficult to understand the work that went into them. For instance, consider if a technical writing instructor asked students to create TikTok videos in lieu of a traditional written documentation (instruction set) project. TikToks are short—two minutes or less!—so a brief clip showing how do something might seem like an easy task. However, a student's project evaluation memo accompanying this project might outline the following process and choices:

1. Initial brainstorming and research on topic online
2. Drafting and storyboarding of video content through writing scripts, cues, directions, etc.
3. Shooting video on location
4. Editing video and making rhetorical choices related to presentation and organization of information, language, visual and textual content, etc.
5. Writing captions, text overlays atop video, video descriptions, hashtags
6. User-testing video with someone from its target audience and applying feedback

Suddenly, a 90-second video becomes a very sophisticated writing task that meets multiple learning outcomes/objectives. This is why a project evaluation memo is just as important a tool for student reflection as it is for instructor assessment of student work.

❺ FURTHER READING

For more on these topics, see…

CAST. (2011a). *About Universal Design for Learning*. CAST. http://www.udlcenter.org/aboutudl/udlguidelines

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