

Critical Questions about Tiered Lessons  
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**What is a tiered lesson?**

Many of us have heard the term “tiered lesson” as the differentiation movement has taken center stage as a means of meeting the needs of all students in the classroom. A tiered lesson is a differentiation **strategy** that addresses a particular standard, key concept, and generalization, but allows several pathways for students to arrive at an understanding of these components, based on the students’ interests, readiness, or learning profiles.

**If I teach a tiered lesson, am I meeting the needs of gifted students?**

It depends. When the tiered lesson addresses the student’s readiness to interact with a particular topic/skill/idea, there is a good chance that the needs of the gifted students will be met. A lesson tiered by readiness level implies that the teacher has a good understanding of the students’ ability levels with respect to the lesson and has designed the tiers to meet those needs. You might think of a wedding cake with tiers of varying sizes. Many examples of lessons tiered in readiness have three tiers—below grade level, at grade level, and above grade level. There is no rule that states there may only be three tiers, however, the number of tiers will depend on the range of ability levels in your classroom. Remember: You are forming tiers based on your assessment of your students’ abilities to handle the material particular to *this* lesson. Students are re-grouped the next time you use tiering as a strategy.

**Will my groups be the same size?**

Not necessarily. The number of groups per tier will vary as will the number of students per tier. We are not looking to form groups of equal size; we are trying to form groups based on the readiness needs of individual students. For example, Tier One may have two groups of three students, Tier Two five groups of four students, and Tier Three may have one group of two students. When the lesson is tiered by interest or learning profile, the same guidelines apply for forming these groups—different tiers may have varying numbers of students.

**If I teach only the gifted students, does that mean I won’t tier lesson?**

No. The gifted are a heterogeneous group even when in a pull-out or self-contained class. You will still need to address the varied ability levels in this population.

**Is there anything I need to have done before I try a tiered lesson with my class?**

Yes. You must have a clearly articulated classroom management plan that provides the structure for the class when students work in groups. In addition, you must have anchoring activities for students who finish early or are waiting for you to assist their group. Both of these are non-negotiables. It makes sense to alert your administration and the parents that you will be trying some new strategies in the classroom in case there are questions.

**Are there specific parts to a tiered lesson?**

Definitely! To take a closer look at the anatomy of a tiered lesson, I’ll use the one reproduced here. It was developed by Dr. Rebecca Pierce, Associate Professor of Mathematical Sciences at Ball State University in conjunction with her work on the Javits Grant, Project GATE.

**First, identify the grade level and subject** for which you will write the lesson. In this case, the grade level is second and the subject is mathematics.

**Second, identify the standard (national, state, district, etc.) that you are targeting.** A common mistake for those just beginning to tier is to develop three great activities and then try to force-fit them into a tiered lesson. Start with the standard first. If you don't know where you are going, how will you know if you get there?

**Third, identify the key concept and generalization.** The key concept follows from the standard. Ask yourself, "What Big Idea am I targeting?" In this example, it is an understanding of fractions. The generalization follows from the concept. Ask, "What do I want the students to know at the end of the lesson, regardless of their placement in the tiers?" In this lesson, all students will come away knowing that fractions represent parts of a whole.

**Fourth, be sure students have the background necessary to be successful in the lesson.** What scaffolding is necessary? What must you have already covered? Are there other skills that must be taught first?

**Fifth, determine in which area you will tier.** You may choose to tier the content (what you want the students to learn), the process (the way students make sense out of the content), or the product (the outcome at the end of a lesson, lesson set, or unit—often a project). When beginning to tier, I would suggest that you only tier one of these three. Once you are comfortable with tiering, you might try to tier more than one area in the same lesson.

**Sixth, determine the type of tiering you will do: readiness, interest, or learning profile.** Readiness is based on the ability levels of the students. Interest is based on their interest in a topic, generally gauged through an interest survey. Learning profile may be determined through various learning style inventories. Gardner's Multiple Intelligences as a learning style system is currently quite popular.

**Seventh, based on your choices above, determine how many tiers you will need and develop the lesson.** Remember, when meeting the academic needs of gifted students, you will want to choose to tier according to readiness. You may have three tiers: below grade level, at grade level, and above grade level. If you choose to tier in interest or learning profile, you may control the number of tiers by limiting choices or using only a few different learning styles. Tiering on all eight of Gardner's Multiple Intelligences in one lesson may not be a good place to start.

Differentiation means doing something different—qualitatively different. Make sure you keep this in mind.