

How to Use PLDs to Inform Differentiation

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Why Differentiation Begins with Clear Expectations

Every classroom includes students who begin at different levels of readiness, yet all students are expected to develop the same historical thinking and work toward the same grade-level standards.

Effective differentiation is not about lowering expectations or creating different learning goals. Instead, it provides appropriate supports, challenges, and feedback that help every student progress toward mastery.

Performance Level Descriptors (PLDs) provide a practical framework for making those planning decisions. Rather than waiting until after an assessment to interpret student performance, teachers can use the PLDs before instruction begins to anticipate what successful performance looks like and intentionally design learning experiences that move students from one level of understanding to the next.

For U.S. History EOCEP, each indicator is also tied to an embedded Historical Thinking Skill (HTS): Comparison, Causation, Periodization, Contextualization, Continuity and Change, or Use of Evidence. Together, the PLDs and these Historical Thinking Skills help teachers plan instruction that develops both historical knowledge and historical thinking.

Using PLDs to Differentiate: Step-by-Step

1. Begin with the Standard

Not every indicator requires the same amount of instructional time, but every lesson begins with a clear understanding of the standard students are expected to master.

Example: You select USHC 4.P, which focuses on summarizing the changing role of the government in the economy between 1917 and 1945. This indicator encourages inquiry into the laissez-faire policies of the 1920s, the New Deal's approach to government regulation during the 1930s, and command economies during both World Wars.

2. Unpack the Standard

Once you've identified the standard, the next step is understanding exactly what students must know and be able to do. Break the standard into concepts (nouns) and skills (verbs), then determine its intended Depth of Knowledge (DOK). Identify the embedded Historical Thinking Skill (HTS).

Example: For USHC 4.P, concepts include “fiscal and monetary policy,” “government intervention,” and “economic conditions.” Skills might include “summarize” or “analyze,” pointing to DOK level 2 or 3. The embedded Historical Thinking Skill (HTS) is Periodization. Students must understand turning points and economic shifts across a defined era.

3. Identify What Success Looks Like

Study what student performance looks like at each PLD level:

- **Does Not Meet Expectations:** Students may recall isolated facts or identify basic relationships without explanation.
- **Minimally Meets Expectations:** Students begin to describe or explain core ideas using foundational understanding.
- **Meets Expectations:** Students summarize accurately using key content and language from the standard.
- **Exceeds Expectations:** Students use evidence and multistep reasoning to analyze, compare, or justify conclusions

How does student thinking change from “Minimally Meets Expectations” to “Meets Expectations”?

What additional reasoning and skill application characterize “Exceeds Expectations”?

Example:

- At **Does Not Meet Expectations**, a student may only identify or recall government-economic relationships from the era.
- At **Minimally Meets Expectations**, a student can describe or explain how the government’s role changed.
- At **Meets Expectations**, a student can summarize the changing role by defining and explaining major characteristics of the era.
- At **Exceeds Expectations**, a student can summarize by analyzing evidence and applying multi-step thinking to draw conclusions or provide justifications.

4. Plan Instruction That Moves Students Forward

- **Does Not Meet Expectations:** Use visuals, retrieval practice, or basic sorting activities to activate prior knowledge and support foundational understanding.
- **Minimally Meets Expectations:** Provide scaffolds (sentence frames, guided questions) to help students describe concepts and begin connecting ideas.
- **Meets Expectations:** Design tasks that ask students to summarize, categorize, or explain content with accuracy and context.
- **Exceeds Expectations:** Encourage independent analysis, justification, or synthesis using evidence and reasoning strategies.

Example: Students working toward Minimally Meets Expectations might complete a sentence frame comparing government actions in the 1920s vs. the 1930s. Students at Meets Expectations may summarize the trajectory of fiscal policy shifts across three decades. For Exceeds Expectations, ask students to use two pieces of evidence to argue which era marked the most significant changes in federal economic policy and justify their answer.

5. Use Feedback to Support Continued Growth

Use the PLD to craft growth-oriented feedback. Consider how to guide students toward the next level:

- **From Does Not Meet to Minimally Meets:** “You’ve identified a key fact. Let’s build on that. What does it help us to understand about the era?”
- **From Minimally Meets to Meets:** “You’ve explained an event. Now summarize how it connects to broader shifts across time.”
- **From Meets to Exceeds:** “Great summary. Try using evidence to justify which change had the greatest long-term impact.”

Example: A student describes wartime rationing. Your feedback: “Strong example of economic control during WWII. To deepen your response, explain how the role contrasts with the 1920s laissez-faire approach, and use another source to support your claim.”

Sample Differentiated Planning Snapshot

Indicator	Historical Thinking Skill	Meets Expectations	Support for Minimally Meets Expectations	Extensions for Exceeds Expectations
USHC.4.P	Periodization	Summarizes the changing role of government in the economy from 1917-1945 by defining and explaining major characteristics of each era.	Describe government roles using sentence starters, word banks, or labeled timelines	Analyze shifts across multiple periods using evidence and multistep reasoning to draw and justify conclusions

Final Reflection

By understanding the progression across the four performance levels, you are better equipped to plan responsive instruction. This includes designing tasks that target specific levels of

performance, offering scaffolds that move students forward, and delivering feedback that aligns with the skill progression described in the PLDs.

Performance Level Descriptors help teachers look beyond content coverage and focus on how students develop historical understanding over time. When used during planning, they provide a practical framework for anticipating student needs, designing purposeful supports, and maintaining rigorous expectations for every learner.

Rather than serving only as an assessment reporting tool, PLDs become a guide for differentiated instruction. Used alongside standards, Historical Thinking Skills (HTS), and aligned assessments, they help teachers design learning experiences that move students toward increasingly sophisticated historical thinking while keeping every student working toward the same grade-level expectations.