



NOVAK EDUCATION

UDL LESSON PLANNING PROTOCOL



USING THIS TOOL

The Novak UDL Lesson Planning Protocol is a step-by-step process that supports educators in designing academically rigorous, inclusive, and engaging learning experiences aligned with grade-level standards. It is grounded in the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework and the belief that all students can meet high expectations when supported by strong multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). This protocol helps educators proactively remove barriers and create meaningful access to learning. It outlines seven practical steps to guide intentional, student-centered learning experiences for all learners.

PLANNING WITH PURPOSE

Tips for Using this Protocol

- **Stay student-centered.** Keep the focus on creating learning experiences that support access, engagement, and demonstrated growth for every student. Revisit the goal often and check whether design choices are responsive to learner variability.
- **Reflect with purpose.** Use the guiding questions in each step to make intentional decisions about lesson design. Reflecting on student experience and variability helps identify barriers and consider flexible strategies to reduce them.
- **Collaborate with colleagues.** Use the protocol in team planning to share insights, align practices, and expand ideas for supporting diverse learners. Collaboration strengthens capacity to design more fully inclusive learning environments.
- **Use AI to support your thinking.** Each step includes an optional prompt that can be used with generative AI tools. These prompts can help brainstorm ideas, develop scaffolds, and explore flexible options. AI should be used to enhance your expertise and decision-making, not replace it.
- **Use it to refine, not redo.** This protocol is not about starting from scratch. It's a flexible planning companion that helps you sharpen and build on what you already do, especially when time is tight and classrooms are complex.
- **Start small.** Choose one step to focus on when planning or revising a lesson. While beginning with a single step may not fully eliminate all access barriers, it provides a practical and strategic entry point for building fluency with universally designed instruction.



Note for Educators Around the World

While this protocol uses the language of grade-level standards, it can be easily adapted for use in systems that emphasize curriculum outcomes, competencies, learning goals, or intentions. The heart of the work is designing inclusive, student-centered experiences that help all learners succeed.



This Protocol Isn't Just for Classrooms

While the Novak UDL Lesson Planning Protocol is designed with K–12 classrooms in mind, the same process can be used when designing professional learning, coaching sessions, or adult education experiences. Just like in K–12 settings, adult learners benefit from clear goals, flexible methods, opportunities for voice and choice, and a strong sense of belonging. Whether you're planning a PD session, a team meeting, or a coaching cycle, these steps support intentional, inclusive design for all learners. We use the term students throughout this tool, but the steps apply equally when working with educators, families, or community members. Feel free to adapt the language to fit your context.

STEP 1

CLARIFY THE PURPOSE



Guiding Questions

- What is the clear, grade-level standard or learning objective for this lesson?
- Why is this learning important, and how will it be useful to students now and in the future?
- How will students have opportunities to set goals to own and increase their learning?



Why it Matters

Begin by analyzing the standard, then break it into precise, student-friendly learning targets that make expectations explicit and accessible. A clear, grade-level-aligned goal communicated to students sets the foundation for purposeful, inclusive instruction. When students can articulate the learning goal and its relevance, they are more likely to engage meaningfully, persist through rigorous tasks, and demonstrate mastery.



AI Prompt

I'm teaching [standard] to [grade]. Break this into clear, student-friendly objectives I can share with the class. Include success criteria to help students track their progress. Explain why this learning matters and suggest ways students can set personal goals as they work toward the objective.

STEP 2

ANTICIPATE VARIABILITY



Guiding Questions

- What prior knowledge or misconceptions may affect learning?
- What barriers (academic, social, sensory, or behavioral) might impact student engagement or success?
- What supports or scaffolds will be necessary to eliminate these barriers and ensure all students can meet the goal?
- What extensions or opportunities for deeper learning will be necessary to challenge students who are ready for more?



Why it Matters

Learner variability is natural and expected. It is not just about how students differ from one another, but also how the same student might engage differently from day to day. Emotions, focus, lived experience, prior knowledge, and language all influence how students interact with content and with others. Use classroom data or team insights such as formative assessments, IEP goals, screeners, or behavioral observations to predict barriers and identify proactive supports. When we anticipate variability, we can design standards-aligned lessons that maintain firm goals while incorporating instructional flexibility grounded in UDL principles. This allows all students to access learning, experience challenge, and show what they know.



AI Prompt

What are common misconceptions and predictable barriers in [standard] for [grade]? Generate scaffolds to reduce these barriers and suggest extensions for students who are ready for deeper learning.

STEP 3

BUILD A WELCOMING START



Guiding Questions

- How will I welcome students and create a sense of belonging in the learning environment?
- How will I establish an inclusive and academically supportive space that invites participation and encourages risk-taking?
- How will I activate or connect to students' background knowledge and prior experiences to spark interest in the learning?



Why it Matters

A welcoming start establishes a predictable, inclusive environment that fosters academic risk-taking and sets the tone for high-level learning. When routines build a sense of belonging and students are invited to connect to prior knowledge or personal relevance, they are more likely to engage meaningfully and persist through challenging tasks.



AI Prompt

Suggest a universally designed opener for [standard] in [grade] that builds a welcoming tone, fosters a sense of belonging, encourages active participation, and activates background knowledge to support engagement with the learning objective.

STEP 4

EMBED FLEXIBLE ASSESSMENTS



Guiding Questions

- How will students show what they know and can do?
- What success criteria or rubrics will support clarity and self-assessment?
- How will I provide timely, meaningful feedback throughout the learning process?



Why it Matters

When students have multiple ways to demonstrate their learning, they are more likely to engage meaningfully and they are better able to demonstrate standards-based understanding in ways that align with their strengths. Clear success criteria and flexible assessment options support student agency, deepen metacognition, and allow all students to reflect on progress, not just performance.



AI Prompt

Suggest three assessment options for [standard] that provide student choice. Create a rubric with descriptions of progressing, meeting, and exceeding expectations.

STEP 5

DESIGN FLEXIBLE LEARNING EXPERIENCES



Guiding Questions

- How will students access and process the learning in ways that reflect their strengths and needs?
- How will students deepen their understanding through interaction with ideas, tasks, and tools?
- What flexible options (i.e., working individually, in pairs, or in accessing small group instruction) will help all students stay engaged in learning and help them progress toward the goal?



AI Prompt

- How can I design a lesson for [standard] at [grade] so that students are not expected to learn in the same way? What are flexible ways students can access and process the learning? How can I leverage small group instruction as one of several options for support?



Why it Matters

Once the learning objective and success criteria is clear, variability is anticipated, and students are welcomed into the learning space, the next step is to design experiences that support how students learn. Instruction that incorporates active engagement supports deeper understanding, especially when students have flexible options for accessing and exploring content. Flexible instructional design empowers students to make informed choices about how they access and interact with rigorous content, whether working independently, engaging with digital tools, collaborating with peers, or participating in small-group instruction for targeted support. When learning is intentionally designed with flexibility, students are more likely to access complex ideas, persist through challenges, and build the knowledge and skills needed to meet the learning objective.

STEP 6

CREATE SPACE FOR STUDENT OWNERSHIP



Guiding Questions

- How will students reflect on their learning and set goals for improvement?
- How will I invite student questions, feedback, and co-creation?
- How will students monitor their own growth over time?



AI Prompt

Suggest simple reflection prompts or tools for students in [grade] to track their progress on [standard]. How can I invite students to give feedback and contribute to shaping the learning experience?



Why it Matters

Deep learning occurs when students can reflect on their progress, assess their strategies, and adjust their approach to meet goals. Opportunities for reflection, feedback, and self-monitoring build ownership, agency, and motivation. When students have a voice in the learning process, they are more likely to stay engaged and take initiative.

PLAN AN INTENTIONAL CLOSE



Guiding Questions

- How will I summarize and celebrate student learning?
- How will I support emotional closure or reset before transitioning?
- What routines will reinforce relationships and a sense of readiness for what's next?



Why it Matters

A strong close reinforces mastery, highlights key takeaways, and creates space for students to reflect on their learning. Purposeful closing routines reinforce key concepts, promote reflection, and signal the value of the learning process.



AI Prompt

What are simple, inclusive routines to end a lesson on [standard] that help students reflect on their learning, support emotional regulation, and reinforce community?



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