

Universal Design for Learning

A guide for families & educators — how designing learning for *every* student from the start, not retrofitting later, helps all learners access, engage, and show what they know.



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DESIGN FOR ALL FROM THE START

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework for building lessons that work for **the full range of learners from the start** — rather than designing for an “average” student and retrofitting fixes later. It rests on **three principles**, and it benefits everyone. This guide walks **ten steps** through it.

General guidance. UDL is a framework, not a program — implementation varies. This guide is educational, for families and educators alike; work with your school on what UDL looks like in your child's classrooms.

What UDL Really Is

WHAT TO KNOW

UDL is a **framework for designing flexible learning** that works for the widest range of students *by design*. Instead of one rigid path plus retrofitted accommodations, UDL builds in options from the start.

BY THE NUMBERS

A framework

not a program

Flexible by design

options built in

For the range

not the "average"

HOW TO HELP

Understand UDL as **proactive design**: anticipating learner variability and building in choices, rather than reacting to struggles one child at a time.

GOOD TO KNOW

There is **no "average" learner** — designing for the range from the start serves everyone better than designing for a myth.

Know the Three Principles

WHAT TO KNOW

UDL rests on three principles — offering multiple means of **Engagement** (the “why” of learning), **Representation** (the “what”), and **Action & Expression** (the “how”). Together they address why, what, and how students learn.

BY THE NUMBERS

Engagement

the “why”

Representation

the “what”

Action & Expression

the “how”

HOW TO HELP

Learn the **three principles** — they’re the lens for spotting where a lesson offers only one way in, and where it could offer more.

GOOD TO KNOW

The three principles map onto **three brain networks** (affective, recognition, strategic) — UDL is grounded in how people actually learn.

Multiple Means of Engagement

WHAT TO KNOW

The “**why**” of learning. Students engage differently, so UDL offers **choice, relevance, and the right level of challenge** — tapping motivation instead of assuming one thing motivates everyone.

BY THE NUMBERS

Choice

in topics & tools

Relevance

connect to their world

Right challenge

not too easy/hard

HOW TO HELP

Look for (or ask about) **meaningful choices, real-world relevance, and goal-setting** — the levers that turn compliance into genuine engagement.

GOOD TO KNOW

Motivation isn't a fixed trait — the right choice or connection can switch on a “disengaged” learner.

Multiple Means of Representation

WHAT TO KNOW

The “**what**” of learning. Students take in information differently, so UDL **presents content in more than one way** — text, audio, visuals, video, hands-on — and makes key ideas and vocabulary clear.

BY THE NUMBERS

Multiple formats

text, audio, visual

Clarify

key ideas & vocab

Options

not one-size-fits-all

HOW TO HELP

Value teaching that **presents information several ways** — a concept explained, shown, and done sticks far better than one told once.

GOOD TO KNOW

Offering audio *and* text isn't extra work for one child — it helps the whole class, and it's how UDL works.

Multiple Means of Action & Expression

WHAT TO KNOW

The **"how"** of learning. Students show what they know differently, so UDL offers **more than one way to demonstrate learning** — write it, say it, build it, present it — plus support for planning and using tools.

BY THE NUMBERS

Show it different ways

write, say, build

Support planning

organizers & steps

Allow tools

AT welcome

HOW TO HELP

Look for **flexible ways to demonstrate learning** — so a dysgraphic child can present orally, and a quiet one can submit in writing, each showing real mastery.

GOOD TO KNOW

A single required format (always an essay) tests **the format as much as the learning** — options reveal what students truly know.

Why UDL Helps Every Learner

WHAT TO KNOW

UDL is designed for **variability** — the reality that every brain learns differently. Built-in options help students with disabilities, English learners, and “typical” learners alike. It’s good teaching, universally.

BY THE NUMBERS

For variability

every brain differs

Helps all

not just disabilities

Just good teaching

universally

HOW TO HELP

Support UDL knowing it isn’t “special” help for a few — it lifts the whole class, which is exactly the point.

GOOD TO KNOW

Like curb cuts and captions, UDL “accommodations for some” become **improvements for everyone**.



UDL vs. Accommodations

WHAT TO KNOW

Accommodations **retrofit** a fix for one student after the fact; UDL **designs in** flexibility from the start. They work together — but the more UDL a classroom has, the fewer individual retrofits it needs.

BY THE NUMBERS

Accommodations

retrofit, per child

UDL

proactive, for all

Together

fewer retrofits needed

HOW TO HELP

Value both, but recognize that a **well-designed UDL classroom** prevents many struggles before they need an individual accommodation.

WATCH OUT

UDL doesn't replace a child's IEP or 504 — it reduces how often the whole class hits the same barrier.

UDL at Home

WHAT TO KNOW

You can borrow UDL thinking at home: **offer choices, present information in more than one way, and let your child show what they know flexibly** — it makes home learning work for how your child learns.

BY THE NUMBERS

Offer choice

how & what

Multiple formats

read, watch, do

Flexible output

let them show it

HOW TO HELP

Give your child **real choices**, use audio/visual/hands-on alongside text, and let them demonstrate learning in whatever way lets their understanding shine.

GOOD TO KNOW

UDL at home is mostly a mindset — "Is there more than one way in, and more than one way out?"

Ask Your School About UDL

WHAT TO KNOW

You can advocate for UDL by asking good questions: **how does the classroom offer choice, present content multiple ways, and let students show learning flexibly?** Strong UDL benefits your child and everyone.

BY THE NUMBERS

Ask about choice

and flexibility

Multiple formats

how is content shown?

Flexible assessment

more than one way?

HOW TO HELP

Ask teachers and the school **how they build in flexibility**, and share that UDL supports your child without singling them out.

GOOD TO KNOW

Framing it as “what helps everyone” makes UDL an easy, positive ask — not a special request.

The Mindset Shift

WHAT TO KNOW

At heart, UDL flips a question. Instead of “what’s wrong with the student who can’t access this lesson?”, it asks **“what’s wrong with the design of a lesson only some students can access?”**

BY THE NUMBERS

Flip the question

design, not deficit

Barrier is the design

not the child

Fix the lesson

serve everyone

HOW TO HELP

Adopt the core UDL mindset: when many students struggle with the same task, look first at **the design of the task**, not the students.

GOOD TO KNOW

The most powerful idea in UDL: the **curriculum** can be “disabled,” not the child — and curriculum can be redesigned.

The Three Principles of UDL

UDL's three principles — the framework in a nutshell, addressing why, what, and how students learn.

Engagement — the “why”

Multiple ways to spark and sustain motivation: choice, relevance, appropriate challenge, collaboration, and self-regulation support.

Representation — the “what”

Multiple ways to present information: text, audio, video, visuals, and hands-on, with key ideas, vocabulary, and background made clear.

Action & Expression — the “how”

Multiple ways to show learning: writing, speaking, building, presenting — plus support for planning, organizing, and using tools.

The aim

“Expert learners” who are purposeful and motivated, resourceful and knowledgeable, and strategic and goal-directed.

The origin

UDL was developed by **CAST**, a nonprofit education-research organization, and is referenced in U.S. education law.

DESIGNED FOR EVERY LEARNER

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