

Identifying Learning Targets

What is a Learning Target?

A learning target is a smaller component of a sub-skill. It is the one specific thing that a focal student needs to learn next along a developmental continuum or learning progression. It is sufficiently granular or the right “grain size” so that a teacher knows exactly s/he would teach next. *Note: that doesn’t mean you will know the best way to teach it.* Learning targets are very individual and unique to each student. You may have focal students who share a sub-skill, but they will probably have different learning targets. For example, all of a teacher’s focal students might struggle in graphing lines, but some might struggle most with generating data in t-table while others might be having trouble plotting points. All of a teacher’s focal students might struggle in phonics, but some might struggle most with decoding blends while another might be having trouble with long vowels. Through our inquiry process, we begin to recognize how to help students who show up with similar looking learning targets over time.

Why Learning Targets?

Why not simply select a strategy once you have identified your target population’s sub-skill challenge area? We don’t jump from identifying a sub-skill weakness to implementing strategies because sub-skills are too broad for us to know what to teach in order to correct the student’s weaknesses. Instead, our emphasis is on “getting small” and more specific through learning targets. This approach is grounded in evidence about how student learning is accelerated. Research and experience support the idea that a student who has fallen behind in an important skill is likely to be missing one or more, but not all, of the fundamental building blocks needed for mastery in the sub-skill. Supplying a missing instructional building block that is impeding learning, or correcting a specific misconception, can often allow for the student to make big jumps forward, thus accelerating his or her learning.

The size of learning targets is important to consider. If the target is very small, you may be able to teach it and show that the student has learned it within a few days. If the target is larger you may need to work on it for several weeks. Most students have a collection of learning targets within a sub-skill area.

Criteria for Selecting a Learning Target

How do you know that you’ve picked an item that can be considered a learning target? It should fit the following criteria:

- **Small and specific:** it is the right grain size that would allow you to know what to teach next.
- **High leverage:** It is foundational in order to master the skill and move to the next level of proficiency. It is “necessary vs. simply nice” to proficiency.
- **Teachable and learnable** within a short cycle of a few days to a few weeks
- **Measurable** for monitoring and for tracking progress over time.

Learning Target Worksheet

Focal Student	Sub-Skill	Possible Learning Targets
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Name your focal student • Outline any assessment data you've collected on this student that helps you identify sub-skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Name the sub-skill • Detail what it takes to be proficient in this sub-skill • What are the necessary (or foundational) skills and knowledge versus those that are "nice to have" 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
<p><i>Jack... 10th grade</i> <i>Did QRI diagnostic and running record. He passes his phonics survey. He read at 145 wpm. A bit slow but ok. Struggled with identifying supporting details and some of the big ideas of the passage. He was a 2 on the comprehension scale.</i></p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Comprehension</p> <p><i>Needs to know how to follow the coherent flow of a text and I.D. the big idea and then determine which details support that big idea (main idea)</i></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 2. 3. 4. 5.
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