

Design options for language and symbols

A suggestion for implementing the strategy
'Design multiple means of Representation'
from the Guide: [Universal Design for Learning](#)

Includes:

Why this matters

Clarify vocabulary, symbols, and language structures

Support decoding of text, mathematical notation, and symbols

Cultivate understanding and respect across languages and dialects

Address biases in the use of language and symbols

Illustrate through multiple media

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From

Guide: [Universal Design for Learning](#)

Strategy: [Design multiple means of Representation](#)

Suggestion: [Design options for language and symbols](#)

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05 July 2026

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inclusive.tki.org.nz/guides/universal-design-for-learning/design-options-for-language-and-symbols

Why this matters

Learners make sense of information in different ways.

If information is presented in only one way, barriers to access and understanding may be experienced by some learners ([CAST, 2024](#)).

[Design options for language and symbols](#) prompts us to consider learner variability at the outset and offer options to:

- [clarify vocabulary, symbols, and language structures](#)
- [support decoding of text, mathematical notation, and symbols](#)
- [cultivate understanding and respect across languages and dialects](#)
- [address biases in the use of language and symbols](#)
- [illustrate through multiple media](#).

This guideline also reminds us to consider:

- How will these options support learners in reaching their goals?
- Could any of these options create barriers or unnecessary challenges?
- Will all learners have fair and equal access to high-quality choices?
- How do these options reflect and respond to learner variability?

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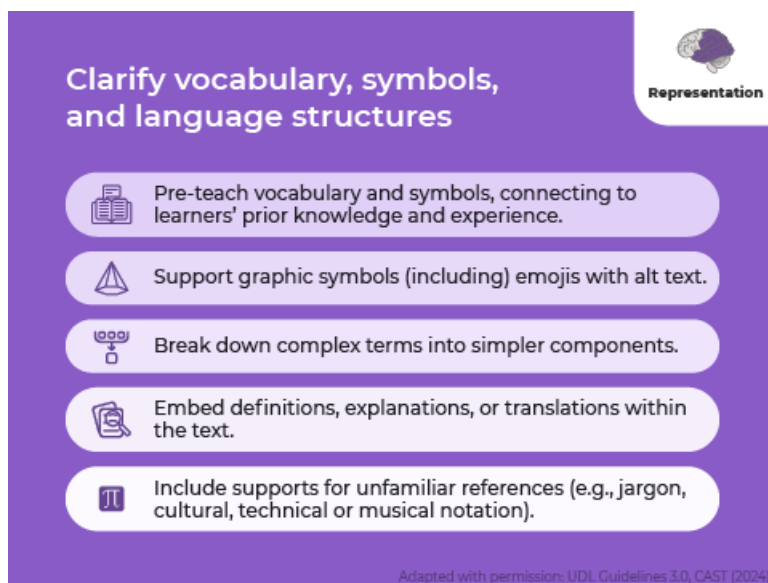
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Clarify vocabulary, symbols, and language structures



Clarify vocabulary, symbols, and language structures

Representation

-  Pre-teach vocabulary and symbols, connecting to learners' prior knowledge and experience.
-  Support graphic symbols (including) emojis with alt text.
-  Break down complex terms into simpler components.
-  Embed definitions, explanations, or translations within the text.
-  Include supports for unfamiliar references (e.g., jargon, cultural, technical or musical notation).

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Source:

[UDL Guidelines 3.0 | CAST \(2024\)](#)

<https://udlguidelines.cast.org/representation/language-symbols/vocabulary-symbols-structure/>

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Support decoding of text, mathematical notation, and symbols

As learners gain fluency at different rates, consider how to support decoding and maintain equity of access to the curriculum ([CAST, 2024](#)).

To support decoding, offer consistent and meaningful exposure to symbols to support comprehension and effective use.

When decoding is not the focus of learning or assessment, support access for all learners by offering options to reduce barriers, such as:

- text-to-speech
- glossaries
- predictive text.

Note: Without fluency, decoding increases cognitive load and reduces capacity for processing, understanding and engaging with complex concepts.

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Cultivate understanding and respect across languages and dialects

Learners bring skills and experience in different languages.

Creating opportunities to use this capability affirms that diverse linguistic expressions are valued and essential to an inclusive classroom ([CAST, 2024](#)).

- ✓ Promote the opportunity to use first languages, including NZSL, to build knowledge and understanding; for example, in group work, storytelling, debating, or concept development.
- ✓ Support translanguaging, the ability to move fluidly between languages, as an approach that encourages learners to use their full linguistic ability.
- ✓ Offer bilingual access to key content wherever possible.
- ✓ Link key vocabulary words to definitions and pronunciations in the languages of learners.
- ✓ Define specific vocabulary (for example, “map key” in social studies) using both the technical and common terms.
- ✓ Model how to use online glossaries and multilingual translation tools.
- ✓ Embed visual supports for vocabulary clarification.

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Address biases in the use of language and symbols

Address biases in the use of language and symbols

Representation

- Check all learners have equity of access to information and resources.
- Present videos with accurate closed captions turned on.
- Label classroom items in multiple languages with supporting visuals.
- Encourage the use of multiple languages and dialects.
- Build understanding of language and symbols associated with ableism, sexism and racism.

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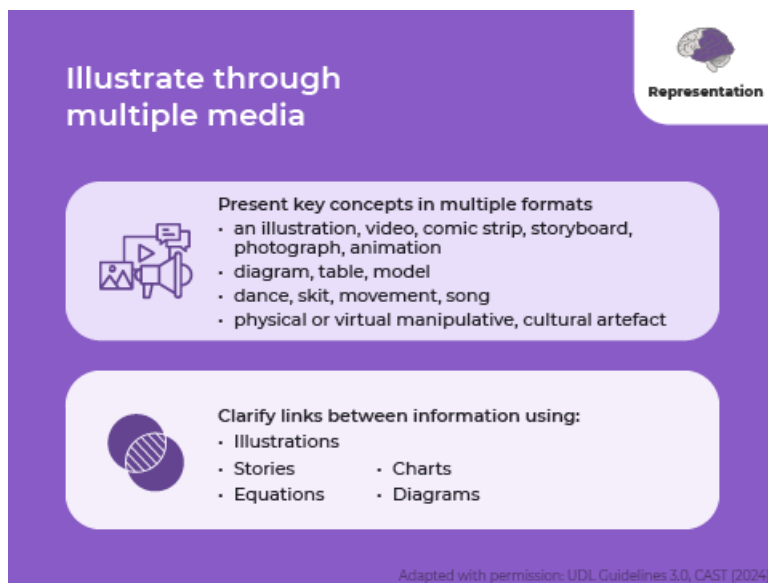
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Illustrate through multiple media



Illustrate through multiple media

Representation

Present key concepts in multiple formats

- an illustration, video, comic strip, storyboard, photograph, animation
- diagram, table, model
- dance, skit, movement, song
- physical or virtual manipulative, cultural artefact

Clarify links between information using:

- Illustrations
- Stories
- Equations
- Charts
- Diagrams

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