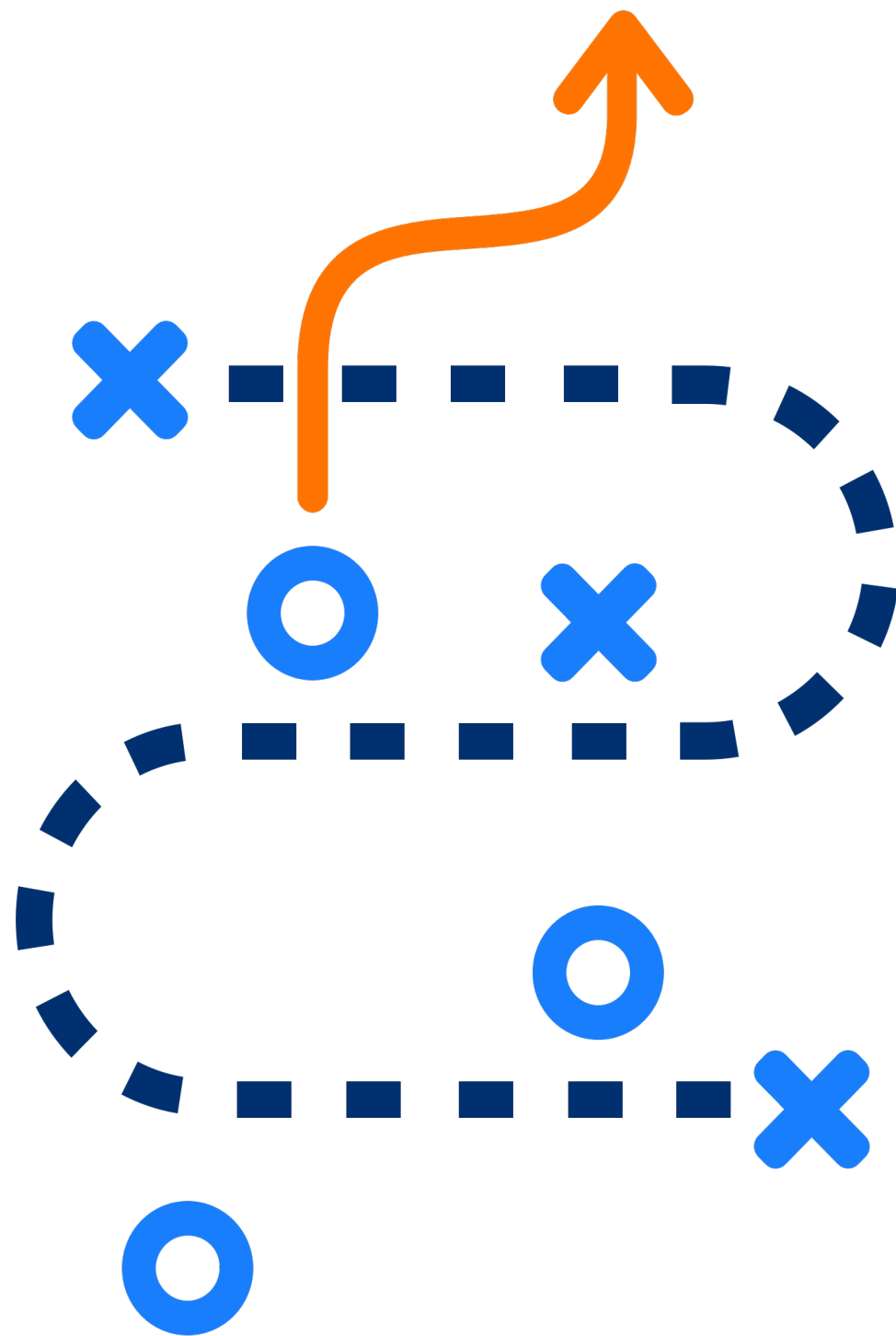


# The Differentiation Playbook

7 Key Plays for Today's Educators



# Foreword

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**Dan Cogan-Drew**  
Chief Product Officer  
of Newsela

**“You keep using that word. I do not think it [always] means what you think it means.”**

**- Inigo Montoya**

Imagine that you’re a climbing instructor. You have 30 climbers standing at the base of a wall and your objective is to ensure that every one of them gets to the top. Imagine further that your group is divided into three sub-groups. Your experts you might let climb straight up. Maybe they don’t even need ropes! Your basics you’ll want to put on belay and supervise as they ascend, since you know this is not that familiar for them. You might even pair experts with basics. What do you do with your novices?

When I first started teaching, I took it as a universal truth that differentiating instruction was good and that in fact, differentiation was my job. Over the last dozen years of trying to figure out what good technology can mean for teaching and learning, I’ve come to realize some core tenets of effective differentiation that stand firm, even as classroom environments evolve. An educator who practices effective differentiation does three things well: recognizes every student as an individual, maintains high expectations for the learning and growth of each child, and varies accommodations according to the need of each student.

# Foreword

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Thinking back to the climbing wall, this is where I often got differentiation wrong - to the detriment of my students. In my attempts to recognize every student as an individual, I varied the accommodations according to every student's needs, but I let my high expectations slip as I did so. Instead of enabling every student to experience climbing to the degree that they were capable, I had them participate in another activity altogether. Instead of climbing, they were skipping rope or using the uneven bars.

What did this look like in my classroom? I assigned my class a three-page essay. But instead of requiring all students to complete those three pages, I asked my less confident writers to make a movie or give a powerpoint presentation, because writing was hard for them and they quickly lost interest. And that meant I had to work even harder to sustain their focus. But when they were working on a presentation, they were clearly engaged. I told myself that I was differentiating instruction because I'd found a way to reach each of my students. But while I may have thought that I was skillfully differentiating instruction, I was actually depriving my students of the benefit of improving their writing. I failed to recognize that engagement was just the base from which I had to build; achieving the learning objective was the true goal.

Let's be honest: differentiation done right is hard work for both teacher and student. But over time, I got more

comfortable with the challenge. The work was hard, but it felt like the right way to teach. If we were going to learn how to write, we were all going to learn how to write - because differentiation done right means getting every student to the top of that wall. Differentiation done right means preserving those "a-ha!" moments for every learner. Differentiation done right unlocks an innate desire to take ownership of one's own learning.

So even on days when the wall feels insurmountable, or when we feel like we're starting back at square one, we can remind ourselves of the real objective of the work we all do - to give students the exhilarating experience of taking in the view from the top.

## **Dan Cogan-Drew**

Chief Product Officer of Newsela

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# Differentiation Done Right

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Differentiating instruction is a perennial challenge for educators. Teachers must grapple with it every day, in every classroom, everywhere—and they have for decades. In an ever-changing education landscape, you may ask, why is a seemingly age-old topic like differentiation on our minds?

In short, we think differentiated instruction is at an inflection point. Shifting attitudes toward tracking and grouping, the education community's deepening understanding of culturally responsive pedagogy, and scalable edtech tools are making it easier than ever to achieve more effective differentiation. Taking advantage of these changes means understanding shifts in how educators interact with their students, and how both are interacting with the litany of tools available to them.

That's why Newsela has compiled this playbook on next generation differentiation. Staying ahead of the curve takes time, effort and resources. In compiling some educator-approved best practices, you can stay focused on what matters most - positive learning outcomes for every student.

# Differentiation Done Right

Differentiation done right requires adequate time, planning, and resources to address individual needs.

## Educators Speak: The biggest challenges of differentiation



Time to plan differentiated lessons and collaborate with colleagues



Finding resources appropriate for students at all levels



Reconciling differentiation with state standards



Lack of professional development or resources



## On-the-fly differentiation in the classroom requires:

- ✓ A deep understanding of students
- ✓ Experience with adapting lesson content
- ✓ Flexibility

# The Moment Is Now: Differentiation Is at an Inflection Point

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What do we mean when we say that differentiation is at an inflection point? After all, pedagogies are constantly evolving - any educator will tell you that they are always updating their approach to make their instruction the best it can be. At Newsela, we take the long view. We work with educators from around the country to understand the climate today, so we can design our products for the classrooms of tomorrow.

# The Differentiated Instruction of Yesterday



**How it used  
to be**

## **The role of edtech**

In an era with limited technology and resource sharing tools, differentiated instruction often defaulted to ability grouping and tracking. With this strategy, generations of students faced the stigma that comes with being told they are struggling.

## **Cultural responsiveness**

In the past, differentiated instruction and culturally responsive teaching were often considered as separate pedagogies, with different goals and different methods.

## **Data and assessments**

Technical innovations like interactive lessons made assessment easier and more accurate, but teachers bore the brunt of the responsibility when it comes to interpreting mountains of student data.



# Differentiated Instruction, Today and Tomorrow



## What the future holds

### The role of edtech

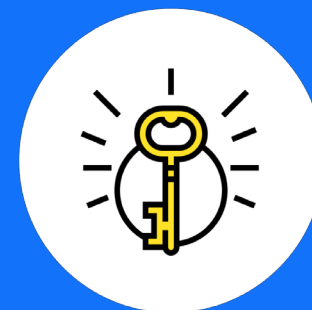
Aided by interactive and responsive digital tools, teachers can provide personalized instruction within whole groups—empowering students and giving them opportunities to interact with peers at all ability levels.

### Cultural responsiveness

Educators can leverage cultural differentiation tactics for students. In increasingly diverse classroom environments, this merging of culturally responsive teaching and differentiated instruction is a welcome shift.

### Data and assessments

Today's assessment technologies can not only compile assessment data, but also analyze and interpret it for key insights. Simplified assessment data analysis liberates teachers to focus on the most meaningful, relationship-based components of differentiated instruction.



## Key Play #1

Assemble a focus group or use a free online survey tool to get feedback about how confident your teachers are about their ability to differentiate instruction for all students.

# Differentiation Today: Grouping Gets an Upgrade

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The topic of ability grouping and tracking tends to rouse strong opinions. On one hand, these practices can make differentiation easier and more scalable for schools that struggle to find real differentiation solutions. By placing teachers with students of roughly the same ability level, schools make differentiation a bit less challenging for their instructors.

On the other hand, critics have argued that grouping struggling students together stigmatizes them and reproduces racial and socioeconomic inequalities. That's resulted in schools vacillating between whether or not to use ability grouping and track students. According to the Brookings Institution, tracking and especially ability grouping at the elementary level have come back into fashion.

***"In 1998, 28% of fourth-grade reading instructors used ability grouping. By 2009, that number had risen to 71%."***

**There's another way.** Teachers have often relied on ability grouping and tracking in an era of limited choice. But today, new frameworks are changing the differentiation game by imagining methods that bring students together instead of siloing them. Many of them update and customize the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework to meet the needs of today's learners.

UDL calls for educators to build multiple means of representation, expression, and engagement into the curriculum. The underlying mentality is that if a barrier to learning exists in the classroom, it comes from the curriculum—not the student. In other words, curricula should be fully accessible to students of all backgrounds and ability levels by default.

In the past, designing lessons with a variety of approaches to representation, expression, and engagement could increase prep time exponentially. Now, multimedia resources, simulations, and online interactive texts can help educators scaffold knowledge in a way that's not just tailored for broad ability brackets, but personalized for individual students.



**Newsela Insight:**

More than half of Newsela PRO students scaffold their own reading, allowing for agency in their learning.

What if, in the classrooms of 2030, ability grouping is long gone? Instead, perhaps students will learn together—and from each other—using evidence-based, flexible whole-group frameworks, facilitated by the technologies that make teachers' work easier.

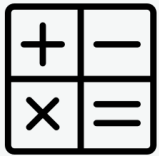


## Key Play#2

Make a toolkit of differentiation-friendly edtech tools that can help your teachers move beyond the stigma of tracking and grouping.

# Differentiation Across Content Areas

In need of some quick inspiration for differentiation strategies across content areas? Here are a few thought-starters to share that encourage student voice while differentiating:



## Math

Ask open questions and encourage students to discuss what they notice in the solutions. Turn simple observations into rich classroom discussions.



## ELA

Set up rotating “literacy centers” with a variety of leveled texts.



## Social Studies

Leverage project-based learning strategies to provide opportunities for exploration and choice.



## Science

Provide different exit tickets for disparate levels: fill-in-the-blank, matching, short-answer, and essay questions can cover a wide range of student ability.



## Key Play #3

Encourage teachers to use student-defined measures of success where possible to boost student engagement and student voice in their own learning.

"I take a Coaching mentality to my teaching— if work isn't good enough, it doesn't get graded, but does get feedback. Kids need and thrive on that direct feedback. ***My planning consists in providing a variety of response options and stimulation prompts.*** Rather than just reading about Ramses II, we also read the webcomic of Shelley's "Ozymandias," and when we get to Plato, we watch the Allegory of the Cave and compare it to the Matrix, or the Allegory of Godzilla."

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Drew Sedrel,  
Humanities Teacher

# Culturally Responsive Differentiation

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Today's thought leaders realize that differentiated instruction isn't just about differentiating by ability level. They're also exploring how differentiation tactics can be tools to make classrooms more culturally responsive. That starts with embracing students' diversity as an asset.



**Let students' backgrounds enrich the curriculum.** Students from diverse backgrounds might have unique contributions to your lesson content. For instance, a student from Russia might have a unique perspective on a history lesson about the Cold War. While students should never be put on the spot to be representatives of their culture, teachers can enrich their lessons by giving students space to volunteer information about their personal experiences.



**Understand that engaging certain student populations might look different in different cultural settings.** Discovering reluctant readers' interests and providing texts on those topics is a tried-and-true strategy to differentiate for them. Immigrant students who are reluctant readers might prefer texts that are relevant to their own cultures—or conversely, they might be curious about the culture of their new home. Build a multicultural library of resources to cater to diverse students' interests—without assuming interest in a particular topic.



**Engage students by giving them diverse role models.** Deliberately recruit diverse parents and student helpers to work in the classroom. Giving students positive academic role models from their own background is key to engaging them—a core principle of differentiated instruction.



#### **Newsela Insight:**

Newsela teachers can offer their students choice by using Text Sets to differentiate content on core concepts.



#### **Key Play #4**

Ensure your teachers have the ability and the resources to celebrate their students' academic success uniquely and fairly.

“I think a common misconception is that differentiation is just about helping the students who struggle. Differentiation is all about meeting every child where they’re at and making sure that they’re appropriately supported and challenged. And that also applies to students who are at an advanced level—it was still my job as a teacher to challenge them. I associated differentiation with supporting students who struggle when I was a new teacher, and I realized how limited that perspective was. *I felt like I really became a better teacher when I understood that it was all about planning for and responding to every student.*”

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Christina Pirzada,  
Newsela Product Manager



# Support teachers by knowing what's on their minds

Differentiation may happen in the classroom, but that doesn't mean it's only a job for teachers. Administrators can be crucial partners in helping teachers differentiate more effectively. Here are key areas where administrators can strategize with teachers:



Reporting data and strategizing for testing



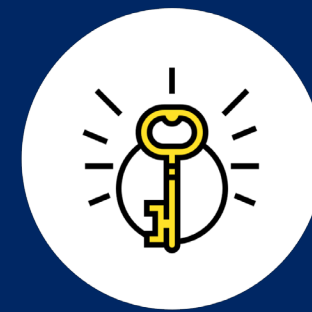
Planning differentiated lessons



Communicating with parents



Showing growth and accountability



## Key Play #5

Help teachers write ideas and plans for on-the-spot differentiation into their lesson planning tool, so they are ready and able to differentiate effectively mid-lesson.

# Data-Based Differentiation

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Educators at the forefront of differentiation are conceptualizing it as a “data-based iterative process” grounded in evidence-based practices (Ernest, Heckaman, Thompson, Hull, & Carter, 2011, p. 191). That may sound esoteric, but it’s just a more systematic approach to doing what teachers have done for centuries: paying attention to their students and responding to their feedback.

But while highly effective teachers have always listened to their students’ feedback, that feedback is coming in greater volumes than ever before. Interactive tools and clickers provide teachers with real-time data about how many—and exactly which—of their students are grasping the material.

Even for educators who choose not to use these technologies, big data has entered education, and it’s here to stay. Many parents expect granular detail on their children’s progress, and students raised with screens are used to interacting with apps that track their learning and activities. Now more than ever, educators can take advantage of this information gold mine to differentiate instruction for individual students.

## A New Era of Data-Informed Differentiated Instruction

Newsela's resident educators love tools that provide educators with real-time assessment data. Rather than planning lessons based on assumptions about which students will know what, teachers can get accurate data that fully encompasses their students' learning abilities. When struggling students are able to master topics and skills quickly, educators will be able to recognize this and adapt on the fly, and their practice will be nimbler than ever. It's an fundamental paradigm shift: from differentiating in the planning stage based on broad assumptions and premade ability groups, to differentiating in the classroom in response to accurate data about student success.



### Newsela Insight:

Newsela PRO teachers are 6x more likely to differentiate their formative assessments than Newsela teachers overall.



### Key Play #6

Help teachers leverage student learning information from all sources, including edtech tools, to help them effectively differentiate based on real-time skill mastery.

# Differentiation Gets Results - Don't Miss Out

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## The evidence is clear.

Differentiation gets results. Research shows clear associations between effective differentiated instruction and:



Higher reading fluency



Improved reading comprehension



Student engagement



Student grades

Differentiating based on interest improves student motivation, and that in turn leads to better performance and greater interest in the material.

## Students aren't the only ones who benefit.

When teachers differentiate effectively, they become more confident in their own abilities, and that confidence makes them even better at their jobs. Here's how administrators can leverage differentiated instruction to empower your educators.



When teachers differentiate their instruction and see it translate into breakthroughs for their students, they see evidence that their methods are working. Set your teachers up for success **by providing the resources to differentiate efficiently and effectively.**



If teachers **feel a strong sense of efficacy in their ability to teach**, they're more likely to take risks and try out challenging pedagogies, including new types of differentiated instruction. [One 2014 study](#) found that when instructors believe they can teach effectively, they're more likely to differentiate.



When administrators cultivate efficacy through **strong professional development**, they can kick off a virtuous cycle where teacher efficacy leads to differentiation, which then strengthens teachers' efficacy even further.



### Key Play #7

Connect the dots for teachers between hot topics and best practices, helping them understand that differentiated instruction and establishing growth mindset in students are mutually beneficial.

Sometimes, the most significant results are the ones that can't be quantified or easily measured in a study. We design our technology based on the belief that no student should feel like their lessons were designed for someone else. Motivating students means creating a welcoming classroom where everyone feels they belong, regardless of their background, ability level, or obstacles they may face—and achieving this calls for effective differentiation.

To take full advantage of that potential, teachers need the right tools - especially those that allow for student choice, and that encourage learners to read at their stretch level. The real cornerstones of good differentiation are smart grouping, responsiveness in the classroom, and meaningful relationships between teachers and students. Administrators can't buy these things for their teachers, but they can provide the resources to facilitate student choice and challenge learners at their own level. In doing this, administrators can become a strong allies for teachers as they take on the new world of next generation differentiated instruction.



## How else does differentiation motivate students?

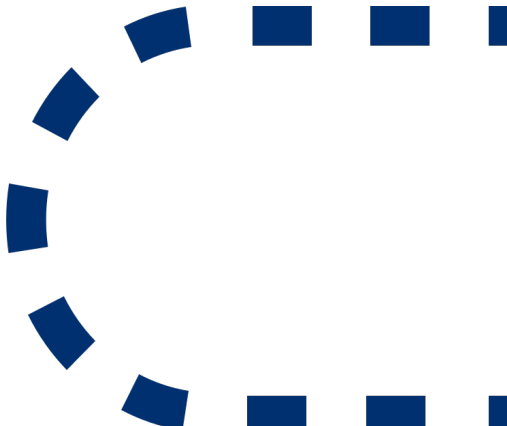
- All learners can experience progress and feel successful
- Students take ownership of their education when they have choices and control
- Over time, this cultivates a growth mindset grounded in intrinsic motivation to learn

“Reading is such an emotional experience for children. The shame associated with not being able to read is a serious epidemic in schools and can be so disengaging and demotivating. ***Overcoming that using differentiated instruction was a big win.*** The students who came in feeling they couldn’t read or contribute, now feeling like they can contribute in a meaningful way that they had not previously had access to, was incredibly gratifying.”

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Liz Crowley,  
Newsela Partnerships Manager

## 7 Key Plays for Successful Differentiation



# 1

Survey your teachers to evaluate strengths and areas of opportunity.

# 2

Help teachers utilize edtech tools to reduce the stigma of tracking and grouping.

# 3

Enable teachers across content areas to incorporate student voice into measures of success.

# 4

Ensure your teachers have the ability and resources to celebrate academic success uniquely and fairly.

# 5

Train teachers for adaptability in the classroom so they feel equipped to differentiate effectively mid-lesson.

# 6

Help teachers leverage learning information from all sources, including edtech tools.

# 7

Connect the dots for teachers between hot topics and best practices, like growth mindset and differentiation.



# Newsela PRO teachers will tell you:

## ENGAGEMENT

**92%**

of teachers said their students find the content they read on Newsela highly engaging.

## KNOWLEDGE

**97%**

of teachers said Newsela helps their students improve general knowledge on topics they read.

## READING SKILLS

**93%**

of teachers said Newsela helps their students improve their reading skills.

## INCLUSIVITY

**95%**

of teachers said Newsela's leveled content empowers them to include all students in the same discussion.

## RELIABILITY

**94%**

of teachers said they and their students can easily find the content they're looking for on Newsela.

## RELEVANCE

**94%**

of teachers said Newsela's content helps them connect classroom instruction to the students' lives and lived experiences.

## LEARNING

**93%**

of teachers said their students learn when they read articles on Newsela.

## ALIGNMENT

**92%**

of teachers said Newsela offers content that is well-aligned with their teaching goals.

# What educators are saying about Newsela:

“Students were getting much more out of using Newsela than similar products. So when I came to Middletown, I knew that Newsela was one of the first things I really wanted to look into and purchase.”

**Natalie, Elementary Supervisor of Curriculum and Instruction  
Middletown, NJ**

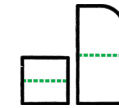
“I already knew from our classroom pilots that Newsela offered world-class content and instructional tools. What I didn’t know what was an absolute pleasure they’d be to partner with. The Newsela PRO team has provided us with excellent treatment throughout our partnership. The high-quality training sessions, responsiveness to feedback and inquiries, and proactive notifications regarding new content and features have all been first rate.”

**Eric, ELA and Social Studies Curriculum Specialist  
Buncombe County, NC**

“Let me preface by saying that I love Newsela; it is a fantastic way to differentiate for my classroom, and to engage my students in real, meaningful learning about the world around them.”

**Heather, Teacher  
Nashville, TN**

## Newsela PRO works, and it works for everyone.



One study found that using Newsela twice a week leads to **2x reading gains** in achievement scores and **3x gains** when used daily.



Another found that Newsela increases reading scores for students of **all demographic subgroups**.



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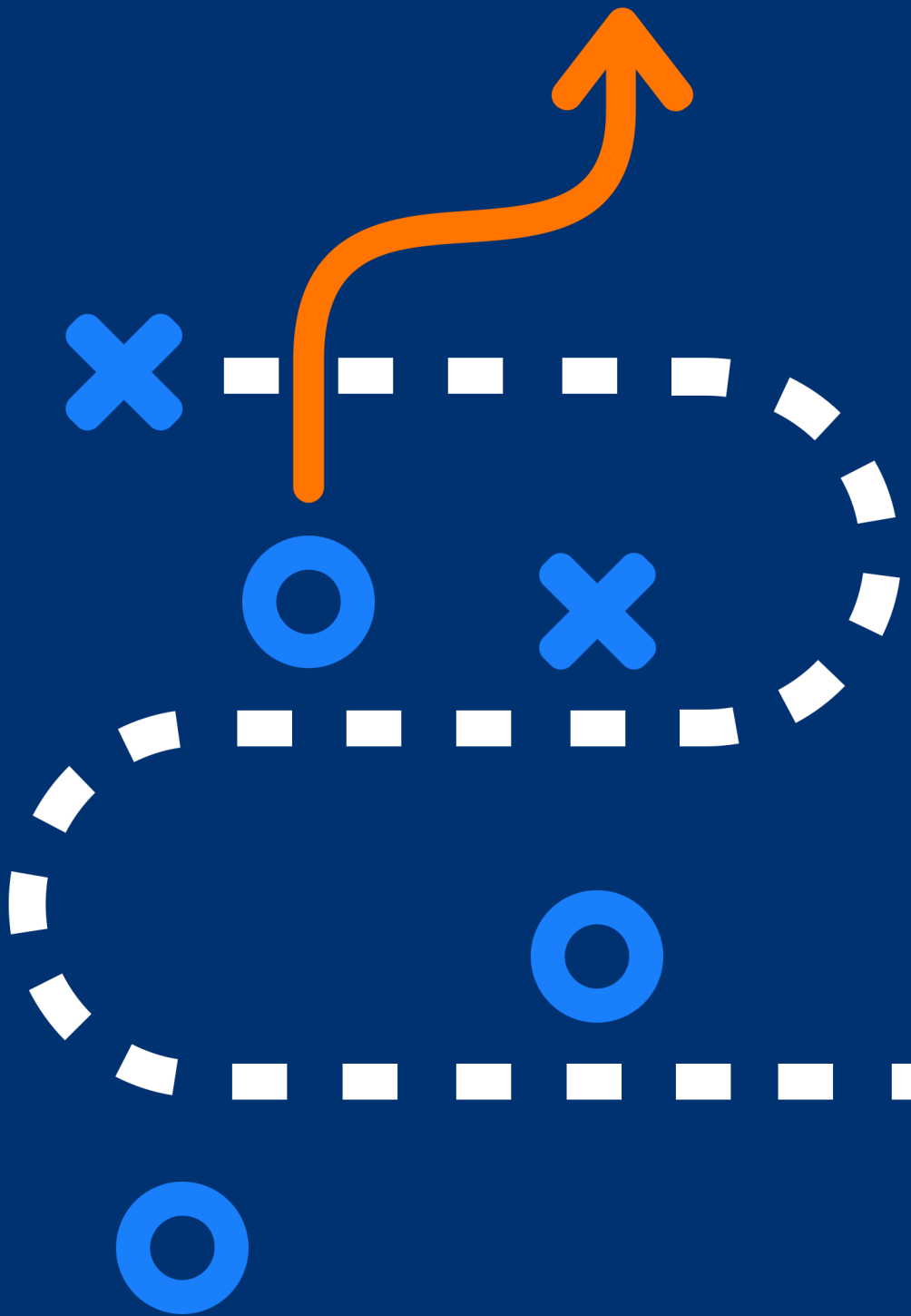
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Thank you.

