

Accommodations vs. Modifications vs. Adaptations

Purpose & Overview

Confusion around accommodations, modifications, and adaptations is common, even among experienced educators. These terms are not interchangeable, and misunderstanding them can lead to compliance errors, inconsistent implementation, or barriers for students.

This worksheet provides a **clear comparison chart, concrete examples, case scenarios, and quick checks** so educators can confidently apply the right supports in IEPs and 504 Plans.

Definitions at a Glance

Term	Definition	Key Question	Impact on Learning
Accommodation	A change in <i>how</i> the student learns or demonstrates knowledge without altering the standard/expectation.	“How can we remove barriers without changing the learning goal?”	Provides access without lowering expectations.
Modification	A change in <i>what</i> the student is expected to learn—reducing or altering grade-level standards.	“Does this change the actual learning target?”	Alters expectations, may impact diploma track.
Adaptation	Adjustments to instruction or materials that make content more accessible, often combining accommodation + differentiation.	“How can we adjust materials/teaching so the student can engage?”	Provides access by reshaping materials or methods, while aiming to keep standards intact.

Quick Reference Examples

Support Area	Accommodation	Modification	Adaptation
Reading	Provide text-to-speech or audio book	Assign shorter, simpler text at a lower grade level	Use graphic organizers, chunk text, or pre-teach vocabulary
Writing	Allow speech-to-text software	Reduce required essay length (e.g., 1 paragraph instead of 3)	Provide sentence starters and scaffolding for paragraph writing
Math	Provide calculator for multi-step problems	Focus only on single-digit multiplication	Use manipulatives or visual models to support conceptual understanding
Assessment	Extended time on tests	Fewer test questions or alternate grading criteria	Use word banks, visuals, or bilingual glossaries
Classroom Environment	Preferential seating, quiet space	Alternate setting with reduced workload	Provide visual schedules, sensory tools, or flexible seating options

Case Scenarios (Which is it?)

Scenario 1:

Student takes the same grade-level reading test as peers, but listens to it via text-to-speech.

- **Answer:** Accommodation (removes barrier, goal unchanged).

Scenario 2:

Student completes 10 spelling words while peers complete 20, aligned to grade-level standards.

- **Answer:** Modification (reduces expectations).

Scenario 3:

Student uses color-coded math steps and manipulatives to solve multi-step problems.

- **Answer:** Adaptation (teaching materials reshaped, expectation same).

Implementation Guidance

- **Document Clearly:** If it's an accommodation or modification, it must be listed in the IEP/504.
- **Use with Purpose:** Don't add "laundry lists"—tie each support directly to a need in the PLAAFP.
- **Adaptation ≠ Compliance Category:** Use the term carefully—it's an instructional practice, not a legal category like accommodations/modifications.
- **Communicate with Families:** Explain the difference, especially around modifications (which may affect diploma track or standardized assessments).

Educator Quick Check

Before adding a support, ask:

1. Am I changing *how* the student learns/demonstrates? (Accommodation)
2. Am I changing *what* the student must learn? (Modification)

3. Am I reshaping the material/method to increase access? (Adaptation)
 4. Does this align with the PLAAFP and goals?
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Action Starter: Try Tomorrow

- Review one student's IEP or 504.
- Highlight all listed supports and label each as **Accommodation, Modification, or Adaptation**.
- Remove any that don't align to needs in the PLAAFP.
- Share with a colleague and confirm agreement.