Writing for Understanding

Writing for Understanding is an approach to writing instruction that recognizes that at the heart of effective writing, by any accepted definition, is the building of meaning and then expressing it so that others can follow the writer’s thinking.

Therefore, Writing for Understanding recognizes that, if students are to write effectively and with engagement - during testing, for their own personal growth, for school, for real life - they need to have certain elements in place. These are:

- knowledge and understanding which can be articulated in spoken and written language
- an appropriate focus for thinking about and synthesizing that knowledge
- a structure through which to clearly develop and present that knowledge
- control over conventions

In Writing for Understanding instruction, the teacher’s guiding principle is not “Let’s see if you can write this.” Rather, her guiding principle is, “Let’s make sure you can write this.”

In this Writing for Understanding approach, teacher “backwards planning” becomes critically important. Before sitting down to write, the student needs to have all of the above elements in place - especially the first three. The teacher, therefore, needs to plan for the student actually getting access to all of those elements.

Conceptually, that planning in the Writing for Understanding approach includes the following components:
Writing for Understanding Overview

**Central Ideas**

What is it that I want students to understand about this content (and what misunderstandings might I need to address)? What understandings about the craft of writing do I want them to get? How will I plan backwards from my goal to design instruction so students can get there, and how will I know when they’ve got it?

**Focusing Question**

What question will I pose so that students can see how to approach this thinking / writing in a specific, appropriate, manageable way?

**Building and Processing Working Knowledge**

How am I going to make sure that students know enough about this subject by the end to actually be able to write about it?

- What will they read, and how will I help them read it?
- What vocabulary do they need?
- What do they need to draw or make?
- What experiences do they need to have?
- How will I engage all students in purposeful conversation to build knowledge?
- How will students select from and analyze the knowledge through the lens of the Focusing Question, then capture it in notes or some other type of visible thinking so that they all have access to ideas to use in their writing?
- How will I monitor their developing understanding so I am sure they are getting it? How will I give them feedback as they acquire and develop that understanding?

**Structure**

How will students know how to construct / build this piece of writing so that their thinking is clear, both to them as writers and to the readers of their work? What will I show them as a model? What tools will they need? What concepts of craft will they need to know?

**Writing**

How will students draft / revise so that their final writing is clearly focused, organized, and developed to show understanding of the central ideas? How will I monitor their writing so I am sure they are getting it? How will I give them feedback as they write and revise to show understanding?