



WRITING FOR UNDERSTANDING:

Using Backward Design to Help
All Students Write Effectively



THE VERMONT WRITING
COLLABORATIVE



Hopewell, NJ

Preface: A Message to Teachers

It was a December afternoon, and the twenty-seven third- and fourth-grade students who filled the classroom during the day had long since boarded the school buses and gone home for the evening. Their young teacher should have been going home, too—she had supper to fix, papers to correct, phone calls to make for her family, laundry to do.

Home, however, did not appear to be in sight; there was still so much to do here. She contemplated the classroom, large yellow crate in hand. Everywhere she looked, the evidence of her students' ongoing hard work was evident. For the past week, they had all been engulfed in writing dinosaur reports. The dedicated young teacher had taken this responsibility very seriously. Students were working in pairs, and each pair had selected for research the dinosaur that interested its members the most. Each pair had its own large plastic envelope, in which students were keeping their materials: books on the dinosaur in question, pictures, clay for making a dinosaur model. Further, each crate contained a clipboard, with a planning web for the students to use to decide what their dinosaur report should include. Each group even had a number and a place to put the number. As they needed her help with anything, the teacher had thought, the students would put up their number, then wait

for her to get to them for help (meanwhile busily and productively occupying themselves).

In short, the teacher had planned well. These third and fourth graders were well equipped for reading and thinking and writing about their dinosaur of choice!

But somehow, things had not worked out.

Standing there with the empty crate, the young teacher mulled over the past few days. The students needed help, lots of it, with reading their dinosaur materials, and very few of them could figure out which material they actually needed. The planning web's purpose was elusive; many students didn't know what to put in it. The teacher could see that many, maybe most of her third and fourth graders, needed her help with navigating the material, then figuring out what to put on the web. She could see, when she had a chance to look up as she raced around the room from group to group, that even the strong students were copying down anything and everything about their dinosaur, whether they understood it or not. Others, while waiting for their teacher to get to them, had gone off task and were playing with the clay—noisily.

Suddenly, the young teacher found her eyes filling with tears. What had she been thinking? How could she possibly help so many people? And if she didn't help them, what would these twenty-seven curious, eager, but not-yet-very-skilled third and fourth graders take away from this dinosaur report-writing experience?

It is our guess that there is not a writing teacher in the country who has not experienced some version of this scenario. Incredibly dedicated, hardworking teachers everywhere have tried valiantly to help students write—not just reports, but responses to text, stories, reflections, poetry, persuasive position papers. With many students needing help (of course! writing is a challenging task!), these teachers have found themselves unable to meet the needs they can see in their students. Trying to work with one or two students at

a time, nearly always with different material, they struggle to help all of their students read the material, understand it, decide what to use, then figure out how to write something that makes sense. The barriers—for the student struggling to read and organize ideas, for the teacher struggling to reach each one—are enormous.

In a genuinely academically diverse classroom—as most public school classrooms are—trying to effectively provide writing instruction has been a Herculean task. Often, working with writing this way, teachers have found themselves making impossible choices: either find a way to work adequately with each child or group in what amounts to tutorials (at lunch, at 7:00 in the morning, during recess, after school, for weeks), or else settle for some number of students producing substandard writing—writing which makes sense to neither the writer nor a reader.

We are writing this book for those teachers, to let them know that there is an alternative. The book describes an approach to teaching we have called *Writing for Understanding*. Its premise is that writing is about constructing and communicating meaning. The product itself—the student’s written work—shows that the writer knows and understands what he is talking about and can communicate it clearly to readers. In order to write effectively to show meaning, students—at any grade level, no matter what they are writing about—need to have four elements in place. They need:

- knowledge, and solid understanding of that knowledge
- a focus through which to think about and work with that knowledge and understanding
- a structure to develop their knowledge and understanding
- grade-level control over writing conventions

Writing for Understanding is for teachers. The book lays out a manageable, effective approach to teacher planning so that students have access to all of those elements, especially the first three, before they sit down to write. Based on the principle of “backward design” (Wiggins and McTighe), it conceptualizes planning for writing instruction in terms of key elements. These are:



Central Ideas

What is it that I want students to understand about this *content*? What understandings about the craft of writing do I want them to grasp?



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?



Structure

How will my 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?



Writing

How will my students draft/revise so that their final writing is clearly focused, organized, and developed to show understanding of the central ideas?

In the book, we will explain each of these elements in detail, making ample use of student work and teacher think-alouds as we go. In the Introduction, we lay out the argument for paying close attention to the role of understanding in the composition process. Chapter One takes a close look at what we mean by “effective writing” and explains the *Writing for Understanding* approach to planning and instruction in greater detail. In Chapter Two, we begin examining each planning element listed above, working with the idea of planning for a focus for student thinking and writing. Chapter Three explains the importance of planning for the acquisition of knowledge and understanding in both content and writing craft, and offers examples of what this can look like. In Chapter Four, we examine the role of structure in writing and show some ways in which teachers can plan for structure in writing. Chapter Five works with drafting and embedded revision (formative assessment on the part of both student and teacher), while Chapter Six examines the question of transfer, moving away from guided instruction to more independent work. And transfer is the ultimate goal of *Writing for Understanding*: the point where students have internalized the ability to write effectively and can apply it in new situations.

In a *Writing for Understanding* classroom, what might the dinosaur reports experience described at the beginning look like? It could take many different forms (*Writing for Understanding* is *not* a lockstep, rigid approach), but here is one possibility:

Twenty-seven third and fourth graders are sitting in small groups. Each group has chosen a dinosaur to research together, and the students are excited about that (what’s not to love about dinosaurs?).

First, though, they are going to write, together, about Ankylosaurus, the dinosaur that they have researched together as a whole class. On the wall is a large, colorful web full of highly

organized group notes and pictures contributed by the class, their guided, shared work over the past week. Their focus for the notes, “Ankylosaurus was a creature that was well adapted to its environment,” has determined how those notes have been structured—every note reminds the students just how well adapted Ankylosaurus was, in many specific ways.

The teacher pulls out the overhead projector. “Here we go, everybody!” she says. “We now know so much about this truly amazing Ankylosaurus that we’re ready to write. Today, we’ll begin with an introduction—we need to let the reader know a bit of background about dinosaurs in general before we launch into our own focus—‘Ankylosaurus was a creature well adapted to its environment.’ So, scientists, what do you think our reader might need to know about dinosaurs in this introduction?”

Together, the class composes an introduction for the group piece. By the time students have completed this process, they will have a model—a good idea of what their own piece will look like, what a focused, organized, well-written, well-understood “well-adapted dinosaur” paper can be. When they come to start reading and discussing their own dinosaur paper, they will bring to that process a strong sense of this final product and the understanding embodied by it.

And the young teacher in this *Writing for Understanding* classroom? She knows that every one of her students is engaged in a task that makes sense to him. She knows that every one of her students is working with knowledge he understands. She knows that she will get a range of achievement, but that her third and fourth graders will *all* be able to construct and communicate meaning in these dinosaur reports.

For students to have genuine access to instruction like this, teachers need help planning, so that students can write successfully and effectively and even joyfully, and still have time for recess

A Message to Teachers

—and so that the teacher still has time to do her laundry. This book is written to help make that teacher planning possible, manageable, and workable.

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