



The First Pillar: Backward Planning

The first pillar in Writing for Understanding is backward planning. In ordinary life, we all plan backward, all the time. When we have to get to the supermarket, we don't just drive or walk around aimlessly, hoping we'll stumble on it—we first have to know where the supermarket is. In addition, we need to know how long it will take to get there and what time we have to be home to make dinner. Sensible backward planning makes all that possible.

Writing for Understanding instruction leans on backward planning. Deeply indebted to the Understanding by Design work of Wiggins and McTighe (1998), known to many as "UbD," the Writing for Understanding approach recognizes that knowing where the grocery store is and how to get there is a key underlying principle of planning for student proficiency in writing. When applied to writing, backward planning means, at the very least, that teachers have a clear, specific, and reasonable idea of what the final piece of writing will look like for the students they are teaching *before* they plan the unit, and *long before* they ask students to write.

Plan with standards in mind.

Part of backward planning for proficient writing in the Writing for Understanding approach means paying attention to standards. This includes writing standards, of course; it also includes reading standards and sometimes content standards.

Using the writing standards.

When teachers plan for proficient student writing at any grade level, one of the first things they need to consider is which type of writing they are planning to work with:

- Writing to share a claim/argument on a particular topic
- Writing to inform about or explain a topic, or
- Writing to dramatize a particular event/situation, either real or imagined

Each of these three writing types captures a particular way of thinking about a topic. For example, two fifth-grade teachers whose students will study Jackie Robinson need to consider what kind of thinking they want their students to show in their writing, what understanding the writing will demonstrate.

Do these teachers want the students to explain the importance of Jackie Robinson's life in both the world of major league baseball and the national struggle for civil rights? If so, they are aiming toward informative/explanatory writing—and need to plan instruction accordingly.

Do these teachers hope to have students capture understanding of the significance of Jackie Robinson's life by dramatizing a particular moment in that life (say, sliding into second base and being spiked by the second baseman)? If so, they are aiming toward narrative writing—and need to plan accordingly.

Do these teachers want the students to be able to take a stand on some aspect of the topic? Might they, for example, want students to make a claim about where Jackie Robinson's impact was the most significant—the world of major league baseball or the national struggle for civil rights? If so, they are aiming toward argument writing—and need to plan instruction accordingly.

Using the reading standards: reading literature, reading informational text.

Most state literacy standards in this country derive from a common set of reading anchor standards. These apply to literary text (stories, novels, poems, some types of literary nonfiction) and to informational text (articles, various types of explanatory text). (At K–5, they also include foundational skills, mainly directed toward decoding and fluency.) Statewide reading standards typically do not describe particular content about any particular text. Rather, they describe ways and levels of thinking about, approaching, and understanding text.

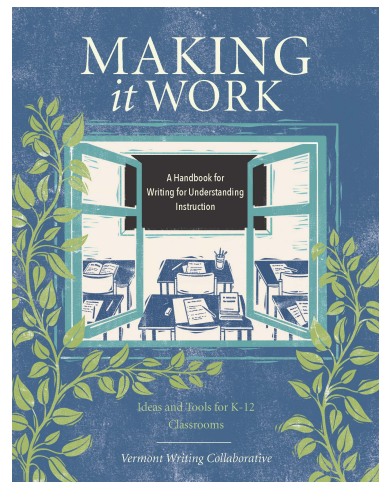
In most states, two standards—what one might call the “grandparents of all standards”—bookend the reading standards at every grade level, both literary and informational. Those standards require students to use evidence to show understanding and to successfully read complex text. Because knowledge is so important and because proficiency is so important, helping students successfully navigate grade-level complex text about a substantive topic matters. And because real knowledge and understanding are so important, supporting one’s ideas with accurate and thoughtful evidence from those complex texts matters.

When planning a Writing for Understanding sequence, teachers will *always* be planning for, at the very least, these two reading standards—working with complex text and gathering thoughtful evidence from those texts.

In addition, sometimes a Writing for Understanding sequence will address additional reading standards, particularly for upper grades. A fourth-grade Writing for Understanding sequence on the Greek myth of Narcissus, for example, might focus on a standard addressing the theme (e.g., “What big idea is this myth trying to share with us about our own lives?”). An eighth-grade Writing for Understanding sequence using the Langston Hughes poems “Mother to Son” and “A Dream Deferred” might focus on a reading standard addressing the relationship of structure to meaning (e.g., “How does the poet treat the concept of hope in these two poems? How does the poem’s structure contribute to that?”)

Using content standards: science and social studies.

A Writing for Understanding instructional sequence is geared toward thoughtful, proficient writing. Proficient writing shows solid understanding of a substantive topic or text, appropriate to the grade level. Sometimes that will mean addressing a particular science or social studies standard. Increasingly, schools around the country are adopting the Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS). Many schools are using the National Curriculum for Social Studies Standards or the C3 Framework for guiding work in social studies. If a teacher is designing a Writing for Understanding sequence in either of these content areas, addressing one of these standards may be part of the design.



You can find ideas and tools for backward planning in *Making it Work: A Handbook for Writing for Understanding Instruction*- available in our online bookstore.