

The Second Pillar: **Substantive Knowledge Matters**



In recent years, knowledge and understanding have found their place in the sun.

State literacy standards could not be more clear about the importance of knowledge and understanding. Deep literacy is not a fragmented accumulation of many disconnected facts; rather, it is the result of consistent, purposeful attention on the part of teachers and curriculum to building a strong and deep base of knowledge over a wide range of subject matter.

So why does knowledge matter so much to literacy overall? Briefly, deep knowledge of substantive content matters for two related reasons. First, it is important because it becomes part of our internal schema—and, once acquired, makes learning content easier, especially from reading. When we know a lot about, say, Jackie Robinson, we have built a mental schema that includes both many facts (e.g., Jackie Robinson was the first black player in major league baseball, in 1947; Branch Rickey teamed up with Jackie to make it happen) and also results in deep understanding (e.g., doing this good work was complicated and demanding, requiring patience and determination on the part of many people in the face of hostility). As we gain new knowledge from reading about, say, Mahatma Gandhi, we can bring this new knowledge to our schema about Jackie Robinson, resulting in a greater understanding of both bodies of knowledge.

In terms of writing specifically, deep substantive knowledge matters because without it, we cannot write clearly, proficiently, and thoughtfully—and maybe not even coherently. Consider a teacher asking students to write a response to the instruction, “Trace the key events that led to the American Civil War”—a classic, typical essay for a middle school American history class.

For students who have only a cursory familiarity with the years and events and sweeping forces before the Civil War, such a task would be impossible. With only superficial facts to use, students would have to resort to a list of these facts—or experience the temptation to analyze those facts from a perspective they would be just guessing at—in short, making it up.

In contrast, students who have substantive knowledge before writing—of Bloody Kansas, of the abolitionist movement, of the growing industrialization of the northern states, of the tariff wars, of the horrors of slavery—are in a position to write this essay thoughtfully. The clear essay that results not only helps students synthesize this particular understanding—it helps build a schema in their heads for what in-depth, thoughtful, accurate writing looks and feels like, no matter its topic.

For some years, the emphasis in the world of literacy instruction has been on skills. At the risk of oversimplifying a bit, many people (including teachers) have believed that reading and writing can be learned by acquiring a set of disembodied skills. This has resulted in a lot of reading instruction reduced to only decoding (at primary levels) and practice with such concepts as “finding the main idea” in comprehension (at upper levels). In writing, the skills approach has emphasized either grammar and syntax (at the sentence level) or abstract, even fill-in-the-blank structures (at the paragraph and essay level). The notion here has been that if students learn abstract skills, they will be able to apply them in any situation requiring reading or writing. In this world view, specific text or topic knowledge does not really matter too much.

It’s important to be clear: skills do matter. When reading, kids need to know how to decode words, and they do indeed need to be able to determine a main idea.

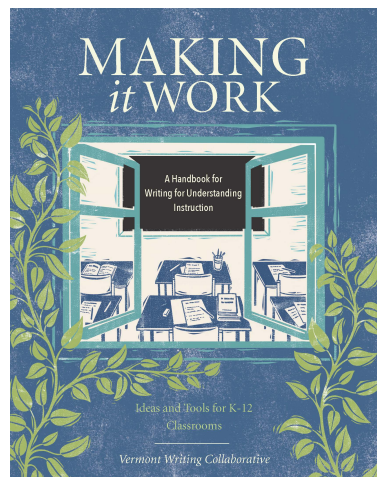
When writing, they do need to use accurate syntax and clear overall structure. In fact, these skills are themselves a form of what we might call knowledge of craft.

However, when teachers try to teach these skills in the absence of strong and worthy and connected content knowledge, the result is not strong readers and strong writers—rather, the result tends to be students who cannot build connected, synthesized meaning and students who cannot write a clear and thoughtful essay (or even, sometimes, a clear and thoughtful paragraph). It might even lead to students thinking that superficial knowledge is the same as deep understanding—and that making material up is okay as long as it sounds good or fills most of the page.

Writing for Understanding rests on the understanding that writing well is ultimately about making meaning thoughtfully and honestly, and communicating that meaning clearly. When a piece of writing is effective, at any grade level, it is a coherent chunk of meaning to both the writer and the reader.

It follows, then, that paying attention to building students' substantive knowledge and understanding—of a poem, an article, a novel, a topic—is a critically important part of writing instruction. And—serendipitously—the miracle of learning kicks in here. When students have written thoughtfully and proficiently about Jackie Robinson and why his contributions to the broader civil rights movement were so significant, they are actually more able to transfer that thinking and writing to a new context, one that they may be just beginning to learn about—say, perhaps, why Mahatma Gandhi's contributions to nonviolence were so significant.

In short, substantive knowledge and understanding matter. Without it, thoughtful writing cannot exist.



You can find ideas and tools for building knowledge and understanding in *Making it Work: A Handbook for Writing for Understanding Instruction*—available in our online bookstore.