

The Vermont Writing Collaborative. *Writing for Understanding*. Vermont: Vermont Writing Collaborative, 2008. Print.

Used with permission by The Vermont Writing Collaborative,  
<http://www.vermontwritingcollaborative.org/>

### Chapter One:

## What is *Writing for Understanding*?

**H**ow do we know when a piece of student writing is effective and when it is not? Do we all agree on what effective student writing is?

In our experience, the good news is that while there is certainly room for variety (in fact, great variety) in writing, and emphasis varies on what matters most, there is general consensus about the basic elements that constitute effective writing. In this chapter we will describe those “elements of effective writing” and their relationship to understanding, then look more closely at the *Writing for Understanding* approach.

To do that, it’s helpful to look at some student writing. What does ineffective writing look like? How is effective writing different?

### **Upper Elementary Informational Writing**

A fifth-grade student wrote the following report about the Vietnam War and put it into her end-of-year writing portfolio. We don’t know where the student got the information for the report;

it may have been from independent reading and research, it may have been from an interview, or it may have been from classroom content.

When the reader first looks at the piece, it looks like it may be an effective piece of writing. The spelling and punctuation seem to be in place, and the writer has used paragraphs in what seems to be an intentional way.

---

*The Longest WAR!!!!*

The longest war was also known as the Vietnam War. Was it a good idea for the U.S.A. to help Southern Vietnam to keep their freedom? Yes, because we fight for freedom not letting people take over people. Two main topics involving this war are freedom and the fact that it was the longest war.

The reason I picked freedom is because I believe in freedom and they should have their own rights, own laws and be two different countries. They did succeed in this task as there is a North Vietnam and a South Vietnam today.

The Vietnam War was the longest war known to history. It started in 1957 and ended in 1975. It ended over two decades ago. There was a lot of blood shed and lives lost in this very long war. Because of the length of this war it is one that is still very much thought of in the minds of many adult Americans. The North and the South fought against each other and we helped South Vietnam.

What I learned about this war, which to me can for any war, is that war can mean you may or may

## Chapter 1: What is *Writing for Understanding*?

---

not have a winner, but no matter what we always help and support the troops. I think war is scary and I don't really like the fact that people just can't be nice and treat one another as everyone should be treated.

---

However, after reading the piece, the reader is confused. The young writer has clearly invested time and energy in the writing. Her proofreading has been careful, and her engagement and interest in the idea of war seem unmistakable.

Yet the piece shows fragmented understanding in some places, actual misunderstanding in others. In fact, there are not two Vietnams today, so the U.S. did not "succeed in this task" as the young writer asserts. Further, the Vietnam War was not the "longest war known to history." What does the writer know about the Vietnam War that she is trying to tell us? What point is she trying to make about the war? In this piece, the writer herself seems to be confused. As a piece of writing, it cannot be called effective.

### **Primary Response to Text**

A second-grade class in an urban school was working with response-to-text writing, a genre that helps students construct and communicate understanding of a literary or informational text. In this case, the class had read the *Catwings* series by Ursula Leguin. Below is one student's response to that reading experience.

---

We read Catwings series by Ursula Leguin. the books are abut cats with wings and there many adventures and troubles they face. two of the mane characters, Jane and alexander are the same and different in many ways.

Jane and alexander are the same in many ways. they both ran away from home to see New things. they both had fears to over come, Jane was so terrified of rats Jane coul only hiss HATE! † scwed me! axander was so afraid of hights that he coul not get doun by himself.

Jane and alexander are also different in many ways. first of all Jane has older siblings and alexander has younger siblings. Second Jane is so tarafide of rats she coud not tock on the other hand alexander is afrade of bul dogs. therd of all Jane was born in ally (a stray cat). and alexander was born in a house. (**not** ally cat).

As you can see Jane and allexander are the same and different in many ways. becous the more diffrenses you have with somewon the more simaler-iteas youl find with them. thow your thinking is all your own your feelings can be the same. Even your werst enemy has many simalaratys.

---

This second grader does not yet have complete, consistent control of capitalization and spelling. However, the writer knows what he is talking about. He has a clear sense of the direction his thoughts are heading, expressed in his controlling idea (“Jane and alexander are the same and different in many ways”). He uses the structure of the piece to develop his ideas, switching paragraphs when his ideas need to shift. The writer knows the book he is writing about. He is able to go back to the text to retrieve specific ideas to develop his focus statement. At the end, the writer reflects on some big ideas, connecting his understanding of the book to his own observations about life. As a piece of writing, this one is effective.



### **Middle-school Persuasive Writing**

The eighth-grade student who wrote this persuasive piece was in an integrated history and language arts class. He had participated in a unit on World War I, including a simulation of a debate that occurred in 1919, in which the United States Senate was trying to decide whether to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and join the newly formed League of Nations. This is the final draft of a speech in which the student, as “senator,” was trying to persuade his constituents that he had made the correct decision in voting that the U.S. join the League.

---

Great people of North Dakota,

I, Senator McCumber, have just participated in a debate regarding whether or not America should sign the Treaty of Versailles, and in doing so, join the League of Nations. The League of Nations is a unified group of nations dedicated to the preservation of peace. The League is designed to deal with international issues, adjudicating differences between countries instead of them going directly to combat.

Now, in the interests of the great state of North Dakota, I voted in favor of the treaty with no reservations. We need a fair treaty to prevent future wars as horrible as the Great War was. After the war, the central powers composed the Treaty of Versailles to create the League of Nations in an attempt to ward off future conflicts. We cannot have another war as horrible as this one. I believe, because of that, that we need a fair treaty, equal to all its members, that will restrict the use of new weapons, and prevent future wars from breaking out.

First, the Treaty and the League will control the use of new weapons. As stated in Article VII, "One of its (the League's) jobs will be to come up with a plan for reducing the number of weapons around the world (arms reduction)." This means that the League will be in charge of weapons issues. This will cause heavily armed countries to demilitarize and make it less possible for war to break out. This is good because heavily armed countries generally end up using those arms in some way.

Another reason why I believe we need to sign the Treaty with no reservations is we need a treaty that is fair to all its members. Reservations (proposed by the League's opponents) would give America too much power within the league, thus allowing America to bend the rules of the League to suit its own will. This would cause unrest in the League, possibly causing America to make enemies. This could lead to another war. The treaty should be as fair as possible.

Yet another reason why I voted for America to sign the treaty is the fact it would prevent future wars from breaking out. The way the League is designed, it would give plenty of time for the League to settle the countries' differences with a fair and equal compromise. If war were to break out, the council members in the League would all help in defending each other, thus ending the war as quickly as possible with as few deaths as possible. The treaty would prevent war from happening or end the fighting as quickly as possible.

Some people say that we shouldn't join the League because we would be intervening in foreign

Chapter 1: What is *Writing for Understanding*?

---

affairs, that it would cause another war. How can you not intervene when 8 million people died in the last war? How can you stand there with a clear conscience when you know you could have prevented all that carnage from ever happening? The League will help countries settle their differences with plenty of time to talk it over. Six months for the countries to listen to the council's advice, and after that another three months before they can mobilize. If we join the League, we will keep anything like the Great War from happening again.

In conclusion, the Treaty of Versailles needs to be signed so the League will be put into affect. The League of Nations will prevent war from breaking out, restrict weapons development and militarism, and keep us from the horrors of another Great War.

Thank you.

---

After reading this piece, the reader has learned something about the League of Nations and some of the arguments both for and against the United States' joining it. The writer takes a clear position, organizes his argument well, and supports his ideas persuasively with real, specific information and ideas (the provisions the League would make for nations to discuss their differences, the urgent need to prevent millions more deaths as happened in the Great War). He knows that use of a counter-argument to bolster one's own position is an important aspect of the critical thinking involved in persuasive writing, and he has done so, skillfully ("Some people say that we shouldn't join the League because we would be intervening in foreign affairs"...). Because of the writer's intentional, informed use of ideas within a clear persuasive structure, the reader comes away with a deeper understanding of the



issue than he had before reading. Like the writer of “The Longest War,” this student is engaged with, even passionate about, his ideas. Unlike “The Longest War,” this piece is clear and informative. As a piece of writing, it is effective.

### **The Elements of Effective Writing**

These pieces of student writing help shed light on the common elements of effective writing, no matter what grade level and genre. What are those common elements?

### **What NAEP Tells Us**

NAEP (The National Assessment of Education Progress) tests students in writing at regular intervals. NAEP is the yardstick against which state writing standards in on-demand writing are measured, so the way NAEP defines proficient writing is important.

In its 2003 report to the nation, NAEP defined fourth graders as “proficient” in on-demand writing when they are “able to produce an organized response...that shows an understanding of the writing task they have been assigned. Their writing should include details that support and develop their main idea, and it should show that these students are aware of the audience they are expected to address” (NAEP 2003, p. 9).

In eighth grade, proficiency builds from the fourth grade description. NAEP wrote that students “should be able to produce a detailed and organized response...that shows an understanding of both the writing task they have been assigned and the audience they are expected to address. Their writing should include precise language and varied sentence structure, and it may show analytical, evaluative, or creative thinking.”

Twelfth-grade writing at the “proficient” level moves on from there. According to NAEP, students who are proficient in on-demand



writing “should be able to produce an effectively organized and fully developed response...that uses analytical, evaluative, or creative thinking. Their writing should include details that support and develop the main idea of the piece, and it should show that these students are able to use precise language and variety in sentence structure to engage the audience they are expected to address.”

In short, NAEP defines proficient writing at any grade level as having a controlling idea, an organizing structure, adequate elaboration, an awareness of audience, appropriate word choice and variety of sentence structure, and, as students mature in age, increasing sophistication of thought.

But NAEP actually implies more than this. In addition, by implication, the thinking communicated in the piece has to be clear and credible. Prompted writing on a national scale cannot depend on specific, common knowledge of content, but it can and does depend on a student’s sense of reasonableness. By implication, then, clarity and reasonableness in thought are part of NAEP’s definition of effective writing. *In other words, effective writing is inseparable from clear thinking.*

### **Others in the Field Agree**

There is widespread agreement in the field among teachers of writing at any grade level about what essentially constitutes successful, effective writing. From the widely used “6 + 1 Traits” to state standards around the country, these elements of successful, effective writing are visible. Different approaches may use different terminology; they may and do group elements of effective writing differently on scoring rubrics. In the end, however, there is consensus on what effective writing is, what might be called the “grandmother of all writing standards.” Effective writing includes:

- *Focus.* To be clear and effective, every piece of writing must have a single focus. This is true for a grocery list and a literary analysis, a letter to Aunt Martha and a PhD thesis. Donald Murray puts this idea elegantly and forcefully in his *The Craft of Revision*. He writes,

First of all, I must answer the question: "What is the one thing I must say?" For years—decades—I fought this, wanting to say two things or three or more. No matter what clever designs I created, what rhetorical tricks I employed, what new approaches I created, they all collapsed in confusion. In writing my column and my textbooks, my poems and my novels, my essays and my articles, I could only say one thing. Everything in the piece of writing had to lead to or away from that single message.

Focus makes sure that one meaning is emphasized, and once that is established everything in the piece of writing must support and develop that meaning.  
(2004)

- *Structure.* Structures can and do vary widely, but if a piece of writing is to be clear and coherent to both writer and reader, it must have a structure, an organizational pattern that makes sense for the focus. Typically, elements of structure include such elements as introductions, transitions, conclusions, the way ideas are chunked, and overall text structure.
- *Development of details, elaboration.* A writer needs to develop and support a focus, regardless of the structure she is using. The development will vary depending on the genre, the particular focus, the audience, the grade level of the student, or any of a number of other factors. Sometimes "details" means, quite simply, enough (accurate) information;

sometimes it means reflection or explaining; sometimes it means the creation of images; sometimes it means examples; the list goes on. Regardless of those specifics, however, students need to use details in a way that is appropriate for the piece of writing.

- *Appropriate voice and tone.* Again, voice and tone vary with the purpose of the piece, the developmental level of the child, and other circumstances. As writers grow in sophistication, they pay more and more attention to the tone of a piece—should it sound formal? Informal? Silly? Moving? Outraged? A writer needs to know how to work with voice and tone effectively.
- *Conventions.* Simply put, the conventions of Standard English matter. Students need to know how to spell and how to correct spelling; they need to know how to work with punctuation, usage, grammatically correct sentences, and the rest of the elements of Standard English, as appropriate to their grade level. Any particular piece of writing needs to reflect this basic mastery of conventions.

What is unspoken in all of these elements, of course, is meaning—the very purpose of the writing itself. A focus exists to direct the *meaning* that the writer is constructing. The structure the writer uses exists to help make that *meaning* clear. Details and information, ideas and images, are all present in an effective piece of writing to make *meaning* more accessible. Voice and tone, even conventions, are not ends in themselves—they are there in the service of *meaning*, first for the writer and then for the reader.

When we look back at the three young writers at the beginning of the chapter, the necessity of these agreed-upon elements seems



very clear. The fifth grader writing about the Vietnam War certainly has voice—she feels strongly about war, and it shows in her writing. She has a sense of structure, and she has reasonable control over conventions for her age. But without a clear central idea to guide her, and without accurate or adequate knowledge, she cannot show understanding or communicate any real meaning.

The second-grade *Catwings* reader and writer, as well as the eighth-grade 1919 senator are both in a better position. Each has constructed and communicated meaning: their pieces both show solid knowledge of their subject (and engagement with it), are built around a controlling idea, and make use of clear structures to develop their thinking and get it across to an audience.

### **Teaching Effective Writing: What's Been Missing?**

With general overall agreement on what effective writing looks like, why has it been so difficult to get most of our students to be able to write effectively?

The fundamental answer to that question, the central argument we make in this book, is that we have not, as teachers, paid enough attention to that unarticulated purpose of all writing: *to construct and communicate meaning*. As a result, we have not adequately addressed the relationship among knowledge, focus, and structure to achieve clarity and genuine understanding, for both writer and reader.

The reasons for that lack of attention are multiple, complex, and historical, and a full discussion of them is beyond the scope of this book. However, in general, gleaned from our own years in the classroom and working with many other teachers, a few reasons seem to stand out.

- *We are uncertain about what it takes to teach students to be able to write effectively.* As former students ourselves, we can



all remember a time when we were struggling with a concept in class—perhaps chemistry, perhaps calculus, perhaps the role of symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter*. We can remember the frustration of asking a teacher to explain something to us that the teacher himself clearly understood, but which he was at a loss to explain to us. For someone who intuitively understands trigonometric functions, or symbolism, it can be baffling to try to break that down or find an illuminating explanation for a student who cannot.

Writing has been a lot like that. As teachers, we somehow figured out how to write, even without being taught (at least, we learned it well enough to get through!). But knowing how to write and teaching someone else how to write are two different things. Most teachers have no models to go by when faced with that challenge of teaching students to write. We have done a lot of *assigning* of writing, but we have not done much *teaching* of writing.

- *We are wary about helping students too much.* Teachers frequently express concern and confusion about their role in student writing. Sometimes, teachers worry that if they help students, they are “writing for them.” In other cases, teachers are actively resistant to what they think of as “intervention” in students’ writing. They sometimes see this as intrusion into a student’s personal life and ideas, or a judgment on students’ culture. In this view, direct instruction can be a form of unethical authoritarianism.
- *We equate effective writing with control over conventions.* Many of us who are teachers today remember when writing really was all about spelling and a plethora of comma rules. We remember getting papers back with a vast number of red

marks (always red!), indicating where a comma was needed, an infinitive had been split, or a participle dangled. With such an emphasis on conventions, there was often little attention given to what the writer was actually trying to say.

- *We equate effective writing with strong voice.* Writing is a tool for expression, often personal expression. Sometimes, that “personal voice” has been so highly valued that it mattered more than anything else—more than organization, more than clarity, more than thoughtfulness. As long as writing showed how the writer really felt about something, it was sometimes assumed to be effective writing.
- *We equate effective writing with use of the writing process.* The writing process was developed over the past thirty-plus years as a reflection of the reality of how “real writers” write. It has been profoundly useful, and influential, in guiding the way many schools, probably most schools, organize their writing programs.

Sometimes, however, “using the writing process” has become a goal in itself. There has been such emphasis on the process that there has sometimes been insufficient emphasis on the product, other than the requirement that it reflect the student’s voice.
- *We overlook the relationship between oral and written language.* It is true that many professional writers, or skilled writers in general, do not need to “talk” their ideas before writing. Indeed, skilled writers often point out that writing is, for them, often an act of self-discovery—that in the act of writing, they are able to synthesize their ideas in ways they had not before writing.

However, these are people who often, probably usually, already have a deep knowledge of what they are writing about and a depth of vocabulary to bring to the task. For students who struggle with writing, this is rarely the case. Often, these struggling students have limited knowledge in particular and limited language in general. For them, conversation with other people about what they will write, especially guided conversation, is a critical step in building meaning *before* writing. It is a step which has frequently been omitted in the writing classroom.

- *We disagree over the role of structures.* Some teachers, particularly those who work largely with expository writing, have placed a great deal of importance on the structures of writing—sometimes so much that the structure becomes the most important feature of the writing. Other teachers, however, have been suspicious of giving students any specific structures. They feel that structures (like the five-paragraph essay) are inherently “formulaic” and ultimately limit a student’s own inventiveness and creativity. Out of this fear, teachers have sometimes refrained from giving students any structures at all to follow, trusting that they will come up with a structure that works for what they are trying to say.

For students who have read a lot of expository text and have unconsciously internalized some of those text structures, this minimalist approach has sometimes been successful. Students without this type of prior knowledge and unconscious understanding, on the other hand, have often floundered as they have tried to build a piece of writing with no internal road maps to follow.



- *We equate “engaged, authentic” writing with writing about one’s own personal experiences and/or prior knowledge.* It has long been a truism that one should write about what one knows; all writers know this, all teachers of writing or teachers who use writing in their classes know this. This truism has often led, however, to the idea that one should write about only what one already knows, or at the very least decide for oneself about what to learn and write.

One of the unintended consequences of this assumption has been that teachers have frequently not paid sufficient attention to how students actually acquired the knowledge about which they would write. In writing from personal experience, the knowledge could be assumed; after all, the knowledge was the writer’s own life events or ideas or reflections.

Because of this emphasis, *the corollary to “writing about what you know” has frequently not been articulated—that you should “know about what you write.” As a result, deliberate, intentional planning for knowledge building has not often been a part of the writing teacher’s approach.*

### **Writing for Understanding**

*Writing for Understanding* is an approach that recognizes (like NAEP and others) that *at the heart of effective writing, by any accepted definition, is the building of meaning and expression so that others can follow the writer’s thinking.* Therefore, *Writing for Understanding* postulates 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 elements are:



## Chapter 1: What is *Writing for Understanding*?

---

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

In this approach, then, teacher “backward 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 instruction that will help the students to gain access to each one of those elements.

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

---

### Planning Components of *Writing for Understanding*



#### **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 develop?

How will I plan backward 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 and writing in a specific, appropriate, manageable way?



### **Building and Processing Working Knowledge**

How will I make sure that students know enough about this subject by the end to actually be able to write about it? How will I make sure they know about the craft of writing?



- 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 in order to build knowledge/understanding?
- 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 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 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?

## Chapter 1: What is *Writing for Understanding*?

---

- What tools will they need?
- What concepts of craft will they need to understand and use in their writing?



### **Writing**

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

- Again, 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 that understanding?

---

After planning and instruction that addresses these components, the teacher looks closely at the resulting student work. What did they get? What did they not get? Where is the understanding strong—where is it weak? What transferable writing tools have the students gotten from this that they'll be able to apply more independently next time—and what transferable writing tools still need more work?

After that—more planning. Using information gained from the first pieces of writing, the teacher plans the next unit of instruction that will include writing. Working with the idea of a “gradual release of responsibility,” the teacher decides where students still need very direct guidance and instruction, where a little less.

### **Writing for Understanding and Independence:**

#### **What's the Relationship?**

Ultimately, the teacher is planning so that, both now and down the road, students will show solid understanding of their subject in effective writing. The *Writing for Understanding* approach is

based on the idea that students *will come to expect to understand what they are talking about, and will expect to be able to write clearly about it*. It is about giving them an approach and transferable tools, skills, and strategies—not rigid structures or some sort of lockstep procedure—for seeking and building and expressing that understanding in writing.

### Writing as a Set of “Transfer” Skills

Several years ago, when we had begun to be highly intentional about *Writing for Understanding* instruction with our elementary- and middle-school students, we happened to run into one of our former students, now a ninth grader in high school. She had been a motivated, strong student, so when we asked her how high school was going, we were taken aback by her answer.

She frowned. “Well,” she said, “I just had to write a history paper that was hard. At first I couldn’t really do it.”

This was distressing to hear. “Why not?” we asked her. “What didn’t you know how to do?”

“Oh, I knew *how*,” she replied without hesitation. “I just didn’t know *enough*. I didn’t, like, understand the stuff. So I had to do that first. Then I could write it okay.”

“Good,” we said. “Good for you.” We could not have asked for more (Hawkins 2006).

This ninth grader had come to a place in her writing that we wish for all our students. She had written many essays, reflections, research papers, and narratives in which she had constructed real meaning, real understanding. She had learned how to express that



understanding clearly in focused, organized, effective writing. When she read her own writing back to herself, it made sense.

*Making sense* in writing was now an expectation in her head. When faced with a writing task as a high school student for which she was not yet prepared—when she “didn’t, like, understand the stuff”—she knew what she had to do. And, in her own words, once she had arrived at a greater depth of knowledge and understanding, she had the writing skills to call on so that she “could write it okay.”

What is it that we want our students to be able to do with writing? What does “being a writer” look like? If genuine mastery of a complex ability like writing means being able to *transfer that ability to new situations*, what skills and habits of mind must the successful writer develop?

In *Writing for Understanding*, we have identified this critical set of skills and habits of mind:

**Control over elements of written expression.** First, writers who are comfortable in a new writing situation, with new demands, are familiar with and have appropriate control over elements of written expression. Even young writers in the early grades use skills and craft. As they get older, their tools become more sophisticated, but regardless of the age, a student who is a writer is able to use skills and craft flexibly and appropriately. These include the elements of effective writing we read about earlier, described by NAEP and agreed upon by the writing community everywhere.

**Habits of mind.** In addition, writers who are comfortable facing a new writing challenge have certain habits of mind. How students approach the writing task (or any task) matters. Teachers have long known from empirical experience that a student’s attitude towards learning, as well as his or her orientation to learning, make a huge difference in how well or how poorly that child learns. In writing,

our experience has shown us that two habits of mind, in particular, make a difference in how well students transfer their learning to new, more independent writing tasks.

The first is *expectation of meaning*. When students have written many pieces over the years that make sense and reveal understanding, then they come to expect all of their writing to reflect similar sense and understanding. They do not settle for “sort of” getting it. Students who are accustomed to meaning-making and understanding in writing know from experience when they understand a subject well enough to proceed with the writing. And they know when they need to help themselves in some way, perhaps by re-reading, by gathering more information, or by further discussion.

The second is being “*learning oriented*.” This is an approach to learning, or in this case to writing, whereby students view a writing challenge as a problem to be solved, as opposed to a set task which has a solution that is either right or wrong (National Research Council, 2000). In our experience, students of any age who transfer successfully, in writing, view the writing challenge as one which they are capable of meeting. They are willing to persist to some degree until they have, if you will, solved the problem. Being learning oriented in writing involves an attitude of competence, a willingness to persist flexibly, and an adequate ability to self-monitor one’s thinking and writing.

In our experience, these skills and habits do not usually spring up spontaneously in students, especially in struggling students. Rather, *they develop as a result of many successful experiences with thinking and writing*. As we break down the elements of backward designed planning that make up the *Writing for Understanding* approach in the following chapters, it will become easy to see how students become more and more able to transfer their learning about writing in both of these areas.

### **Towards Independence: The Role of Embedded Instruction in Reading**

In the world of reading instruction, the last few years have seen a surge of interest in how to help students comprehend what they read. Recognizing that reading comprehension is, in fact, what reading actually is, teachers have searched for ways to help students become able readers. They have searched for ways to help students become readers who can navigate many kinds of text and who have the tools, or strategies, to make meaning out of that text, even when the text is difficult.

As those strategies have been identified and broken down into skills (activating prior knowledge, finding the main idea, questioning, predicting, and the like), there has sometimes been a tendency to expect students to abstract these skills very quickly. If we give students lots of practice in “finding the main idea,” the reasoning sometimes goes, they will be able to transfer that skill to, say, reading a primary source document like *The Federalist* or the description of a set of symptoms for a complicated disease. If we do several exercises with predicting, we hope, students will be able to transfer this abstract skill to reading *Crime and Punishment*, or their science textbook, or the consumer report on the recall for their car, or a presidential candidate’s position on protecting the environment.

In fact, however, giving students fragmented “practice” in reading strategies does not help students very much. They do not become more capable readers.

Over the past few years, researchers have made some discoveries and developed some insights into learning and the ability to transfer knowledge to new situations—in short, to solve new problems. It does not come from being a sort of generic “good thinker” or a “good problem solver.” Rather, it appears to grow from a deep familiarity with a particular body of knowledge. Only when people have that



deep knowledge base are they able to form general principles and concepts, which they are then able to transfer to new situations and new demands (National Academy of Sciences, 2000).

In the world of reading instruction, this understanding about learning means that students are far more likely to become capable, strategic readers if they are learning reading strategies while in the process of acquiring deep content knowledge. The National Reading Panel states that “when the strategy instruction is fully embedded in in-depth learning of content, the strategies are learned to a high level of competence” (Rand Reading Study Group 2002). In other words, students use reading strategies to build specific content, or domain, knowledge and understanding. When they have repeated, successful experiences with this, they are far more likely to abstract those strategies and apply them independently to new situations.

Building on this insight, the 2004 *Reading Next* report states that, if we are serious about helping our struggling adolescent readers with reading comprehension, one of the essential components of the curriculum is that instructional reading strategies be embedded in content area instruction (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004).

### **Towards Independence: The Role of Embedded Instruction in Writing**

We have found that the need to teach skills by embedding the learning in the deep consideration of content is just as true for writing as for reading, perhaps even more so. Students will not learn to write by being taught abstracted elements like “details” or “voice.” Even if instruction is broken down into smaller components (“introduction” or “transitions” or “show, not tell” craft lessons), students cannot and will not become effective writers if this kind of instruction occurs in a fragmented or decontextualized state. Writing absolutely needs these and other skills, but it is much more



---

Chapter 1: What is *Writing for Understanding*?

---

than a set of separate skills. Just as students will not learn to read capably across a wide range of texts and in a wide range of situations if they are given only abstracted skill lessons in the absence of deep, coherent content consideration, so they will not learn to write thoughtfully if they are taught only discrete, abstracted skills in the absence of deep, coherent content knowledge. In our experience, students need to be helped, over and over again, to experience what it is to write thoughtfully, clearly, and with solid understanding.

Just how much is “over and over again”? How much practice do students really need—all students, not just the advantaged—if they are going to be competent, independent writers at their grade level—or as adults? And what kind of practice?

There is no easy, “one quantity” answer to this, of course. Perhaps the best way to think of it is in terms of other skills that take practice. A basketball player does not expect to dribble expertly or make great lay-ups on the basis of a few gym classes or sessions on the neighborhood playground. A piano player does not expect to be able to play Mozart’s “Minuet in G” or a Scott Joplin rag after a few runs through the sheet music. A parent does not want his son or daughter getting behind the wheel of a car after a single highway experience. Developing competence in any of these fields requires much practice.

Further, the practice is not limited to a series of drills or skills sessions, though it surely includes that. Rather, the young basketball player has many experiences with whole games, with another team opposing his and the opportunity—in fact the necessity—to think on his feet, to monitor what he is doing, and to adjust as he goes. He is building meaning of the game. The piano player, even at the most basic level, does not just play scales or finger exercises, though those surely matter. Instead, he plays whole pieces frequently—first with one hand, then with two, then with chords—building meaning of the music. The young driver practices putting in the clutch,

operating the hand signals, and parallel parking with a sawhorse, but she also drives on the road, with other drivers, in real traffic—building those skills within the overall context of actually driving. In each case, the learner is putting discrete skills to work flexibly, as needed, to build meaning.

*Writing for Understanding* is built on these principles. Knowing what they want students to be able to do in the end—create written products that make sense and convey meaning to both writer and reader—teachers plan backward so that students have plenty of knowledge and guidance and practice in getting there, including plenty of opportunity to write whole pieces that make sense. Their instruction takes into account the need for students—all students—to expect to understand what they are writing about and to have tools of written expression to demonstrate and develop that understanding.

Below is an example of a social studies teacher’s backward planning for her upper-elementary students. The students will be writing about the Christmas Truce of World War One, an event in which both German and British soldiers all up and down the trenches of the Western Front put down their guns and treated each other like brothers.

---

### Sample of Writing for Understanding

#### Plan: *The Christmas Truce*



#### Central Ideas

*Content:* People’s beliefs can influence their behavior in extraordinary ways.

*Writing:* To write effectively in response to text, we choose evidence from the text thoughtfully and explain its relationship to the focus of the writing.



**Focusing Question**

How did the arrival of Christmas Eve affect the fighting in the trenches of the Western Front in December, 1914? Why?



**Building and Processing Working Knowledge**

In order to gain sufficient knowledge to be able to address the focusing question, students will have these learning experiences:



- use atlases to identify countries involved in WWI
- map the Western Front, share photographs of no-man's-land between trenches
- listen to an article on The Christmas Truce read aloud to them
- partner-read the article
- confront focusing question, "How did the arrival of Christmas Eve affect the fighting in the trenches of the Western Front in December, 1914?"
- as a group, develop focus statement in response to question, something like "The arrival of Christmas Eve caused the troops on both sides to treat each other with friendship and good will." This focus statement will serve as the controlling idea for the writing.
- in pairs, go back to text, paraphrase evidence from text to support focus, put on graphic organizer note templates (visible thinking)
- in pairs, share evidence on note templates, discuss as we go



**Structure**

- supply students with one model paragraph which includes context, paraphrased evidence from notes,

explanation relating evidence back to focus; work with model paragraph in discussion

- remind students of structure they have already used in writing responses to text (summary intro, focus, body paragraphs with supporting evidence, conclusion)



**Writing**

- have students write summary introductions in class, share before going on
- continue writing in class, stopping to share and get feedback on body paragraphs with evidence and revise along the way
- stop for discussion again before writing conclusion so all students have a chance to process the “so what” conclusion (“So, what does this event show about the power of belief systems to influence people’s behavior?”)

---

In the next chapters, we will take a closer look at each of the planning and instructional stages in *Writing for Understanding*.



---

**TO SUMMARIZE....**

---

- There is widespread agreement on the elements of effective writing. These include establishing a purpose and focus, developing a structure, including details and development, and using conventions accurately.
- Even though there is an implicit recognition of the role of knowledge and understanding in effective writing, the effort to ensure that students develop that knowledge has often been overlooked as part of writing instruction. Just as it is important for students to write about what they know, it is also important for them to know about what they write. *Writing for Understanding* builds this critical element of planning for content understanding into the teacher's backward design planning.
- When writing instruction is a part of content instruction (as it is in reading instruction), students are more likely to internalize the lessons of good writing and ultimately become able to transfer those writing skills and habits of mind to new situations.
- Students who have frequent experience with creating writing that shows understanding are more likely to expect to build understanding when they write in new situations.