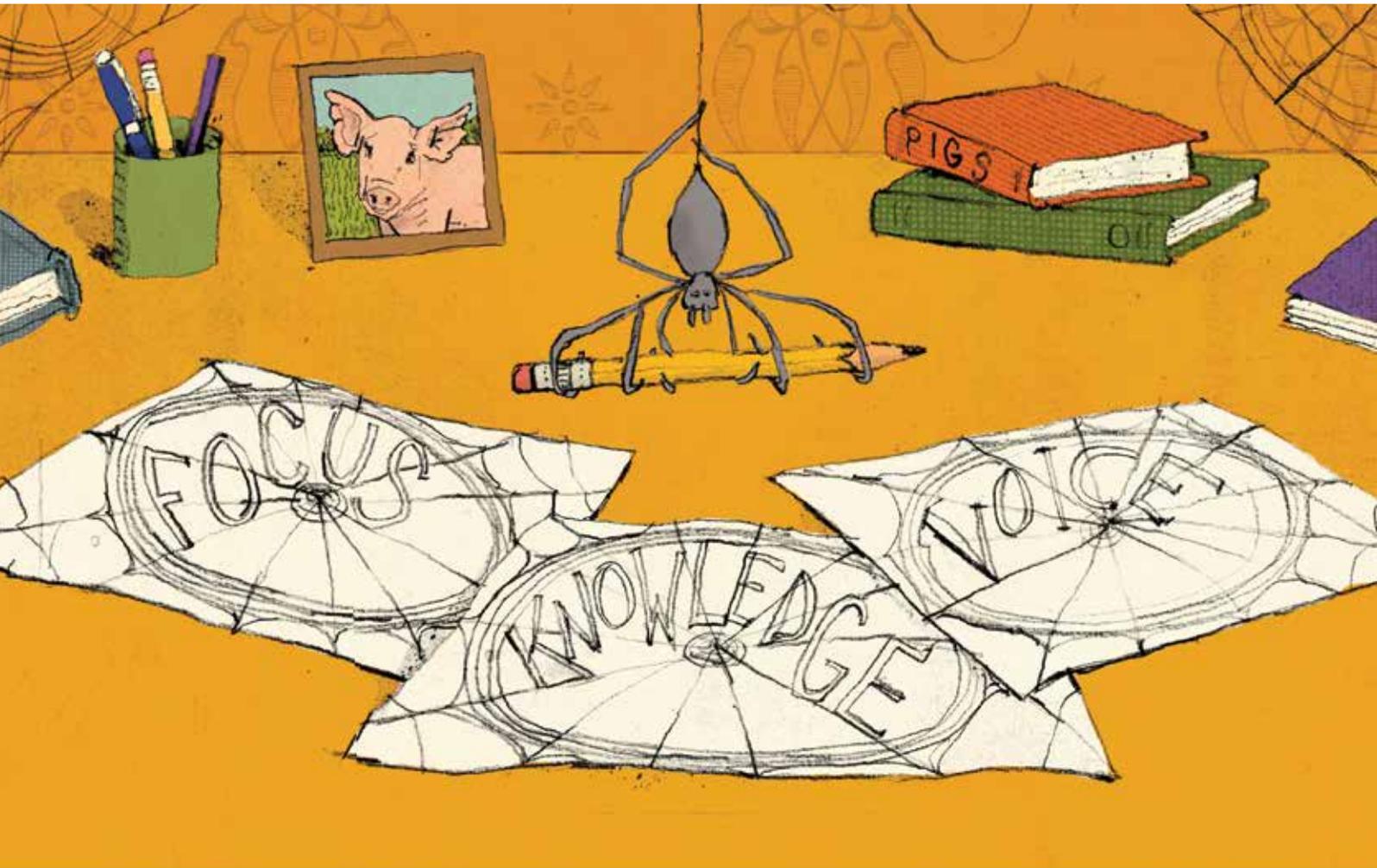


# A Powerful Tool

## Writing Based on Knowledge and Understanding



BY THE VERMONT WRITING COLLABORATIVE\*

It had been a memorable summer on the Zuckerman farm. Wilbur the pig had spent his day eating the best slops the farm had to offer. The goslings had hatched. Best of all, Charlotte the gray barn spider had made friends with him and filled his days with friendship and happiness. Charlotte and Wilbur had gotten to know each other well. Each knew what the other liked to eat, how the other thought, and what the other cared about.

So when Wilbur learned that Mr. Zuckerman planned to turn him into bacon, Charlotte went into action. It was imperative that Mr. Zuckerman understand what she knew to be the truth

*Founded by public school teachers Eloise Ginty, Joanna Hawkins, Karen Kurzman, Diana Leddy, and Jane Miller, the Vermont Writing Collaborative is a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping all students become powerful thinkers, readers, and writers. This article is adapted from their book *Writing for Understanding: Using Backward Design to Help All Students Write Effectively* (Vermont Writing Collaborative, 2008).*

about Wilbur. (In fact, she needed to *persuade* Mr. Zuckerman of her point of view—Charlotte was nothing if not aware of her audience!)

She thought and thought, and she came up with a plan.

She wrote. Choosing her words with great care, using all the technical skill she could muster, Charlotte turned her web into a thing of meaning—a clear and powerful expression of the essential truth about her friend Wilbur.

“Some pig!”

Charlotte, the clever spider in E. B. White’s immortal classic *Charlotte’s Web*, was not writing because she needed to pick an interesting topic and she had to come up with something to say. She did not write a first draft to show she knew how to use a process.

Nor was Charlotte writing from a sketchy knowledge base. She had not spent 10 minutes hastily researching facts about pigs. She had spent the summer with Wilbur; she knew him well. From that

\*Eloise Ginty, Joanna Hawkins, Karen Kurzman, Diana Leddy, and Jane Miller.

deep understanding had grown a very personal connection. Wilbur was Charlotte's friend. Charlotte's writing saved his life.

Writing is not always about life and death, but in the end, writing is always about meaning. From the efficiently constructed grocery list, to the first-grader's tribute to his mother on Mother's Day, to the fourth-grade essay on how chickadees survive in the winter, to the eulogy composed for a dear friend, to the investigation of the effects of global warming on polar bears, a piece of writing has meaning for the writer—and for the reader. Such writing can only come from knowledge and understanding.

Charlotte was right. Writing matters, for all kinds of reasons. Today, in an era when people are deluged with information and ideas, the ability to make sense of them and to express that understanding in coherent writing is a critical skill.

As Charlotte knew, writing is not easy. Because it is not pas-

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sive but active, not receptive but generative, it often involves hard mental work. *This is precisely what makes it a powerful tool to put into the hands of students.*

### Looking Back: The Writing Process

Teaching students to write effectively is challenging. The National Writing Project (NWP) has contributed enormously and consistently to the effort to help teachers help students learn to write.\* In the early 1970s, researchers such as Donald Graves and Janet Emig began studying the ways writers go about the task of thinking and producing polished writing. The NWP's book *Because Writing Matters* further chronicles the development of the field of composition pedagogy as well as the understanding of writing as a process, not only a product.<sup>1</sup>

This work evolved into what has become known to teachers as the *writing process*, an approach that has stressed the importance of stages in writing: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing.<sup>†</sup> Over the past 30-plus years, many teachers and schools have instituted various incarnations of process writing, often in the form of writing workshops.

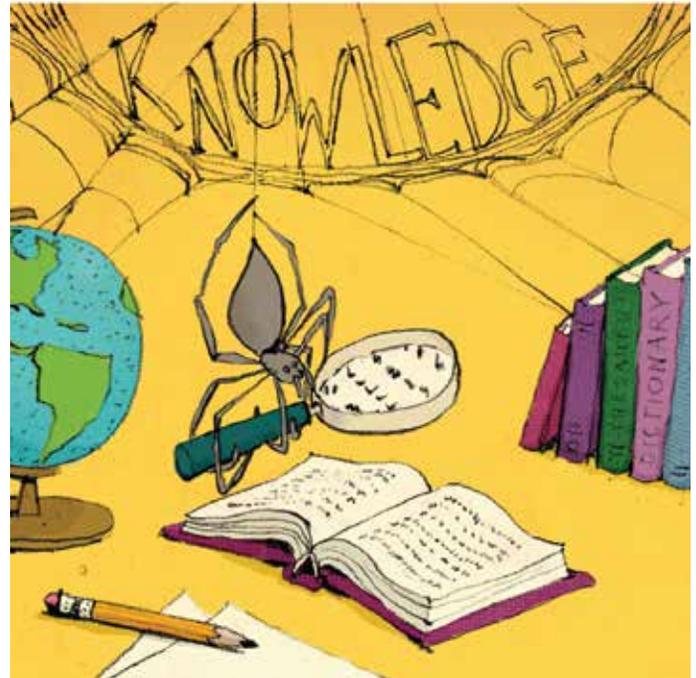
However, more than 30 years since the writing process

\*The National Writing Project focuses the knowledge, expertise, and leadership of educators on sustained efforts to improve writing and learning for all students. For more about NWP, visit [www.nwp.org](http://www.nwp.org).

<sup>†</sup>For more on the challenge of helping students write, see "Writing about Writing" in the Summer 2014 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/summer2014/waddell](http://www.aft.org/ae/summer2014/waddell).

approach began to enter classrooms, writing is still a challenge for students, and teachers struggle to find the best ways to help them. The majority of eighth-grade students have not yet reached the proficient level, and in most states the level of proficiency in writing is low to very low.<sup>2</sup>

In the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in writing (the most recent year with comparable data), the national percentage of students scoring at the "proficient and above" level was virtually unchanged from the 2002 assessment. A bit of good news is that two of the three states with the highest percentage of proficient students (Connecticut and New Jersey) had a slight majority of their students scoring in the "pro-



ficient and above" range, but the national percentages showed little growth.

The need for help for teachers is clear: teaching the writing process, as we have understood it, is not enough.

### What Works?

Charlotte was onto something. She knew Wilbur well before she set to work on writing in her web, and she worked hard on her web missives. From Charlotte, we learn that writing depends on knowledge, it requires careful attention to structure, and it takes time.

Interestingly, NAEP agrees. In 1998, it asked the Educational Testing Service (ETS) and the National Writing Project to study a sample of classrooms where more than two-thirds of the students had strong achievement on the fourth- and eighth-grade NAEP. NAEP wanted to know what kinds of classroom assignments produced strong writers. They found that some degree of personal choice in writing matters, as does audience—both staples of "process writing."

But they also found that other things matter, including:

- **Thinking.** Students need to be given the opportunity to reflect

on their knowledge, to analyze information, to synthesize. They need questions and assignments that ask them to “transform the information from the reading material in order to complete the writing assignment”<sup>3</sup>—in other words, to construct real meaning.

- **A framework for organizing and developing ideas.** Students do not just figure out how to organize their ideas. They need assignments that show them the way—if not literally mapping it, then at least pointing in a familiar direction.
- **Frequent opportunities to write.** A 2002 report on National Writing Project classrooms in five states added another significant factor that matters: time. It found that “NWP teachers spend far more time on writing instruction than most fourth-grade teachers across the country. Eighty-three percent of NWP classroom teachers ... spent more than ninety minutes per week on writing activities, compared with just 31 percent of fourth-grade teachers nationally.”<sup>4</sup>

This does *not* mean that all National Writing Project classrooms produce more effective writers.<sup>5</sup> It does, however, indicate a correlation between *how much* students write and how well and thoughtfully they write.

Taken together, these reports seem to point to what components are needed to help all students write effectively. What are they?

### The vital role of knowledge

First, remember that the ETS report to NAEP emphasized the value of a thoughtful question to drive student writing, with the clear message that writing is about thinking. So far, so good.

We find, however, that the “thoughtful question,” by itself, is not enough to produce effective writing. Our work has convinced us that, even with a thoughtful question, many students fail when they write. This failure occurs not because they don’t have a thoughtful question, but *because they don’t have sufficient knowledge in the first place.*

It seems clear, then, that it is up to teachers to provide activities and experiences that give students knowledge and help them construct meaning from that knowledge. If writing is about making meaning, then ensuring students have the raw materials—information, knowledge, understanding—is fundamentally important. Students cannot think deeply—or at all—about knowledge that they do not have.

### The role of structure

Second, the ETS report also referred to the importance of scaffolding for structure for students. The implication is that students need a clear and specific sense of direction when they write, to help them understand how to put the piece of writing together.

Again, however, we find that the minimal level of scaffolding recommended in the ETS report is not sufficient when students are actively learning to write. A student cannot invent a structure she has never seen before. She cannot intuit the concept of “thesis statement” if she has never worked to develop one.

In fact, our work has shown us that structures are more than tools for organizing ideas. Forms and structures in writing are not merely techniques to be learned, they are techniques *for* learning. The act and process of selecting, ordering, and developing ideas pushes students to find meaning and to construct

understanding as they write.

We have found that when we introduce students, from primary grades through high school, to a variety of flexible structures and give them guided practice in using them, they become able to “own” those structures in their own thinking. Those structures become a *vehicle for thinking*. Students are able to use them to make meaning in their own minds and on paper, meaning that is clear to both the writer and the reader.

The great caveat here with structure, of course, is this: *structures are not a substitute for knowledge*. Flexible structures do indeed give students a vehicle for thinking—as long as they have something of substance to think about.

Students need a clear and specific sense of direction when they write, to help them understand how to put the piece of writing together.

### “Writing for Understanding” Works

Over many years of work with students of all ages and abilities, we have developed an approach that builds our findings into the writing process: writing for understanding.

Based on the idea that writing is ultimately about meaning, this approach places a premium on understanding. Students need to understand the ideas with which they are working. They also need to understand the structures and writing elements they are using. And they need all this not just for this particular writing task; they also need it for transfer, so that they can apply it to other thinking and writing tasks down the road.

Our approach has three premises. The first is backward design. We are indebted to the “understanding by design” work of Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe.<sup>6</sup> We base our approach on the idea that teachers plan best when they plan backward for instruction, starting by identifying the understandings they want students to communicate in writing by the end of the unit, then planning backward for specific instruction, in both content knowledge and writing structures and craft, so that all students are able to produce a solid, thoughtful piece of writing at the end.

The second premise is an emphasis on understanding. In order to write effectively, students require two types of understanding. First, we have seen students struggle with writing for many reasons, but one of the most frequent and least addressed is knowledge and understanding of content: *too often, students do not know what they are talking about.* An essential part of backward

design planning, then, involves planning for students to develop deep content knowledge.

It also includes understanding of writing craft, including structure. Our work is geared toward students being able to write not just about the ideas in a particular piece, but as a transferrable skill. It is geared toward students gaining conceptual and structural knowledge of elements of writing, standards, and genres of writing—expressive and informational/expository. We want students to internalize and increasingly “own” the concept of introduction, of transitions, of images, of all those elements it takes to write well, so later they can transfer them to new writing situations.

The third premise is direct instruction. We have all seen students benefit from direct instruction (and then lots of guided practice) in many ways: riding a bike, making a foul shot, parallel parking, being polite to siblings. Our approach incorporates direct instruction, as needed, into every aspect of an instructional unit, so that by the

## At the heart of effective writing is the building of meaning and expression so that others can follow the writer’s thinking.

end, students have a piece of writing that is clearly structured, well developed, and thoughtful—and a set of skills that are on their way to being transferable.

This direct instruction includes frequent, built-in oral processing. It is true that sophisticated writers can sometimes write more effectively than they can speak. For student writers, however, we find that this is rarely true. Students cannot write what they cannot speak. This is as true for high school students as it is for first-graders.

Oral processing before writing and during writing, then, is a fundamental aspect of writing for understanding. It allows students to work out their ideas in guided conversation before they have to work with them in writing.

### Effective Writing

How do we know when a piece of student writing is effective? Do we all agree on what effective student writing is?

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, in our experience, there is general consensus about the basic elements that constitute effective writing:

- **Focus.** 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 doctoral thesis.
- **Organization.** While structures can and do vary widely, a

piece of writing must have a structure—an organizational pattern that makes sense for the focus. Typically, elements of structure include 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 (accurately!), 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, and any of a number of other factors.
- **Appropriate voice and tone.** These 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, and 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 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.

### Teacher Planning for Effective Writing

The “writing for understanding” approach 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. As previously discussed, we know that students need to be able to incorporate certain elements into their writing for it to meet this definition.

In this approach, then, the teacher’s backward planning becomes critically important. Before sitting down to write, the student must have all the above elements in place—especially the first three. The teacher, therefore, needs to plan for instruction that will help the students gain access to each one of those elements. (For more on the planning components of such instruction, see the box on page 38).

After planning and instruction, the teacher looks closely at the resulting work of students. 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 comes 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 and where they need a little less.

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

## Moving toward Independence

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 and strategies to make meaning out of that text, even when the text is difficult.



As those strategies are identified and broken down into skills (activating prior knowledge, finding the main idea, questioning, predicting, and the like), there is sometimes 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 Papers* 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 Reports* article 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.

Researchers have discovered that the ability to transfer knowledge to new situations—in short, to solve new problems—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 can then transfer to new situations and new demands.<sup>7</sup>

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.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, students use reading strategies to build specific content, or domain, knowledge and understanding. When they have many successful experiences with these strategies, 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 com-

Students are far more likely to become capable readers if they learn reading strategies while acquiring deep content knowledge.

ponents of the curriculum is that instructional reading strategies be embedded in content-area instruction.<sup>9</sup>

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 way. Writing absolutely needs these and other skills, but it is much more 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 without deep, coherent content consideration, 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.

\*For more on why reading comprehension depends largely on knowledge, see the Spring 2006 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/spring2006](http://www.aft.org/ae/spring2006).

Just how much is “over and over again”? How much practice do students really need, and what kind?

There is no easy 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 layups 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 with 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. 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—produce writing that makes sense and conveys 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 all students to understand what they are writing about and to have tools of written expression to demonstrate and develop that understanding.

E. B. White ends *Charlotte’s Web* with this reflection on Charlotte through the eyes of her good friend, Wilbur—the pig whose life was saved by her writing.

“Wilbur never forgot Charlotte. ... She was in a class by herself. It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both.”

Indeed. Like Wilbur, we are lucky to be still learning from this remarkable spider! □

## Endnotes

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8. Catherine E. Snow, *Reading for Understanding: Toward an R&D Program in Reading Comprehension* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2002), 39.
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# 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?
- 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?