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Spotlight on...Writing for Understanding

Have you ever had the experience of leading students through a writing project only to gather their polished pieces of writing and discover that your students really don't have much understanding of the topics about which they were writing? Sure, the writing might present a well-organized structure, be free of grammatical and mechanical errors and even cite sources, but the message communicated through the writing is weak, exposing minimal understanding and even misunderstanding of the content. This realization is what led Vermont Writing Collaborative researchers to take a closer look at what writing really is all about and how intentionally planned instruction can support students in using writing as a vehicle for building understanding.

As Joey Hawkins, a founding member of the Vermont Writing Collaborative, explains, "Students need to know what they are talking about when they write. Writing can be thought of as construction and communication of meaning about content that matters. Whether the content is personal or academic, writing is a powerful, synthesizing experience that allows, even forces, the thinker/writer to make connections among ideas, to sort and develop and to finally create a coherent chunk of meaning out of a body of ideas and/or experiences" (Hawkins, 2006). Effective writing requires not only knowledge of writing modes and mechanics, but also strong understanding of content.

To tackle the challenge of insuring that writing is a process of constructing meaning, the Vermont Writing Collaborative has developed an approach to content writing they call *Writing for Understanding*. The approach follows a "backwards design" process similar to the *Understanding by Design* model (McTighe and Wiggins, 1999). The following table summarizes the steps in the *Writing for Understanding* approach.

Talking is a hydrant in the yard and writing is a faucet upstairs in the house. Opening the first takes the pressure off the second.

~Robert Frost



Start writing, no matter what. The water does not flow until the faucet is turned on.

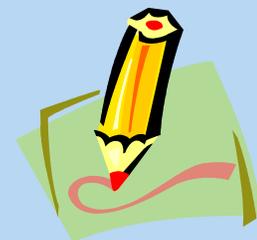
~Louis L'Amour

Steps	Explanations and Guiding Questions
Determine the Enduring Understanding(s)/ Big Idea(s)	<p>The approach begins by identifying Enduring Understandings or Big Ideas that will serve as the foundation for study in the unit.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What understanding about the content will this writing show? • What understanding about the craft of writing should it show?
Establish an Essential Focusing Question	<p>Select an essential question that will guide the study and be answered by the final piece of writing.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What question will I pose so that students can see how to approach this work in a specific, appropriate and manageable way?
Build Working Knowledge	<p>Instructional activities are structured to build students' working knowledge of the Big Idea. This includes teaching specific vocabulary and concepts, building knowledge through a variety of instructional activities, engaging in close reading about the topic and incorporating intentional use of collaborative conversations about the content.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will students gain the content knowledge they need to be able to work with this?
Process the Knowledge	<p>Provide students with opportunities to process the information they have collected and synthesize it in meaningful ways. This is paramount to being able to write effectively to answer the essential question. Conversation and note taking in a guided setting sets students up to write.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will students select from and analyze the knowledge through the lens of the Essential Focusing Question? • How will they capture the knowledge in notes so that they can use the ideas in their writing?
Select a Structure	<p>Intentional instruction about appropriate structures to use, including models, is</p>



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	<p>provided to students.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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?
Engage in a Writing Process	<p>Once students have built deep knowledge of the topic, helpful notes and a clear sense of structure, they are ready to draft, confer and revise to develop polished pieces that communicate understanding.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How will students use a writing process (which includes drafting, conferring, revising, etc.) so that their final writing is clearly focused, organized and developed to show understanding of the Big Idea?

Resources to support educators in utilizing the Writing for Understanding process can be found in the Online Resources and Professional Text sections below.

Online Resources

The following online resources provide tools for helping students use writing as a tool for building understanding.

[In Common](#)

In Common provides a range of examples of student work aligned to Maine’s writing standards drawn directly from K-12 classrooms across the country. Student writing samples demonstrate how writing skills can progress as students gain fluency across the three major types of writing: argument/opinion writing, informative/explanatory writing, and narrative writing. Protocols provided help educators analyze various aspects of the writing samples.

[Writing to Learn \(Teaching Channel\)](#)

In this video, a high school English teacher shares how and why she incorporates writing to learn opportunities into her instruction.

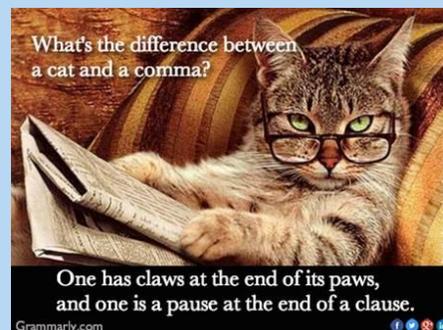
[Writing to Learn Exercises \(Teaching Channel\)](#)

This resource provides several video clips showing ways in writing to learn opportunities can be incorporated in instruction.



Ideas are like rabbits. You get a couple and learn how to handle them, and pretty soon you have a dozen.

~John Steinbeck



Professional Texts

Here are two professional texts that connect to the Writing for Understanding approach.

Writing for Understanding: Using Backward Design to Help All Students Write Effectively

Joey Hawkins, Eloise Ginty, Karen LeClaire Kurzman, Diana Leddy and Jane Miller, 2008

Writing for Understanding provides a practical, proven approach to teaching writing that targets insufficient student understanding of content information and of the writer's craft as key reasons for poor quality student writing. Through *Writing for Understanding*, teachers learn to help students:

- Build and process working content knowledge and understanding of the writer's craft,
- Identify a central idea for their writing, then focus it through a question, and
- Transfer their developing writing abilities independently to new situations.

With models of effective teaching, samples of student writing, and practical tools for classroom use, *Writing for Understanding* offers an inspiring and useful tool for developing effective, independent student writers (Vermont Writing Collaborative, 2008).

Real-World Literacies: Disciplinary Teaching in the High School Classroom

Heather Lattimer, 2014

Heather Lattimer draws on [Literacies of Disciplines: An NCTE Policy Research Brief](#) and stories from high school classrooms to illustrate how we can learn to recognize the unique languages and literacy structures represented by various disciplines and then help our students both navigate within individual disciplines and travel among them. Lattimer explores instructional practices grounded in real-world contexts that provide students with opportunities to approximate the kinds of reading, writing, listening, and speaking that occur in the world beyond school.



2014-15

Registration Information and
Online Registration Link:
www.maine.gov/doe/literacy-for-me/cdln.html



Children's Literature

Written Anything Good Lately?

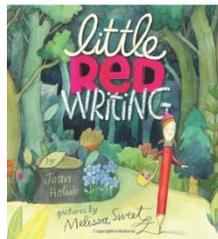
Susan Allen, 2010



Communicating through writing can take many forms. This book will show you twenty-six examples of informational writing--one for each letter of the alphabet (Amazon Reviews).

Little Red Writing

Joan Holub, 2013



Ms. 2, the story's pencil teacher, helps students write their own version of Little Red Riding Hood. Filled with energy and exuberance, and told through the point of view of the other pencils in the class, students will enjoy this narrative romp that reveals how to write right along with being a mentor text for the traits of writing (Ruth Cullham, 2013).

For additional information about this edition email:

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