

Think Before You Write

The Writing for Understanding process ensures that students acquire content knowledge before they sit down to write.

Joanna Hawkins

It was a beautiful spring afternoon in Vermont, and my teaching colleague Julie and I had just spent hours assessing our 7th and 8th grade students' research papers. We should have been delighted—with our red-pen work finished, we would spend the final few days before spring break listening to our students present their posters showing what they had learned.

But we were not delighted; we were dismayed. True, the papers showed that students knew how to use multiple sources, summarize information in their own words, and create a bibliography. Unfortunately, the papers did not show that the students had gained much understanding of the subject matter.

What had gone wrong? We thought we had done everything right. We had selected an area of high interest for the students: how African Americans struggled after the Civil War to create a nation of equals. Besides that, we had allowed each student to choose a topic that would be challenging but not frustrating. We had made sure that all students had access to resources at their reading levels.

We had given students plenty of class time to work and clear due dates for each part of the project. We had bought



index cards, large envelopes, and rubber bands and distributed them liberally. We had shown students how to cite sources and reminded them (constantly) to do so. Finally, we had written and reviewed a model paper so that students would know what a good paper looked like. We had set up times for students to confer with one another on their first drafts and made ourselves available for questions.

Yet, the conclusion was inescapable: The students' papers, although fairly

long and clearly structured, were not good. Even the best papers were not consistently thoughtful, precise, or well developed.

"Well," we told ourselves, "let's just get through these poster presentations and go on spring vacation, and when we come back we'll think about what went wrong."

The next morning, the students began their poster presentations. One by one, they stood in front of the class and began talking about their subjects.

One strong student described the African American church's impact on the U.S. civil rights movement. Another student, who generally struggled academically, described Madame C. J. Walker and her success as a businesswoman.

Most middle school students love posters, and these were interesting, showing evidence of lots of time spent on the projects (to say nothing of lots of glue and glitter). Julie and I were determined to give each student the opportunity to show how much he or she knew during the presentation.

The student who had tackled Madame C. J. Walker—a highly successful entrepreneur who built a business empire on hair products for African Americans in the late 1800s—had made a large, colorful poster featuring quotes from Madame Walker. As the student made her presentation, we asked her questions. How did Madame Walker make all that money? What did she do with it? The student answered, sometimes consulting her notes, sometimes recalling information she already knew. She made the key point that Madame Walker showed other African Americans that business success was possible. Even more important, Walker modeled the idea that businesses should play a role in helping others. For example, she organized businesswomen to become active in political causes, such as efforts to stop lynching. Finally, we asked the student, “How would you describe Madame Walker's impact in creating a nation of equals?” With this support, the student synthesized what she knew and connected it to the central idea of the unit—the concept of equality.

As the other students made their presentations, we followed the same pattern. Students warmed to their subjects and spoke more and more



Middle school students prepared these posters in preparation for a whole-class presentation (left) and a discussion with a partner (right). The discussions deepened students' knowledge of the topics and prepared them to write their papers.

fluently as we asked questions. Other students, catching the flow of the classroom conversation around them, joined in. The conversations were energetic, fascinating, and inclusive.

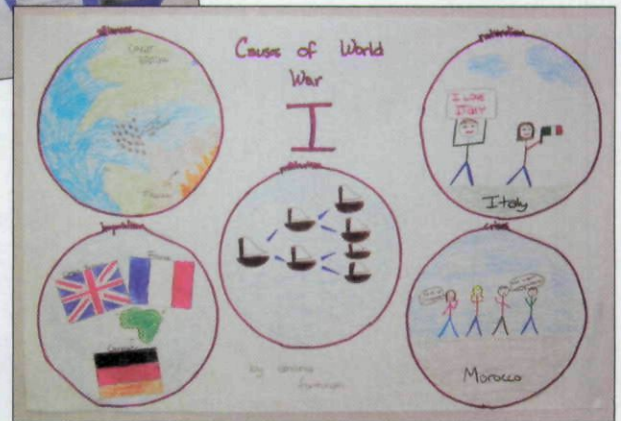
At the end of the class period, Julie said, “Too bad we didn't have them do these presentations *before* they wrote the papers. They seem to understand their subjects a lot better now than they did when they wrote about them.”

It was one of those epiphanies that come to teachers every now and then, when we stumble on an obvious truth. We had always heard the axiom that students need to write about what they know. Here we saw the corollary: Students need to know about what they write.

We had these students rewrite their papers after their poster presentations. The papers were vastly better than their first attempts. And we have never taught quite the same way since.

Settling for “Sort of” Writing

Good writing communicates meaning about content that matters. Whether that content is personal or academic, writing enables writers to make connections among ideas, to sort and elaborate their thoughts, and to create a coherent chunk of meaning out of their ideas and experiences.

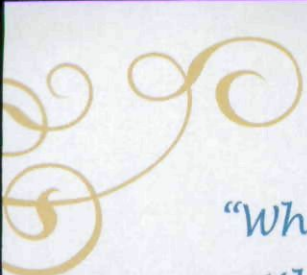


As teachers, we want all our students to have this kind of writing experience. Sometimes, however, we make it difficult for them to do so. We ask them to write from insufficient knowledge, before they know what they're talking about. Of course, some students figure it out. They know enough, or they read well enough, or they have enough determination (or helpful enough parents) to make coherent meaning out of a subject.

Many students don't, however. They settle for partial meaning, partial understanding—the kind of writing that demonstrates they “sort of” get it. And the students who struggle the most, who have the most limited vocabularies and the lowest reading abilities, often conclude that writing is not for them.

Ensuring Content Knowledge

Since our experience with the research paper on African Americans, Julie and I have developed an approach to content writing in our classrooms that we call Writing for Understanding. We use a backward design process similar to the Understanding by Design model



“What is written without effort is read without pleasure.”—Samuel Johnson

(McTighe & Wiggins, 1999). The box below shows the essential steps in the process.

We already had the first two steps in place in the research paper unit. We had identified an *enduring understanding*, or *big idea*, that we wanted students to know and understand by the end of the unit: In the years after the Civil War, African Americans struggled to create a nation of equals. Then, we had articulated an *essential focusing question* that enabled students to think about the big idea in a specific, appropriate, manageable way: How did the person or organization that you studied struggle after the Civil War to create a nation of equals?

We had also included the last two steps of the process in our research paper unit. We had given students lots of support in constructing their papers to make their thinking clear. Such *structure* is essential—students need to have a firm sense of how to build their understanding into a clear essay. We had addressed the *writing process* step by allowing students to confer with one another about their draft papers and revise their essays thoughtfully.

What we had left out, though, was the heart of the process—steps 3 and 4. We had not made sure that students actually learned the content knowledge that they needed to address the focusing question, gain deep understanding of the big idea, and communicate meaningful content in their written pieces.

Building Working Knowledge

Now, we have become intentional about this stage, which we call *building working knowledge*. Through a highly scaffolded process, whose elements we list here, we help students gain solid understanding of the content and capture that knowledge in notes or pictures so that they can use their ideas in their writing.

Developing vocabulary. Many researchers have written recently about the importance of vocabulary in understanding any field of knowledge (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002; Hirsch, 2003; Marzano & Pickering, 2005). The importance of precise vocabulary in writing is evident. Students need to thoroughly know, at the word and concept level, the language that they are going to use when they write.

In our world history curriculum, we take our 7th and 8th graders through a unit on the complexity of history. We focus the unit on a particular event—the rescue of British soldiers, stranded on the beaches of Dunkirk during World War II, by hundreds of little boats whose civilian captains risked their lives to transport these men across the English Channel.

The Writing for Understanding Process

1. Select an enduring understanding or big idea that students should demonstrate in their written product.
2. Develop a focusing question that will enable students to approach the big idea in a specific, manageable way.
3. Build working knowledge of the content.
4. Help students process the knowledge, capturing it in notes so that they can use it in their writing.
5. Help students structure their writing so that their thinking is clear.
6. Use the writing process (draft, confer, revise) to help students produce a written product that is focused, organized, and developed to show understanding of the big idea.

Our focusing question is, How do the forces of technology, geography, desire for power, economics, and values influence the little boats' rescue of the British soldiers at Dunkirk? Clearly, students need to understand key vocabulary words and concepts to address this question. So we work with the terms *technology*, *geography*, *desire for power*, *economics*, and *values/ideas* in a variety of ways. We ask, How do these concepts affect our own lives? What are some examples?

We cannot leave concept knowledge to chance. Without a solid shared understanding of this vocabulary, students will not be able to express their ideas about the content of the unit.

Comprehending text. Building students' working knowledge also requires that we pay attention to reading. This means not only having materials at appropriate reading levels available, but also providing opportunities in class for students to read, discuss, and reread; analyze text structure; and summarize (Snow, 2002). All the best resource material in the world is of little help to students if they do not comprehend it.

For the Dunkirk world history unit, we read “The Long Night of the Little Boats,” by Basil Heatter (1970). A teacher reads the text aloud to students first, using her vocal expression to give students a sense of the text's meaning. Students then read the same text to one another. We discuss, reread, paraphrase, identify text structure, draw pictures, and finally summarize in writing.

Refining understanding through discussion. Above all, building working knowledge includes frequent, intentional use of oral language. As we watched our students present their posters during that eye-opening experience four years ago, and as we and their classmates engaged with them in

probing conversation about their subjects, we were seeing in action Vygotsky's (1978) ideas about social learning. Students were constructing real understanding from fragmented knowledge through guided oral conversation.

Humans make meaning through sharing, discussing, exchanging, and refining experience and language. Frequent and intentional use of oral language becomes part of a "conversation-infused curriculum" (Applebee, 1996). As we work on a unit, students discuss

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information that they are all working with. Because the planning is intentional and directed toward creating the final piece of writing, because their knowledge is continually being mediated by oral language, students know what they are talking about when they finally sit down to write a full, focused paper.

In the Dunkirk world history unit, students need to build their background knowledge about World War II. What was going on in Europe in 1940? What was driving Germany to try to take over the world? Why were so many British soldiers stranded on the Dunkirk beaches that night? Shared conversation throughout the unit helps students explore these questions and refine their understanding.

Processing and Capturing Knowledge

To use working knowledge, students must capture it in some way that is specific to the essential focusing question. We have found that we need to be intentional about having students take notes. As students build their understanding through conversation and begin to zero in on the analytical understanding they will need for writing, we

make sure they have opportunities to capture that understanding in their own words. Sometimes their notes include pictures, but they always include primarily written language. Often we explicitly direct the note-taking process, especially at the beginning of a unit.

In the Dunkirk unit, processing the knowledge means going back to the text through the lens of the essential focusing question. This time, we stop and discuss evidence of geography as a factor in the event. Why did it matter

that the English Channel was relatively narrow, and that it was unusually calm that night? Together, using a template, we jot down our thoughts about these questions under "Geography." Under "Economics" on the template, we note that dire economic straits in the 1930s were a huge factor in Hitler's ascent to power. Under "Values," we note that patriotism and a "we can do it" attitude were essential in motivating the captains of those little boats to set out that night.

Occasional Miracles

The Writing for Understanding process does not ensure that all students magically reach uniformly high standards in writing or in content knowledge. But we have found (and have seen replicated in other classrooms) that ensuring that students acquire content knowledge *before* writing keeps all students firmly in the game. For some, the process does seem miraculous.

Watching reluctant 7th and 8th graders blossom when they "get it" is one of teaching's finer moments. With Writing for Understanding, the strongest students frequently show levels of insight that amaze us. And

even the students who struggle the most in school produce writing that shows solid understanding.

Last fall, I was visiting an area high school and ran into one of our former middle school students, now a 9th grader. Of course, I asked her about her writing.

"Well," she said, "I just had to write a history paper that was hard. At first I couldn't really do it."

My heart sank. "Why not?" I 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 understand the stuff. So I had to do that first. Then I could write it OK."

"Good," I said. "Good for you."

I could not have asked for more. **EL**

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