

ALL: INTRO

Guidance Document for Writing Big Ideas: Unit Backwards Design

This guidance document will focus on how to write big ideas for each unit. Before we begin.... a word about language. We highly recommend that you write the unit in the language of instruction. Here are templates for writing them in [Spanish](#) and in [English](#). Match the language of instruction to the language of the templates so that your unit writing is authentic to the language in which you will teach.

What are big ideas and why do we need them?

The biliteracy mapping process we have undertaken is standards based. Standards can be interpreted in different ways, and depending on how they are interpreted, they can be more or less rigorous. In writing big ideas, we will interpret the standards, build a meaningful frame, or context for learning, and succinctly state what students will learn in the unit. While big ideas come from standards, they are different from standards and have a different purpose. Let's explore what they are, why we use them and how to write them.

SECTION 1

What are big ideas?

Big ideas are understandings that students develop throughout a unit. These understandings reflect connections made over time that help students organize their thinking. Big ideas are “the important understandings that we want students to ‘get inside of’ and retain after they’ve forgotten many of the details.” (Wiggins and McTighe, 1998, p. 10). The current standards-based era we are in prioritizes critical thinking and problem solving over learning facts and details. Big ideas help us organize and focus our teaching so that students experience meaningful learning that will endure. Big ideas move us away from activity-based planning to understanding based planning.

In his book titled *Unwrapping the Common Core* (2014), Larry Ainsworth describes the role of big ideas this way (p.55):

Big ideas originate with the educator who thinks deeply, in advance of any instructional planning, about what the end learning goals for students should be for a particular unit of study. The educator then guides students during the unit to discover these Big Ideas for themselves by the end of the unit. This backwards-planning approach to standards-based unit design is an intentional way of aligning standards, assessment, curriculum and instruction.

Although extremely beneficial to educators, ultimately Big Ideas provide the greatest benefit to students because:

- Big Ideas represent those “aha” realizations, discoveries, or conclusions students reach on their own either during or after instruction.
- Big ideas are key generalizations students are able to articulate in their own words after their “I get it” moment
- Big ideas bring relevance to students by answering their unspoken mental question: “Why do I have to learn this anyway?” Or “When will I ever use this in real life?”

- Big ideas endure in students’ minds and help them apply those insights to future learning. That is why they are often referred to as enduring understandings”. (Wiggins and McTighe, 2005)

SECTION 2

Big ideas, or essential understandings, are statements that describe what students will learn. They are not details, but rather, they are understandings that endure and travel with students into their future learning. Wiggins and McTighe developed the idea of the big idea in their work on Understanding by Design (1998), and we are using their work on big ideas to shape this part of unit writing.

Big ideas can be characterized by the following:

- They are enduring understandings (not details)
- They are answers to essential questions
- They establish a rationale for why the learning is important
- They include academic language and are rigorous and worthwhile
- They need at least 2 examples to be big ideas
- They must complete the prompt; **I want my students to learn that....**

Let’s examine some examples and non-examples of big ideas:

Examples	Non-examples
Plants and animals are interdependent.	Birds spread seeds through their beaks.
When reading literary texts, it is important to describe how a narrator’s point of view influences how events are described.	One type of first-person narratives is biographies.
Fractions, decimals and percentages are all ways of expressing the relationship of a part to the whole.	Fractions, decimals and percentages.
Geography, climate and the topography of a region influence the life of a community.	The Pueblo Indians constructed homes made of adobe.

SECTION 3

Why do we need two types of big ideas?

In our integrated biliteracy units that plan for language, literacy and content, we will write 2 types of big ideas: 1) content (social studies, science or universal theme) and 2) language arts (reading and writing).

Content based big ideas:

The meaningful context that frames the entire unit hinges on the content area standards such as the Next Generation Science Standards or your state’s Science standards, the C3 Social Studies Framework and your state’s Social Studies standards, or universal themes (relationships, right and wrong, survival, prejudice, courage and heroism, individual vs. society, etc.). This meaningful frame is a hallmark of best practices for

second language acquisition and literacy instruction, and it reflects the instructional shifts of the common core language arts standards. In addition to providing the meaningful frame, through identifying big ideas, we also identify the linguistic complexity, language forms and conventions, and vocabulary (WIDA 2012 Resource Guide) required for the entire unit, and as such, the big ideas drive the planning for oracy and building background knowledge at the beginning of the unit and the transfer part of the Bridge at the conclusion of the unit.

Let's analyze the characteristics of content big ideas by reading through the following three examples. As you read through the statement and its examples, think about how they establish a meaningful context for learning as well as how they identify the academic language required for the unit:

I want my students to understand that all living things have a life cycle that includes birth, growth, reproduction and death. (NGSS 3-LS1-1)

1. For example, plants start as seeds which grow into mature plants that produce flowers. Flowers are fertilized by animals like honeybees or by the wind. Once they are fertilized, plants make seeds in the form of fruit. The seed inside the fruit or flower can be planted and grows into a new plant, and so the cycle starts over again.
2. Animals begin life either from an egg or as a baby. Baby animals grow and change and become adults. Adult animals look for a mate to begin the life cycle all over again with new babies. Each type of animal has their own unique life cycle.

I want my students to understand that when a person uses money for a purchase, they either purchase a good (a thing) or a service (what a person does for you). (CA SS 1.6 1)

1. When a person purchases a good, they purchase a material thing such as food, clothing, entertainment, furniture, cars.
2. When a person purchases a service, they pay for something someone does for them such as a wellness check with the doctor, a dental appointment, a haircut, a meal.

I want my students to understand that prejudice is an idea or opinion that disregards basic facts. Often, prejudice ends in discrimination, or biased treatment based on someone's race, gender, religion, sexual identity, socio-economic background, or other characteristics. (Universal theme in Literature)

1. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, any person of Japanese descent living in the United States was considered suspect. As prejudices against them grew, simply because they had a genetic link to an enemy country, the government rounded them up and held them in internment camps.
2. Bullying is often caused by a prejudice against people who are different. Students who pick on a classmate wearing clothing made by her mother and not a certain brand of clothing would be engaged in bullying.

SECTION 4

Language Arts Big Ideas

The second set of big ideas we write for each unit come from the language arts standards that are listed on your grade-level standards based map. As opposed to the content area big idea which you will research and write from scratch, the language arts big idea is easier to write because its purpose is to illustrate the connections that exist among all three sets of standards. Let's take a look at some examples, and as we do, look for the connections among the content standards, the writing and the reading standards:

I want my students to understand that when reading **informational texts**, it is important to: (RI.1)

- ask and answer questions about key details (RI.1.1)
- describe the connection between two individuals, ideas, events or pieces of information in a text (RI.1.3)
- use the illustrations and details in a text to describe its key ideas (RI.1.7)
- identify basic similarities in and differences between two texts on the same topic (RI.1.9)

... in order to write an informative **news article** describing the goods and services available in their community (W.1.2)

I want my students to understand that when reading an **informational text**, it is important to be able to (RI.3):

- Ask and answer questions about to demonstrate understanding of a text, referring explicitly to the text as the basis for the answers (RI.3.1)
- Determine the main idea of a text; recount the key details and explain how they support the main idea (RI.3.2)
- Distinguish their own point of view from that of the author of a text (RI.3.6)
- Use information gained from illustrations (e.g. maps, photographs) and the words in a text to demonstrate understanding of the text (e.g. where, when why, and how key events occur) RI.3.7)

...in order to write a **fact sheet** about the life cycle of living things (W. 3.2).

I want my students to understand that when reading **literary texts**, it is important to be able to (RL.5)

- Quote accurately from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text (RL.5.1)
- Determine a theme of a story, drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text (RL.5.2)
- Describe how a narrator's or a speaker's point of view influences how events are described (RL. 5.6)
- Compare and contrast stories in the same genre (e.g., mysteries and adventure stories) on their approaches to similar themes and topics. (RL.5.9)

...in order to write a **narrative memoir** about people who have been the target of prejudice (W.5.3).

SECTION 5

How do we write big ideas?

Content Area Big Ideas (Social studies or Science)

In order to craft rich, rigorous big ideas, we need to research and learn more about the topic so that we can write a good big idea that reflects the standards and matches the developmental stages of the grade level we

are writing for. Simply rewording the standards into a big idea, or copying and pasting from other sources, is not going to work. Instead, we need to research in order to understand what the standard is focusing on, and then we need to write a statement and at least two examples that support it.

Writing Social Studies Big Ideas:

Let's look at a sample instructional focus and think about it in relation to state standards:

Fall holidays. (Kindergarten)

**The first question you want to ask is,
“Do my state standards mention
learning about fall holidays in Kindergarten?”**

State academic standards are not usually so specific. They usually point to more general knowledge, like:

The student understands that holidays are celebrations of special events. The student is expected to: (A) explain the reasons for national patriotic holidays such as Presidents' Day, Veterans Day, and Independence Day; and (B) identify customs associated with national patriotic holidays such as parades and fireworks on Independence Day.

This example was taken from the Texas State Standards, available:

<http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter113/ch113a.html>

OR

Explain why individuals, groups, issues and events are celebrated with local, state or national holidays or days of recognition (e.g., Lincoln's Birthday, Martin Luther King's Birthday, Pulaski Day, Fourth of July, Memorial Day, Labor Day, Veterans' Day, Thanksgiving).

This example was taken from the Illinois State Standards, available:

http://www.isbe.state.il.us/ils/social_science/standards.htm

It is important to note that while both standards mention specific holidays, those holidays are mentioned as examples, rather than as the unique focus of the instruction.

So, in looking at our state standards, the focus must be reworked to:

Holidays

Once you have made sure you are focusing on your state standards, you need to think about creating a **big idea**. Big ideas, or essential understandings, outline what you want all students to know and understand when they reach the summative assessment in the biliteracy unit framework (BUF).

Big ideas must be able to complete the sentence, “I want my students to understand that...”

As you can see, “**I want my student to understand that *holidays***” is not a complete sentence. As teachers we need to ask ourselves, “Well, what do we want our students to understand about holidays?” At this point, it is important to go back to the standard, and identify what the standard expects. So, in looking at the standards, the big idea becomes

I want my students to understand that...

We celebrate holidays in order to remember or honor historical events or people, and there are certain customs associated with celebrating some of these holidays.

The next question we ask is, “Is this a big idea or a detail?”

To check if it is a big idea or detail, we see if we can give an example.

I want my students to understand that we celebrate holidays in order to remember or honor historical events or people, and there are certain customs associated with celebrating some of these holidays.

For example, on Independence Day, we are celebrating the independence of the United States from England. It is typical to celebrate this holiday with a parade and fireworks.

If you can give several examples of the big idea, it is indeed a big idea and not a detail.

When we teach big ideas, we want to make sure to have students study several examples of the big idea. For the big idea above, in order to truly teach to the standard (which mentions holidays in the plural), it would be essential to study several holidays in order for students to understand that other holidays, not just Independence Day, are in celebration of an event or a person.

When children are taught a big idea through one example only (only studying Independence Day) they have a harder time generalizing their learning to other situations. So, in this example, students may learn that Independence Day is in celebration of a historical event, but not understand that Veteran’s Day is also in celebration of a historical event. To really make sure children have understood the big idea, children need to study several examples.

So, while we started with ***Fall Holidays***, we went through the thinking and refining process to come up with the big idea:

I want my students to understand that we celebrate holidays in order to remember or honor historical events or people, and there are certain customs associated with celebrating some of these holidays.

SECTION 6

Content Area Big Ideas (Social studies or Science)

In order to craft rich, rigorous big ideas, we need to research and learn more about the topic so that we can write a good big idea that reflects the standards and matches the developmental stages of the grade level we are writing for. Simply rewording the standards into a big idea, or copying and pasting from other sources, is not going to work. Instead, we need to research in order to understand what the standard is focusing on, and then we need to write a statement and at least two examples that support it.

Writing Science Big Ideas:

If you teach in a state that has adopted the Next Generation Science Standards, the work in creating big ideas has already been done for you. The **Disciplinary Core Ideas** (the orange box) and the **Crosscutting Concepts** (green box) are already written as big ideas and can be used with the BUF. The Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS) are available here: <http://standards.nsta.org/AccessStandardsByTopic.aspx>

Let’s go through the thinking and refining process that we used for the social studies big idea above, with another big idea:

I want my students to understand that there are different types of weather in different places.

Climate, rather than weather, is often part of state academic standards. When you are writing big ideas, it is very important to think through the vocabulary and language structures you use, because the big idea helps to determine the vocabulary and sentence structures that are the focus of instruction during the oracy building portion of the BUF. (For this reason, it is important to write the big ideas in the language of instruction. For example, if science is taught in Spanish, it would be important to write the science big ideas in Spanish.)

If we want our students to use academic language in both English and Spanish correctly, we need to use it correctly. Although weather (*tiempo*, in Spanish) and climate (in Spanish, *clima*) may be used interchangeably in informal, everyday speech, in the academic context they refer to two different things. Weather is what is going on today, and can change by the hour: It's raining; it's cold; it's sunny, etc. Climate refers to an overall meteorological description, and is associated with place: arctic, temperate, tropical, etc. So, in looking at state standards, the big idea would become:

I want my students to understand that there are different types of climate in different places.

It fits into the sentence frame (I want my students to understand that...). Is it a detail or a big idea? Can we give an example?

For example, it is cold year-round near the poles and warm year-round near the equator.

We can give an example, so it is a big idea.

Because this is a unit for early elementary (K-2), it is probably important to teach about weather as well. So, we will want to include a second, related big idea:

I want my students to understand that each climate zone includes a variety of weather patterns.

And here is the "For example," of this big idea:

For example, while it is always warm near the equator, it may be sunny and warm or rainy and warm, depending on the season.

So, this unit would have two, related big ideas:

I want my students to understand that there are different types of climate in different places.

I want my students to understand that each climate zone includes a variety of weather patterns.

I would hope the teacher would teach to these big ideas by looking at a variety of climate zones and studying the weather in at least two of them.

Some other big ideas related to climate and weather:

I want my students to understand that human life is affected by climate and weather.

Example number 3

I want my students to understand that the earth rotates on an axis and also circles the sun.

While this can be found in many state standards and can complete the sentence prompt, it is difficult to come up with a, “For example...” So, this is a detail. Now, this is a very important detail, and one that can be hard for young students to grasp, so we have to ask the next question,

“So what?”

We haven’t really discussed the “So what?” question yet, so let’s take a look at it. Yes, students need to know this detail, but why? And if you, and more importantly the students, don’t know why they are learning it, it probably won’t be fully comprehended. I can see two different big ideas, depending on the state standards:

I want my students to understand that in our solar system, planets and moons move in two ways: rotation and revolution.

This would be the big idea if the unit were focused on how things in space move. By studying all planets and moons in our solar system (or at least several, not just earth), students are brought to the deeper understanding that this is how many things in our solar system move. It is not a detail, but a big idea that is more widely applicable.

OR

I want my students to understand that the rotation, revolution, and tilt of the earth affect the earth in specific ways.

This would be the big idea to use if the standards were more focused on how life on earth is affected by the rotation and revolution of the earth. And, if you are going to discuss how the earth’s revolution causes seasons, you need to teach students about the earth’s tilt.

SECTION 7

Writing Language Arts Big Ideas

The prompt you will use to write your language arts big idea is this one:

I want my students to understand that, when reading _____ texts (Literature or Informational) it is important to _____ (reading standards – rungs on the ladder), in order to write _____ (writing genre) about _____ (content or universal theme).

Simply add the standards from your map to the prompt above, and your language arts big idea will be written.

Why are examples important?

Examples force us to truly articulate the big idea we are describing, and they ensure that all teachers who teach that big idea have interpreted it in a similar fashion. Consider this big idea:

I want my students to understand that symbols, icons, and traditions of the United States provide a sense of community across time.

- For example, the eagle on our flag is a symbol that represents freedom and _____.

This big idea comes directly from the California Social Studies Framework. When we went to write examples of a symbol, icon or tradition we realized that each member of the team writing this big idea had a different idea of what “sense of community across time” meant, and we struggled with how to complete the statement for the first detail. So, we decided to research the symbols, icons and traditions of the US and then went back to the big idea and rewrote it to include why this statement is important:

I want my students to understand that across time the U.S. has built an identity that represents all people who live in the country. This identity is exemplified through symbols, icons and traditions that illustrate the values of the country (liberty, justice, respect equality) and how the country has evolved over time (CA SS 1.3)

Once we had rewritten the big idea, it was much easier to write the examples, which are below:

1. I want my students to understand that the Statue of Liberty was a gift from France and is an icon of freedom welcoming and embracing immigrants seeking freedom to the United States. Unveiled in 1886, many immigrant groups have faced prejudice in adjusting to life in the United States, and yet the values of acceptance and welcoming immigrants that are represented by the Statue of Liberty have endured (CA SS 1.3.3).
2. I want my students to understand that since its adoption in 1777, the American flag has represented the values of purity and innocence (white color), hardiness and valor (red), vigilance, perseverance, and justice (blue). Today, Americans use the flag in all 50 states and territories, and it is used at all sporting events and government and public places. Regardless of where Americans are, they use the same flag, and this contributes to a common sense of identity. (CA SS 1.3.3)

As you write your big ideas, be sure that your examples represent an accurate interpretation of the big idea and that they are written using the same characteristics of a big idea (a statement that can fit the prompt, I want my students to understand that....). Examples are not activities, but rather, are ways of unpacking the big ideas to make sure the big idea is understood well by all. The examples matter!

SECTION 8

How many big ideas for a unit?

All content standards are represented in the big ideas. The ladder and three buckets are represented in the language arts big idea. You may need three to four big ideas to cover all the content standards, whereas the one big idea for the language arts standards (our sentence prompt) suffices. You can also chunk several standards into one big idea. To make sure you are addressing all the standards, cite the standard in parenthesis at the end of each big idea.

Conclusion:

When you write big ideas, you are synthesizing, evaluating, and analyzing. It is hard work that requires you to think critically. Take your time, write a first draft, and then come back to it and revise. Write big ideas with someone else. It is hard to do alone.

Checklist:

Criteria	Notes
Each big idea lists the standards it is addressing in parenthesis.	
All content standards are represented in the big ideas. The ladder and three buckets are represented in the language arts big idea.	
Big ideas are enduring understandings that include why their study is important.	
Each big idea has at least 2 examples.	
The big ideas and examples are written as statements and not instructional activities.	

References:

Ainsworth, L. (2014). *Unwrapping the Common Core*. Greenwood Village, CO: The Leadership and Learning Center, a division of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

English Language Development Standards ; World Class Instructional Design and Assessment WIDA, (2012), Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System;
<https://wida.wisc.edu/sites/default/files/resource/2012-ELD-Standards.pdf>

Wiggins, G. & McTighe, J. (1998). *Understanding by design*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Wiggins, G. & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by design (2nd Ed)*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development