

The Understanding by Design Guide to Creating High-Quality Units



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Introduction

The Understanding by Design Guide to Creating High-Quality Units is targeted to individuals and groups interested in improving their skills in designing units of study based on the Understanding by Design (UbD) framework. This guide introduces UbD unit design and directs readers through the process. It is organized around a set of modules that move from basic ideas (e.g., the three stages of “backward design”) to more complicated elements of unit design (e.g., authentic performance tasks). Figure 1 shows a graphic representation of the organization of the modules.

Each module includes the following components:

- Narrative discussion of key ideas in the module
- Guiding exercises, worksheets, and design tips for unit design
- An example of an emerging design
- Review criteria (design standards) with prompts for self-assessment
- A list of resources for further information

Figure 1

Outline of Modules

Stage 1—Desired Results	Stage 2—Evidence	Stage 3—Learning Plan
Module A: The Big Ideas of UbD		
Module B: The UbD Template		
Module C: Starting Points		
Module D: Developing an Initial Unit Sketch		
Module E: Different Types of Learning Goals	Module F: Essential Questions and Understandings	Module G: Determining Evidence of Understanding and Developing Assessment Tasks
Module H: Learning for Understanding		

In addition to the print format, the *Guide to Creating High-Quality Units* features online resources correlated to the text. Many of the exercises and worksheets are accessible as downloads in electronic form, as are additional unit examples. The online portion includes frequently asked questions (FAQs) and will allow updates (e.g., more unit examples and new resources) to be readily accessed.

We invite users, especially beginners, to complete the exercises and worksheets to assist them in thinking through the unit design process. However, it is important to always keep the end—a coherent and well-aligned unit plan—in mind. If you find one or more exercises and worksheets unnecessary, feel free to skip them. Also, think of the exercises and worksheets as being like the training wheels on a bicycle. Eventually you'll find that you no longer need them as your understanding of UbD deepens and your unit design skills become more effective and automatic.

The modular presentation of this material means that users need not follow the modules in the order presented. As you can see from Figure 1, the volume is organized by the logic of the three stages of backward design. This logic should not be confused with a directive about the (inherently messy) process of design. Your interests, strengths, and prior experience as a designer will inevitably dictate how you use this book and the sequence you follow.

Think of this guide, then, as a cookbook. A cookbook has chapters devoted first to recipes for appetizers, then for soups and salads, then for fish and meat, vegetables, and desserts. Similarly, the *Guide to Creating High-Quality Units* is organized by the “menu” of a unit's parts—the elements of the unit template. But although the cookbook is organized, you need not read it from cover to cover or make all the recipes in the order in which they appear. So, too, in unit design. Like the recipe creator, you'll find that your path is informed by the need to put the final work in a certain form, but creation is inherently more nonlinear as you try things out, alter various “ingredients,” and double-back to ensure that the end product works.

If you want more information on available products related to Understanding by Design, consult www.ascd.org. A community of people interested in UbD and additional resources are on ASCD EDge, accessible at <http://groups.ascd.org/groups/detail/110884/understanding-by-design/>. ASCD EDge is a professional networking community for educators.

The Big Ideas of UbD

Purpose: To become acquainted with the big ideas of Understanding by Design.

Desired Results: Unit designers will understand that

- Understanding by Design (UbD) is a curriculum-planning framework, not a prescriptive program.
- UbD focuses on helping students come to an understanding of important ideas and transfer their learning to new situations.
- UbD reflects current research on learning.

You should work on Module A if you are new to Understanding by Design.

You might skim or skip Module A if you are familiar with the basic ideas of UbD.

As its title suggests, *Understanding by Design* (UbD) reflects the convergence of two interdependent ideas: (1) research on learning and cognition that highlights the centrality of teaching and assessing for understanding, and (2) a helpful and time-honored process for curriculum writing (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

UbD is based on eight key tenets:

1. UbD is a way of thinking purposefully about curricular planning, *not* a rigid program or prescriptive recipe.
2. A primary goal of UbD is developing and deepening student understanding—the ability to make meaning of learning via “big ideas” and to transfer learning.
3. UbD unpacks and transforms content standards and mission-related goals into relevant Stage 1 elements and appropriate assessments in Stage 2.
4. Understanding is revealed when students autonomously make sense of and transfer their learning through authentic performance. Six facets of understanding—the capacities to *explain*, *interpret*, *apply*, *shift perspective*, *empathize*, and *self-assess*—serve as indicators of understanding.
5. Effective curriculum is planned “backward” from long-term desired results through a three-stage design process (Desired Results, Evidence, Learning Plan).