

# 2

## Essential Understandings

*When curriculum and instruction require students to process factual information through the conceptual levels of thinking, the students demonstrate greater retention of factual information, deeper levels of understanding, and increased motivation for learning.*

—H. Lynn Erickson (2007, p. 2)

**W**hat I am about to share with you in this chapter is a significant gift that educators can bring to the classroom. It had a pivotal impact on my own teaching and one that will yield enormous benefits for your students by strengthening their critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This gift is the strategy of teaching with essential (or enduring) understandings. It is wildly impactful for students—empowering them to connect concepts and knowledge across grades and subjects and giving them the perspective to apply what they have learned to their immediate world and the greater world at large. If you follow what I suggest in the pages ahead, I guarantee it will transform your teaching or the teaching of those you may mentor.

The obvious by-product of using essential understandings is a more meaningful learning experience for students. As mentioned in Chapter 1, KUDs—what we want students to know, understand, and do—form the basis for a unit of instruction and emanate from standards. It is imperative that teachers present and teach the factual information (know) and skills (do), but the end goal is to have students use them to make sense of a greater realization (understanding). Therefore, this chapter addresses the unit map component of essential understandings. It is challenging work, but once you grasp the overall *what* and *why* and then delve into the *how*, you'll see the benefits.

## THE NATURE AND CRITICAL IMPORTANCE OF ESSENTIAL (OR ENDURING) UNDERSTANDINGS

You might have heard the term *enduring understandings* from Wiggins and McTighe’s (1998) prominent work *Understanding by Design*. They also use the phrase *big ideas*, which is a term that appears in many textbooks, too. Others (including me) use the phrase *essential understandings* (Erickson, 2007). But no matter what the terminology may be, these understandings or big ideas share a common denominator: They are conceptually based statements that teachers invent or borrow and use as a guiding light to design curriculum and instruction that derive from standards. As Wiggins and McTighe (1998) state, “*Enduring* refers to the big ideas, the important understandings, that we want students to ‘get inside of’ and retain after they’ve forgotten many of the details. . . . Enduring understandings go beyond discrete facts or skills to focus on larger concepts, principles, or processes” (p. 10).

So why should teachers spend the time to create essential understandings? Many academic experts have espoused the virtues and efficacy of using understandings and guiding questions as a driving force in instruction. There are too many to name here; however, those that stand out for me are H. Lynn Erickson, who popularized concept-based instruction; the aforementioned Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, who are known for their work in backward design; and Carol Ann Tomlinson, who is at the forefront of differentiation. Erickson crystallizes the relationships between concepts and facts. In her work, she discusses the “synergistic interplay between the factual and conceptual levels of thinking” (Erickson, 2007, p. 2) as a pathway to intellectual growth. In a nutshell, the idea is that most people don’t remember a litany of facts. However, if you tie them to concepts so there is a home base and an opportunity to make connections, then people are much more likely to retain these facts.

I can explain it best by giving you a concrete example. Let’s say you are teaching the Civil War. As a guide about what to teach, you look to the standards, which might look like an excerpt from the Massachusetts curriculum framework shown in Figure 2.1 (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2003).

### Massachusetts History and Social Science Curriculum Framework: The Civil War

#### The Civil War

- USI.35 Describe how the different economies and cultures of the North and South contributed to the growing importance of sectional politics in the early 19th century.
- USI.36 Summarize the critical developments leading to the Civil War.
- USI.37 On a map of North America, identify Union and Confederate states at the outbreak of the war.
- USI.38 Analyze Abraham Lincoln’s presidency, the Emancipation Proclamation (1863), his views on slavery, and the political obstacles he encountered.
- USI.39 Analyze the roles and policies of various Civil War leaders and describe the important Civil War battles and events.

**FIGURE 2.1**

Source: Adapted from Massachusetts Department of Education (2003).

There is a lot of factual material that students would need to know in order to meet these standards. Here is a preliminary list: growth of sectional differences (e.g., agrarianism/slavery versus capitalism/industrial growth, southern Protestantism versus northern Puritanism, etc.); catalysts leading to war, such as increasing tensions (e.g., *Dred Scott* decision, John Brown's raid, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Lincoln-Douglas debates, etc.) and efforts to compromise (e.g., Missouri Compromise, Compromise of 1850, Kansas-Nebraska Act); the Civil War political leaders (e.g., Jefferson Davis, Alexander Stephens, Abraham Lincoln, Stephen Douglas, Charles Sumner, etc.), military leaders (e.g., Robert E. Lee, "Stonewall" Jackson, Ulysses S. Grant, William Tecumseh Sherman, etc.), and abolitionist leaders (e.g., William Seward, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frederick Douglass, etc.); Lincoln's speeches; the battles (e.g., Antietam, Vicksburg, Gettysburg); states that seceded from the Union and those that did not; and so forth. There are also many terms students would need to know, such as *agrarian*, *industrialist*, *sectionalism*, and *secession*. All of this is critically important information for students to know when they are learning about this period in history, and it must be included in the knowledge piece explained in Chapter 1. However, it still represents a mere collection of facts.

To help students make sense of this factual information, we need to create overarching conceptual statements. These statements will provide students with the context they need in order to understand the broader relevance of the pertinent facts. It is through creating essential understandings that we also discern what the standards mean and what we really want our students to take away. As educators, we must study these standards carefully in order to develop approaches to teaching the material that will ensure that students leave a particular unit of study with a deep level of understanding. Consider the following examples of essential understandings, which could be tied to some of the social studies standards and facts cited earlier:

- Differences in cultural, political, and economic systems can foster sectional tensions that can escalate into acrimony and result in conflict.
- Political sectionalism and unwillingness to compromise can lead to conflict.
- Individuals can make powerful contributions for targeted groups of people that might lead to change, growth, and survival.
- Leaders' perspectives, personality traits, and actions can shape events and impact people's political opinions and involvement, thereby generating change.
- Disparate views of political leaders can contribute to unavoidable conflict, which impacts individuals and groups.
- Location and topography influence strategic military maneuvers and decisions that contribute to the development and outcome of battles.
- To position their armies for victory, military leaders must understand the political dynamics so they can develop a strategy that fully considers their economic advantages and military strengths.

## **ESSENTIAL UNDERSTANDINGS AS STATEMENTS OF CONCEPTUAL INTENT**

The exercise of creating or finding the right essential understanding will allow you to focus on what you want students to understand as indicated by the standard. In that way, it will serve as a statement of your own conceptual intent. Since you will use the

understandings to write, find, or revise curriculum, it's important that these statements clearly articulate the goals for the unit, as they will form the basis for your teaching.

Why aren't there one or two universal essential understandings for each standard? There are many reasons for teachers to craft different essential understandings for the same standard. It might be that teachers interpret the same standard slightly differently because they naturally view it through their own individual lens, they want to go beyond the standard, they have various rich resources at their disposal to use, and so forth. In addition, there might be more than one essential understanding that makes sense for each standard. If there is a subtle difference between two or more essential understandings, then choose the one that clearly indicates the direction for your teaching. You don't want overlap; this is because each essential understanding should stand alone. In other cases, however, the standard might be hefty and require two essential understandings to cover different aspects of it. Or you might have two understandings aligned to a particular standard because they represent two directions that a standard can take, and you might teach to both.

The following questions might help you as you begin to think about how you will find or design essential understandings for your class:

- *What do you want your students to really remember long after they have forgotten the discrete facts?*
- *What is your goal for student understanding based on the standards?*
- *What is the essence of this particular unit of study?*
- *What differentiated resources will you use to illuminate the standards?*
- *What reading materials are at your disposal?*
- *Are you team teaching with other staff members who will address parts of these standards?*
- *How can you merge content areas in a meaningful way in a core classroom?*
- *How can you help students transfer the knowledge they learn across subjects and grades?*
- *How can you help students make various connections, including text-to-text and text-to-world?*

Let's review concrete examples and special considerations in the sections that follow before we embark on the step-by-step process of crafting your own essential understandings.

## **EXAMPLES OF ESSENTIAL UNDERSTANDINGS ALIGNED TO THE ANCHOR STANDARDS FOR READING**

What follows are essential understandings that I wrote to align with the ten College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading. Prior to reviewing them, consider this quote from highly acclaimed literacy researchers Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell (2001): "Reading for meaning—*comprehension*—is the goal of every reading episode as well as of our teaching. We want students not only to understand what they read but also to enjoy

texts, interpret them, and apply their learning from reading to other areas. . . . Reading is the construction of meaning. Without understanding, there is no reading. Everything about reading is directed toward making meanings that are infused with active curiosity, emotion, and satisfaction” (pp. 302, 322). The kinds of comprehension required in the Common Core Standards echo Fountas and Pinnell’s statements. In their book *Pathways to the Common Core*, Lucy Calkins and her colleagues also elucidate the very sophisticated expectations embedded in the reading standards:

The grade level specifics for informational reading follow the same logic as those for literature. The difference lies in the kind of comprehension involved. When reading informational texts, the standards focus readers on the work of analyzing the claims texts make, the soundness and sufficiency of their evidence, and the way a text’s language and craft may reveal points of view; the emphasis is investigating ideas, claims, reasoning, and evidence, rather than themes, characters, figurative language, and symbolism. The level of analysis called for by the information reading standards is no higher than that called for in literature—the Common Core standards for reading literature demand extremely sophisticated reading practices. (2012, pp. 75–76)

With these quotations in mind, take a look at my essential understanding examples in Figure 2.2. Of course, these are merely my interpretations, and your essential understandings might look a bit different. As you read them, begin to reflect on the following considerations for crafting effective essential understandings. Doing so will help prepare you for the upcoming exercise in which you write these kinds of statements for your targeted unit.

- **Concepts.** When creating essential understandings, consider the concept or word that serves as an umbrella term that encompasses the facts. A concept is “a mental construct that frames a set of examples sharing common attributes . . . concepts are timeless, universal, abstract, and broad” (Erickson, 2002, p. 164). Concepts are expressed as nouns and can be one or two words, such as *theme*, *writing process*, *global economy*, *figurative language*, or *persuasion*. Put another way, the New York State Department of Education (1999) provides this definition: “Concepts represent mental images, constructs, or word pictures that help people to arrange and classify fragmented and isolated facts and information” (p. 8). In Figure 2.2, look for the concepts in some of my essential understandings; you won’t find any proper nouns because concepts are defined as timeless, universal, abstract, and broad. Figures 2.3 and 2.4 also include lists of concepts in various subject areas. Some concepts listed in the figures are not as complex as others, and sometimes I use gerunds for concepts (e.g., summarizing, comparing and contrasting). However these words represent key ideas, too. The capitalized words in the following literature examples feature examples of concepts:

- CHARACTERS can change over time through EVENTS, SETTING, or INTERACTION with other characters, which can, in turn, shape the PLOT.
- Writers intentionally craft DIALOGUE TAGS to enhance the spoken words of CHARACTERS to convey TONE and ACTION.



## Essential Understandings Aligned to the College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading

CCR Anchor Standards	Essential Understandings
Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text (2010a, R.CCR.1).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People cite concrete evidence from a text to support their analyses of what the text says explicitly and inferentially.</li> </ul>
Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas (R.CCR.2).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Summarizing allows readers to briefly articulate the substance of a work to facilitate overall comprehension.</li> <li>• Proficient readers engage in an ongoing process of extracting information from a text and tracking the development of central ideas to comprehend the whole of a text.</li> </ul>
Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text (R.CCR.3).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Characters' motivations, circumstances, and interactions with others drive plot development.</li> <li>• Analyzing the development and interactions of individuals, events, and ideas allows readers to arrive at insights and conclusions.</li> </ul>
Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone (R.CCR.4).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Readers can uncover an author's meaning and tone by interpreting and analyzing salient words and phrases.</li> </ul>
Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole (R.CCR.5).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Readers analyze the structure of a text to locate information, determine how parts are related, and construct overall meaning.</li> <li>• Authors structure texts to organize content, develop ideas, and help facilitate comprehension.</li> </ul>
Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text (R.CCR.6).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A character's or narrator's point of view can expose readers to cultural awareness and an appreciation for diversity.</li> <li>• Proficient readers assess the author's point of view or purpose and the use of rhetorical devices to determine how it shapes the content and style of the text.</li> <li>• Acknowledging and addressing counterclaims contribute to the strength of an argument and the ability of authors to successfully convince others of their point of view.</li> </ul>



CCR Anchor Standards	Essential Understandings
Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words (R.CCR.7).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• People evaluate and integrate content in various formats and media to gain clarity about a topic and communicate a complete account.</li> </ul>
Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence (R.CCR.8).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Readers evaluate an author’s argument by examining valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence in order to determine the validity of the claim.</li> </ul>
Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take (R.CCR.9).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Readers analyze multiple texts on similar themes or topics to build knowledge and to compare authors’ approaches.</li> <li>• Readers glean a more thorough and accurate account of a subject matter or issue by comparing and contrasting multiple texts on the same topic.</li> </ul>
Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently (R.CCR.10).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students develop skills and strategies necessary to appreciate literature through independently and proficiently reading, comprehending, and writing about complex text.</li> <li>• Students develop content knowledge through independently and proficiently reading, comprehending, and writing about topics found in complex informational text.</li> </ul>

**FIGURE 2.2**

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## English Language Arts Concepts



Reading for Literature		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• genre (e.g., fantasy, mystery, biography, memoir, etc.)</li> <li>• literary devices (e.g., allusion, suspense, tone, foreshadowing, dialect, mood, symbolism)</li> <li>• elements of literature (i.e., character, plot, setting, theme, point of view)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• words/phrases/language</li> <li>• figurative language (e.g., simile, metaphor, personification, sensory detail/imagery)</li> <li>• reading strategies (e.g., questioning, inference, retelling, summarizing, prediction, monitoring and clarifying, visualization, connection)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• narrator/narration</li> <li>• persuasion</li> <li>• illustrations/visuals</li> <li>• cause/effect</li> <li>• culture</li> <li>• diversity</li> <li>• interactions</li> <li>• motivation</li> <li>• pattern</li> <li>• perception</li> <li>• perspective</li> </ul>

**FIGURE 2.3** (Continued)

FIGURE 2.3 (Continued)

Reading for Literature		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• central message/moral/theme</li> <li>• hero/heroine</li> <li>• protagonist/antagonist</li> <li>• exposition</li> <li>• problem/solution</li> <li>• conflict</li> <li>• sounds of language (e.g., rhythm, rhyme, meter, repetition, alliteration, onomatopoeia)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• metacognition</li> <li>• audience</li> <li>• author/writer</li> <li>• writer’s style</li> <li>• voice</li> <li>• purpose</li> <li>• reader</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• relationships</li> <li>• sequence</li> <li>• structure</li> <li>• transformation</li> </ul>
Reading for Informational Text		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• claim/proposition/position</li> <li>• main topic/key details</li> <li>• idea/concept</li> <li>• thesis/topic sentence</li> <li>• evidence/reasons/support</li> <li>• structure/organization</li> <li>• comparison/contrast</li> <li>• similarities/differences</li> <li>• procedure</li> <li>• chronology</li> <li>• sequence/time</li> <li>• cause/effect</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• problem/solution</li> <li>• relationship</li> <li>• interaction</li> <li>• interpretation</li> <li>• integration</li> <li>• argumentation</li> <li>• persuasion</li> <li>• stereotype</li> <li>• fact/opinion</li> <li>• illustrations/visuals/images</li> <li>• author’s purpose</li> <li>• author/writer</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• writer’s style</li> <li>• voice</li> <li>• perspective/point of view</li> <li>• words/phrases/language</li> <li>• reading strategies (see “Reading for Literature”)</li> <li>• metacognition</li> <li>• text features</li> <li>• research</li> <li>• credibility</li> <li>• search tools (e.g., key words, sidebars, hyperlinks)</li> </ul>
Writing		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• text types (e.g., argument, informative/ explanatory, narrative)</li> <li>• audience</li> <li>• purpose (e.g., to persuade, describe, inform, etc.)</li> <li>• bias</li> <li>• viewpoint/perspective</li> <li>• perception</li> <li>• elements of literature (see “Reading for Literature”)</li> <li>• reasons/evidence</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• thesis/topic sentence</li> <li>• structure/organization</li> <li>• sequence/logical order</li> <li>• comparison/contrast</li> <li>• cause/effect</li> <li>• transitions</li> <li>• fact/opinion</li> <li>• writing process (e.g., prewriting, drafting, editing, revising, publishing)</li> <li>• research/information</li> <li>• bibliography/works cited</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• investigation</li> <li>• analysis/reflection/interpretation</li> <li>• summarizing/paraphrasing</li> <li>• word choice/language</li> <li>• writer’s style</li> <li>• writer/author</li> <li>• reader</li> <li>• plagiarism</li> <li>• see “Language”</li> </ul>



Language	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• grammar and usage</li> <li>• sentence structure</li> <li>• conventions (i.e., capitalization, punctuation, spelling)</li> <li>• language</li> <li>• vocabulary acquisition</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• word relationships</li> <li>• word nuances</li> <li>• words/phrases</li> <li>• figurative language</li> <li>• references (e.g., thesaurus, dictionary, etc.)</li> <li>• expression</li> </ul>
Speaking and Listening	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• collaborative conversations</li> <li>• collaborative discussions</li> <li>• communication</li> <li>• main ideas/supporting details</li> <li>• facts/details</li> <li>• formal versus informal discourse</li> <li>• viewpoint/perspective</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• comprehension (e.g., questioning, clarifying, retelling, summarizing, paraphrasing)</li> <li>• active listening</li> <li>• oral communication (e.g., volume, pitch, intonation, phrasing, pace, modulation, facial expressions, verbal cues, gestures)</li> <li>• visual displays</li> </ul>
Foundational Skills for Reading	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• word recognition</li> <li>• word analysis</li> <li>• phonics</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• print features</li> <li>• reading accuracy</li> <li>• reading fluency</li> </ul>

**FIGURE 2.3**

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## Content Area Concepts



Science	Social Studies	Math
adaptability	change	algebra
change	citizenship/democracy	data analysis
conservation	civilization	estimation
diversity	conflict	function
energy	culture	geometry
environment	diversity	logical reasoning
equilibrium	economy	measurement
evolution	exploration	number
genetics	geography/climate	operation
gravity	government systems	order
light	immigration/migration	pattern

**FIGURE 2.4** (Continued)

FIGURE 2.4 (Continued)

Science	Social Studies	Math
magnetism matter organism scale and structure scientific method systems	imperialism interdependence justice nationalism politics religion social systems	probability proportions quantity ratio statistics symmetry
Visual Arts	Health	Macroconcepts (broad, interdisciplinary concepts)
aesthetic balance color contrast form line pattern perspective shadow shape texture unity	body system diet disease drug exercise family hygiene illness nutrition puberty wellness	change community connection form function identity interdependence movement order pattern perspective structure system

FIGURE 2.4

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- **Number of concepts.** Each essential understanding should forge a relationship between at least two concepts; oftentimes there are more than two.
- **Verbs.** Look at the verbs used to connect the concepts in each literature essential understanding that you read earlier; verbs are in italics for easy reference in these examples:
  - CHARACTERS can *change* over time through EVENTS, SETTING, or INTERACTION with other characters, which can, in turn, *shape* the PLOT.
  - Writers intentionally *craft* DIALOGUE TAGS to *enhance* the spoken words of CHARACTERS to *convey* TONE and ACTION.

In *Concept-Based Curriculum and Instruction for the Thinking Classroom* (2007), Erickson suggests that essential understandings should not include forms of the verb *to be*, such as *is*, *are*, *was*, or *were*. While essential understandings that use forms of the verb *to be* are not incorrect, they are invariably more sophisticated when they are rewritten using stronger

verbs. One reason they are higher level is that some verbs can be converted to concepts, which means the verbs give more mileage for conceptual intent. Consider *cooperate* as a verb doubling for the concept *cooperation*, or *discriminate* for *discrimination*. Finally, the verbs in essential understandings should be in the present tense. All told, verbs can turn a mediocre essential understanding into a stronger one. Weak example: *Conflict can be a result of societies dividing individuals into groups based on their background*. Stronger: *Societies might discriminate against groups of people based on their background, which can foster discord and erupt in conflict*. Review Figure 2.2 and locate the strong verbs in the essential understandings.

- **Importance factor.** One of the main points of establishing essential understandings and teaching around them is to have students come to realize an enduring truth. If you keep this end goal in mind while constructing your essential understandings, you will have successfully addressed what I call the importance factor. Figure 2.5 illustrates this idea. The examples in the left column are weak not just because of the verbs *to be*; they also seem incomplete in terms of what teachers want students to really understand and viscerally grasp. To merely state that *paragraphs are organized in a logical order in an informative paper* begs the questions, *Who cares? Why should students know this? What about it is important?* Plus, it is more a statement of fact than an essential understanding. If, however, I write *why* organization matters, then I've succeeded in writing a more sophisticated and complete essential understanding. So to answer the question, *Why is it worth knowing that paragraphs are organized logically?* I can respond, *Logically organizing paragraphs in a sequential fashion facilitates comprehension*. Let's try the second example: *Why is it worth knowing that context clues are what readers use to help understand words?* Because *using context clues provides readers with a means for deciphering unknown words, which supports overall comprehension*.

### Strong Versus Weak Essential Understandings I



Weak Essential Understandings	Stronger Essential Understandings
Paragraphs are organized in a logical order in an informative paper.	Logically organizing paragraphs in a sequential fashion facilitates comprehension.
Context clues are what readers use to help understand unfamiliar words.	Readers use context clues as a means for deciphering unknown words, which ultimately aids in overall comprehension.
It is important for writers to be aware of purpose and audience when they begin their writing project.	Knowing the purpose and audience at the outset of writing guides authors to incorporate the appropriate elements for a specific genre and focus on a target audience in their work.

**FIGURE 2.5**

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- **Transfer value.** As adults, we make connections and transfer knowledge repeatedly when we watch or listen to news reports, read editorials, encounter novel situations, and so forth. It actually helps us make sense of the world or gain deeper insights. In the same way, we need to create learning experiences for students so they can make similar connections and become more global, critical thinkers. When you write or find profound and

worthwhile essential understandings to represent what is important for students to retain beyond a course of study, you have successfully taken the idea of “transfer value” into account. If you stay on course with using these essential understandings to guide your students’ instruction, you will prime them to make key connections and transfer information to broaden their thinking. When students say something like the following, they have “arrived,” and you have aided them on their journey:

- *A few years ago I read the book Sacrifice, set in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692. The panic of witchcraft affected the characters as townspeople turned against each other. I also better understand the terror and ignorance of characters and their motivations in The Crucible now that I’m reading literature with a similar plotline and historical setting.*
- *Religious intolerance seems to be a recurring theme in history and even ironic. We learned before that one reason early settlers came to the New World was to practice religious freedom, but yet there was religious intolerance in many of the colonies. Then we learned that religious intolerance was evident all throughout history—Spanish Inquisition, pogroms in Russia, Holocaust. Now we continue to learn about religious intolerance all over the world today. It doesn’t seem that we’ve learned too much from our past mistakes.*

In addition to reviewing the essential understandings in Figure 2.2 with the aforementioned bullets in mind, think about or discuss with colleagues how some essential understandings can apply to different units of instruction across grades and subjects.

## SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS: TIME, INTELLECTUAL GROWTH, CLUSTERING

In the upcoming Exercise 3, “How Do Educators Create (or Revise) Essential Understandings?,” you will have a chance to practice writing and revising your own essential understandings. Before we delve into this exercise, I want to mention a few additional points for you to consider as you are working:

- **Time.** It is important to know the amount of time you have available to teach your targeted unit and find or craft essential understandings that take this factor into account. If you have three weeks for a unit, you do not want five statements; that wouldn’t be sufficient time to explore them all thoroughly. By the same token, avoid using more than six essential understandings for a comprehensive unit because that is probably about the maximum number you can aptly cover for a six- to eight-week unit. This is generally the case, but not always. So keep in mind how many understandings you will create based on the time you have at your disposal to teach your targeted unit.
- **Intellectual growth.** When you build or revise essential understandings, be aware that as students advance through the grades, the essential understandings should be commensurate with their growth and development and serve to continuously challenge them. You know that essential understandings are expressly written to form a relationship between at least two concepts that emanate from standards to articulate what students should understand. Therefore, there will undoubtedly be some of the same concepts from grade to grade, and it is important to determine what you want

students to glean as they become more adept learners. Note that there are many different ways that an essential understanding can be written using the same concepts.

For example, students will revisit *character* and *setting* repeatedly throughout their schooling. Following are several understandings that can be used with these two concepts for various grades and literary units of study. Some clearly overlap, so teachers can choose the language they prefer; others are more sophisticated, for older and advanced students:

- Settings can shape and transform characters' beliefs, feelings, and actions.
- Settings can facilitate growth and change for characters, thereby impacting the plot.
- Authors suggest settings through characters' dialectical and speech patterns.
- Settings can create a mood or atmosphere that impacts characters' motivations and actions.
- Settings can symbolize the emotional state of characters and propel the plot forward.
- Settings that provide a cultural context can foster character identity and newfound perspectives.
- Historical settings can influence the interactions among main and subordinate characters, which can impact the plot and contribute to the theme.
- Complex characters develop through their interactions with other characters and reactions to settings.

As students learn and apply more sophisticated reading strategies with more complex text, it is critical that they be required to apply and synthesize these—and, of course, other—concepts at a higher level. If teachers were to create the same understandings from the elementary school years into high school using the same concepts, the bar for students would be set too low for them to demonstrate higher learning and growth as they mature. Given two concepts, there are myriad ways to write essential understandings; so devise and choose appropriate ones based on your student population and the considerations I've shared.

- **Clustering.** As mentioned previously, essential understandings serve to foster critical thinking and problem solving, and to help students make connections and transfer knowledge. To support this goal, think about using the same essential understandings over two or three grade levels. As students approach different and more complex subject matter, topics, and texts, encourage them to see the relationships by using the same understandings for grade clusters (e.g., 3–5, 6–8, 9–10, 11–12). For example, you might use something like this for Grades 7 and 8: *Intolerance leads to unspeakable actions, which can desensitize communities.* It could pertain to units of study within and across these grades, such as the Crusades during a study of Medieval Europe, the conquistadors who destroyed civilizations, the Salem witch trials, the Trail of Tears, and slavery.

Review Figure 2.2, which has the essential understandings aligned to the CCR Anchor Standards for Reading. Could any of those serve for a tight cluster of grades? Teaching this way also supports the notion of curriculum mapping. Educators can build upon prior knowledge and introduce appropriately challenging material through horizontal articulation across subjects and units of study in the same grade, plus vertically between different grade levels. When essential understandings guide instruction and when there is an intentional fluid progression of skill building and conceptual focus, students can more easily see connections and transfer knowledge from subject to subject and grade to grade.

## CONSTRUCTING YOUR OWN ESSENTIAL UNDERSTANDINGS

Chapter 1 guided you through two exercises: (1) “What Is the Best Way to Group Standards?” and (2) “How Are Standards Used to Determine What Students Should Know?” At this juncture, you will embark upon Exercise 3: “How Do Educators Create (or Revise) Essential Understandings?” It includes step-by-step directions to help you practice creating your own essential understandings. I must admit, creating rigorous, meaningful essential understandings is challenging work. There is a process to follow that I delineate, and I find that those who abort it and jump ahead do not necessarily create the most enriching statements. Invariably, they end up forging ahead only to find that if they had started with Step 1 they would have had a stronger end result. Therefore, I suggest following each step in order. After this exercise and the next one in Chapter 3 for essential unit and guiding questions, you will have completed the components shown in Figure 2.6, “Unit Template Excerpt 2.” The number of lesson guiding questions listed in the figure that follows is merely an example. You will determine how many are needed to best accommodate your unit goals.

### Unit Template Excerpt 2

Unit: \_\_\_\_\_

Subject: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade: \_\_\_\_\_ Timing: \_\_\_\_\_

ELA Common Core Standards		Knowledge
Content Area Standards: _____ (if applicable)		Knowledge
Essential Understandings	Essential Unit Guiding Questions	Lesson Guiding Questions
1.	1.	Lesson (L) 1.1: L 1.2:
2.	2.	Lesson (L) 2.1: L 2.2: L 2.3:
3.	3.	Lesson (L) 3.1: L 3.2:

**FIGURE 2.6**



## EXERCISE 3: HOW DO EDUCATORS CREATE (OR REVISE) ESSENTIAL UNDERSTANDINGS?

### STEP 1: Assemble Materials

Before beginning, lay out the tools you'll need for your targeted unit.

- English language arts (ELA) Common Core Standards that you grouped (Chapter 1, Exercise 1) and entered on the unit template
- The knowledge list you created (Chapter 1, Exercise 2), which should also be on the unit template
- Textbook, materials, and resources tied to the unit
- Laptop or paper and pencil

... and a little chocolate wouldn't hurt.

### STEP 2: Find and Make a List of Concepts Embedded in the Standards

- Review the standards on your unit template and systematically make a list of all the concepts that are in each standard on a separate sheet of paper or a new page on the computer.
- Use Figure 2.3, "English Language Arts Concepts," and Figure 2.4, "Content Area Concepts" (as applicable), to assist with this task.

As you might have noticed earlier when you previewed Figure 2.3, the concepts are categorized based on the ELA Common Core headings (e.g., Reading Standards for Literature, Reading Standards for Informational Text, etc.). This figure also provides some concepts in more than one category since there is a great deal of overlap. Figure 2.4 includes a column for macroconcepts. Basically, these are overarching megaconcepts that can be used across subjects and grades. Because they are broad and encompass many concepts, they are typically used for crafting interdisciplinary units. However, feel free to use them for your unit, as needed, even if you are addressing one content area.

If you see concepts in either Figure 2.3 or Figure 2.4 that are related to your grouped standards but are not stated explicitly in the standards, feel free to include them. Also, you might find concepts that you listed in the *knowledge* component; it is fine to record these again on your concept list. You will need this list of concepts that you generate for the next step, so keep it handy. If you typed the list on a computer, I suggest you print it out.

### STEP 3: Brainstorm Statements

- Keep your tools out for reference and gather the concepts you generated in Step 2.
- Consider the age and readiness level of your students and—above all—the essence of what you want them to glean from this unit.
- Look at your concept list, and begin brainstorming statements that include relationships between at least two concepts. Truly brainstorm by avoiding any conversation or critiquing as you list statements; know that in the next step you will edit and revise to find just the right verb or collapse statements that appear too similar. To get started, you



might have a conversation with colleagues (or yourself) about the key takeaways from the unit using this beginning frame: *Students will understand that. . .* What follows this phrase should be a complete sentence rather than a fragment. Check that this is the case by removing the sentence starter to see if what you have left is a complete thought.

Another suggestion is to use a formula to write essential understandings. Take a look at the types of formulas shown in Figure 2.7 and choose what works for you or modify what I have suggested. Note that concepts can be embedded in a phrase, such as *understanding purpose and audience, comparing and contrasting texts, formulating ideas, and punctuating sentences*. Remember that at this point you are brainstorming, so merely write down statements; you’ll have an opportunity to revise them in the following step. I even advocate teaching students how to articulate a theme for a reading selection or craft a thesis statement using one or both of the constructions I’m sharing here.



### Ideas for Formulating Essential Understandings

CONCEPT +	VERB(S) +	CONCEPT +	ANSWER: So what? Why is this important? How? What about it?
Communities	change and grow	throughout time	by the cultural and religious contributions of people who live there.
Music	can serve	as a political, social, and cultural vehicle	for fostering change, action, and solidarity.
Writers	make more	convincing arguments	
	and support	explanations more clearly	when they cite salient quotes from a text to support their assertions and analyses.

CONCEPTUAL PHRASE +	ANSWER: So what? Why is this important? How? What about it?
To counter unjust leaders and support righteousness,	individuals might courageously help others to survive.
To gain both general knowledge and discipline-specific expertise,	people read a wide range of quality materials and refine and share what they glean through writing and speaking.
To present an argument that effectively convinces others,	writers must articulate a clear position, evaluate and use evidence to support it, and address counterclaims.
Knowing the purpose and audience at the outset of writing	allows authors to incorporate the appropriate elements for a specific genre and focus on a target audience.

<b>CONCEPTUAL PHRASE +</b>	<b>ANSWER: So what? Why is this important? How? What about it?</b>
Engaging in physical activity and eating nutritional meals	promote optimal health, which can contribute to longevity.
Evaluating and choosing multiple credible sources	enable writers to identify effective reasons and sound evidence to support their assertions.

**FIGURE 2.7**

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A word to the wise: If you are using your state or district document as a guide, or even a published textbook that claims to include big ideas or enduring understandings, be sure that the essential understandings you find from these resources follow the criteria I have explained. Many times I find resources that purport to include essential understandings, but in actuality are providing statements of fact; these are better suited for the knowledge section of your unit template.

**STEP 4: Revise the Brainstormed Statements**

Revise the statements you have brainstormed. As you do so, avoid overlap. Combine similar statements and/or wordsmith them to arrive at one essential understanding that can stand alone. If some statements subsume others, then merge them or just keep one statement that is the strongest. As a brief example, what follows are similar statements to think about or discuss with colleagues. You could select, merge, or rewrite any of them to arrive at the one that best represents what you want students to understand about the literary work:

- Settings impact characters’ actions.
- Settings shape and transform characters.
- Settings can change characters.
- Characters evolve as they encounter various settings.
- Settings can facilitate growth and change for characters, thereby impacting the plot.

Also keep in mind the considerations that were discussed earlier in this chapter and that I reemphasize here: verbs, importance factor, and transfer value.

- **Verbs.** Use Figure 2.8, “Verbs That Show Relationships,” to revise your statements so that there are no forms of the verb *to be* to connect concepts. In addition, make sure you write present-tense verbs. Once you write past-tense verbs, you have grounded your statement with an event, situation, or person from the past. You want your statements to potentially be used in different situations across time.



## Verbs That Show Relationships

act	elicit	initiate	recommend
activate	employ	institute	reconcile
ascertain	enable	integrate	reduce
build	encourage	interact	regulate
change	energize	interpret	reinforce
construct	enhance	introduce	relate
contrast	establish	invent	resolve
contribute	estimate	lead to	respond
control	evolve	manage	restore
convert	examine	manipulate	revitalize
cooperate	expand	map	separate
correspond	explain	model	sequence
create	expound	modify	shape
decipher	express	motivate	share
define	facilitate	offer	show
demonstrate	formulate	organize	simplify
describe	foster	originate	solve
design	generate	perform	stimulate
determine	guide	persuade	structure
develop	identify	point to	suggest
devise	illustrate	precipitate	support
differentiate	impact	prevent	transfer
direct	improve	produce	transform
discriminate	incorporate	promote	transition
display	increase	prompt	translate
disseminate	induce	propel	transmit
distinguish	infer	propose	uncover
distribute	influence	provide	use
dominate	inform	provoke	utilize
drive	inhibit	question	

**FIGURE 2.8**

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- **Importance factor.** Make sure your essential understandings answer the question of why the content is important to learn or what makes it so salient. These examples—along with others in this chapter and elsewhere in the book—will help elucidate this point:

- *Individuals might courageously help others to survive* does not provide information about why individuals are prompted to stick their necks out. This shows a more comprehensive understanding: *To counter unjust leaders and support righteousness, individuals might courageously help others to survive.*
  - *The structures and behaviors of living organisms help them adapt to their environments.* This doesn't answer the question *why*? A stronger statement would include this at the end: *so they can survive.*
  - Try this: *People cause changes to the environment.* What about it? So what? This reflects a deeper essential truth: *People cause changes to the environment, which can impact organisms' survival and reproduction.*
  - Consider math: *People can display the same data in different ways, which may lead to various interpretations and conclusions.* If the statement were merely *People can display the same data in different ways,* it would not be complete in furnishing the essence of the unit goal.
  - Any subject matter is ripe for creating essential understandings. An art teacher might make the point of why considering others' perceptions about artwork is a central principle in her teaching: *People can listen to someone's beliefs and reasoning about a work of art to gain a new perspective and perhaps a greater appreciation for the art piece.*
- **Transfer value.** The goal is to prime students to connect and transfer what they learn within and across grades and even subjects; therefore, it is important to create conceptually based, general statements that can allow for this transference. If you are too specific and insert, for example, Navajo, Amelia Earhart, the Versailles Treaty, Hester Prynne, or the Mississippi River, they cannot make these connections. Instead, replace any proper nouns with general concepts. When you create your lesson guiding questions featured in the next chapter, you will address the specifics of the unit and include the pertinent factual knowledge. Plus, this specific information should be addressed in the knowledge component. The glory of essential understandings is that they are enduring, so refrain from using proper nouns or past-tense verbs, as illustrated in Figure 2.9.

## Strong Versus Weak Essential Understandings 2



Weak Essential Understandings	Red Flags	Stronger Essential Understandings
Virginia communities have a long history and have changed greatly from the time of the early explorers to today.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● <i>Virginia</i> shouldn't be used because it is a proper noun; the statement would only work for this state.</li> <li>● The verbs could be stronger.</li> <li>● Although there are concepts—<i>community, history, explorers</i>—there are other concepts that should be included that contribute to change. What is really worth knowing is why communities change, a question that isn't fully addressed.</li> </ul>	Communities change and grow throughout time by the cultural and religious contributions of the people who live there.

**FIGURE 2.9** (Continued)

FIGURE 2.9 (Continued)

Weak Essential Understandings	Red Flags	Stronger Essential Understandings
In <i>The Hundred Dresses</i> , Maddie realizes that standing by while Wanda is bullied makes her an accomplice and just as guilty of bullying Wanda as the girls who taunt her.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The essential understandings should be void of proper nouns: <i>The Hundred Dresses</i>, Maddie, Wanda.</li> <li>• The statement is specific to a work of literature even though it contains global concepts.</li> </ul>	Those who witness an act of bullying and fail to take action perpetuate cruel and unacceptable behavior, thereby serving as accomplices in persecuting others.

FIGURE 2.9

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### STEP 5: Record Your Essential Understandings

- Once you have crafted your essential understandings, logically sequence them based on how you will teach the unit. You will see two places on the unit template for entering essential understandings. (See Chapter 1, Exercise 1, for options on how to access the unit template if you haven't done so already.)
- On page 1 of the unit template, list all of the essential understandings and associated questions so you can see an outline of the whole unit.
- Note that page 2 and the similarly formatted pages that follow are dedicated to each essential understanding and other template components that will be discussed in the chapters that follow.

## SHARING ESSENTIAL UNDERSTANDINGS WITH YOUR STUDENTS

So should teachers share essential understandings with their students? The essential understandings basically give away what you want all students to realize, so if you show or read them, it is most effective to do so near the end of the unit. Also, keep in mind that educators write essential understandings to gain clarity about the direction of a unit and its outcomes based on standards. They serve to keenly identify targeted goals prior to teaching. As such, they are written in adult language, so not all students can decipher them. Unit guiding questions, which are the subject of the next chapter, are intentionally written in language suitable for students' age and readiness and used during teaching. If you wanted to also share essential understandings, do not water them down. Instead, write them for you—the professional—then substitute difficult vocabulary for age-appropriate language. Show the connections among the questions the students explored throughout the unit and the associated essential understandings. Also, you might choose to conduct one of the following exercises through discussion or writing. Any would help to further foster the goal of having students engage in thinking critically and making connections.

### Option 1

In small groups or as a class, have students brainstorm a list of lessons and activities they have completed during the unit. Then ask them to work in pairs or trios to create general statements about what they learned based on the list they generated. Tell them their statements cannot include proper nouns. You can help guide them to take the factual information from the lessons and see if they can arrive at a larger understanding. Promote conversation through these kinds of questions:

- *Why did we learn about this?*
- *Can you make any connections between this unit and other units we have studied?*
- *Can you make connections about life based on what you learned?*
- *Did you learn how to solve any problems through our work in this unit? How so?*
- *Can you think of a theme based on what we studied much like you would consider the theme or central message of a text?*

### Option 2

- Write each factual piece of information that was presented in the unit on a separate card. Gather the fact cards together to make a set.
- Distribute a set of fact cards to each small group. Have the groups categorize the cards in a way that makes sense.
- Ask students to carefully study all the cards in one category at a time. At the top of each category, have them write a general statement on a blank card that does not include any of the proper nouns that are on the teacher-prepared fact cards they grouped.
- Have each group share and discuss these generalizations with the whole class. You can then reveal the essential understandings and see if any are similar to what students created as a springboard for discussion.

### Option 3

- As a class, generate a list of the different lessons and activities students completed in the unit.
- Distribute concept cards to small groups—for example, *diversity, patterns, conflict, friendship*, and so on.
- Instruct groups to identify the concept cards that are associated with what they learned, and use these concepts to create general statements to share with the class.

## LOOKING AHEAD

One significant goal for students on the journey toward deep understanding is to make connections and transfer knowledge. Using essential understandings and guiding questions help support students in this endeavor. In Chapter 3, you will learn more about guiding questions—specifically, the difference between unit and lesson guiding questions, why these questions are so important, how to go about creating them for your students, and ways to use them during instruction. I also define and share a process for creating text-dependent questions to facilitate close reading of complex text.

