

Backward Design

Understanding by Design, a 1998 book by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, offers a powerful framework for designing courses that begins with identifying desired learning outcomes for students, and then works backwards to determine acceptable evidence of those learning outcomes, and then finishes the process by planning learning experiences and instruction to help students reach those learning goals.

In most cases, a helpful way to design a course is to proceed through the following phases:

1. Identify desired results — GOALS

Organize your course around your core learning goals to foster enduring understandings in your students. Adapt your goals according to student feedback and readiness.

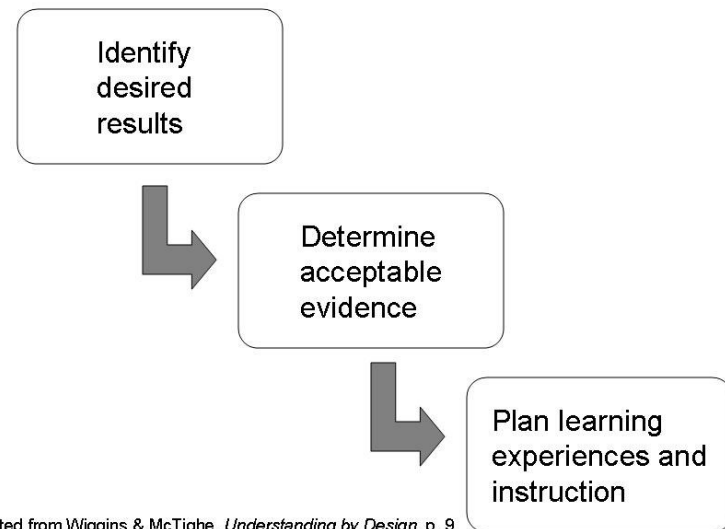
2. Determine acceptable evidence — PROGRESS

Assess students' ability to meet the learning goals, both at the beginning of the course and throughout the course. Are they getting it? What progress are they making? What kinds of assessments will enable students to demonstrate that they are making progress toward the course's learning goals?

3. Plan learning experiences and instruction — PRACTICE

In class sessions and homework assignments, give students a chance to practice their learning—to engage new material and apply it. Adapt your teaching strategies as needed, according to the ongoing assessments you do of student progress.

Stages in the Backward Design Process



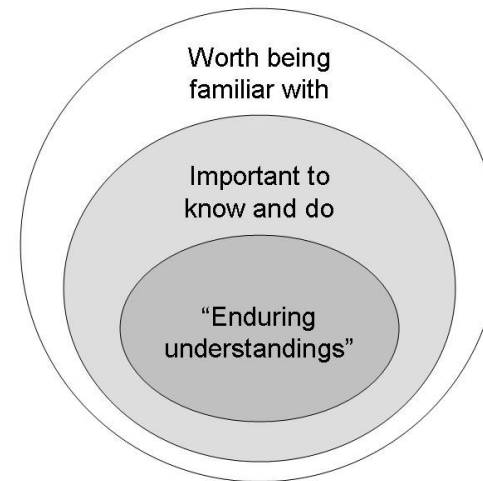
Adapted from Wiggins & McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, p. 9.

Identifying Learning Goals

As there is always more content than can be reasonably addressed in a course, Wiggins and McTighe suggest the following framework for helping to make decisions during the first stage of the course design process. By thinking about your course goals in terms of the following three categories, you will be better able to make the hard decisions about what to include in the course.

1. **Worth being familiar with** – What should participants hear, read, view, explore or otherwise encounter?
2. **Important to know and do** – What knowledge and skills should participants master? What facts, concepts and principles should they know? What processes, strategies and methods should they learn to use?
3. **“Enduring understandings”** – What are big ideas and important understandings participants should retain? These are the things that you want students to remember after they’ve forgotten the details of the course.

Establishing Curricular Priorities



Adapted from Wiggins & McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, p. 10.