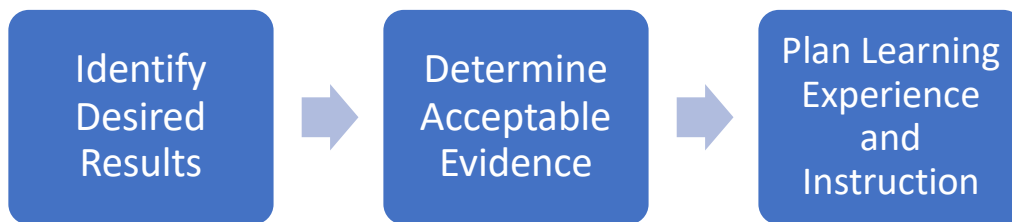# BACKWARD DESIGN

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THE MODEL

Backward Design – The Model

Understanding By Design, written by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe (1998), offers a framework for designing courses and content units called "Backward Design." The model enables instructors to plan lessons and courses focusing on student learning. There are three sequential stages in Backward Design:

Identify Desired Results	→	Determine Acceptable Evidence	→	Plan Learning Experience and Instruction

"Backward Design" model encourages the instructor to establish the purpose of doing something before implementing it into the curriculum. Once the learning goals, or desired results have been identified, instructors will have an easier time developing assessments and instruction around grounded learning outcomes.

However, when teachers are designing lessons or courses, they often focus more on teaching rather than learning. For many years, teachers have been planning lessons and units of instruction like this:

Step 1: Identify a topic or content that needs to be covered

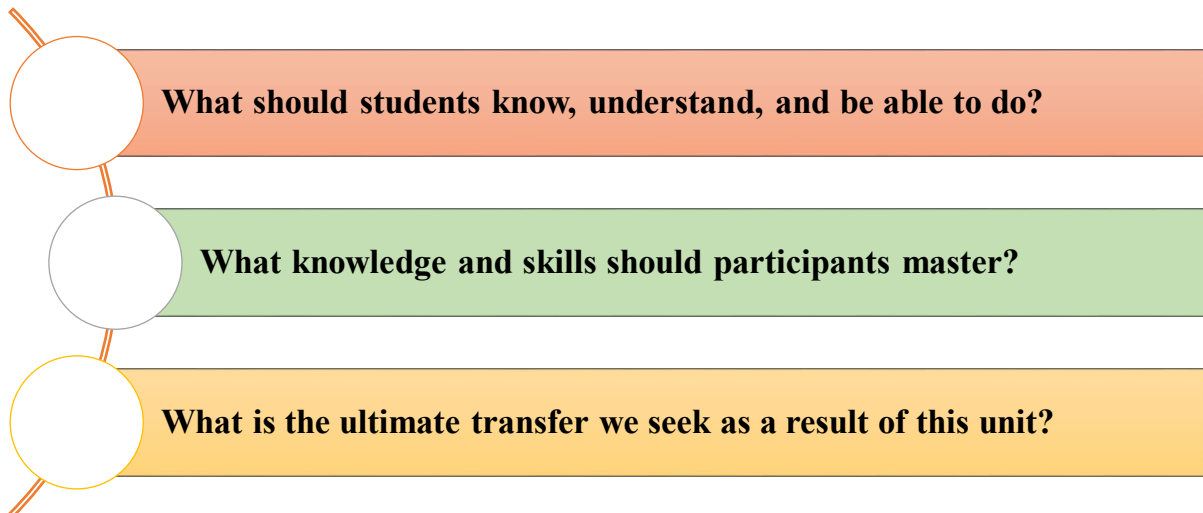**Step 2:** Develop assessments around their learning activities

Step 3: Attempt to draw connections to the learning goals of the course

In contrast, the backward design approach has instructors consider the learning goals of the course first. Therefore, traditional methods of design can lead to the **misconception** that learning is the activity when, in fact, learning is derived from a careful consideration of the meaning of the activity.

Stage 1 – Identify the desired results

Wiggins and McTighe recommend establishing curricular priorities in the first place. They suggest that the instructors ask themselves the following three questions as they progressively focus on the most valuable content:

What should students know, understand, and be able to do?

What knowledge and skills should participants master?

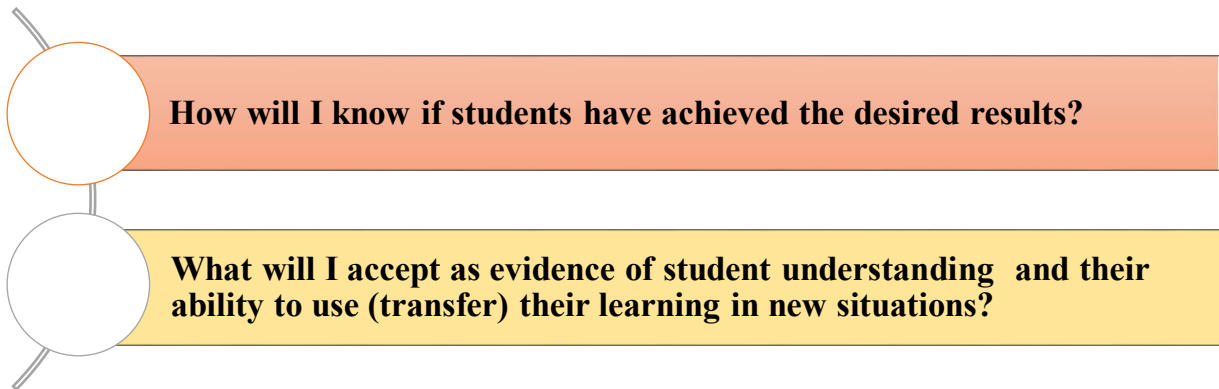**What is the ultimate transfer we seek as a result of this unit?**

Therefore, the first stage of backward design is to write learning outcomes. Instructors will have a clearer vision of what evidence students can provide to show they have achieved or have started to attain the goals of the course. For further information on how to develop learning outcomes, please refer to **Writing Learning Outcomes.**

Stage 2 – Determine Acceptable Evidence

The second stage of backward design requires instructors to consider the assessments and performance tasks students will complete in order to demonstrate evidence of understanding and learning. When the assessments don't match the learning goals, it becomes a frustrating experience for students and instructors. You can consider the following two questions at this stage:

How will I know if students have achieved the desired results?

What will I accept as evidence of student understanding and their ability to use (transfer) their learning in new situations?
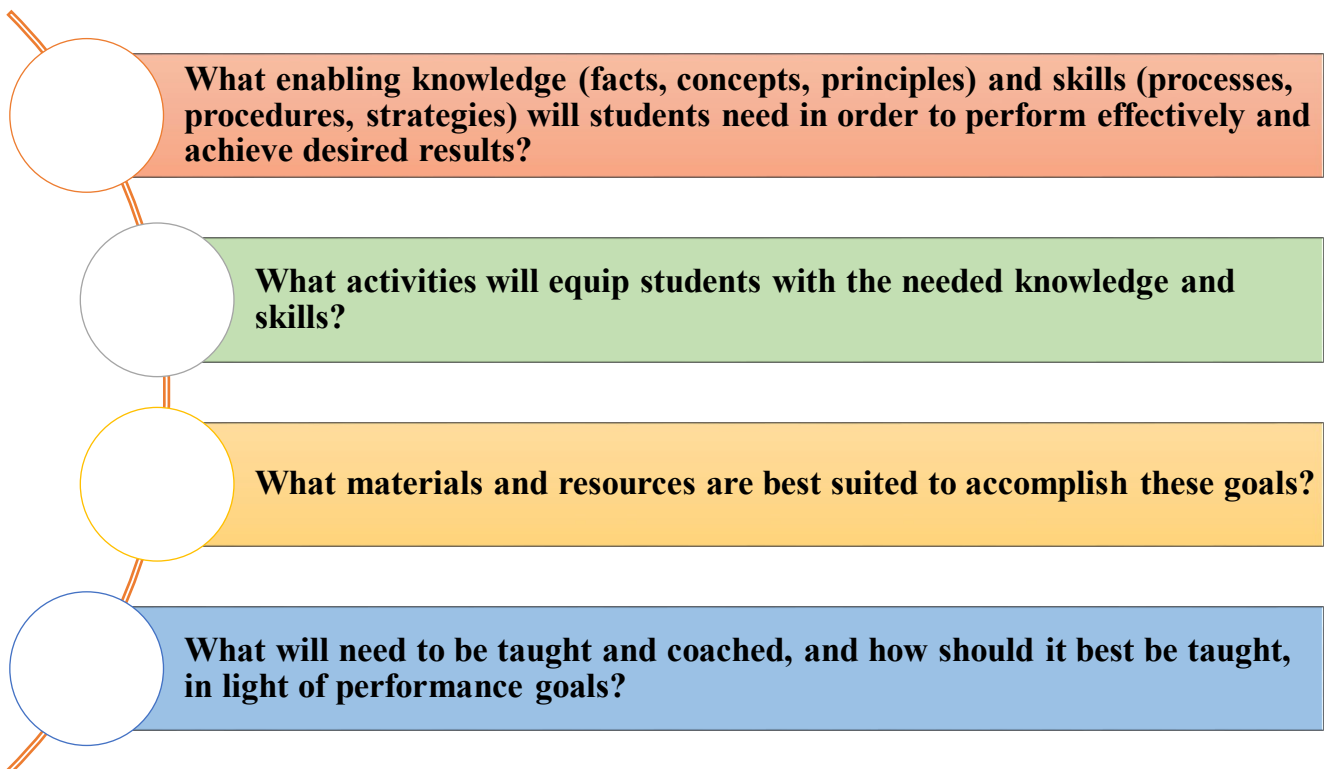
The backward design approach encourages us to think about a unit or course in terms of the collected assessment evidence needed to document and validate that desired learning has been achieved so that course is not just content to be covered or series of learning activities.

For further information, please refer to **Formative and Summative Assessment.** You may also refer to **Reflection Questions** in Appendix A to evalute

Stage 3 – Plan Learning Experience and Instruction

The final stage of backward design is when instructors begin to consider how they will teach. With the learning outcome and assessment methods established, the instructor will have a clearer vision of which strategies would work best to provide students with the resources and information necessary to attain the goals of the course. You can consider the questions below.

What enabling knowledge (facts, concepts, principles) and skills (processes, procedures, strategies) will students need in order to perform effectively and achieve desired results?

What activities will equip students with the needed knowledge and skills?

What materials and resources are best suited to accomplish these goals?

What will need to be taught and coached, and how should it best be taught, in light of performance goals?

For further information, please refer to **Teaching Strategies.**

The template below might help you understand and use backward design in designing or redesigning your courses. You can reach the editable version of the template here.

Appendix A

Reflection Questions

Questions to reflect on	Comments
What assessment tools will I use (i.e., assignments, exams, projects, collaborative work, peer assessment)?	
Do you select assessment instruments sequenced, varied, and appropriate to the content being assessed?	
Are assessments consistent with learning outcomes and learning activities?	
Do you state course grading policy and late submissions in the syllabus?	
Does assessment occur before, during, and after learning?	
Do you provide rubrics or desired criteria to make it transparent?	
Do you provide opportunities for self assessment?	

References

McTighe, J., & Wiggins, G. (1998). *Understanding by design professional development workbook*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

Bowen, R. S. (2017). Understanding by Design. Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching. Retrieved from https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/understanding-by-design/

Backward Design: The Basics (2020) by Jennifer Gonzalez. Cult of Pedagogy. Retrieved from https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/backward-design-basics/

Backward Design Process as a Curriculum Development Model.

https://oer.pressbooks.pub/curriculumessentials/chapter/chapter-backward-design-process-as-a-curriculum-development-model/

What is Backward Design? G. Wiggins & J. McTighe, chapter 1 in Understanding by Design (1998). https://educationaltechnology.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/backward-design.pdf

Further Resources

- Backward Design. Office of Undergraduate Education. University of Colorado Boulder.

- Understanding by Design Framework – ASCD by Jay McTighe and Grant Wiggins.

- Grant Wiggins - Understanding by Design (1 of 2).

- Grant Wiggins - Understanding by Design (2 of 2)

- What is Understanding by Design? Interview with Jay McTighe.