

# CHAPTER 3

## DEFINING ACHIEVEMENT STANDARDS FOR ASSESSMENT

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### CHAPTER FOCUS

This chapter answers the following guiding question:

What kinds of achievement must teachers be able to assess in the classroom?

From your study of this chapter, you will understand the following:

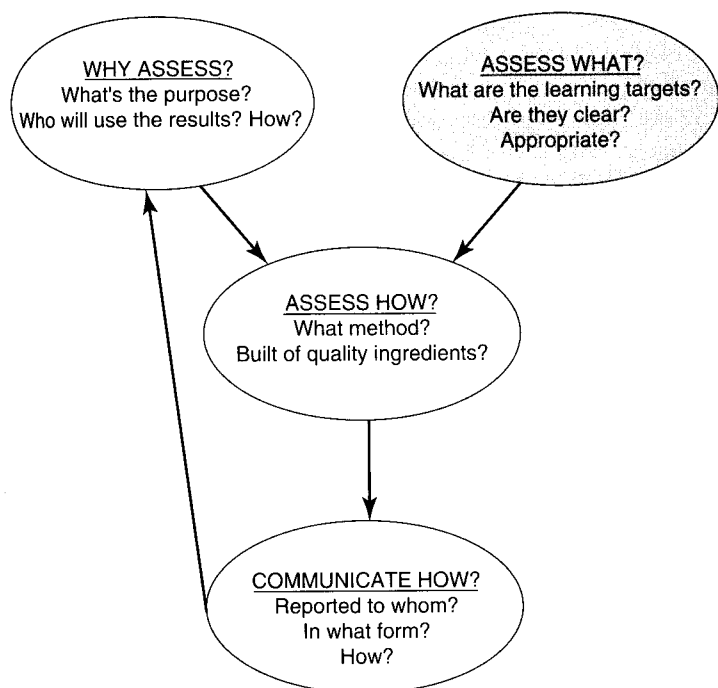
1. Clear and appropriate achievement standards and targets are central to sound assessment and student success.
2. Sound achievement standards and targets have clear, identifiable attributes.
3. Teachers must be prepared to assess in their classrooms four different, but interrelated, kinds of achievement targets, plus dispositions.

### Validity from a Different Perspective

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Chapter 2 was about one key to valid classroom assessment: sound assessments arise from a clear sense of purpose. We must know why we are conducting the assessment—exactly who will use the assessment and how. Different users need different information in different forms at different times to do their jobs. Every assessment must be valid for its intended purpose; that is, it must serve its intended user well. Sometimes the users are students themselves trying to decide if the learning is worth the risk of trying for it and the effort required to attain it. Sometimes the users are teachers trying to diagnose student needs. Other times users are principals, parents, school board members, and so on. Each brings different information needs to the assessment context.

In this chapter, we move on to the next key to excellence in classroom assessment: clear and appropriate achievement targets (Figure 3.1). What do we expect our

**Figure 3.1**

Clear targets: A key to effective classroom assessment

students to achieve? Teachers who cannot define the student characteristic(s) that they wish to assess will have difficulty developing assessment exercises and scoring procedures that reflect their expectations. Further, they will find it impossible both to share a clear vision of success with their students and to select instructional strategies that promise and deliver student success.

Only after clarifying the achievement target can the assessor pick an appropriate assessment method and develop and implement it properly so as to produce a high-fidelity representation of student achievement. Assessments that appropriately cover the material to be learned are said to meet standards of *content validity*.

### Defining Achievement Targets

Achievement targets define academic success—what we want students to know and be able to do. Visualize a target with its concentric circles and a bull's-eye in the middle. The center circle defines the highest level of performance students can

achieve; a very high-quality piece of writing, the most fluent oral reading, the highest possible score on a math problem-solving test. Each consecutive outside ring on the target defines a level of performance further from the highest level. As students improve, they need to understand that they are progressing toward the bull's-eye.

Our mission as teachers in standards-driven schools is to help the largest possible percentage of our students to get there. To reach that goal, we must take charge of defining where "there" is. What are the attributes of a good piece of writing, such as Emily's end-of-year sample from Chapter 1? How does this level of performance differ from performance of lesser quality—that is, from the outer rings of the target? Ms. Weathersby knew, and gave Emily the insights she needed to understand as well.

I have adopted the target metaphor to permit me to point out now and repeatedly throughout this book that students can hit any target that they see and that holds still for them. But if they are guessing at what success looks like, in effect trying to learn while blindfolded, success will be a random event for them.

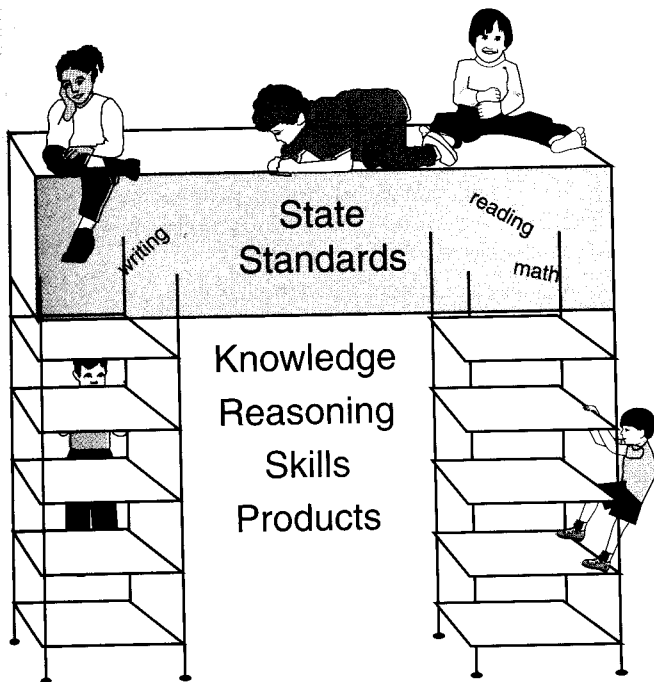
Schools use a variety of labels for their achievement expectations. Some call them *goals* and *objectives*. Others refer to *scope* and *sequence*. Still others label them *proficiencies* or *competencies*. More recently, we refer to *standards* and *benchmarks*. These terms all refer to the same basic thing: what we want students to know and be able to do.

I suggest that we think of them in this way: States and local school districts have developed academic achievement *standards*. These are the focus of state and district standardized tests. However, as teachers, we know that it is never the case that students attain mastery of standards in an instant. Rather, they progress through ascending levels of proficiency over time as they journey up to a place where they are ready to demonstrate that they have met the state standard. This is illustrated in Figure 3.2.

The scaffolding on which they climb during the process of becoming competent can be thought of as *enabling classroom-level achievement targets*. They must be the focus of classroom instruction and day-to-day classroom assessment if students ultimately are to arrive at success. Figure 3.3 provides two examples of state standards deconstructed into their enabling classroom-level achievement targets.

Our standards and achievement targets form a solid foundation for classroom assessment when they meet the following criteria:

1. *Center on Important Learnings*—Academic achievement expectations cannot merely be a matter of local opinion. Rather, they must be steeped in the best thinking of leading experts in the field. We don't get to vote on what our local faculty means by "good writer." Those traits have been clearly defined in our professional literature. Nor is it merely a matter of individual teacher opinion of what it means to do good science or solve math problems appropriately. As teachers, it is our personal and collective responsibility to remain in touch with our professional literature and know the most current thinking in the fields we teach.
2. *Are Unambiguously Stated and Public*—Our achievement expectations must be written in clear language, offered in public, and include student-friendly versions. When achievement targets are clearly stated, all who read and paraphrase them interpret them to mean essentially the same thing. Similarly, one criterion by which we should judge the appropriateness of



**Figure 3.2**  
Relationship of standards to enabling  
classroom targets

our achievement expectations is our ability to provide samples of student work to illustrate different levels of proficiency.

Once stated in these terms, our expectations should be made public for all—school and community—to see and understand. First and foremost, this includes our students. I urge that we transform our classroom achievement targets into student-friendly versions that we are prepared to share with our students from the very beginning of their learning. This represents one of several specific strategies that I will share on how to use assessment FOR learning.

3. *Are Organized to Unfold in Proper Order Over Time Within and Across Grades*—

The achievement expectations held as important in any particular classroom cannot be merely a matter of the judgment of teachers at that grade level. Rather, they must fit into a continuously progressing curriculum that guides instruction across grade levels in that school and district. The overall curriculum should define ascending levels of competence that spiral through grade levels, mapping a journey to academic excellence. Each teacher's goals and objectives, therefore, must arise directly from what has come before and lead to what will follow.

Because of differences in academic capabilities, students will ascend that continuous-progress curriculum at vastly different rates. Some will zoom, others will crawl very slowly. But please realize that the path to academic success doesn't change as a function of how fast they travel it. Prerequisites will remain foundations for what follows. They must be mapped to guide progressive learning—for students with learning disabilities, for midrange students, and for those who are gifted and talented.

**Sample State Standard**

*History:* Students will evaluate different interpretations of historical events.

*The teacher must translate this into relevant classroom targets:*

*Knowledge and Understanding:* Students must know and understand each historical event, and must understand each of the alternative interpretations to be evaluated. The teacher must determine if students are to know those things outright or if they can use reference materials to retrieve the required knowledge.

*Reasoning:* Evaluative reasoning requires judgment about the quality of each interpretation. Thus students must demonstrate both an understanding of the criteria by which one judges the quality of an interpretation and the ability to apply these criteria.

*Performance Skills:* None required

*Products:* None required

**Sample State Standard**

*Writing:* Students will use styles appropriate for their audience and purpose, including proper use of voice, word choice, and sentence fluency.

*The teacher must translate this into relevant classroom targets:*

*Knowledge and Understanding:* Writers must possess appropriate understanding of the concept of style as evidenced in voice, word choice, and sentence structure. In addition, students must possess knowledge of the topic they are to write about.

*Reasoning:* Writers must be able to figure out how to make sound voice, word choice, and sentence construction decisions while composing original text. The assessment must provide evidence of this ability.

*Performance Skills:* One of two kinds of performance will be required. Either respondents will write longhand or will compose text on a keyboard. Each requires its own kind of skill competence.

*Products:* The final evidence of competence will be written products that present evidence of the ability to write effectively to different audiences.

**Figure 3.3**

Converting state standards to classroom achievement targets

- Typically, these roadmaps to academic success are created by teams of experienced teachers for use across the school district by all teachers. But when that has not been done, you must map the journey for your own students. This requires that you become a competent master of the standards your students are expected to meet. More about this in item 5.
4. *Are Manageable in Number and Scope*—It is always the case that time and resources available to promote student learning are limited. Similarly, students vary in the rate at which they are capable of learning. And achievement expectations vary in the demands they place on teacher and learner. It is essential that these variables be considered in defining each teacher's assigned

responsibilities. In the productive classroom assessment environment, the amount to be learned fits within those limited resources. Too much overwhelms, too little frustrates. Both excesses discourage both teacher and learner.

5. *Fall Within the Teacher's Repertoire*—As a classroom teacher, it will fall to you to deliver instruction and to conduct classroom assessments that focus on an assigned set of achievement expectations. To fulfill this responsibility, you must become a confident, competent master of the achievement targets that you expect your students to hit. This doesn't mean, for example, that elementary teachers need to be masters of high school physics. But it does mean these teachers must thoroughly and completely understand those physics concepts that their students must master at this particular point on their journey toward high school physics and beyond. If they do not, then important prerequisites will be missing. This dooms students to inevitable later failure.

#### **An Example:**

Figure 3.4 presents sample learning requirements for the state of Wisconsin as transformed by the Milwaukee Public Schools. This example centers on one Language Arts standards, in this case in writing, that Wisconsin school leaders feel are important for their students. The standard, written at a general statewide level of specificity at the top, is clearly stated and specific. Most importantly, the Milwaukee team made sure the learning requirements are vertically articulated within and across grade levels (Col. 1). A sample of that progression appears in the figure. Further, achievement expectations at each level are transformed into student- and community-friendly vocabulary (Cols. 2 & 3). In this form, they provide a foundation for assessments that both support and verify learning—assessments OF and FOR learning.

## The Benefits of Clear and Appropriate Targets

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The energy you invest in becoming clear about your classroom targets will pay big dividends.

### Control Over Your Professional Success

One major benefit of defining specific achievement targets is that you set the limits of your own professional responsibility. These limits provide you with a standard by which to gauge your own success as a teacher. In short, defining targets helps you control your own professional destiny. The better you become at bringing your students to mastery of your delimited learning outcomes, the more successful you become as a teacher. The thoughtful use of classroom assessment can help.

As a community of professionals, I think all of us must take responsibility for our own success. If I succeed as a teacher and my students hit the target, I want acknowledgement of that success. If my students fail to hit the target I want to know it, and I want to know why they failed.

**Wisconsin Content Standard:** Students in Wisconsin will write clearly and effectively to share information and knowledge, to influence and persuade, to create and entertain.

MPS learning target	MPS student-friendly language	MPS public language
<p><b>Grade 2</b>            B.2.1—Communicate ideas in writing using complete sentences sequentially organized around a specific topic for a variety of audiences and purposes.            B.2.2—Independently create multiple drafts of writing in a variety of situations.            B.2.3—Correctly compose complete sentences.</p>	<p>B.2.1—I can organize my ideas into a paragraph with a main idea and details by using a web.            B.2.2—I can write a first draft and then make it better.            B.2.3—I can write a sentence that begins with a capital letter, ends with an end mark and has a subject and a verb.</p>	<p>Students will:            B.2.1—write in complete sentences organized around a topic. Write for different purposes; for example, to entertain or to provide information.            B.2.2—create and improve a piece of writing through multiple drafts.            B.2.3—write complete sentences that contain subjects and predicates.</p>
<p><b>Grade 3</b>            B.3.1—Organize sentences into paragraphs to create meaningful communication for a variety of audiences and purposes.            B.3.2—Independently apply revision and editing strategies to create clear writing in a variety of situations.            B.3.3—Employ standard American English including correct grammar to effectively communicate ideas in writing.</p>	<p>B.3.1—I can write paragraphs with main ideas and details to share my ideas with others.            B.3.2—I can change my writing to make it easier to read and understand.            B.3.3—I can use correct nouns and verbs when I write, for example: The boys were playing outside. Instead of: The boys was playing outside.</p>	<p>Students will:            B.3.1—write a variety of well organized paragraphs that contain main ideas and details.            B.3.2—improve writing by revising and editing, for example, choosing specific words and applying proper grammar, spelling, and punctuation.            B.3.3—use standard American English to communicate ideas in writing.</p>
<p><b>Grade 4</b>            B.4.1—Prepare multi-paragraph writing, adapting style and structure to suit a variety of audiences and purposes.            B.4.2—Independently employ purposeful revision and editing strategies to improve multiple drafts of writing in a variety of situations.            B.4.3—Identify various sentence forms and structures while applying the rules of standard American English to written communications.</p>	<p>B.4.1—I can write more than one paragraph on or different reasons.            B.4.2—I can use the writing process to check my writing for mistakes and make my writing better.            B.4.3—I can choose different kinds of sentences to make my writing more interesting.</p>	<p>Students will:            B.4.1—write reports and stories several paragraphs in length. Change the style and structure according to the type of writing and the reader.            B.4.2—plan, draft, revise, edit, and publish their writing.            B.4.3—apply standard American English to written communication. Know different types of sentence forms, such as declarative, exclamatory, imperative, and interrogative.</p>

<p><b>Grade 8</b></p> <p>B.8.1—Compose clear and effective writing including literary commentaries, critiques and interpretations that analyze a reading or viewing experience.</p> <p>B.8.2—Independently identify questions and strategies for improving drafts in writing conferences.</p> <p>B.8.3—Apply the rules of standard American English to written communications.</p>	<p>B.8.1—I can write my personal thoughts about something I read or saw.</p> <p>B.8.2—I can think of questions and make a plan to improve my writing.</p> <p>B.8.3—I can check writing and make the right changes in grammar, capitalization and punctuation.</p>	<p>Students will:</p> <p>B.8.1—write for a variety of purposes, to include clear commentaries and critiques about something that was read or viewed.</p> <p>B.8.2—identify and apply strategies to improve their own and others' writing.</p> <p>B.8.3—apply the rules of standard American English to their writing.</p>
<p><b>Grade 11 &amp; 12</b></p> <p>B.11/12.1—Create substantial pieces of proficient writing to effectively communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes, including literary analyses.</p> <p>B.11/12.2—Apply the writing process to create and critique writing composed in a variety of situations.</p> <p>B.11/12.3—Edit and critique writing for clarity and effectiveness.</p>	<p>B.11/12.1—write longer compositions of different types. Analyze literature and communicate their analyses using written reports.</p> <p>B.11/12.2—apply the writing process to any writing they undertake.</p> <p>B.11/12.3—edit and critique writing for clarity and effectiveness.</p>	<p>Students will:</p> <p>B.11/12.1—write longer compositions of different types. Analyze literature and communicate their analyses using written reports.</p> <p>B.11/12.2—apply the writing process to any writing they undertake.</p> <p>B.11/12.3—edit and critique writing for clarity and effectiveness.</p>

**Figure 3.4**

Sample of Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) map of achievement expectations

Source: Milwaukee Public Schools, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Reprinted by permission.



I can think of at least five possible reasons why my students might not have learned:

1. They lacked the prerequisites needed to achieve what I expected of them.
2. I didn't understand the target to begin with, and so could not convey it appropriately.
3. My instructional methods, strategies, and materials were inappropriate or inadequate.
4. My students lacked the confidence to risk trying—the motivation to strive for success.
5. Some force(s) outside of school and beyond my control (death in the family, for example) interfered with and inhibited learning.

As a professional educator whose students failed to hit the target, I must know which problem(s) inhibited learning if I expect to remedy the situation. Only when I know what went wrong can I make the kinds of decisions and take the kinds of action that will promote success for me and my students next time.

For example, if my students lacked prerequisites (reason 1), I need to work with my colleagues in the lower grades to be sure our respective curricula mesh. If I lack mastery of the valued targets myself or fail to implement solid instruction (reasons 2 & 3), I have to take responsibility for some pretty serious professional development. Similarly, if my students lack confidence or motivation (reason 4), I may need to investigate with them the reasons for their lack of motivation and plan a course of action that will teach me new and better motivational tactics. And finally, if reason 5 applies, then I need to reach out into the community beyond school to seek solutions.

As a teacher employed in a school setting committed to helping all students meet state or local academic standards, my success hinges on my understanding the reasons for any lack of success.

Note that I can choose the proper corrective action if and only if I take the risks of (1) gathering dependable information about student success or failure using my own high-quality classroom assessments, and (2) becoming enough of a classroom researcher to uncover the causes of student failure. If I as a teacher simply bury my head in the sand and blame my students for not caring or not trying, I may doom them to long-term failure for reasons beyond their control. Thus, when they fail, I must risk finding out why. If it is my fault or if I can contribute to fixing the problem in any way, I must act accordingly.

I believe that the risk is greatly reduced when I start out with clear and specific targets. If I can share the vision with my students, they can hit it! If I have no target, how can they hit it?

### Student Academic Self-Efficacy

Teachers must know which achievement targets they expect their students to hit if they are to share that meaning of success with them. If teachers can help students understand these expectations, they set them up to take responsibility for their own success. The motivational implications of this for students can be immense.

Personalize this! Say you are a student facing a big test. A great deal of material has been covered. You have no idea what will be emphasized on the test. You study your heart out but, alas, you concentrate on the wrong material. Nice try, but you fail. How do you feel when this happens? How are you likely to behave the next time a test comes up under these same circumstances?

Now, say you are facing another test. A great deal of material has been covered. But your teacher, who has a complete understanding of the field, points out the parts that are critical for you to know. The rest will always be there in the text for you to look up when you need it. Further, the teacher provides lots of practice applying the knowledge to solving real-world problems and emphasizes that this is a second key target of the course. You study in a very focused manner, concentrating on the important material and its application. Your result is a high score on the test. Good effort—you succeed. Again, how do you feel? How are you likely to behave the next time a test comes up under these circumstances?

Given clear requirements for success, students can approach learning from a more efficacious perspective; that is, they are better able to gauge the appropriateness of their own preparation and thus gain control over their own academic well-being. Students who feel in control of their own chances for success are more likely to care and to strive for excellence.

### Greater Efficiency

In our research on the task demands of classroom assessment, my colleagues and I determined that teachers can spend as much as one-third of their available professional time involved in assessment-related activities. That's a lot of time! In fact, in many classrooms it is too much time. Greater efficiency in assessment is possible.

Clear achievement targets can contribute to that greater efficiency. Here's why: Any assessment is a sample of all the questions we could have asked if the test were infinitely long. But because time is always limited, we can never probe all important dimensions of achievement. So we sample, asking as many questions as we can within the allotted time. A sound assessment asks a representative set of questions, allowing us to infer a student's performance on the entire domain of material from that student's performance on the shorter sample. If we have set clear limits on our valued target, then we have set a clear sampling frame. This allows us to sample with maximum efficiency and confidence; that is, to gather just enough information on student achievement without wasting time overtesting. When we have a clear sense of the desired ends, we can use the assessment methods that are most efficient for the situation.



### Accurate Classroom Assessments

In Part II of this book I discuss several assessment methods in detail. I will argue that some methods work well with certain kinds of achievement targets but not with others. In that context, it also will become clear that some methods produce achievement information more efficiently than do others. Skillful classroom



assessors match methods to targets so as to produce maximum information with minimum invested assessment time. This is part of the art of classroom assessment. Your skill as an artist increases with the clarity of your vision of important learning.

## Sources of Information About Achievement Standards

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You can search out, identify, come to understand, and even place limits around the achievement targets and thus your teaching responsibilities in three ways: analyzing state and local standards, studying your local written curriculum, and interacting with professional colleagues. Let's explore each.

### State and Local Standards

Virtually every state and lots of local districts have standards of academic excellence, typically developed by teams of experienced teachers from within the state. In addition, states administer statewide assessments reflective of those standards and schools are held accountable for demonstrating student mastery of state standards by scoring high on these tests. Contact your district office or state department of education for information about these standards.

### Your Local Written Curriculum

Every school district will transform its state standards into its own local written curriculum. This document will present achievement expectations in much greater detail, typically identifying how the standards that define success within subjects will unfold over time within and across grade levels. Specific topics to be covered will be described, revealing how they are woven together into progressions that engage students in learning over time. This guiding curriculum document also will state if teachers are to emphasize integration across subjects or grades, such as writing across the curriculum. For all of these reasons, you can turn to your local curriculum description for insights regarding your assigned achievement expectations.

### Professional Networking

Besides state standards and your local curriculum, the next most important source of insight into key achievement targets is your team of professional colleagues. This includes your principal, other teachers in your school and grade levels, and others with experience in teaching in your context. Besides these, another way to remain current and to grow as a teacher is to join the appropriate local and national professional associations of teachers. Most have assembled commissions of their members to translate current research into practical classroom guidelines, and many regularly publish journals to disseminate this research. Work

with the resource personnel in your professional library if you have one. Often they can route special articles and information to you when they arrive. In addition, you can always search the Internet for information on valued achievement targets.

## Types of Achievement Targets

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All right, you might now ask, how do I make my targets clear? What is it that I must describe about them? The first step in answering these questions is to understand that we ask our students to learn a number of different kinds of things. Our challenge as teachers is to understand which of these is relevant for our particular students at any particular point in their academic development.

As my colleagues and I analyzed the task demands of classroom assessment, we tried to discern categories of targets that seemed to make sense to teachers (Stiggins & Conklin, 1992). We collected, studied, categorized, and tried to understand the various kinds of valued expectations reflected in teachers' classroom activities and assessments. The following categories or types of achievement targets emerged as important:

- *Knowledge*—mastery of substantive subject matter content, where mastery includes both knowing and understanding it
- *Reasoning*—the ability to use that knowledge and understanding to figure things out and to solve problems
- *Performance Skills*—the development of proficiency in doing something where it is the process, such as playing a musical instrument, reading aloud, speaking in a second language, or using psychomotor skills, that is important
- *Products*—the ability to create tangible products, such as term papers, science fair models, and art products, that meet certain standards of quality and that present concrete evidence of academic proficiency
- *Dispositions*—the development of certain kinds of feelings, such as attitudes, interests, and motivational intentions

As you will see, these categories are quite useful to our thinking about classroom assessment because they subsume all possible targets, are easy to understand, relate to one another in significant ways, and (now here's the most important part in the context of this text!) have clear links to different methods of assessment. But before we discuss assessment, let's more thoroughly understand these categories of achievement targets.

### Knowing and Understanding Targets

When we were growing up, we were asked to learn important content. What happened in 1066? Who signed the Declaration of Independence? Name the Presidents of the United States in order. What does the symbol "Au" refer to on the periodic

physics of a fly line in motion. These represent elements of knowledge that are useful to me because I know and understand them.

I submit that merely knowing but not understanding leaves any learners unable to make use of what they have learned. Simply knowing that bridges don't fall down does not make that knowledge useful. Learning a few mathematical equations cannot by itself lead me to comprehend physics. But knowing and understanding the *meaning* of such equations will.

Therefore, as a classroom teacher/assessor, I must know and understand what I expect my students to master. Further, I must be prepared to assess my students' understanding of what they claim to know.

### **Two Ways of "Knowing"**

When I was a student, consequences were dire if anyone was caught with a crib sheet in a test. We were expected to know the required material outright. We were expected to have burned the content into the neural connections of our brains by whatever means. Remember all the tricks? Color-coded flash cards. Repetition—over and over. Cramming. All nighters. Playing recordings repeatedly while sleeping. If we didn't memorize it, we failed. There can be no question, some of that stuff stuck and that's a good thing. Regardless of how one gets there, knowing something outright can be a powerful way of knowing. But this is not the only way of knowing.

The reason, as stated previously, is that I am every bit as much a master of content if I know where to find it as if I know it outright. In other words, the world does not operate solely on information retrieved from memory. To see what I mean, just try to fill out your income tax return, operate a new computer, or use an unfamiliar transit system without referring to the appropriate (hopefully well-written!) user's guide. When we confront such challenges in real adult life, we rely on what we know to help us find what we don't know.

In short, this "knowledge" category of achievement targets includes both those targets that students must learn outright to function within an academic discipline (core facts, principles, concepts, relationships within structures of knowledge, and accepted procedures) and those targets they tap as needed through their use of reference resources. Each presents its own unique classroom assessment challenges. And remember, each way of "knowing" must be accompanied by "understanding."

*To help our students know and understand content, we ourselves must be masters of the disciplines we expect them to master.* Thus, we must be prepared to share the topics, concepts, generalizations, and theories that hold facts together. We also must be ready to share with them our skills and methods of researching information. Further, as classroom teachers, part of our job is to devise assessment exercises that require students to demonstrate their understanding of those connections.

### **Ways of Coming to Know**

I can think of at least three ways to come to "know" something. Give me a list to memorize and in the end I will know it. If that list bears useful information and