

Applying the Science of Learning to Write Textbook Chapters

Brief Description

Framework for applying learning science into actionable textbook design strategies through evidence-based practices, based on content from the *Northwestern University Practicum on The Science of How Students Learn*.

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Introduction

This framework for textbook chapter authors is derived from the science of learning, a research-based body of evidence on how people acquire, retain, and apply knowledge. More specifically, it is informed by the [Northwestern University Practicum on *The Science of How Students Learn*](#), where a multidisciplinary content design team of educational developers curated evidence-informed, effective strategies alongside real-world examples contributed by University Teaching Award winners, translating these insights into actionable approaches for fostering student engagement and success. Instructional strategies for classroom teaching are adapted for concrete authorial practices that shape how disciplinary knowledge is presented in textbooks.

The focus is on chapter-level decisions—such as how ideas are introduced, revisited, and reinforced; how readers are prompted to think, predict, and reflect; and how content is structured to sustain attention and support transfer—that influence learners’ comprehension, cognitive engagement, and ability to apply knowledge across contexts. The elements below are organized around key goals with explanations of why they matter for student learning, and a checklist of specific design moves authors can use to structure content.

Goal 1: Amplify Motivation

Amplifying motivation means intentionally designing learning experiences that increase readers’ desire to engage, persist, and invest effort in their learning by connecting content to purpose, relevance, and emotion. It is the practice of not leaving motivation to chance, but actively building it into one’s design, so readers are more likely to care about, engage with, and sustain effort in learning.

1. Invoke purpose early and often.

Why This Strengthens Learning: Invoking purpose early and often strengthens learning because it focuses attention, increases intrinsic motivation, and sustains effort over time.

- Revisit purpose, or why this content matters, throughout the chapter (e.g., in section openings, in application prompts).

2. Evoke curiosity and wonder.

Why This Strengthens Learning: Emotions such as curiosity, wonder, and interest heighten attention and cognitive capacity. When readers feel curious, they become more alert and focused, are more likely to notice and engage with new information and prioritize the learning task over distractions.

- Use open-ended or puzzling questions to spark interest before explanation.

3. Use warm, supportive language.

Why This Strengthens Learning: By signaling care and approachability, it encourages engagement, help-seeking, and persistence, creating a positive emotional climate where learners feel confident to participate, take risks, and invest more deeply in their learning.

- Write in a tone that signals that learning is a process.

Goal 2: Deepen Connection

Deepening connection refers to designing chapters in ways that prompt readers to actively engage with new ideas over time—by drawing on prior knowledge, revisiting key concepts, and making connections across sections and contexts. Rather than presenting information once, chapters are structured to return to important ideas, ask readers to think with them, and support the gradual building of understanding.

4. Begin with prediction to activate thinking.

Why This Strengthens Learning: Prediction activities prompt students to draw on prior knowledge and reveal misconceptions, preparing the brain to learn more deeply.

- Open the chapter with a provocative, student-relevant question that invites a guess or judgment.

5. Build in frequent retrieval opportunities.

Why This Strengthens Learning: Retrieval practice strengthens memory and improves long-term retention, especially when it is frequent and requires effort.

- Incorporate “What do you recall?” questions or reflection prompts across sections.

6. Revisit core ideas.

Why This Strengthens Learning: Interleaving and revisiting ideas across contexts improves the ability to transfer knowledge to new situations.

- Return to key concepts multiple times in different contexts (e.g., reintroduce concepts in later examples, echo opening questions in later sections).

Goal 3: Cultivate Attention

Cultivating attention means intentionally designing chapters that capture, direct, and sustain readers' focus on what matters most for learning. It is the practice of helping readers pay attention in meaningful ways, rather than assuming attention will happen naturally.

7. Build structured pauses for thinking.

Why This Strengthens Learning: Structured pauses create opportunities for learners to process one idea before linking it to another, increasing the likelihood that they will integrate new knowledge with prior understanding.

- Include “Catch Your Breath” moments (e.g., short reflections, retrieval prompts, quick synthesis questions).

8. Sustain attention through purpose and relevance.

Why This Strengthens Learning: When students understand why material matters and how it connects to their lives or broader goals, they are more likely to invest effort, persist through challenges, and process ideas more meaningfully—resulting in stronger and more durable learning.

- Incorporate real-world relevance and applications.

9. Design for transfer beyond the chapter.

Why This Strengthens Learning: Designing for transfer strengthens learning because it helps students apply knowledge beyond a single context, which is essential for true understanding.

- Encourage readers to extend learning across contexts, not keep it isolated.

Goal 4: Demystify Rigor

Demystifying rigor means making challenging academic expectations clear, transparent, and achievable, so readers understand what high-quality work involves and how to reach it. It is the practice of ensuring that rigor is about meaningful challenge and growth, not confusion, hidden expectations, or gatekeeping. The following practices recognize that the University Practica definitions of rigor operate in a symbiotic relationship with equity to both challenge and support student learning.

10. Design for explanation, not just opinion.

Why This Strengthens Learning: Eliciting explanations improves understanding, because learners must process information at a deeper level rather than relying on surface familiarity.

- Incorporate peer explanation opportunities: “Explain your reasoning to a partner,” “Teach this concept in your own words.”

11. Scaffold learning through practice.

Why This Strengthens Learning: Using practice to break complex tasks into manageable steps, enables readers to build skills progressively, correct misunderstandings, and develop deeper, more flexible understanding that supports long-term retention and transfer.

- Focus on specific components of complex tasks.

12. Make expectations transparent.

Why This Strengthens Learning: Clear expectations reduce confusion and inequities by making academic norms visible, creating a more inclusive and supportive environment that promotes confidence, persistence, and meaningful learning.

- Explain the purpose of activities so students understand how they support learning (a key inclusive and motivational practice).

AI Tech Tip

Use a secure generative AI tool (e.g., Copilot, ChatGPT) to review how your draft aligns with this framework. Use only institutionally-approved tools for sharing unpublished content.

Prompt:

Analyze the attached chapter using the checklist items from “Applying the Science of Learning to Write Textbook Chapters” (<https://searle.northwestern.edu/resources/learning-teaching-guides/applying-science-of-learning-to-write-textbook-chapters.html>) listed below:

- Revisit purpose, or why this content matters, throughout the chapter (e.g., in section openings, in application prompts).
- Use open-ended or puzzling questions to spark interest before explanation.
- Write in a tone that signals that learning is a process.
- Open the chapter with a provocative, student-relevant question that invites a guess or judgment.
- Incorporate “What do you recall?” questions or reflection prompts across sections.
- Return to key concepts multiple times in different contexts (e.g., reintroduce concepts in later examples, echo opening questions in later sections).
- Include “Catch Your Breath” moments (e.g., short reflections, retrieval prompts, quick synthesis questions).
- Incorporate real-world relevance and applications.
- Encourage readers to extend learning across contexts, not keep it isolated.
- Incorporate peer explanation opportunities: “Explain your reasoning to a partner,” “Teach this concept in your own words.”
- Focus on specific components of complex tasks.
- Explain the purpose of activities so students understand how they support learning (a key inclusive and motivational practice).

For each item, note alignment level, give examples, and suggest revisions. Also summarize overall strengths and 2–3 priority improvements.

How to Cite this Guide

Womack, Veronica Y. "Applying the Science of Learning to Write Textbook Chapters." Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching, Northwestern University, June 5, 2026, searle.northwestern.edu/resources/learning-teaching-guides/applying-science-of-learning-to-write-textbook-chapters.html. Licensed under [Creative Commons](#) Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International.

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