Chapter 3

Arriving at Letter Grades: Focus on Working It Through

In this chapter we describe our experiences working through the five-step process outlined in the previous chapter. We offer ideas, clarify terms, and highlight questions based on the work we have done over the last decade with hundreds of colleagues at all levels of the school system.

Throughout this chapter we use specific examples in a variety of subject areas to show what each step could look like. As each context is unique, we present our experiences as examples or suggestions to be adapted, not as a linear procedure to be adopted.

We do understand that as a reader you might be thinking, "Just tell us the way to do it!" However, in our experience, we've learned that we only really understand what we create for ourselves.

Step 1: Identify Three to Five Big Ideas for One Subject Area

- We work with individuals, a group of colleagues, or with an entire staff. It is important to us that people choose to participate rather than be mandated to take part.

- We start with the question "What are the five Big Ideas that you expect your students to learn in …?" (choose one subject area) and invite individuals to respond in their own words from their experiences. We've learned that going directly to curriculum documents at this point can make us want to give up before we get started; it is easy to get bogged down by the sheer numbers of learning standards in curriculum documents. Figure 3.1 shows two teachers' responses to the question "What are the five Big Ideas that you expect your students to learn in Language Arts/English?"
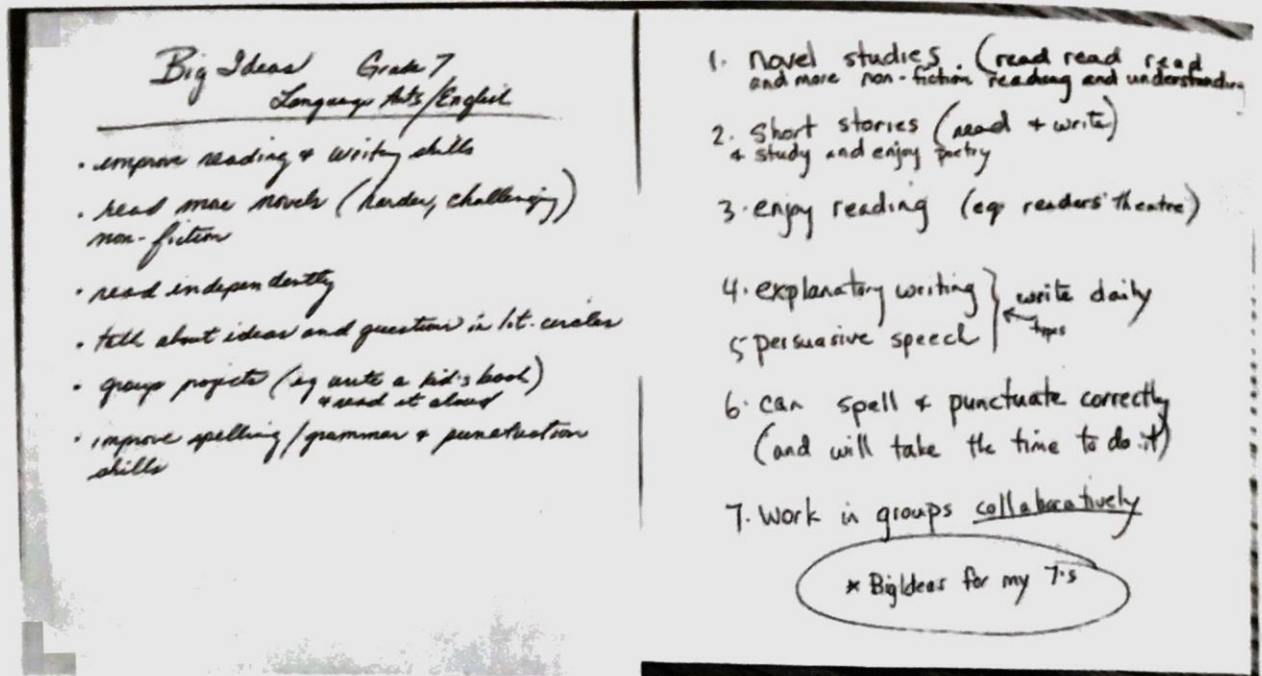
Figure 3.1: Two Teachers' Individual Lists of Big Ideas for Grade 7 English Language Arts

- As colleagues' individual lists can often focus on topics, skills, units, and activities, we stop and give an example of how their ideas fit under an overarching Big Idea. Any time we spend sharing and comparing individual lists and working together to create a combined list of Big Ideas is for us time well spent. (See Appendix 2 on page 52, where we have included Big Ideas that colleagues have created for other subject areas, such as mathematics, social studies, science, primary science, and French.) Figure 3.2 shows
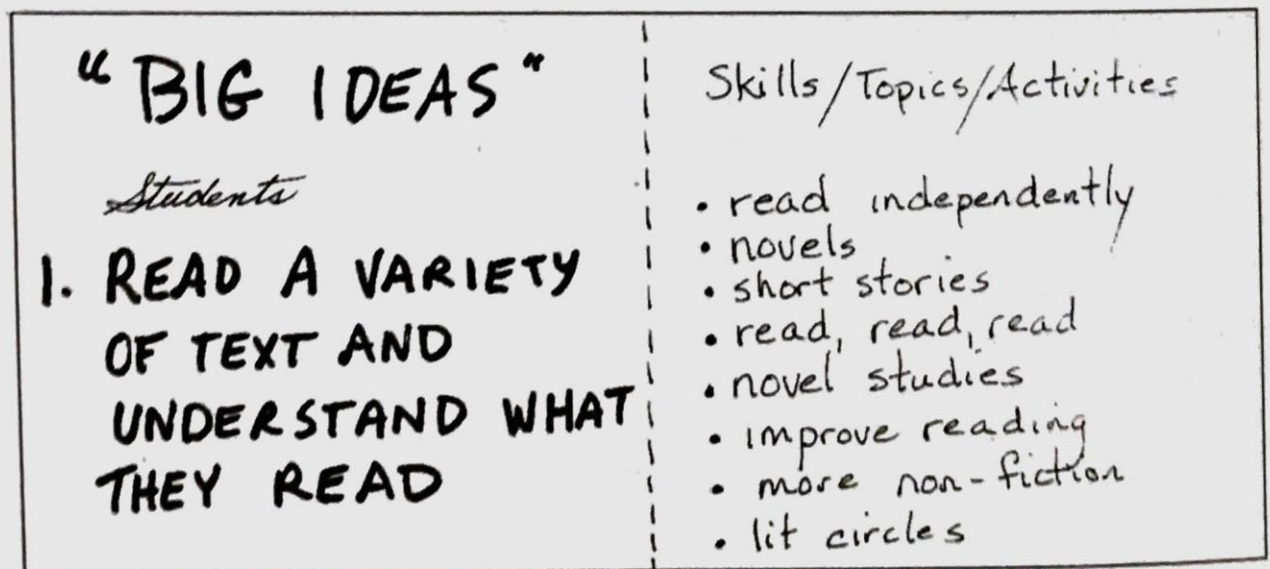

Figure 3.2: Example of How Topics, Activities, Units, and Skills Fit Under a Big Idea

how topics, activities, units and skills fit under the overarching Big Idea. Figure 3.3 shows how a group combined their individual lists and sorted them under five Big Ideas.

- Once we have identified the Big Ideas for one subject area, we then refer to our curriculum documents. To help us stay focussed on learning standards (and not get sidetracked into reading about other information, such as resources), we look at just one question: "What Big Ideas on our list do we need to add to or change?" We choose to work with hard copies rather than scrolling back and forth on the computer screen; we write directly onto the copies, cut them up, move them around, and do whatever is needed to organize our ideas.

- Reducing our list to three to five Big Ideas requires more talk time, and we find that we can move our thinking forward by asking such questions as "Is there a bigger category that these ideas could fit under?" and "Are there any ideas that we could combine with other ideas?" Given our experiences, we've learned that having fewer than three to five Big Ideas gets too general, and having more than five is overwhelming (especially in steps 4 and 5).

- The last task for step 1 is to decide on phrases that capture the gist of the Big Ideas. Since single words such as *content, knowledge,* and *skills* are too vague to identify the learning, and educational jargon such as *essential inquiries* has no meaning for students or parents, we use a short phrase that begins with a verb, such as *read* and *understand.* When it is just too hard for the group to generate these phrases together, we ask a few volunteers to have a go at bringing these Big Ideas to the group at the next meeting.
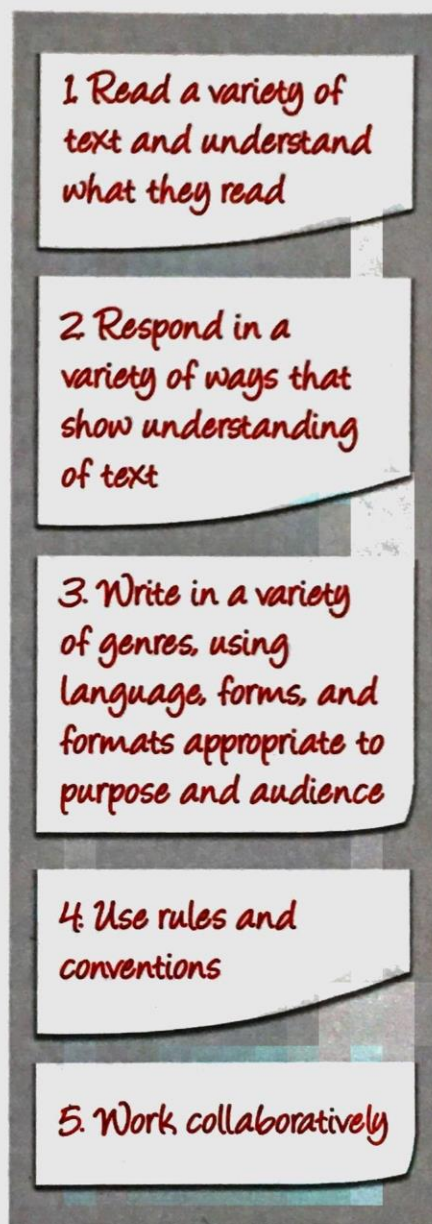
1. Read a variety of text and understand what they read

2. Respond in a variety of ways that show understanding of text

3. Write in a variety of genres, using language, forms, and formats appropriate to purpose and audience

4. Use rules and conventions

5. Work collaboratively

Figure 3.3: Combined and Sorted List of Big Ideas in Grade 7 English Language Arts

Step 2: Write Three Levels of Performance for Each Big Idea

- We post the three to five Big Ideas that we worked on in step 1. We've learned not to assume that people will remember what they did in a previous meeting, so we take time to read over and talk about our list of Big Ideas. These ideas are the foundations of this five-step process, and if changes need to be made, we make them now. Figure 3.4 shows the Big Ideas that were created in Step 1 and posted at beginning of Step 2.

- We put chart paper next to each Big Idea and label one chart *A*, one *B*, and one *C*. (You could use whatever symbol or phrase that you are required to use, such as *exceeds*, *meets*, or *levels 4, 3,* and *2*.) Figure 3.5 shows the placement of the chart paper with labels *A*, *B* and *C*.

- A question we typically work through first is "Why don't we describe four or five levels of performance? This would be a better fit for the letter grades we have to give (*A, B, C+, C, C-*)." At different times, we've used more than three levels. However, we've learned that we can clearly describe and differentiate among three levels of performance, but after that, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to make distinctions among the levels.

- A related question that we spend time thinking and talking about is "Why is there no column that describes 'less than satisfactory'?" This is a challenging question because there are many different reasons
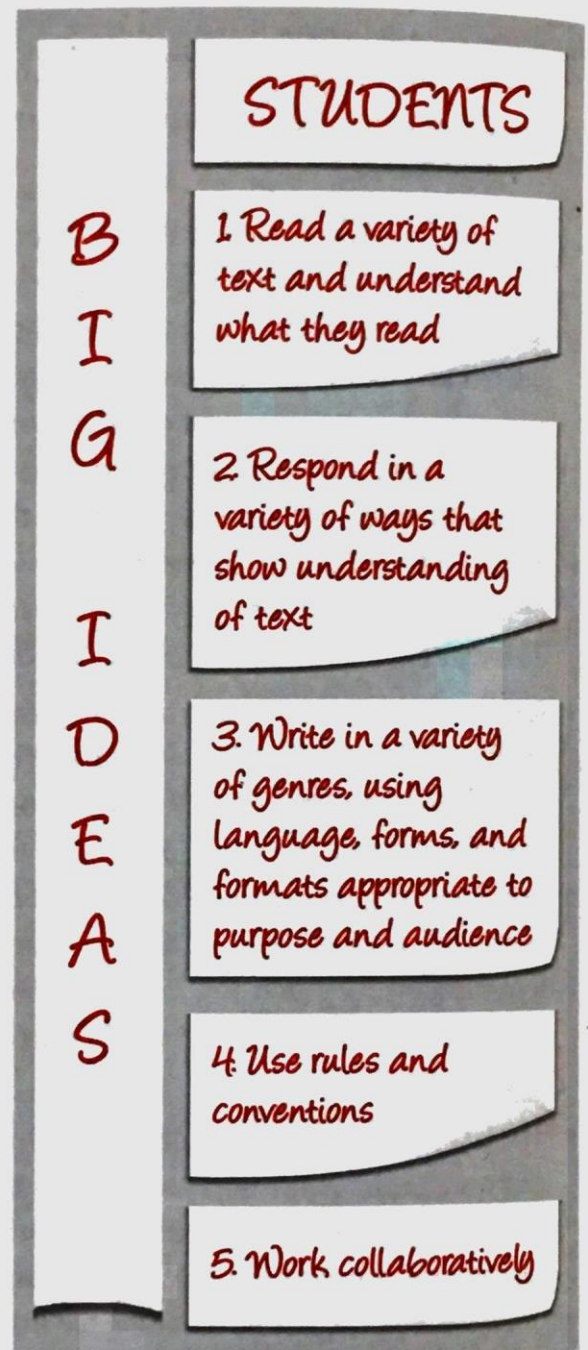
B I G I D E A S

STUDENTS

1 Read a variety of text and understand what they read

2. Respond in a variety of ways that show understanding of text

3. Write in a variety of genres, using language, forms, and formats appropriate to purpose and audience

4. Use rules and conventions

5. Work collaboratively

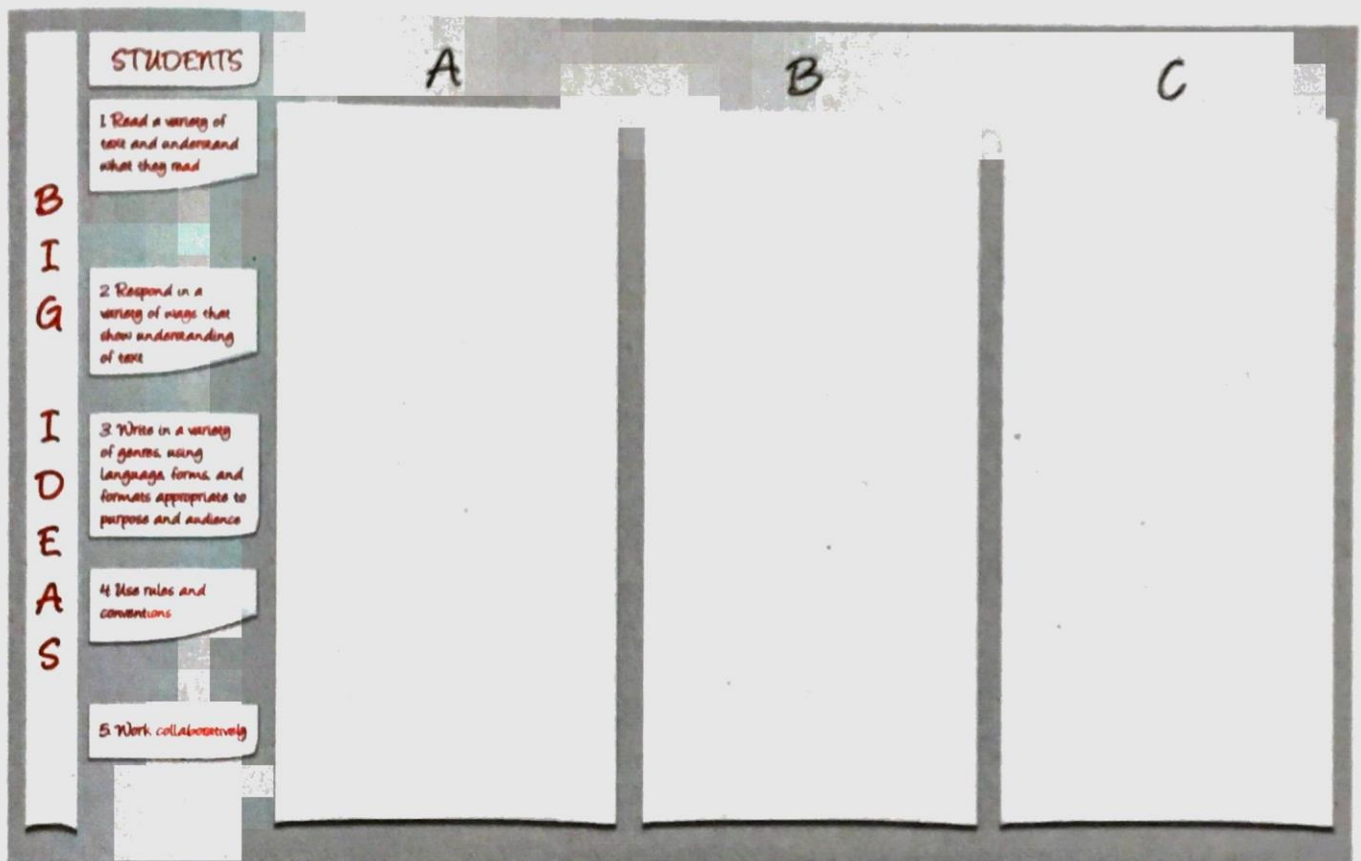**Figure 3.4:** Big Ideas for Grade 7 English Language Arts

Figure 3.5: Chart Paper Placement Showing Labels *A*, *B*, and *C*

why student performance could be less than satisfactory or not yet on the map. Some students might not have completed enough work for us to determine the level where their evidence best fits. Some might have been absent for long periods of time and others might just be beginning to learn in a particular area. We choose not to have a description of unsatisfactory performance, as students who are not yet on the map (in a particular Big Idea) often need specific plans and might require more time to learn, the reteaching of concepts, and/or individual support.

- We let students who are not yet on the map know that the description of *C* performance is what they need to be working toward. (In British Columbia, *D* or *E* letter grades are replaced with *I* (for "in progress or incomplete"). (See British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2009, 14.)

- We work on one Big Idea at a time and start by first describing the *A* (or *excellent*) level of performance in relation to Big Ideas (categories of learning standards) and then we record our thinking on the chart. To prompt our thinking, we each recall a student whose work would be considered an *A* performance, and then we talk about what that student does, says, and produces. Figure 3.6 shows a description of an *A* performance for each Big Idea.

Figure 3.6: Description of an *A* Performance for Each Big Idea

- We repeat this process for each of the Big Ideas. In describing the *C* level, it helps us to think of a student who is "beginning to develop." To write descriptions at the *B* level, we think of a student who is strong in some areas but still needs to develop in others. It is these descriptions of learning, aligned with the Big Ideas, that form the framework for what we call Learning Maps. Figure 3.7 shows a description of an *A* performance and a *C* performance for each Big Idea. Figure 3.8 shows a Learning Map with three levels of description: *A*, *B*, and *C*.

- At this point in step 2, we refer to our provincial (or state) and district documents that show the range of grade-level expectations to guide our thinking as we write and revise our descriptions of learning. Learning Maps need to show the bigger picture of learning at a particular grade level, one that is beyond our individual classrooms and schools.

- Throughout step 2, we remind ourselves that the language we use to describe performance needs to be understood by our students and their parents. If any of our words have the potential to make our students feel put down, the Learning Map would end up being useless in terms of supporting learning. (See Appendix 3, page 54, which gives examples of effective descriptive language for Learning Maps.)

Figure 3.7

STUDENTS	A	B	C
1 Read a variety of text and understand what they read	Consistently read a great deal of sophisticated material in different genre, often of complex style and form at an independent level. Show a deep understanding of material at both literal and inferential levels.		Read minimal (on request) amount of short simple material. Often will stick with a familiar genre. Usually understands the gist of the material, but may not show an understanding at a deeper level.
2 Respond in a variety of ways that show understanding of text	Consistently respond with a deep and insightful understanding. Make powerful connections to their own life, the lives of others, to other texts.		Make connections between what they are reading and personal understanding. Responses may be loosely connected to text.
3 Write in a variety of genres, using language, forms, and formats appropriate to purpose and audience	Consistently write with ease in a variety of genres and use specific techniques appropriate to the type of writing/form/format/topic. Use reasons and details to create precise meaning.		Writing is simple and straightforward. Can follow a format with support. May struggle to make meaning clear and often needs support and encouragement to develop ideas and elaborate with details.
4 Use rules and conventions	Independently follow basic rules and conventions and apply the more complex rules of language. Make no errors that interfere with meaning.		Use conventions in many areas but a number of errors interfere with meaning. Typically require encouragement and support to pay attention to conventions.
5 Work collaboratively	Participate willingly. Take on a leadership role.		May need reminders to participate and show appropriate collaborative skills.

Figure 3.7: Description of a C Performance for Each Big Idea

Figure 3.8

STUDENTS	A	B	C
1 Read a variety of text and understand what they read	Consistently read a great deal of sophisticated material in different genre, often of complex style and form at an independent level. Show a deep understanding of material at both literal and inferential levels.	Typically read age-appropriate material. May lack variety in choice of genre (e.g. may read a series). Understanding is accurate and consistent with the information in the text.	Read minimal (on request) amount of short simple material. Often will stick with a familiar genre. Usually understands the gist of the material, but may not show an understanding at a deeper level.
2 Respond in a variety of ways that show understanding of text	Consistently respond with a deep and insightful understanding. Make powerful connections to their own life, the lives of others, to other texts.	Make deliberate connections with their previous experiences and tend to go beyond simple responses. Can offer reasons in their responses.	Make connections between what they are reading and personal understanding. Responses may be loosely connected to text.
3 Write in a variety of genres, using language, forms, and formats appropriate to purpose and audience	Consistently write with ease in a variety of genres and use specific techniques appropriate to the type of writing/form/format/topic. Use reasons and details to create precise meaning.	Writing shows awareness of genre/form/format/topic. Language could be more precise with the use of details, reason, and examples.	Writing is simple and straightforward. Can follow a format with support. May struggle to make meaning clear and often needs support and encouragement to develop ideas and elaborate with details.
4 Use rules and conventions	Independently follow basic rules and conventions and apply the more complex rules of language. Make no errors that interfere with meaning.	Can follow the standard rules and conventions they have been given for language use and for different forms of writing. May make 1 or 2 errors that require revision.	Use conventions in many areas but a number of errors interfere with meaning. Typically require encouragement and support to pay attention to conventions.
5 Work collaboratively	Participate willingly. Take on a leadership role.	Participate and willingly contribute to what's asked and required.	May need reminders to participate and show appropriate collaborative skills.

Figure 3.8: Learning Map with Descriptions of A, B, and C Performance for Each Big Idea

To complete step 2, we read through each of our descriptions and ask ourselves: "Have we left anything out? Do we need to change our language? Have we been too wordy? Are we specific enough to differentiate among levels?"

Step 3: Identify Evidence that Shows Student Performance

In order to ensure a common understanding about evidence, we start by putting the following questions on the table for discussion: "What do you mean by evidence? What evidence do we include for report cards? What evidence do we not include? Where does effort fit? How much evidence do we need?" We end up agreeing to use culminating tasks (not practices or first attempts) and typically will include one to three pieces of evidence for each Big Idea.

- We put a strip of paper underneath each Big Idea and record evidence of learning for each one. For some Big Ideas, this is an easy task; for others, it is difficult. We talk about the fact that previously our focus had often been on assignments and topics rather than on learning standards. And when we did begin to focus on learning standards, it was on the ones that were easiest to measure. For many of us, this was the first time we had actually aligned our evidence with learning standards (Big Ideas). Figure 3.9 shows the evidence selected for each Big Idea.

Figure 3.9: Evidence Shown for Each Big Idea

- As a last task in step 3, we take an overall look at the evidence we've recorded and ask: "Is the evidence a fit for the Big Idea (learning standard)? Have we included a variety of evidence, including products, observations, and talk with students? Have we included enough evidence for each Big Idea? Does the evidence best illustrate the student's learning? Have we gone into overkill with the amount of evidence we are including?"

Step 4: Highlight Descriptions of Learning on the Learning Map

- We try out a draft of the Learning Map, using evidence of learning from one student. At this point in step 4, we might not have actual evidence or samples of learning, so we think of one student we've taught and talk about the kinds of evidence he or she would typically produce.

- We use a highlighter pen to shade in the descriptions that best fit with his or her evidence, as shown in figure 3.10. Questions such as, "What happens when students have evidence that fits in more than one level of performance?" or "What if a student's evidence is 'between' two levels?" are typical when we are working on this step, and we need to take time to talk.
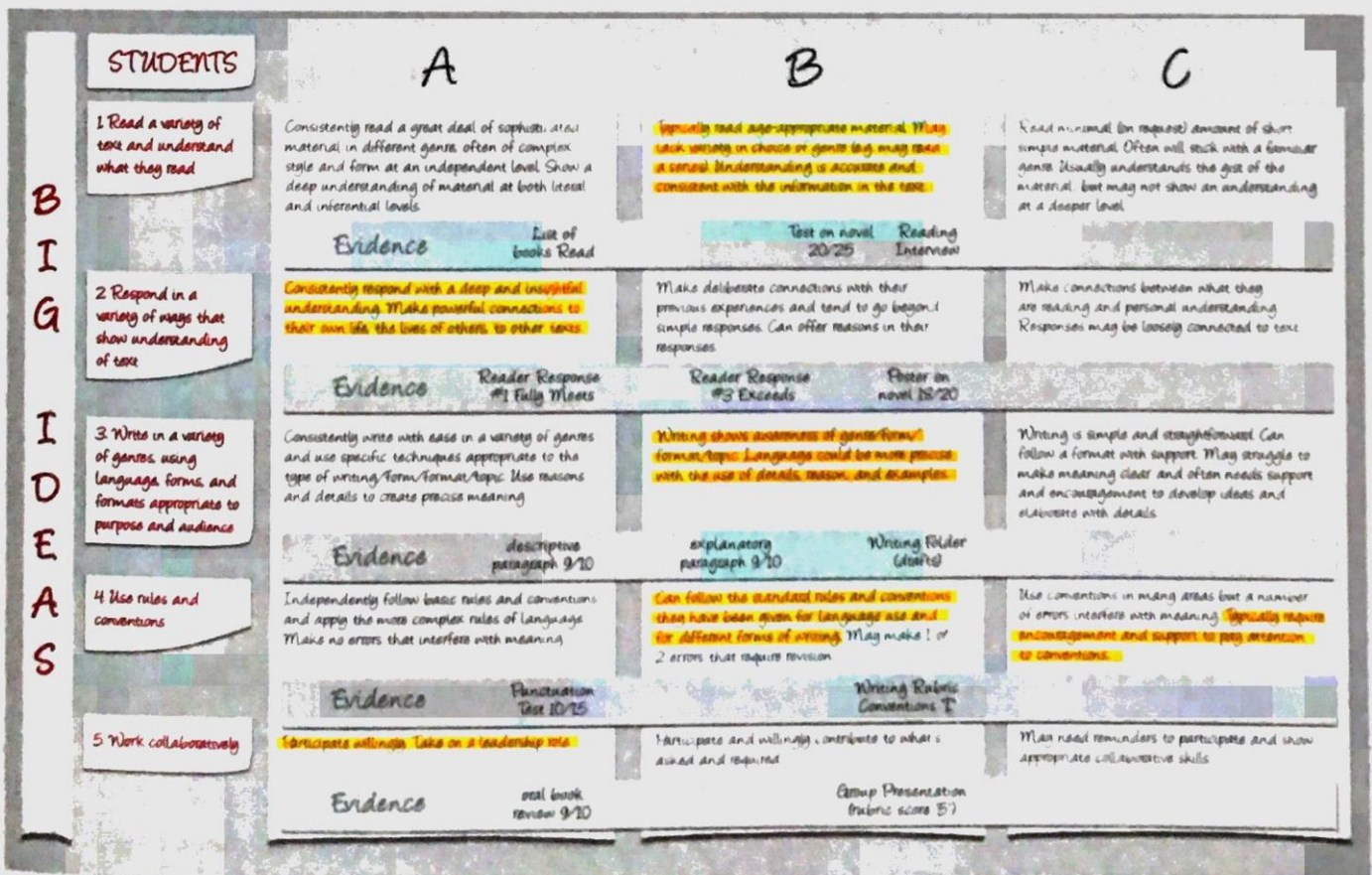

Figure 3.10: Highlighted Learning Map

- To show this range of learning, we highlight part of one description at one level and part at another. If we find it too hard to distinguish one level from another, it is at this point that we revise our descriptions and add in more detail.

- As we continue to highlight the descriptions – similar to plotting places on a map – we find ourselves looking for a pattern to emerge.

Here's a time-saving bonus that Learning Maps provide: If you are required to assign a letter grade and provide written comments for each student, the highlighted parts of the Learning Map (along with students' specific examples) become your comments. Teachers who are not required to give letter grades have told us that they create Learning Maps (without the ranking labels *A, B, C*) to show students and parents/guardians what the required learning looks like; they use the highlighted parts of the Learning Map (which they personalize for each student) as their written report card comments.

Step 5: Determine a Letter Grade (and a Percentage if Necessary)

- We often find that we can glance at a highlighted Learning Map and easily see which overall letter grade a student will receive. But sometimes it is not so clear, and a student's performance is all over the map. Our documents remind us that making professional judgments is a part of determining a letter grade:

  From information collected through assessment activities, teachers evaluate student performance. They use their professional expertise, knowledge about learning, and experience with students, along with specific criteria, to make judgments about student performance in relation to learning standards. (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2009, 21)

- The highlighted Learning Map provides us with the overall picture of an individual student's learning in one subject area. When we have completed the highlighting, we often think, "If only we could report on each of the Big Ideas, it would be so straightforward." However, as we are required to reduce all the learning a student has done to a single letter grade, we do one of the following:

  - We select the middle ground (performance) if a student's performance seems between levels or is all over the map, or

  - We look back at additional evidence that we have collected for this student, which gives us more information to bring to the Learning Map to help inform our decision