A TEACH BIG ARTICLE

Once Learned, Always Used

The Teach BIG Philosophy of
Long-Term Learning

Part Two

The GRADUATE Infinity Learning Cycle

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TEACH BIG

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Long-Term Learning, Part Two

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A COMMITMENT WITH A PLACE TO LIVE

A commitment with a place to live

In Part One of this series, we made a classroom commitment: Once learned, always used. Our students need chances to retrieve important learning from last month, last week, and yesterday without notes or answer giving assistance. They also need chances to check that learning, strengthen it, and use it in situations that matter.

The GRADUATE™ Infinity Learning Cycle gives that commitment a place in the larger instructional process. It connects how we introduce learning, how we support students as they practice, how they demonstrate independence, and how they continue developing their understanding after the original lesson has ended.

The eight stages are Gather, Reveal, Attempt, Discuss, Use, Award, Target, and Explain. Together, they help teachers plan the movement from purposeful instruction to student ownership. They also keep one question in view that is easy to lose during a busy school year: What will happen to this learning after we teach it?

A student may complete a lesson successfully while its examples are still fresh, then later recognize the topic but struggle to explain it or use it independently. Brain Brags help teachers examine that difference. GRADUATE gives teachers a sequence for responding to it.

A PLACE FOR EARLIER LEARNING AND FUTURE GROWTH

A place for earlier learning and future growth

Two stages are especially useful homes for Brain Brags: at Gather, students retrieve earlier learning for the next experience, and at Award, they demonstrate learning they can recognize as an accomplishment. In both places, the student's first response comes from memory before notes, models, or classmates supply the answer.

The purposes are related but distinct. Gather asks, "What learning can we bring into this experience?" Award asks, "What learning can I now demonstrate and take pride in?" Target then turns the evidence into a next step, and Explain gives students an opportunity to make their understanding clear to someone else. We plan the return while we plan the lesson. That is how a concept introduced in September can remain useful in November, February, May, and beyond.

WHY THE CYCLE IS CALLED INFINITY

Why the cycle is called Infinity

The infinity symbol is a sideways figure eight: one continuous path forming two connected loops. A person tracing the path can keep moving without reaching a final endpoint. Instruction has a sequence, but learning continues beyond a single trip through it.

When a student explains a concept, the teacher hears what is accurate, what is incomplete, and what to pursue next, and that information shapes the next Gather.

A return can deepen the learning: students might first define setting, later explain its influence on a character, and eventually revise their own narrative so setting changes what happens.

Within GRADUATE, Forever expresses the responsibility to keep learning active through Award, Target, Explain, and later returns. It does not mean one successful lesson makes a memory permanent. It means teachers and students continue to retrieve, examine, apply, and extend important knowledge.

> *"We come back to learning because we have another reason to use it."*

THE EIGHT STAGES

The eight stages

Stage	What happens
Gather	Students retrieve earlier learning for the next experience; the teacher sees what reminding or modeling is needed.
Reveal	Explicit teaching and modeling show how a knowledgeable reader, writer, or problem solver approaches the task.
Attempt	Students try the learning in a manageable task with support close at hand.
Discuss	Students explain their choices, compare evidence, and revise their thinking with teacher guidance.
Use	Students apply the learning with appropriate independence while the teacher collects evidence.
Award	Students retrieve and demonstrate learning they can recognize as an accomplishment, with specific evidence of growth.
Target	Students and teachers turn the evidence into a worthwhile next step.
Explain	Students communicate their understanding to someone else, making the learning and its questions visible and giving the next Gather its start.

GATHER AND REVEAL PREPARE PURPOSEFUL LEARNING

Gather and Reveal prepare purposeful learning

Gather creates attention, curiosity, connection, and purpose, and a Brain Brag adds another dimension: students bring relevant knowledge. Before a lesson on how setting influences a character's decision, a teacher might ask students to retrieve the meaning of setting from last month, a cause and effect relationship from last week, and a principle for selecting evidence from yesterday.

Ask, "What does setting mean?" before showing the definition. Ask, "Explain a cause and effect relationship you remember," before providing an example. Students can write, sketch with labels, or give an oral response, and every student needs time to attempt the remembering before classmates share. Then check the responses, correct essential misunderstandings, and make the connection explicit: "We are going to use what we know about setting, cause and effect, and evidence to explain a character's choice." Earlier learning now has a job in the new lesson. If students cannot retrieve a needed idea, the teacher has useful planning information: a brief explanation may be necessary, or the class may be ready to spend more time on the new relationship.

Reveal provides the explicit teaching. A teacher can name the goal, demonstrate the process, and think aloud about a decision students might otherwise miss: "I notice that the path is flooded. I ask whether that condition changes what the character can do. The character chooses a different route, so I can explain a relationship between the setting and the action." The distinction matters: Gather lets students show what they can bring back; Reveal supplies the instruction needed next.

ATTEMPT, DISCUSS, AND USE DEVELOP OWNERSHIP

Attempt, Discuss, and Use develop ownership

After instruction and modeling, students need a manageable opportunity to try the learning. At Attempt, the teacher provides a short task or a temporary scaffold and watches how students use it. Supported practice has value, but it should not be recorded as unaided retrieval.

Discuss gives students a reason to explain their choices, compare evidence, and revise their thinking. Discussion presses on the reasoning: "You identified the rain. Now explain what the rain changes." Or, "That

could happen, but what in this text supports your conclusion?" Have every student attempt the task before the shared conversation, then invite an independent revision.

At Use, students apply the learning with appropriate independence: they read a different short passage, explain how its conditions influence an event, and select their own evidence. If the teacher has to supply the relationship, that signals more support is needed, with another check later. Note that independent application and fresh retrieval differ. Students may use a passage to locate evidence during Use while retrieving the concept's meaning from memory. The teacher should specify which knowledge students must recall and which materials the task requires.

AWARD GIVES STUDENTS EVIDENCE FOR A BRAIN BRAG

Award gives students evidence for a Brain Brag

Award invites students to recognize their own growth and identify what worked: the ability to say, accurately, "I can do this now," and to show the evidence. Remembering previously learned concepts is itself something students can notice and value. A student may retrieve a principle from last month, explain a relationship from last week, or independently recall yesterday's learning, and Award gives the class a place to recognize that continuity.

The teacher might say, "Before you look back at your work, explain one important idea about setting that you can still use." A strong Brain Brag contains specific evidence: "I remembered that setting includes time and place. I used the flooded bridge detail to explain the character's decision." Looking through a notebook is useful reflection, but it becomes fresh retrieval only when the student first retrieves the target knowledge without consulting it: remember independently, check, then examine the evidence of growth. The same sequence applies with partners: every learner produces an individual response first, so a classmate's explanation should not quietly become someone else's evidence of unaided recall.

Award can recognize remembering more accurately, explaining with greater detail, needing less support, or using a familiar concept in a new situation. Students who discover a gap can still name genuine progress: "I remembered the place, and after checking I added the time." Gather brings learning forward. Award helps students recognize what they can carry forward, and a Brain Brag at Award becomes both a celebration and useful information for Target.

TARGET AND EXPLAIN KEEP THE CYCLE MOVING

Target and Explain keep the cycle moving

Target asks students and teachers to identify a worthwhile next need from the evidence: a missing concept, a recurring error, or a skill ready for a more demanding application. A student who can name setting but cannot explain its influence needs a different next step from one who explains influence accurately but struggles to choose relevant evidence. "Get better at reading" is too broad to guide either learner. A useful target names an action and an opportunity: "In my next response, I will explain how the detail supports my answer. We will check it again with a different passage next week."

Explain gives students an opportunity to communicate their understanding to a classmate, teacher, family member, or another appropriate audience. A student might explain: "Setting tells when and where, and its conditions can affect what a character can do." If Explain is being used as a Brain Brag, students prepare from memory; if the purpose is supported teaching or revision, references can be used. Name the purpose so everyone knows what the performance demonstrates.

Explain does not close the door on the concept. It can reveal a new question: Does setting always cause an action? Can two characters respond differently to the same conditions? Award identifies what the learner can recognize as progress. Target identifies where to go next. Explain makes the understanding and its remaining

questions visible. Together, these stages give Forever practical meaning and help the next Gather begin with information about the learner.

GRADUAL RELEASE WITHIN THE INFINITY CYCLE

Gradual release within the Infinity cycle

Gradual release concerns who carries responsibility for the thinking. The teacher leads and models, supports practice, then expects independence: I Do, We Do, You Do. GRADUATE explicitly continues into Forever.

Phase	GRADUATE stages	Movement of responsibility
Ignite	Gather	The teacher leads the entry and connection to prior learning. Students actively retrieve and contribute.
Build	Reveal, Attempt, Discuss	The teacher models, then teacher and students work through guided practice and feedback.
Apply	Use	Students demonstrate what they can do with increasing independence.
Forever	Award, Target, Explain	Students recognize growth, set a next goal, and explain learning that will be used again.

Release responsibility when the evidence supports it: if students still depend on the teacher to select every detail, return to a model, clarify, and offer another opportunity. A Brain Brag at Gather does not contradict teacher led instruction; the teacher organizes the experience while the student performs the remembering. The critical question is, “Who is doing the thinking that this task is meant to develop?” [1]

KEEP ALL THREE TIME WINDOWS ACTIVE

Keep all three time windows active

The three Brain Brag windows describe when learning occurred, not ability groups or daily requirements. Teachers choose important previously taught ideas and plan returns that connect with current work.

Time window	At Gather	At Award
Last month	Retrieve an older concept needed for the new lesson.	Demonstrate an older concept still available and identify a useful application.
Last week	Recall a recent relationship or strategy that supports the next task.	Explain what can now be recalled accurately or used with less support.
Yesterday	Retrieve a recent idea before the teacher reviews it.	Recognize a specific detail the student can bring back and use.

Gather can emphasize preparation while Award emphasizes evidence of ownership; they need not repeat identical questions. Note the limit: if the class retrieves a concept at Gather and practices it all lesson, an Award response that day reflects those recent opportunities, not what remained from a month ago. For that information, return after a meaningful delay.

Keep a small record of each return: the concept, when it was taught, what students showed, and the next return. A complete GRADUATE sequence may extend across lessons. Research on spacing shows that the timing of practice affects later retention and that useful intervals depend on the intended retention period. [2] Teachers can revisit sooner when essential knowledge is fragile and extend the gap when retrieval becomes reliable.

What this changes for teaching

The value of GRADUATE lies in what teachers and students do at each stage and how one stage informs another. Earlier learning becomes a resource for new work: a reading concept can support a writing decision, and a previously taught editing rule can improve a current social studies response. Teaching decisions gain visible evidence: Gather reveals what students can retrieve, Attempt and Discuss reveal where support helps, Use reveals the quality of independent application, and Award, Target, and Explain help everyone plan what happens next. No single response has to carry the entire judgment about learning.

Keep Brain Brags low stakes and accessible. Students may respond orally, through writing, with labeled drawings, or through appropriate accessible technology. Honor needed accommodations, distinguish supported performance from unaided recall, and celebrate accurate thinking and useful correction rather than speed or public ranking.

Research supports the practices within the cycle. Studies of retrieval practice have found stronger delayed retention following recall practice than following repeated study under the conditions examined. [3] Rosenshine's synthesis brings together modeling, guided practice, checking understanding, independent practice, and recurring review. [4] These findings support important ingredients of the approach; they do not constitute a direct evaluation of GRADUATE as a complete named framework.

Our responsibility is to make the continuity real. When students explain today's learning, we listen for tomorrow's starting point. When they retrieve last month's concept, we give it meaningful work to do. Part One gave us the commitment: Once learned, always used. Part Two gives us the cycle that keeps it. When a student retrieves September learning in May and uses it well, the class will know where that moment belongs: in the cycle, and the cycle continues.

References and companion reading

GRADUATE™ is Randi Whitney's instructional framework. The stage names and the Forever grouping in this article follow her framework. The classroom examples show proposed ways to integrate Brain Brags at Gather and Award. Research references support the instructional practices discussed, rather than a claim that the complete named cycle has been independently validated.

Research

[1] Pearson, P. D., & Gallagher, M. C. (1983). The instruction of reading comprehension. Technical Report No. 297. Center for the Study of Reading, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

[2] Cepeda, N. J., Vul, E., Rohrer, D., Wixted, J. T., & Pashler, H. (2008). Spacing effects in learning: A temporal ridgeline of optimal retention. Psychological Science, 19(11), 1095-1102.

[3] Roediger, H. L., III, & Karpicke, J. D. (2006). Test-enhanced learning: Taking memory tests improves long-term retention. Psychological Science, 17(3), 249-255.

[4] Rosenshine, B. (2012). Principles of instruction: Research-based strategies that all teachers should know. American Educator, 36(1), 12-19, 39.

Companion article

Whitney, R. (2026). Brain Brags: A classroom guide to fresh retrieval and connected learning. The Writing Academy® and Teach BIG®. Includes 24 classroom routines, the three retrieval windows, guidance for feedback, and a planning page.

Framework source material

Whitney's GRADUATE framework notes identify Award, Target, and Explain as the Forever phase. The Writing Academy Grade 3 Cluster 1 teacher guide describes the return from Explain to the next Gather, with evidence from one cycle informing the next.