

Using Writing to Improve Reading

Why do professors sometimes claim that college students can't read? A look at how professors and students approach reading assignments might point to the answer. Here are responses to the question: "What do professors expect students to get from a reading assignment?"

Professors:

- ♦ "I want students to understand what the author is saying, what outside issues are involved. If they don't, I expect them to do more reading or ask me questions."
- ♦ "Students should realize that reading is more than seeing the words on the page. It's full comprehension—getting a sense of the words, thinking about the writer's motivation and intention."

Students:

- ♦ "I find the important facts and highlight them. That way I can find them when I study for the final."
- ♦ "My professors want me to know the main ideas and be able to say something about them."

These responses suggest that typical college students stop short of what professors expect. Many professors want students to go beyond comprehension and memorization. They would like students to fully grasp the author's message, figure out what's not on the page (e.g., inferences, implications), and understand the author's bias and purpose. Professors can accomplish these goals by **assigning write-to-learn activities** that teach students how to:

- choose an effective reading strategy.
- make connections with new material.

- interact with the text.
- see the text's organization and purpose.

Teach Students to Choose an Effective Reading Strategy

Imagine what it would be like to read a phone book as if it were a novel: start on page one and read until you find the name and number. That would be silly. But many students have one reading strategy no matter what academic text they read. They start at the beginning and read to the end.

Most good readers, however, use different strategies depending on what they read and why they are reading. They might skim a chapter before starting to read. When given a scientific article, they might read the abstract, introduction, and discussion (and initially skip the methods and findings).

Teaching students to read differently, depending on their purpose, will help them be effective readers. Before students start a reading assignment, **take a few minutes to explain what reading strategy you would use and how it fits with your purpose.**

You can also illustrate what type of notes you would take by putting an example of a page or paragraph on an overhead. Let students know when detailed note-taking (or outlining, annotating, etc.) is necessary and when it's not.

Help Students Make Connections with New Material

Readers understand what they read by connecting the message to what they already know. Help students make sense of new material by asking them to draw on their background knowledge *before* they read. Take five minutes at the end of class and **ask students to write answers to general questions about the upcoming reading assignment:**

1. What do the [article, chapter] titles suggest to you?
2. How might this material tie in with what we've already covered in class?
3. How might this material be significant in chemistry [statistics, dance, etc.]?

Or you can ask specific questions. A professor could ask these questions about an article entitled "Coping with America: Refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in the 1970s and 1980s":

1. Why do you think the refugees entered the U.S.?
2. What education and economic background might they have?

3. What problems might they have coping with life in the U.S.?

This simple, quick activity makes students aware of the gaps in their knowledge and helps them form hypotheses they can test while they read.

If students don't know key background concepts, they are prone to misread or misunderstand. If they struggle to answer the questions, it will be worthwhile for you to take five minutes to place the author's work in the larger context and provide the background needed to understand the reading.

As a follow-up activity, ask students to rewrite their answers to the questions after they complete the reading.

Sequence assignments

These write-to-learn assignments can serve as the building blocks for "formal" writing assignments such as research papers, case studies, review essays, etc.

Get Students to Interact with the Text

Students need to realize that reading is not a one-way street where the author gives all the necessary information to the reader. Effective readers treat reading like a two-way street: while they read, they ask questions, fill in gaps, make reasonable inferences, and figure out the author's bias or slant.

Give writing assignments that require students to interact with an author and his/her message. Here are several possibilities:

- **Help students see that the author is trying to change their view** of something by asking students to answer these questions:

1. Before I read this text, the author assumed that I believed . . .
2. After I finished reading this text, the author wanted me to believe . . .
3. The author was/was not successful in changing my view because . . .

- **If students are reading a textbook, introduce them to the "SQ3R" method:** Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review. Tell students to first skim the chapter to orient themselves to the subject. Next, require that they write questions based on section headings and boldfaced/italicized text. Students then begin reading, keeping their questions in mind. After each section, they recite or write answers to the

Help Students See the Organization and Purpose

Most of us who have read a used textbook have wondered why the first owner highlighted or underlined an insignificant sentence or passage. Research suggests that the first owner probably didn't understand how the author organized the information. When readers don't recognize the pattern of organization, they tend to miss the purpose of a sentence or paragraph. For example, they cannot distinguish between a main concept and secondary information or between evidence and the author's interpretation of the evidence.

Here are two assignments that help students understand the organization and the purpose of each section/paragraph:

- **Ask students to create a guideline sheet of a genre** common in your field. For example, students

Guide Students to Become Better Readers

Students will appreciate hearing how you, as an expert reader in your content area, approach reading. As you expose them to your own reading strategies, they will learn what questions to ask, what inferences can be made, and how to draw on background knowledge. With practice and effort, students will shift from information-gathering to participating in a dialogue with the author and the message.

questions from memory (and reread if they need to). When they finish the chapter, students review the reading and answer the questions again.

- **Give students questions that force them to think about the passage on different levels.** Ask three types of questions:

1. "Right There" questions that ask about the facts.
2. "Think and Search" questions that require students to make reasonable inferences from the facts given.
3. "On Your Own" questions that require students to give plausible answers based on their personal experiences.

An alternative is to have students develop their own questions (which could be used on a future quiz). Guide them with prompts such as, "What questions do you really want answered?" or "What would you like to know your classmates' opinions about?"

- **Ask students to keep a reading log or journal.** For all or selected reading assignments, ask students to write two different entries in a log. One entry is a summary; the other is a response. You can direct the response entry by providing a prompt such as "What are the implications of X?" or you can leave it wide open.

can analyze lab reports and then create "Lab Report Guidelines" that define the content and purpose of each section. Students can discuss their individual guidelines and then develop a single (group or class) version. The guidelines can help them analyze articles they read and help them write in that genre.

- **Ask students to create a two-column outline of an assigned reading.** In the first column, students summarize the content. In the second column, they describe the purpose or the function of the content (e.g., reviews previous studies, defines the theory, provides support, rebuts the opposition).

An alternative is to require that students write two statements about each paragraph: a summary of the paragraph's content and a description of the paragraph's purpose.

Avoid Overload

The write-to-learn activities described in this issue can be quickly graded using a "+" (good), "✓" (satisfactory), or "-" (unsatisfactory) system. No detailed response is usually necessary because students will not revise their work.