

FACULTY FOCUS

Special Report

11 Strategies for Getting Students to Read What's Assigned

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July 2010

11 Strategies for Getting Students to Read What's Assigned

Getting students to take their reading assignments seriously is a constant battle. Even syllabus language just short of death threats, firmly stated admonitions regularly delivered in class, and the unannounced pop quiz slapped on desks when nobody answers questions about the reading don't necessarily change student behaviors or attitudes.

Despite the correlation between reading and course success, many students remain committed to trying to get by without doing the reading, or only doing it very superficially, or only doing it just prior to exam dates. In return, some exasperated instructors fall into the trap of using valuable class time to summarize key points of the readings.

It's not a new problem, and clearly we can't simply bemoan the fact that students don't read. Furthermore, doing what we've been doing — the threats, the endless quizzes, the chapter summaries — has failed to solve the problem. The better solution involves designing courses so that students can't do well without reading, and creating assignments that require students to do more than just passively read.

Featuring 11 articles from *The Teaching Professor*, this special report was created to give faculty new ways of attacking an age-old problem. Articles in the report include:

- Enhancing Students' Readiness to Learn
- What Textbook Reading Teaches Students
- Helping Students Use Their Textbooks More Effectively
- Text Highlighting: Helping Students Understand What They Read
- When Students Don't Do the Reading
- Pre-Reading Strategies: Connecting Expert Understanding and Novice Learning

Whether your students struggle with the material or simply lack the motivation to read what's assigned, this report will help ensure your students read and understand their assignments.

Maryellen Weimer
Editor
The Teaching Professor

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Enhancing Students' Readiness to Learn

By Jennifer L. Romack, PhD.

Over the years, I have probably said, “Have you done your reading? Is everyone ready?” more times than I care to count. But as the years passed, it became apparent that more and more students weren’t doing their assigned reading and were not ready for class.

Several semesters ago, out of sheer frustration, I stopped talking during one of my lectures. I turned up the lights, walked to the chalkboard, and wrote in quite large letters, “Are you ready for class today?” I underlined the word “ready,” faced the class, and let about five seconds of silence simmer uncomfortably. Finally I asked the students to respond honestly and anonymously to my question on a sheet of paper.

I collected the responses and quickly tallied the results. Seventy-five percent of the class responded “no.” Only a few responded “yes.” Most interesting were the students who responded, “I think so.” I asked with disbelief, “How can you not know whether or not you are ready for class?”

Learning Task Rubric

Score	Criteria and Standards
+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpretation of content is completely accurate. • Identifies and describes precise and explicit supporting evidence (facts). • Strongly connects new content to previous learning (elaboration). • Strongly integrates new material to a personal life experience. • Draws an accurate conclusion based upon interpretations, connection, and integration. • Provides a strong reason(s) for the conclusion.
✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpretation of content is somewhat accurate. • Identifies supporting evidence; description is somewhat accurate or clear. • Satisfactorily connects new content to previous learning. • Superficially integrates new material to a personal life experience. • Draws a somewhat accurate conclusion based upon interpretations, connection, and integration. • Provides an adequate reason(s) for the conclusion.
-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpretation of content is inaccurate; facts are misleading. • Supporting evidence is missing, incorrect, or irrelevant. • Fails to elaborate or elaboration is extremely weak. • Fails to integrate or integration to a life experience is vague. • Conclusion drawn or reasons supporting it are inadequate or missing.

To this day, I have not forgotten how they answered:

“Well I read the chapter a few days ago, but I don’t really remember anything.”

“Right before class I studied all of the bold text in the chapters.”

“I looked over the graphs because they’re usually in your PowerPoint.”

“I’m ready because I’m here.”

I had two pedagogical revelations that day. First, I never communicated to my students what it meant to be ready for class. And second, I never made them accountable for being ready. I decided to remedy both omissions.

I began by declaring explicitly in my syllabus what I expected of my students. Here’s what my syllabus now says:

“Learning is not a spectator sport. Fundamentally, the responsibility to learn is yours and yours alone. For learning to happen in any course, you must take an active role in the process. For our class, you are expected to come to class ‘prepared’ and ‘ready to learn,’ which requires you ‘to read’ and ‘to study’ the assigned reading ‘before’ you come to class. Being prepared for class enables you to construct a knowledge base on which subsequent learning rests.

“During our class, we don’t ‘cover’ content, which means I talk less to get you to talk about what you are

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learning. You will be engaging in Learning Tasks (out of class and in class) that require you to (a) use a variety of reasoning strategies to address issues and problems, and (b) write reflectively about what you are learning, how it relates to what you already know about the content, and how it relates to your life. Your performance on these tasks will be evaluated using a Learning Task Rubric, with a minus indicating unsatisfactory performance (55 percent), a check indicating work that satisfactorily meets expectations (75 percent), and a plus indicating strongly engaged, high-quality performance (100 percent). Learning Tasks cannot be made up and late Learning Tasks are not accepted.”

What I teach, course content, hasn’t changed much over the years. But when I introduced the readiness concept into my course, what changed was “why” and “how” I teach. Now my course is more interactive, with student learning at its center.

When preparing for class, I focus on why and how the content (i.e., the process) will be delivered to the students. Learning tasks are designed with two main goals in mind: students attaining learning outcomes and getting students motivated about learning.

Being ready for a learning-centered class takes more work, for students and for the instructor. Those students who come prepared and actively engage in class need to be rewarded for their learning, and those who don’t need to be held accountable. Assessment practices, therefore, must align to an instructor’s explicit expectations.

I have developed the scoring rubric chart (page 4) to evaluate student performance on learning tasks. To qualify for a +, a student’s work must meet four of the six criteria.

Since implementing a readiness component into my course, I have discovered that the weighting of this component affects the quality of student preparedness and motivation. The first semester I weighted it at 15 percent of the course grade.

Based on student feedback collected over numerous semesters, I have gradually increased the weighting so that it now counts for 25 percent of the course grade, and I’m seriously considering increasing it to 30 percent.

This readiness concept is not discipline specific. Therefore I welcome you to either use the concept as it currently exists or to revise it and refine it according to your needs or scholarly inquiry.

Dr. Jennifer L. Romack is an associate professor at California State University, Northridge.

Reprinted from *The Teaching Professor*, October 2006. 🍀

What Textbook Reading Teaches Students

By Tracey E. Ryan, PhD.

“Do we really need to buy the textbook? It’s so expensive!”

“Can’t you just summarize it for us?”

“Would you just tell us what parts will be on the exam?”

“It was so long and so boring. I couldn’t get through it!”

Quotes like these indicate that many of our students want us to help them with the hard work of extracting difficult material and new vocabulary from their textbooks. They may use the term “boring,” but what they really mean is difficult and time consuming. In turn, we sometimes fall into the trap of summarizing the textbook in our lectures and our PowerPoint presentations.

Our students do appreciate a good textbook summary and may even reward us with positive feedback when we highlight text material with flashy, multimedia presentations. In my experience teaching psychology at the university and community college level, I have been flattered by student praise for “making the concepts seem easy.” Recently, however, I am finding myself troubled by the trend of making it seem easy for students. I have been reminding myself and my students that there are important reasons why they should do the hard work of reading the textbook on their own. I decided that the list I’ve created might be useful to others who have students like mine—students who would rather have me read the text and then tell them what they need to know.

1. Many of our students are poor readers. They often don’t know how to extract key information from the textbook, even when the textbook is “user friendly” and written at a lower reading level than a standard college text. I discovered this by asking my novice students to read out loud in class. If you’ve never done this, I recommend that you try it. Many of my students stumble with the vocabulary and sentence structure. When we require them to read the textbook in advance, we give them the opportunity to improve their reading skills and build vocabulary.

2. Most of our novice students know little about the structure of their textbook, how the chapters are organized, and how each section is painstakingly validated with

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current research. Most don't preview and scan the text before reading, as expert readers usually do. We help students understand and appreciate how professional and technical material is formally presented when we require that they read the course text. This will better prepare them for what they will be asked to do later in most professions.

3. Textbooks today are filled with captivating pictures, helpful pedagogy, and interesting, real-life case studies and examples. This is in contrast to many of the textbooks that

Coming to class prepared and with some background knowledge transforms students from passive to active learners.

we read as undergraduates. Textbooks today provide students with many different opportunities for learning, but only if they are read.

4. From careful reading of the text students can come to see the value of having a second professor in the course, the author of their textbook. This second professor repeats what he or she said exactly, as many times as the student needs to read it. And students often get to know the author when the text is written in a personal tone with real-life examples presented from the author's personal or professional experience.

5. When students grapple with the text before class what happens during class makes much more sense. Such prior preparation results in students having a deeper understanding of key concepts and makes it easier for them to integrate those concepts into their own lives.

6. They learn the difference between informed and uninformed discussion. When students have read the material before class, discussions in class are richer and more fun, not just for the teacher but for the students as well.

7. Coming to class prepared and with some background knowledge transforms students from passive to active learners. They stop doing stenography and start doing the kind of critical thinking that promotes learning.

For these reasons, it is worth the effort it takes to get students to come to class having done the reading!

Dr. Tracey E. Ryan is a professor at the University of Bridgeport, CT.

Reprinted from *The Teaching Professor*, April 2008. 🍀

Getting Students to Read

By *Maryellen Weimer, PhD*

Getting students to read their textbooks is like pulling hen's teeth! Even syllabus language just short of death threats, firmly stated admonitions regularly delivered in class, and the unannounced quiz slapped on desks when nobody answers questions about the reading don't necessarily change behaviors or attitudes. Rather, students remain committed to seeing to get by without doing the reading, or only doing it very superficially, or only doing it just prior to exam dates.

Most of us know the problem is bad but most of us don't have the courage Jay R. Howard did. He started and continued surveying despite grim results. Only 40 percent of his students reported that they usually or always did the reading. Grades and reading were linked. Of the students who got C's, D's and F's, only about 31 percent of them reported that they usually or always doing the reading as compared with 54 percent of students who got A's and B's. Even so, I think most of us would cringe if we found out that 40 percent of our best students were not regularly reading the assigned material.

I admire Howard for facing the truth and trying to do something about it. He developed a quiz mechanism—it's described in the article referenced below—and he reports data showing that it changed students reading behavior dramatically.

What I'm seeing more clearly now is that we can't just bemoan the fact that students don't read. Furthermore, we don't really get anywhere by assigning blame (especially when we end up being blameless). And finally, doing what we've been doing, mostly threatening and quizzing, isn't solving the problem. The better solution involves designing the course so that students can't do well without reading. The better solution involves assignments that require students to do more than just passively read. The assignments must be structured so that students engage and respond to the reading. A number of faculty have already arrived at this conclusion and like Yamane (reference below), they have written about the effective ways they are getting students to do the reading.

P.S. As I regularly remind you, don't worry that these articles are written by faculty who teach sociology. If you

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assign textbook reading, these assignments can be used or adapted to your discipline and style. One of my favorite things about teaching is that we can learn much from and with each other.

References:

Howard, J. R. (2004). Just in time teaching in sociology or how I convinced my students to actually read the assignment. *Teaching Sociology*, 32, 385-90.

Yamane, D. (2006) Course preparation assignments: A strategy for creating discussion-based courses. *Teaching Sociology*, 36, 236-248

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Reprinted from *The Teaching Professor* blog, July 18, 2008.

Helping Students Use Their Textbooks More Effectively

By Tiffany F. Culver, PhD. and Linda W. Morse, PhD.

Most college students spend little time reading their texts. There's research to confirm that, but most of us don't need to look beyond our own classrooms for confirmation. In our case we sampled the undergraduates we teach and they reported that on average they spend 1.88 hours a week reading the required text. The hours reported by first-year students were even less—1.54 hours. Our upperclassmen, primarily educational psychology majors, reported a mean of 2.21 hours each week.

These bleak findings caused us to start thinking about why students don't read the text. We wondered if instructors somehow unintentionally discourage students from reading their texts. And most important, we tried to identify those actions a teacher can take that might result in students using their textbooks more effectively. Here's

our list of suggestions.

State your requirements for the text on the syllabus.

Make it clear from the beginning of the course that the text is required and will be used. This should be done orally and in print. Many students apparently get the idea from the instructor that the text isn't that important. If it is important and you intend to use it, or you think it is critical for student success in the course, be absolutely clear about that right from the start.

Introduce the text. At the beginning of the course, talk about the text, its features, how it relates to the course, and how it will be used. How is it organized? Are there outstanding features in its layout? Are key terms highlighted, for example? What do you know about its author? Does it have any support material, such as a student workbook or website?

Communicate your expectations regarding the text frequently. Make it clear when a reading assignment from the text needs to be completed, including whether or not students need to complete the reading before they come to class. If you plan to use the text during class, let students know that they should come to class with their book. If you know a chapter is going to be particularly difficult, then give your students some tips for reading the material.

Make it clear that textbook reading requires effort. Many students think that reading a chapter once, or, worse, skimming it, is sufficient. If a careful reading of the text is essential to course success, let students know that they will need to read the material more than once. Explain that even you can't grasp material in a particular text in one quick read, and that reading textbooks in college requires much more effort than reading the books used in high school courses.

Use the text in class. In your lectures or group work, refer to charts, specific studies, or interesting points in the text. Place reminders about reading on your course Web pages. This connects you and your students with the text. If you disagree with a text, make it clear to the students why and how your position differs. When your lectures digress from the text, make that clear as well, and communicate your reasoning. Students need to know that the instructor has read the text and is familiar with its viewpoints and examples.

Offer students effective textbook study practices. Because many college students don't read college-level material well, they need to be introduced to effective study strategies such as rereading, asking for help, and asking questions in class. Unfortunately, many students rely exclusively on underlining with highlighters. They use multiple

colors, which brightens the paper but doesn't necessarily lead to better identification of key terms or examples.

Choose a good text. Select texts that emphasize good structure, content, and layout. They should closely support your course topics. Let your book company representatives know what you are looking for and what works and doesn't work for your students.

Be a good role model. Let your students know that you read—not only the course texts but other texts and books. Demonstrate your knowledge of texts in the field as a way of showing students that reading is an important professional requirement.

The best advice in a nutshell: let all you say and do reinforce the importance of the text.

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Reprinted from *The Teaching Professor*, April 2008. 🍀

Still More on Developing Reading Skills

By *Maryellen Weimer, PhD.*

If you regularly read *The Teaching Professor*, you will know that in recent issues we've published a number of articles on students and college-level reading skills—more specifically, how we get students to devote the time and energy required to read college-level materials. Here's more on the topic from an excellent article that does a particularly good job of framing the issues. It also offers an assignment that develops reading skills (and some evidence that it works).

Start with the problem

When given an assignment, some students feel they have met their obligation if they have forced their eyes to 'touch' (in appropriate sequence) each word on the pages assigned. How can we entice students to read the material we assign, and how do we help them develop strategies for

deep comprehension and retention of the material? Are there subtle ways we can prod them to read and help them develop literary skills—without spending our own precious time explicitly teaching 'reading?' (p. 125-126)

The problem originates in high school or sometimes even before that, when students are encouraged to read for factual information that can then be regurgitated. They develop "surface learning" strategies that do not lend themselves to college-level reading, which requires engagement and analysis. "A good reader forms visual images to represent the content being read, connects to emotions, recalls settings and events that are similar to those presented in the reading, predicts what will happen next, asks questions, and thinks about the use of language." (p. 126)

Generally, these skills are not explicitly taught at any level of education. Sophisticated learners (like faculty) discover them through a trial-and-error process, but most students in college courses today are not developing these reading comprehension skills. The article attributes the problem to a confluence of factors, including the anti-intellectualism that pervades our culture. "The important point here is that it is unproductive to blame either students or public schools ... We in academia have done our share to contribute to this stress on getting the best grade with the least understanding of the larger meaning." (p. 129)

The authors are especially critical of quizzes over assigned readings. "They encourage surface learning based on episodic memory—short-term memorization for a day or two—rather than deep learning that is transformative of one's perspective and involves long-term comprehension." (p. 127)

If quizzes aren't the answer, then how do instructors "make reading experiences meaningful so that students will want to learn via the written word and will develop an appreciation for the various strategies good readers utilize?" (p. 127)

The authors have developed an assignment that certainly appears to move students in the right direction. Students complete reading responses for each reading assignment. Actually, there are 29 dates when reading responses are due; students are required to submit 25 of them so that if they have an emergency or a lot of work due in other classes, they can opt not to complete a reading response. Reading responses may take one of five forms and students are encouraged to try a variety of these options.

- **Connecting to the text**—This involves underlining key ideas and making marks and comments in the margins. Students then go back through the reading and write five "big" questions on key concepts in the chapter.

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They answer two of those questions or write a commentary on why they think these are the core issues in the reading.

- **Summarizing the readings and visualizing the key ideas**—Students make a visual or graphic organizer for content in the reading. (There are several examples in the article’s appendices.) They can also make a chart or several lists that organize and categorize ideas.
- **Reading response journal**—Here each portion of the reading assignment is responded to with a question or comment.
- **Studying as a group**—Two or three students can convene as a study group. They discuss the readings, focusing on key concepts. Ideas are recorded and then written up.
- **Create a song or a rap**—Students create a song or rap about the assignment, which they then record and submit.

The instructors use a simple grading scheme for the assignment. Minimal efforts garner three points, solid summaries and connections are worth four points, and extraordinary responses merit five points. In the beginning, they provide students with feedback designed to help them improve. Subsequently, students get the score only.

Seventy-eight percent of the students reported that they read 75 percent or more of the assignments. Students also saw a definite connection between having done the readings and being able to participate at a higher level in class. Sixty-eight percent indicated that by doing the responses they did learn something about themselves as readers.

The authors note in their conclusion that if faculty want students to read deeply, they must work to develop assignments that encourage students to make sense of what they read. Because students use different methods to gain understanding, it makes sense to give them different options.

Reference: Roberts, J. C., and Roberts, K. A. (2008). Deep reading, cost/benefit, and the construction of meaning: Enhancing reading comprehension and deep learning in sociology courses. *Teaching Sociology* 36, 125-140.

Dr. Maryellen Weimer has been editor of The Teaching Professor newsletter since 1987. She is a Penn State Professor Emeritus of Teaching and Learning.

Reprinted from The Teaching Professor, Aug./Sept. 2008.

Text Highlighting: Helping Students Understand What They Read

By Lydia Conca, PhD.

Do you have students who have difficulty understanding assigned readings? Do you have students who don’t complete the readings or don’t even bother bringing their books to class? A better question might be how many? Many college students struggle with their reading assignments.

As a teacher educator with expertise in reading development and disability, I find it useful to model effective reading strategies and provide immediate feedback on those strategies frequently used by students. One versatile method I use with undergraduates involves examination of their text underlines—most of those who read do underline. Throughout the semester, I ask students to refer to their assigned readings and share with the class passages they underlined and reasons for their selection. In this way, the types of thinking that accompanies purposeful, active reading become more apparent.

Students underline passages in the reading for a variety of reasons. They may underline based on prior knowledge. For example, a student might highlight text that relates to a personal experience or something they already believe. In these cases, my feedback explicitly encourages them to make these connections and prompts them to draw upon what they know as they read in all their classes. Other times, students underline what they think is an important point. I see this as an opportunity to build content knowledge. My feedback often takes the form of questions and aims to help them examine concepts and relationships expressed in the text in greater depth or from a different perspective.

Sometimes students underline what they don’t understand. They might highlight secondary points or, more typically, they highlight too much, leaving few sentences untouched. On these occasions, I try to demonstrate how I approach the text. I think aloud as I read and make my thinking visible as I switch back and forth from actually

reading phrases, sentences, and passages to interpretation. I make predictions and confirm or revise them as I read on. I paraphrase and evaluate my own ability to infer the author's points. In this way, students observe a model of active meaning construction. When it's apparent that several students are having difficulty, I might parse a complex sentence and analyze its relationship to the passage or chapter, or clarify an abstract concept or position through use of surrounding context. Through my demonstrations and feedback, students learn to become more purposeful and selective about what they underline. They become more aware of their level of understanding, knowing when to reread and seek clarification.

I use material from the text selectively but consistently, and the approaches I demonstrate evolve across the course. Passages selected for class examination relate to essential content. Thus, reading demonstrations and discussions are targeted and kept short, usually lasting less than 20 minutes. At the beginning of the semester, an examination of text underlines is used as a review; later it is a previewing strategy before a reading assignment is completed. After a few demonstrations, I ask students to work with a peer and compare passage underlines, noting what was of interest, of importance, or would benefit from clarification. The approach includes other reading comprehension strategies, such as self-questioning. Following instructor modeling, students write questions that they have about the text in the margins or on sticky notes. Through repeated practice, students become more independent and confident readers.

By semester's end, there are fewer students who fail to bring the assigned reading material to class and even fewer with clean texts, free of markings and notes. Students quickly learn that assigned readings are an integral part of class and become more accountable for their own learning. They are willing to take more risks and seem to better understand that comprehension is a dynamic process. I interpret these changes as evidence of positive growth. It reminds me that today's college students benefit from models of good reading and feedback that informs their efforts.

Dr. Lydia Conca is a professor at Saint Joseph College, CT

Reprinted from *The Teaching Professor*, Aug./Sept. 2008.

When Students Don't Do the Reading

By *Maryellen Weimer, PhD.*

Students not doing the reading or other assigned homework? I've already done more than several blog posts on the topic and lots of articles in the newsletter. Hopefully all the "coverage" has offered grist for your thinking and new strategies worth trying. Despite all the previous "coverage," I'm still finding there is more to be shared on the topic.

I've just finished reading Terry Doyle's new book *Helping Students Learn in a Learner-Centered Environment* and would definitely recommend it to folks interested in learner-centered pedagogies (it can be ordered at www.styluspub.com).

In a chapter on promoting independent learning, Doyle asks why students are unprepared to learn on their own. He uses reading assignments as an example. "Students don't do their reading and other assigned prep work because, based on their experience, they believe that teachers will discuss any important information included in the readings during class." (p. 67)

How does he know that? Well, Doyle facilitates faculty learning communities where faculty explore a range of instructional issues. Doyle has each faculty participant identify a student consultant. He recommends selecting one majoring in the faculty member's content area. Faculty then consult with that student on those instructional strategies and approaches the faculty member is considering implementing. (Isn't that a great idea?) The faculty learning community invites all these students to a session during which students share their thoughts about teaching and learning. During that exchange faculty always ask the students why so many of their classmates don't do their reading assignments. "The nearly unanimous answer, and this comes from some very bright and motivated learners, is that students don't read the material because they feel confident the teacher will always review the important points in the textbook during lecture. They often add a comment about teachers loving to talk." (p. 67)

It doesn't take a lot of intellectual insight to come up with a way to fix that problem. Now, most students also don't read because they aren't very good at it and so

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expecting them to get what needs to be gotten out of the reading on their own will be a daunting task that few will complete successfully. So, students will still need help, but does it really help them learn how to read when what they need to know from the reading is regularly reviewed in class?

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Reprinted from *The Teaching Professor* blog, Nov. 20, 2008. 🍀

Pre-Reading Strategies: Connecting Expert Understanding and Novice Learning

By Heather M. Bandeen

When I first started mentioning pre-reading strategies to the students I work with, they responded with looks of panic. In one class, a student raised her hand and pleaded, “Please don’t tell our instructor to give us any more reading. I am begging you.”

Much to the relief of this student and all the others, I suspect, pre-reading strategies are not about more reading assignments. Rather, they involve activities that are used before students tackle the existing readings for a given course. When used regularly, pre-reading strategies provide a great way for instructors to make their expert understanding accessible while encouraging students to gain a novice intellectual foothold within a new discipline. Next time you announce a reading assignment, try one of these strategies to spark a discussion before your students read:

1) Build a framework: Asking students to take a look at the syllabus is an easy way to help them understand an instructor’s design for a course. I have my students scan the syllabus and then venture a guess as to why the next class

period’s topic has been planned for that particular week. To promote that discussion you might ask: What readings from the previous class periods might help you to understand this new topic? Why do you think this topic comes before some of the others planned for later in the semester?

2) Scan for the low-hanging fruit: Consider introducing students to a textbook by asking them to open to an assigned chapter and scan the pages. Encourage them to look for pictures, headings, bolded words, and any charts/graphs. After a minute or two, ask them to suggest what they think the particular chapter addresses. Try asking: What are some of the most important aspects of this chapter? How do you think this chapter is organized? What would you highlight on a given page and why?

3) Make connections: To help when students encounter an assigned group of readings, have them take those readings out and set them side by side. Give students a couple of minutes to think about how this group of readings might fit together. They might ascertain that by skimming the titles, the headings, and the abstracts (if any), and deciding on the purpose of each reading. You could promote that discussion with these questions: How do these readings support the next class period’s topic? Do the readings provide opposing perspectives or different disciplinary traditions? Would any of the readings be better understood if approached in a particular order? Why or why not?

4) Search for roadblocks: Many times, instructors assign an integral reading that is packed with lots of discipline-specific terms and/or acronyms. The use of specialized language can prevent students from understanding and finishing assigned readings. During a pre-reading session you might have students scan an article and circle any terms that might signal a “roadblock” to understanding. You could compile a list of these terms and make them the focus of a discussion.

5) Uncover the structure: As students progress through a discipline, they will eventually encounter academic writing. An easy way to acclimate students to this kind of professional writing might be to ask them to analyze the parts of a peer-reviewed article. Then, talk about why this format would be required by an academic journal. I often ask my students this summarizing question: How do these specific parts, when taken together, create a compelling academic argument?

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6) Contrast the style: When instructors assign readings from a range of genres, the rationale behind the choices is not always clear to students. After giving students a chance to scan the structure, tone, and format of each reading, they can be asked to talk about appropriate occasions for certain writing approaches. Try asking students these questions: What does one particular style provide that another might not? Why would one of these styles be more compelling for certain audiences?

This list represents a few of the possible strategies teachers can offer so that students learn to make sense of challenging reading material on their own. By allowing the frameworks of a discipline and the careful choices of an instructor to become clear, the “disconnect” between expert understanding and novice learning begins to disappear.

Heather M. Bandeen, The Ohio State University.

Reprinted from *The Teaching Professor*, January 2009. 🍀

The Use of Reading Lists

By Maryellen Weimer, PhD.

After more than 20 years of publication, you’d think every aspect of teaching and learning had been covered in some issue or another of this newsletter. That’s what I keep thinking, and just when I do, I discover an article or receive a submission on a topic never before covered in the newsletter. The case in point this time: reading lists.

Given the difficulty most faculty have getting students to read for courses, even assigned reading in required textbooks, I’m thinking that reading lists may not be used as extensively now as they were 20 years ago. Nonetheless, they still figure prominently in the delivery of independent studies, special topics courses, and senior and graduate seminars.

One recently discovered article from a British journal describes an interview project in which tutors (faculty members) and students were interviewed about experiences with reading lists. Courses are not designed and delivered in North America as they are in the British educa-

tional system, so some of the findings and issues are not the same, but reading the article raised a number of questions that are relevant to faculty in North America who use reading lists.

How are they constructed? Among those interviewed, most faculty reported that they create reading lists out of their own favorite sources—readings that were especially helpful in their initial explorations of a topic. The article expresses some legitimate concerns over the currency of reading lists and whether faculty regularly update them to reflect emerging ideas, theories, and research results.

What role do they play in the learning process? The faculty interviewed saw reading lists as guides, helpful to students as they began exploration of an unfamiliar subject area. Rather than having to find their own way through a forest of potential sources, the reading list allows students to follow a path through unfamiliar territory. Faculty also hoped their reading lists served motivational purposes—that students would discover the inherent intrigue of the area and be inspired to read further on their own.

How do students use reading lists? There was a good deal of divergence between faculty perceptions of the role of reading lists and the practices students reported in relation to them. Uniformly, students reported looking at the “main” or “most important” texts on the lists. Some instructors indicate those priorities by listing materials in categories. Others do so by mentioning sources in class, either using material from them or making statements about their importance. Students reported reading less as opposed to more from their course reading lists, and many had little interest in discussing what they read with the instructor or in class. That’s something that most faculty will not find surprising.

How might students be motivated to explore readings beyond those “required” for the course? This has become such a conundrum for faculty. If reading is not required, there is virtually no chance that students will read at all. But as soon as reading material is required, students tackle it because they have to, and that definitely affects their attitudes toward the material. The ideal is for students to discover for themselves how much can be learned from reading. Perhaps instructors can help to make that happen by raising questions (interesting, relevant ones) in class that are answered in the reading. It might also help if instructors share with students the role of a particular reading in their own intellectual development. And as we’ve explored in several recent issues, a lot of students aren’t reading because they aren’t very good readers or aren’t readers who know how to handle challenging academic material. The best way around that problem is to

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take whatever time can be allotted to start developing those all-important reading skills.

How should reading lists be incorporated into a course? The question here relates to whether some discussion of readings should occur and how students might participate in such an exchange. Should they be able to answer or ask questions about the readings? Should they be asked to write as a means of preparing for discussion? Should they do follow-up reading and writing after a discussion?

Many faculty fondly remember reading lists from their favorite courses. They were the way in to new, unexplored, and extremely interesting areas. Most faculty can still name individual readings that captured their imagination, changed the way they thought, or opened whole new vistas of understanding. The readings that accomplished these results haven't changed (maybe students have), but the power of a set of reading materials is still there. The questions, more challenging now than they once were, are how faculty can get students connected with these powerful intellectual stimuli and how reading experiences in a course can be used to develop a lifelong commitment to reading.

Reference: Stokes, P. and Martin, L. (2008). Reading lists: A study of tutor and student perceptions, expectations and realities. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33 (2), 113-125.

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Reprinted from *The Teaching Professor*, February 2009. 🍀

The Student-Accessible Reading List

By David M. Dolence, PhD.

I have always been a huge supporter of reading lists and thus was excited to see the article “The Use of Reading Lists” in *The Teaching Professor* newsletter. The article raised some concerns and questions that I have asked often. In fact, just recently I changed my approach to reading lists and would like to share that adaptation. It’s

too soon to know for sure, but anecdotal evidence makes me hopeful that student reading beyond course requirements is not a utopian dream.

Many reading lists are not accessible to students for two main reasons. First, they are not connected to specific courses. For example, our department has a reading list that includes a number of quality texts from the various subfields within the discipline, and it is quite good. However, this list was created not for a course, but for the discipline in general. Second, and more important, reading lists can be extremely intimidating in their size and scope. Students new to the field don’t have any idea where to begin. Although it is helpful to divide reading lists into “most important” readings and subject area readings, the end result is still a long and daunting list more often than not. The best students will read books from it, but they are also the students who would ask for additional readings without the list.

Recognizing the value of continued reading and the inaccessibility of many reading lists, I decided to attack both problems. First, I decided to create reading lists closely tied to each specific course—not just to the subject of the course, but to specific class discussions and topics that were addressed as the course progressed. This means I didn’t start the course with a pre-made list but constructed it as the course went along, and I shared it with students at the end of the course. This way the reading list became a way to extend the course beyond the scheduled semester. Using the course email list, I send the reading list to students at the end of the semester, with a personal statement about the importance of continued reading and learning beyond the classroom.

To make the list more accessible, I limit the number of readings to three or maybe four and I annotate each reading. I choose these readings very carefully and with three different groups of students in mind. I choose one reading for the student who already loves the discipline, be that student one of our majors or someone with a declared minor in the field. I select an important work in the field and one that discusses a topic that was particularly interesting to the class as evidenced by discussion or out-of-class questions. I remind students of this interest in the annotation. The reading is directly tied to the course and is not just another book on the topic.

I choose the second reading for those students who enjoyed the course but have no deep interest in the discipline. It is important that this reading not be discipline heavy, but that it engage a popular course topic of discussion in an accessible way. For example, in a presidency

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course we had a particularly good discussion on power and corruption, and as a result, I recommended Warren's *All the King's Men*, with an annotation that specifically spoke to that topic and mentioned violent death in a state capitol building.

My last selection is the most difficult but in many ways the most important. This reading is for students who did enjoy the course and would not be averse to some more

I decided to create reading lists closely tied to each specific course—not just to the subject of the course, but to specific class discussions and topics that were addressed as the course progressed.

exposure, but who won't extend themselves to get it. (I do eliminate the student who did not enjoy the course and is happy to move on.) For the student interested but not terribly motivated, I make a reading suggestion much more lax by academic standards. In fact, in the past I have included movies and songs on my "reading" list. Some colleagues may shun this approach, but to provide a personal anecdote, I first read Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* in high school entirely because I enjoyed an Iron Maiden song by the same name, which led me to the poem. I no longer have Iron Maiden CDs in my collection, but a well-worn collection of Coleridge remains on my bookshelf.

In the several semesters since I have started using the end-of-course reading suggestions, I believe they have proven to be more effective than the standard reading list. I have had two students specifically approach me a semester after the course and mention a book from the reading list that they read. In addition, I have had many more emails that have thanked me for the suggestions or mentioned looking into one of the readings. This may be minimal evidence, but it is a far more direct success than I had with more traditional reading lists. A real value of reading lists is keeping the topic alive in students beyond the classroom and for the rest of their lives.

Dr. David M. Dolence is an assistant professor at Dominican University, IL

Reprinted from *The Teaching Professor*, April 2009. 🍀

How to Get Your Students to Read What's Assigned

By Sara Jane Coffman

How often have these scenarios happened in your classroom?

Scenario 1: You ask a question in class, but all you see are blank stares. It's a straightforward question about the reading and guess who hasn't done it?

Scenario 2: A student comes to your office complaining that he studied for the quiz, but couldn't remember anything he read!

Scenario 3: Your students turn in essays based on the reading assignment, but their papers are extremely superficial. They may have read the material, but they didn't really understand it beyond the most obvious level.

Unfortunately these scenarios happen regularly in many college classrooms. The questions are: How do we get our students to read what's assigned? And how do we get them to read at more than just a superficial level?

To begin with, we need to determine why students haven't read the assignment. Reasons range from not buying the book to poor time-management skills to not knowing how to read a college textbook. Reading is a dying art. I'd like to share nine suggestions that get students doing the reading and, more importantly, show them how and why.

1. Spend at least one class period at the beginning of the course looking at the textbook with your students. Explain why you chose the book and show your excitement about it. Walk them through the structure of the book, pointing out your favorite features. There may be a "To the student" section near the beginning with information on how to read the book. Key terms may be highlighted with advance organizers, structured overviews, or colored boxes in the margins. There may

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be mini-quizzes throughout the chapters so students can test their understanding. Explain how all these features can help students read and learn the material.

Are there interesting tidbits about the author you could share? Better yet, could you arrange a conference call with the author and have him or her talk about the book? Hearing the author being excited about the book has a great effect on students.

2. Encourage use of supplemental materials connected with the textbook. There may be a study guide, online links, or an audio version of the book. Students have different learning styles, and their varying needs can be met by different information formats.

To begin with, we need to determine why students haven't read the assignment. Reasons range from not buying the book to poor time-management skills to not knowing how to read a college textbook. Reading is a dying art.

3. Explain the importance of new terminology. Vocabulary is used precisely in academic fields, and new terms are the building blocks for new concepts. Show your students how to make flash cards with the new term on the front, and the definition in their own words on the back. Rote memorization is one of the least effective ways to learn new material; translating the textbook terms into one's own words is one of the best.
4. Teach your students to identify key ideas by writing notes in the margins, using sticky notes, and rewriting important concepts into a notebook. These activities make reading active rather than passive.
5. Prepare three to five questions for each reading assignment and have your students write answers before coming to class. Get students on board with this activity early in the course. Grading their worksheets can be time consuming—you'll need to develop some efficient approaches, but your students will benefit

greatly by having something to turn in. You'll benefit by having students able to intelligently discuss the material.

6. During class, have students turn to specific pages and read through the graphic material or a key section. Using the book in class helps to establish its importance. You might start out by explaining the material, but at some point start asking students to provide the explanations.
7. Teach students to ask questions about the reading material. Use the five "w's" (and one h)—who, what, when, where, why, and how. Curiosity and learning should be linked. Sometimes we need to show our students how to be curious.
8. Before each exam, explain what percentage of the questions will come from the text and offer some sample questions. Explore with students the different kinds of questions: literal questions (which require simple memorization), inference questions (which require deeper thinking), and application questions (which require them to explain a concept they've learned in a new context).
9. Invite the students who don't do well on your first exam to your office for individual appointments, and spend some time working with them on their reading skills. Have them read aloud and ask them to process the information back to you. Effective learning includes being able to verbalize written material. Your listening ear and encouragement may well be the event that opens new doors for them.

We don't have to just imagine a classroom where students come prepared. We can take actions that make it more likely to happen!

Sara Jane Coffman, Center for Instructional Excellence, Purdue University, IN

Reprinted from *The Teaching Professor*, June/July 2009.





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