Engaging Ideas

The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom
CHAPTER 8

Helping Students Read Difficult Texts

Whenever faculty get together to talk about student writing or critical thinking, they inevitably turn also to problems of student reading. Just as speaking and listening skills are intertwined, so too are writing and reading skills. Many of today's students are poor readers, overwhelmed by the density of their college textbooks and baffled by the strangeness and complexity of primary sources and by their unfamiliarity with academic discourse. Armed with a yellow highlighter but with no apparent strategy for using it and hampered by lack of knowledge of how skilled readers actually go about reading, our students are trying to catch marlin with the tools of a worm fisherman. We have to do more than take our students out to sea. We have to teach them to fish in the deep.

Fear of Deep Waters: Causes of Students' Reading Difficulties

Before we can help students improve their reading skills, we need to look more closely at the causes of their reading difficulties. Our students, of course, have learned to read in the sense of achieving basic literacy. Except for an occasional student with a reading disability, college students do not need to be taught reading in this ordinary sense. Rather, they need to learn how to fish academic texts, which constitute waters deeper than anything they have plumbed before. What factors send them home from the sea of academic reading frustrated by the expense of time and the emptiness of the catch? I can identify ten contributing causes.
same speed. As Shumer notes, “Poor readers” do not discriminate application of poor readers in contrast, read all our passages at the most time with passage, they were to read for detail, inference, and not one for inference and application. He discovered that good

different purposes—ones for first, one for main, one for detail. Shumer noted that after reading the closest

two passages, each of which were to read for a text comprehension, you passages, each of which were to read for a reading comprehension study of detail. Shumer noted that after reading the closest

Besides understanding how skilled readers read difficult texts, stu-

Different Purposes

2. Failure to Adjust Reading Strategies for

Some students buy flash cards. The teacher will explain it in class. Some students buy CD’s, but don’t have to struggle with this text because they have CD’s, but don’t have to struggle with this text because they have

depression. Students of the very poor and challenged they need to de

3. Reading the Text

In contrast, our students imagine that expert readers are

Expertise. The bigger the fish they go after, the greater the struggle.

Agreement. Linking the text with other readings or with personal

considering first readings as applications of tough drafts. They

When experts read difficult texts, they read slowly and read

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9. Difficulty in Tracking Complex Syntax

Although students may be skilled enough reading today's college textbooks, which may be dumbed down through simplification of syntax, they often have trouble with the sentence structure of primary sources or scholarly articles. When they are asked to read primary sources, they often have trouble with the sentence structure of these texts, which may be dumbed down through simplification of syntax.

8. Inadequate Vocabulary

Inadequate vocabulary hampers the reading comprehension of students, reading difficulties in college.

7. Lack of the "Cultural Literacy" Assumed by the Text's Author

With the text's author, these roles, an experienced reader carries on a silent conversation skeptical doubler who can find weaknesses in the text's power and a reader must will themselves to play two opposing roles in these texts. Readers must will themselves to play two opposing roles in these texts. These skilled readers often give the reputation of the author. These
10. Difficulty in Adjusting Reading Strategies to the Varieties of Academic Discourse

Students do not understand that prose styles, discourse structures, and argumentative strategies differ from discipline to discipline or from historical period to historical period. Just as they do not adjust their reading speed to differences in purpose, they do not adjust their reading strategies to differences in genre. They do not understand, for example, that scientists often read the introduction and discussion section of scientific reports quite carefully but skip the methodology section and only skim the findings. To take another example, they do not understand that historians read primary sources quite differently from the way they read journal articles. They also do not understand why some writers labor to make themselves clear through highly mapped, thesis-up-front structures while others seem to seek obscurity through a difficult style and complex, organic organization. They have particular trouble with exploratory, digressive, process-oriented styles or with highly metaphorical or allusive styles. As anglers, they do not adjust their strategy to the kind of fish they seek.

Suggested Strategies for Helping Students Become Better Readers

Having examined these various causes, we recognize that reading skills, like writing skills, develop slowly over time as students move upward intellectually on Perry’s developmental scale, as their vocabularies expand, as they grow in cultural literacy, as they increase their repertoire of reading strategies, and as they develop better study habits. Although we cannot teach reading directly, we can create learning environments that nurture reading growth. What follow are a number of suggestions for creating such an environment.

Explain to Students How Your Own Reading Process Varies with Your Purpose

Students appreciate learning how their professors read and study. You might take some class time to discuss with students your own reading processes. One approach is to create little research scenarios to help students see how and why your reading strategies vary. When you do your own research, for example, when do you skim texts? When do you read for gist but not for detail? When do you read carefully? Under what circumstances do you take notes on a
Teach Students How to Write "What It Says" and "What It Does" Statements

When a question is asked of the reader (paraphrase the question), the student must "glean" the paragraph for ideas and opinions. By "gleaning" the paragraph, the student can identify the main ideas within the essay. For example, the paragraph's purpose may be to "prove" that a particular statement is true. A helpful way to teach students to understand structural function in a text is to show them how to write "What It Says" and "What It Does." Students should keep a dictionary in the room where they study and learn strategies that work for them when they encounter unfamiliar words. The student should be taught how to make small glossary entries. If a student encounters an unfamiliar word, he should write the word down several times to reinforce it in his memory.

Help Students Get the Dictionary Habit

The reader is said to have "overlooked" the parts he has not yet to "read." The reader can review briefly the parts of the text in which there is an appropriate reading place. When the reader has come to an appropriate reading place, he need only look to discover how words are related. The reader may have read them when they encountered unfamiliar words. To the student who does not have a small pocket dictionary, they need to learn strategies that work for them when they encounter unfamiliar words. They need to keep a dictionary in the room where they study and learn strategies that work for them when they encounter unfamiliar words.

Responding Process When You Read

Show Students Your Own Note-Taking and Engaging Ideas
tistical data to support a point,” or “Uses an analogy to clarify the idea in the previous paragraph.” The “what is says” sentence for the paragraph you are now reading is “Teach students about structure by having them write ‘what it says’ and ‘what it does’ statements.” The “what it does” statement is “This paragraph gives another strategy for improving reading.” Asking students to write out “what it says” and “what it does” statements for each paragraph in a scholarly article in your field will ensure not only careful reading of the article but also increased awareness of structure.

Make Students Responsible for Texts Not Covered in Class

A good way to increase the amount of material covered in a course or to create space for active learning is to make students responsible for course readings not discussed in class. (For a justification of this approach from an economist, see Machlup, 1979.) This strategy signals to students that all learning in a course does not have to be mediated through the instructor. Not only does this strategy allow instructors to cover content material without feeling rushed to lecture over it, but it also breaks the vicious reading cycle discussed earlier (teachers explain readings in class because students are poor readers; students read poorly because teachers explain the readings in class). When students know they will be tested on material not covered in class, they are forced to a deeper level of struggle.

Develop Ways to Awaken Student Interest in Upcoming Readings

Students’ reading comprehension increases when they are already engaged with the problem or issue that a reading addresses or are otherwise interested in the subject matter. The trick is to arouse students’ interest in a text before they read it so that they are already participating in the conversation that the text belongs to. Perhaps they will thus be stimulated to read the text for their own reasons rather than for ours. Here are two strategies that might work.

Devise Interest-Arousing Pretests. One technique is to create an interesting nongraded pretest over the upcoming reading. Students will get a preview of the content of the reading, as well as an awareness of their own gaps in knowledge. If the test can make the content seem interesting or important, it may help awaken curiosity.

Assign an Exploratory Writing Task or a Collaborative Group Task on a Problem to Be Addressed in the Reading. Prior to assigning a reading, ask students to do their own thinking about a problem or
Many students do not realize that a passage from a text can be both

1. Give background information about the text.
2. Show the importance of the text.

3. Explain the importance of the text in the context of the other texts.

For comprehension of a Text

1. Identify the author's perspective and viewpoint.
2. Identify the author's purpose and thesis.
3. Identify the author's techniques and strategies.
4. Identify the author's use of evidence.

For understanding of the text:

1. Identify the author's perspective and viewpoint.
2. Identify the author's purpose and thesis.
3. Identify the author's techniques and strategies.
4. Identify the author's use of evidence.

For comprehension of cultural codes:

1. Identify the author's perspective and viewpoint.
2. Identify the author's purpose and thesis.
3. Identify the author's techniques and strategies.
4. Identify the author's use of evidence.

For understanding of cultural codes:

1. Identify the author's perspective and viewpoint.
2. Identify the author's purpose and thesis.
3. Identify the author's techniques and strategies.
4. Identify the author's use of evidence.

For comprehension of the text:

1. Identify the author's perspective and viewpoint.
2. Identify the author's purpose and thesis.
3. Identify the author's techniques and strategies.
4. Identify the author's use of evidence.

For understanding of the text:

1. Identify the author's perspective and viewpoint.
2. Identify the author's purpose and thesis.
3. Identify the author's techniques and strategies.
4. Identify the author's use of evidence.

For comprehension of cultural codes:

1. Identify the author's perspective and viewpoint.
2. Identify the author's purpose and thesis.
3. Identify the author's techniques and strategies.
4. Identify the author's use of evidence.

For understanding of cultural codes:

1. Identify the author's perspective and viewpoint.
2. Identify the author's purpose and thesis.
3. Identify the author's techniques and strategies.
4. Identify the author's use of evidence.
assumes that readers have a certain background knowledge. If that knowledge is absent, the reader can quickly get lost.

To illustrate the importance of cultural codes to students, I have developed the following strategy. I place on an overhead projector several cartoons and ask why persons new to U.S. culture might not see what’s funny. One of my favorite is a “Far Side” cartoon showing a group of partying dogs hoisting drinks inside a doghouse. One dog is speaking to another; the caption says, “Oh, hey! Fantastic party! Tricksy! Fantastic! . . . Say, do you mind telling me which way to the yard?” Understanding this cartoon requires a surprising amount of cultural knowledge:

That dogs in middle-class America frequently live in doghouses
That at middle-class parties, people stand around holding drinks
That bathrooms are often hard to find in middle-class homes, so guests have to ask the host discreetly where they are located
That middle-class homes have backyards
That dogs relieve themselves in the yard

Written texts require similar kinds of background knowledge. After discussing a few cartoons, I distribute a brief news article from the Cold War era, requiring reconstruction of cultural context. The article refers to NATO, to Reagan and Gorbachev, to ballistic and anti-ballistic missiles, to neo-isolationism, and to the way that America’s nuclear arms threw the Marxist-Leninist engine of history off its tracks. Few of my students know what NATO is, understand the difference between ballistic and guided missiles, or appreciate the historical events and American attitudes that are packed into the term neo-isolationism. Fewer still can explain the “engine of history” metaphor. A discussion of this article quickly clarifies for students how knowledge of cultural codes facilitates comprehension of a reading.

One way to help students reconstruct a text’s cultural codes is to create reading guides, the subject of the next strategy.

Create “Reading Guides” for Particularly Difficult Texts or for Texts with Unfamiliar Cultural Codes

Teachers can assist students greatly by preparing “reading guides” that steer them through difficult parts of assigned readings. Typically, these guides define key terms, fill in needed cultural knowledge, explain the rhetorical context of the reading, and ask critical
must develop is the active disposition to seek out views different from one’s own and to evaluate those views critically. This requires critical thinking and being willing to change one’s mind.

The following two games encourage students to see both strengths and weaknesses in any viewpoint. The belief game is played with partners or in small groups. Each team plays an argumentative role, either for or against the stance of the author. The doubting game is played with partners or in small groups. Each team must develop and present a different position from the authors, including a refutation of the author’s stance.


doubting game

Each student to play the "believing and doubting game" (Ellis, 1973, 1986) teaches T each Students to Play the "believing and doubting game"

or why not?

1. The author was/was not successful in changing my view. How so? Why?

2. After I finished reading this text, the author almost made me believe...

Before I read this text, the author almost made me believe...

...on my own...

Help students see that all texts are trying to change students, even if the students are not convinced. This strategy relates closely to the preceding one. Students tend to change their view of something proactive role...
from their own: “If we do not have informed proponents of opposing points of view available, we have to reconstruct the arguments ourselves. We must enter into the opposing points of view on our own and frame the dialogical exchange ourselves” (p. 129). Thus, according to Paul, students must be taught “to argue for and against each and every important point of view and each basic belief or conclusion that they are to take seriously” (p. 140). (For an application of methodological belief and doubt to a political science course, see Freie, 1987; see also “Pro and Con Grid” in Angelo and Cross, 1993, pp. 168–171.)

To apply this strategy to the teaching of reading, instructors need to emphasize that scholarly articles and other assigned readings are voices in a conversation that students need to join. For students, writing in the margins or otherwise responding to texts will begin to make sense when they see their responsibility to imagine and consider alternative points of view and thus to evaluate an author’s thesis, reasons, and evidence.

Developing Assignments That Require Students to Interact with Texts

To conclude this chapter, let’s consider ways that teachers can use exploratory or formal writing assignments to help students become more active and thoughtful readers. When assigned as homework, brief write-to-learn tasks can have a powerful effect on the quality of students’ reading. Some of the following strategies are cross-referenced in Chapter Six as widely used methods of assigning exploratory writing.

Marginal Notes Approach

Many teachers report success simply from forbidding students the use of underlining or yellow highlighters. Instead, they insist on copious marginal notations on the borders of the text itself. (If students plan to resell their texts or are reading library books, they can take marginal notes on separate pages key to the book page.) “Every time you feel the urge to highlight or underline something,” the teacher can advise, “write out why you wanted to underline it in the margins. Why is that passage important? Is it a major new point in the argument? A significant piece of support? A summary of the opposition? A particularly strong or particularly weak point?” The teacher can then exhort the students: “Use the margins to summarize the text, ask questions, give assent, protest vehemently—don’t just color the pages.” The goal here is to get students to carry on lively dialogue with the author in the margins. The instructor
Summary/Response Notebooks

Occasionally in a more formal reflection paper, students to make these responses regularly in their reading logs. Like an open-ended journal, a reading log requires that students develop their own headings. Include student owned exercises andvalves in a reading, they can begin discovering key issues and values in the text. Once students learn this system, teachers can provide new, more appropriate columns. Students first read the notes columns. The instructor might give students for example, in this assignment, the student could fill in a key word or phrase. Like of paper divided into four or five columns. For a heading at the top, another strategy is to have students take reading notes on sheets of paper or the marginal notations next to a certain passage.

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For each of the readings marked with an asterisk on the syllabus, you will write at least two pages in your notebooks. The first page will be a restatement of the text's argument in your own words. You can write a summary, make an outline, draw a flowchart or a diagram of the reading, or simply take careful notes. The purpose of this page is to help you understand as fully as possible the structure and details of the author's argument. This page should help you recall the article in some detail several weeks later. Your next page is to be your own personal reflections on or reactions to the article. Analyze it, illustrate it through your own experience, refute it, get mad at it, question it, believe it, doubt it, go beyond it. I will skim your notebooks looking for evidence of serious effort and engaged thought.

Responses to Reading Guides or Guided-Journal Questions
Keyed to Readings

Another effective technique is to devise critical thinking questions that require students to respond thoughtfully to a text and then to build these into the course as part of a reading guide or a guided journal. (The guided journal is explained in Chapter Six, pages 107–108.) By providing questions for students to respond to, you can get students to focus on points in the readings you find particularly important. You can often begin class discussions by having one or two students read their responses to one of your questions.

Imagined Interviews with the Author

A change-of-pace strategy is to ask students to write dialogues in which they interview the author or otherwise engage the author in arguments with several antagonists (Francoz, 1979). Often the instructor asks the student, as interviewer, to play devil's advocate, arguing against the author's views and then inventing the author's response. Students generally enjoy the creativity afforded by this assignment, as well as the mind-stretching task of role-playing different views. Some teachers ask groups to conduct mock panel discussions in which one group member plays the author of the article and others play people with different views.

Summary Writing

If one prefers to assign formal writing, an excellent way to promote reading skills is to ask students to write summaries or abstracts of articles (Bean, Drenk, and Lee, 1986; Bean, 1986). Summary writing requires that the reader separate main ideas from supporting details, thereby providing practice at finding the hierarchical structure of an article. Moreover, it requires that readers suspend their
Becoming Better Readers

Conclusion: Strategies Teachers Can Use to Help Students

means of words.

Writing "Translations"

between concepts and illustrations.

Main and supporting material, between points and data, and

Main and supporting material, between points and data, and

Multiple-Choice Quiz Questions Developed by Students

Multiple-Choice Quiz Questions Developed by Students

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students' Problem</th>
<th>Helping Strategy</th>
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| Poor reading process | - Give tests or writing assignments on readings that you don't cover in class.  
- Require students to write expressively in response to texts (reading logs, summary/response notebooks).  
- Require marginal notes.  
- Show students your own reading process. |
| Failure to reconstruct arguments as they read | - Assign summary writing.  
- Have students make outlines, flowcharts, or diagrams of articles.  
- Help students write “gist statements” in margins summarizing main points as reading progresses.  
- Go through a sample text with students, writing “what it says” and “what it does” statements for each paragraph. |
| Failure to assimilate the unfamiliar; resistance to uncomfortable or disorienting views | - Explain this phenomenon to students so that they can watch out for it; point out instances in class when students resist an unfamiliar or uncomfortable idea; draw analogies to other times when students have had to assimilate unfamiliar views.  
- In lectures or discussions, draw contrasts between ordinary ways of looking at the subject and the author’s surprising way.  
- Emphasize the “believing” side of Elbow’s “believing and doubting game.” |
| Limited understanding of rhetorical context | - Create reading guides that include information about the author and the rhetorical context of the reading.  
- Through lectures or reading guides, set the stage for readings, especially primary materials.  
- Train students to ask these questions: Who is this author? Whom is he or she writing to? What occasion prompted this writing? What is the author’s purpose? |
| Failure to interact with the text | - Use any of the response strategies recommended in this chapter—reading logs, summary/response notebooks, guided journals, marginal notations, reading guides. |
| Unfamiliarity with cultural codes | - Create reading guides explaining cultural codes, allusions, historical events, and so forth. |
| Unfamiliar vocabulary | • Urge students to acquire the habit of using the dictionary.  
• Create reading guides defining technical terms or words used in unusual ways. |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Difficulty with complex syntax | • Have faith that practice helps.  
• Refer severe problems to a learning assistance center.  
• Have students “translate” complex passages into their own words; also have students practice rewriting particularly long sentences into several shorter ones. |
| Failure to adapt to different kinds of discourse | • Explain your own reading process: when you skim, when you read carefully, when you study a text in detail, and so forth.  
• Explain how your own reading process varies when you encounter different genres of text: how to read a textbook versus a primary source; how to read a scientific paper; how to read a poem; and so forth. |
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