



Efficient and Effective Reading—Help Your Students Get There!

In classes we often find ourselves wanting students to engage in their reading practices more deeply. Sending students off to read a chapter for a class discussion or activity often produces either not doing the reading (prof will discuss in class or post summary notes so why bother?), not getting main ideas and details (often due to weak strategies and poor vocabulary), or failing to sustain attention long enough to get the overall gist of an extended and detailed argument (attention span issues for everyone!). If you want students to get all the ideas from a reading assignment, you will need to help them. Here are three ways to improve students' reading in your classes right now.

Review Your Resource Starting Points

First, take a look at this statement from a subgroup of the National Council of Teachers of English that includes college writing teachers, formally titled [Position Statement on the Role of Reading in College Writing Classrooms](#). Though it is addressed to and designed for writing teachers, it contains a great set of strategies and approaches as well as readings and resources for all faculty. (Note: In the interest of full disclosure, I co-chaired the committee that created this statement in 2021.)

Explain the What, Why, and How of Reading in Your Class

Take the time, in class, to review with students what you are asking them to read and why. Doing so can help with motivation, or at the very least, students will understand your rationale for the assignment you have given them. As you look at the material, even if it is textbook material, point out the ways that the text is designed to help them

read the material effectively. Particularly with a new textbook, point out headings, glossary, review questions at the end of the chapter, charts and graphs and so forth. The review questions, often at the ends of chapters (or online) in textbooks, can help students pay more attention to the reading, keep them focused, and help them get key points. Point out how the text is divided into sections with headings, because you can use those to divide the discussion of the material in class.

Practice Reading Skills in Class, Together

A third strategy can help with in-class discussion and summarize key points of a reading for all students. This approach entails dividing an assigned reading into sections and creating groups (works well for breakout groups on Zoom or, of course, in person) to look at each section. The task is to create a 25-word summary of the section that can be posted to a Google Doc or discussion board in Moodle, creating a full sum of the chapter or reading selection. The summary has to be exactly 25 words, not 24 or 26.

Students will see this as a challenging kind of game. The discussions that result, however, will have students talking about the ideas presented in the text, how they relate to other information you have presented in class, their prior knowledge, perhaps from other courses, and other material they might bring into the discussion. Developing readers will gain insights from those with stronger reading skills. They help one another with vocabulary or look up words in the text's glossary or in the dictionary.

The section-by-section summaries produce a solid summary of the reading material which, posted in Moodle, is available to the class for review. Students who haven't done the reading will feel some peer pressure and will make more of an effort to do the reading for future discussions. Do you want students arguing about which are the most important points in a section of material that need to be included in those 25 words? Do you want them choosing which interpretation best captures the point the author was trying to make? Do you want to be sure they get the key terms and concepts that need to be in the 25 words? You bet! My experience suggests that this approach can re-shape how students complete the reading you assign.

Conclusion

We know from national data from standardized tests, from careful studies of students' untimed actual reading and writing, and from tests of online reading and analysis that current students are not the critical readers and thinkers they can be. In your teaching, you can help them develop skills to be successful in your class and all the others. You can learn more about how to help students with reading by checking that position statement from NCTE. You can also share what you know about reading, and that's a lot because that's how you got to be a faculty member, but providing a guide to the assignment. And in class, you can have students work collaboratively to summarize a reading and have a detailed discussion of the material that you want them to learn.

These approaches will help you help students be better readers and achieve your own teaching goals.

References and Resources

Conference on College Composition and Communication. 2021. [Position Statement on the Role of Reading in College Writing Classrooms.](#)

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About the Author

Alice Horning is a professor emerita, retired from the Department of Writing & Rhetoric and the Department of Linguistics since 2016. She continues to do research and write about student reading problems. She continues to teach for the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of Michigan, where her upcoming class will be on Language and Social Change in October. She blogs at Critical Reading in Digital Times on WordPress.