

Active Reading Strategies that Incorporate Writing to Support Learning

Introduction

Learning to read well makes a difference in student learning and academic success, [according to Leah Christensen](#) (once a Minnesota-based law scholar, now an Associate Professor at Thomas Jefferson School of Law in San Diego), who conducts research investigating the correlation between the way in which law students read and learn the law, and their success in law school. In these empirical studies, she notes the following factors as among those positively impacting student reading comprehension and success as learners in and beyond a particular classroom or discipline:

- Gaining, through instruction and practice, an understanding of how a particular text or type of text is structured.
- Developing, through practice and testing, a range of general reading strategies and strategic disciplinary reading strategies.

The compilation of resources / strategies gathered in this document are arranged into two sections, each offering writing-based active learning strategies that instructors might adapt/adopt in leverage to advance student reading, writing, and accountability skills.

Explain Relevance of Reading Assignments

Effective writing assignment design principles stress the benefits of making clear the purpose, audience, and genre for students; these principles also hold true for reading assignments. In the case of reading assignment design, as Gottschalk and Hjortshoj (Elements of Writing, 2004) point out, the purpose for reading and the role of a reader are often unspecified. Consequently, a student, highlighter in hand, will treat undifferentiated reading assignments as a surface, linear, and passive act – not an encounter.

Two useful questions to consider when assigning reading are (1) what do you want the students to do with the reading? and (2) what is their role as readers? Brief yet explicit prompting that addresses these questions will guide students toward more focused reading and writing.

Example: Gottschalk and Hjortshoj offer this model from a course in Social Sciences: “Read Chapter VI in Hinton as a basis first for understanding the cases we discuss next week. We will return to this chapter when you write a comparison between Hinton’s theory and Caldwell’s two weeks later, and an understanding of both theories will serve you well in the midterm exam” (127).

Here the instructor lays out the purpose for the reading (preparing to discuss cases and compare theories), and the ways that careful reading will prepare the student for future writing. The inclusive use of “we” also underscores how students are responsible for contributing to the course’s production of ideas.

Develop “Writing to Read” Practices

Preview Upcoming Readings

Previewing course reading to establish connections to the course – to the topic at hand, to learning aims, to the field, to future roles students will take. John Bean (Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom) recommends allocating time in-class to tell students something about upcoming reading assignments in order to pique their interest. In his work, Bean has noted that students often wonder why faculty consider reading assignments important, and that they will listen carefully to brief comments about why a reading assignment is interesting and connected to prior and future issues.

Adapt Classroom Activity/Assessment Techniques (aka [CATs](#))

For example, create an assignment in which students write three reading questions/comments based on the text for each reading assignment. The [3-2-1 classroom assessment strategy](#), for example, can nicely turn into a short writing assignment: For example, in a mathematics or engineering course, an application-oriented reading assignment could ask students to record:

- 3 kinds of scenarios where you could use technique we just discussed
- 2 assumptions that you must make about a situation in order to use this technique to solve the problem
- 1 difficulty or Aha! [“muddy point” or “clear sky”]

Passage-Based Reading Activity

In “Making Reading Visible in the Classroom,” Ellen Carillo suggests a passage-based reading strategy that “in its focus on the process of reading actually makes reading visible, thus having the potential to help students in all fields become not only better writers, but better readers.”

This practice requires students to:

- Select a key passage, transcribe it into the document they will compose
- “Unpack” the passage in a close analysis of that passage, with attention to language choices, overall tone, and idea construction.
- Conclude their paper by connecting the passage to the rest of the work.

See the [process overview in Carillo’s article](#), or two examples from UMN courses - one from the [School of Social Work](#), and one from a [CLA](#) department.

Writing with Numbers (Dan Emery)

Written explanations can make data meaningful and valuable. As Nathan Grove and Carol Ruiz have noted about the interplay between text and numeric data, “Academic arguments involve the construction of meaning based in evidence: quantitative reasoning supplies an important category of evidence for successful argument.” In order to help students write effectively with numbers, instructors may find it helpful to incorporate some [strategies that Dan Emery's blog post suggests](#) into their reading and assignment design.

Minute Thesis (Matt Luskey) & Five-Minute Paper (Pamela Flash)

Minute Thesis: In *Small Teaching*, Lang shares an adaptable, in-class exercise he calls “The Minute Thesis.” Students are given two columns of information and asked to write a thesis statement that asserts a relationship between two items in the first column (in Lang’s case, novels read over the semester) and one item in the second column (course themes). The exercise occurs toward the end of the semester as students are gearing up to write final essays. The thesis statements they draft are not always ones that are developed formally in their papers, but the exercise provides students with a low-risk opportunity to practice making assertions (claims that can be contested), establish conceptual connections, and discuss how those connections might be developed in subsequent writing.

Minute Thesis Example: An instructor in Physics wants to make sure her students have a clear grasp of force, the central concept in Newtonian mechanics. She also wants to determine if her students can demonstrate their understanding by explaining the difference between the Newtonian concept and common misunderstandings, as identified in a [Force Concept Inventory](#). On the whiteboard or in an accessible PDF, the instructor writes Column A associated with the Newtonian conception of Kinematics (Velocity discriminated from position; Acceleration discriminated from position; Constant acceleration entails parabolic orbit, changing speed; Vector addition of velocities); in Column B she lists common misunderstandings associated with Kinematics (position-velocity undiscriminated; velocity-acceleration undiscriminated, nonvectorial velocity composition). Students are then asked to write a brief statement that clarifies the difference between one item in Column A and its corresponding misunderstanding in Column B. Students share their responses and discuss in class, providing an opportunity to correct and clarify one another.

Five-Minute Papers: These short writes engage students in reviewing course materials (for example, reading and class session notes) in order to select, organize, and integrate to write out their individual responses to a prompt supplied by the instructor.

Explore this idea via a [slidedeck](#) sharing a selection of prompts from multiple disciplines, drawn from a Pamela Flash workshop.