

How Do Students Approach Reading Tasks?

by Ruth M. Sawyers

When we give reading assignments in texts required for our courses, how do students approach these reading tasks? Some begin by counting the number of pages in the assigned chapter(s); many skip the numerous maps, graphs, charts and pictures provided; others read intently for a few pages, but then find their minds wandering from the text; still others just plunge in, reading from beginning to end. A few read chapter objectives, introductions and summaries, yet the majority lament that after reading their texts, they either fail to understand the information or find it impossible to remember a chapter's content even a few days later.

One of the challenges of English 104, Reading for Success, entails guiding students in effective strategies for reading their textbooks. Students need assistance deciphering the labyrinth of print to discover the author's major points, supporting details, and pertinent examples. Previewing strategies reveal the hierarchy of information in a chapter as students peruse bold head-

ings, subheadings, italicized words, marginal notes, introductions, conclusions, objectives, maps, charts, graphs, pictures, and questions. Summarizing and reviewing the text strengthen a student's mastery of often abstruse concepts. Learning that mnemonic devices, concept mapping and actual test-taking strategies are techniques employed by better students often enlightens students to use more efficient reading/study methods.

During the fall 1994 semester, I challenged students in my three sections of English 104 to integrate the strategies presented in class into their textbook reading through a Content Area Reading Project. Students worked in groups to design a brochure of reading/study strategies to be used as a survival guide for students taking a course in such disciplines as criminal justice, history, psychology, social work, sociology, business, or nursing for the first time. Everyone in the class learned a great deal about applying reading strategies to various disciplines. Armed with their survival guides, they'll approach new reading situations quite confidently.

Initiating Success in the College Student

by Randall P. Kreger

As an instructor of Individualized Reading, English 082 and 083, I am faced with certain realities every time I step into the classroom. Are students prepared for the rigors of pursuing a college education? Their reading, writing, oral communication and listening skills are low. The ability to use higher level thinking skills is

either lacking or apparently missing altogether. The scores on basic skills tests show an overwhelming need for classes to be offered that will enable students to grasp these fundamental skills and prepare them for the years to come in their educational pursuits. Off-handedly, we may wish to say that these students are illiterate, which is an incorrect judgement on our part. However, it may be correct in saying

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Copies of these brochures were sent to appropriate deans and department chairs in March. If you would like additional copies to share with your students, please contact me through *The Literacy Link* or by phoning extension 4156.

that these students are *aliterate*, that being that the students have the skills to read but choose not to use them or improve upon them.

The task seems enormous. Preparing students for four years of college reading in 14 short weeks makes one consider it an exercise in futility. Since the course is designed to enable students to improve their reading using

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a wide variety of college material, instructors must introduce and model reading and studying strategies that may be applied and adapted to individual needs. There is no luxury in having students work with the same textbook as found in other classes. Students enrolled in English 082 and 083 are working with a textbook of their choice from another class they are currently enrolled in. As a result the instructor is obligated to model the application of strategies to a broad range of courses.

So the problem is posed, how do we increase literacy (reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills) with such an eclectic group of students and maintain a sense of continuity at the same time? With the sanction and support of my colleagues, Dr. Kerry Segel and Ruth Sawyers, I introduced a new approach in teaching this class. All of the objectives previously determined to be necessary were interwoven with a thread of continuity to give the class a semblance of structure unique to itself. This continuity is accomplished by using two novels as a core, *The Road to Memphis* by Mildred Taylor and *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Maria Remarque.

While the use of novels in a college class is not unique, it is unique to this course. The purpose for which they are used is also unique. Students have chosen not to read in the past and now are faced with an enormous amount of reading for which they are not prepared to cope successfully. The two novels I selected are not overwhelming in content; in fact, *The Road to Memphis* is considered a young adult novel. These novels have two similarities that caused me to select them. First, in both novels, the protagonist is approximately the same age as my students. I considered this necessary to elicit a sense of relationship to the characters and the plot. This is necessary to increase active reading which initiates higher level thinking skills

needed at the college level. Second, both novels use powerful historical settings producing a high level of interest and fast paced reading.

Requiring the class to read the same novel gives us an opportunity to introduce reading and study strategies in a much more organized manner. Some of the strategies that we model and employ are: pre-reading activities such as surveying, skimming and scanning of texts; K-W-L activities which assess prior knowledge; SQ3R and QAR strategies which allow students

As educators dealing with a specific subject, we naturally have a penchant to consider our content area the most important.

to reflect on what they have read while referencing this new knowledge to prior knowledge. After these and other strategies have been introduced, students then apply and adapt them to their chosen content area. In addition, reading narrative text is much less threatening and easier to apply strategies, especially when working with reluctant readers.

To improve students' thinking skills, I have chosen to use the *Brown Literature Response Model* (Brown, Quirk, and Stephens, 1988; Brown, Stephens, and Phillips, 1993), which poses questions at five different levels: factual, empathetic, critical, sympathetic and analytical. At the factual level students are able to respond to questions that do not require any synthesizing, a level at which many of them are comfortable with. However, the final four levels require students to interpret information in a manner unfamiliar to them but one that is required in understanding and applying college material. In these four levels the student must view the novels from a number of different vantage points in order to answer questions. By having students answer the ques-

tions related to the novel, two components of literacy have been met, reading and writing. After the questions have been answered in written form, they then serve as the basis for whole class discussion that meets the final two aspects of literacy, speaking and listening. Once students are able to understand higher level thinking using the narrative form, they will be able to transfer this knowledge when interacting with expository material.

Initial responses have been favorable from students and instructors. A number of students have completed *The Road to Memphis* within the first two weeks of this semester. Unsolicited comments ranged from anger and disgust concerning the racist attitude prevalent in America during the 1940s to pure excitement about reading such an engrossing novel. Instructors have renewed energy in teaching reading skills and their application to college-level material and are observing more responsive attitudes from the students.

As educators dealing with a specific subject, we naturally have a penchant to consider our content area the most important. Yet in all areas of study we continue to face those students who fall short of the specified goals for one reason or another. For a multitude of reasons they have chosen not to become informed about certain subjects and are with the realization that they are lacking knowledge. By incorporating these strategies into content areas, we have been able to assist students in expanding their base of knowledge needed for college success.

Works Cited

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Real Questions, Real Courses, Real Suggestions

by Janet Rentsch

Your response to my inquiry for effective essay questions along with helpful comments, hints and time tested truths was generous. Thank you for expressing interest and taking the time to write notes. Across the curriculum teachers want students to write logically, clearly and thoughtfully, with no "noise" (spelling errors, punctuation errors, and such). Students take two semesters of English Composition and we work hard to expose/train/teach these skills. When teachers across the curriculum expect a competence, students will deliver, if that teacher will remind the students of the form of writing that is expected. This occurs in business everyday—but that job training is real life, isn't it!

Most students dread essay tests. Most teachers/professors have their testing hopes dashed when grading essay tests. Why does this tete-a-tete occur so regularly, even predictably? Most students are befuddled when facing essay tests. A sampling of causes for this kind of student response to essay tests from SVSU faculty (and this list is by no means comprehensive) suggests the following:

Students do not understand what to write in a logical manner.

Students do not address the question. (W. Elliot)

Students do not proofread what they've written asking themselves "Does it make sense?" (content reasons) and checking for "grammar, spelling, punctuation" (editing reasons). (W. Elliot)

Students do not believe writing counts. (W. Elliot)

When questioned about an essay answer the student replied, "I know it, but, well, you know what I mean."

Students do not connect reading/theories to their current life or future work. Frequently students summarize or write how readings relate to nursing in general, but when asked, they have trouble identifying the personal signif-

icance of the information. (M. Flatt)

Students do not realize the importance of the appearance of writing (correct sentence form, neatness, spelling) and that it influences a reader's/instructor's opinion about writing. (R. Sawyers)

Suggestions??

In Philosophy, D. Hinderer gives "take home essay exams," which are highly directed papers. This saves class time and permits more thoughtful work. Students can deliver higher standards of writing quality and when non-English faculty then take writing into account, they are less resentful. Students also get a chance to talk with each other about their ideas outside of class.

R. Troester provides her students with an essay key word list, that defines the words and what they are really asking with an example of each. Teachers of English Composition do this on a regular basis, but sometimes the "first time around" the skill is not caught. It might behoove teachers who give essay exams to take a teachable moment and provide a similar list. Many of us learn a skill in one area, yet have trouble transferring it to a new area of study. This list may provide the jumpstart that students need in your class. (See list on page 4.)

D. Weaver borrows this powerful teaching idea in Political Science and gives his students a handout "Tips on Writing Answers to Essay Questions." The students see that good writing makes sense no matter what the class.

B. Lane, of the Political Science Department, only gives essay exams and he allows the student to select the questions they answer. All of his exams are open-note, open-book exams. This will require student organization of their notes and text material. He favors questions that ask students to describe, explain, and evaluate, while challenging them to go beyond merely mentioning a subject, as opposed to describing or discussing the subject. In his evaluation of essay

exams, he notes some students fail to organize their thoughts into paragraphs with complete sentences (he requires both).

The Social Work classes depend on concise writing and giving facts from cases to support hypotheses. B. McGregor emphasizes this support writing in her "short answer" essay type questions. She tells students to look at questions and break them down into "sub-questions" in order to include all the requested information. Outlining a response before they answer makes sense as the students organize their thoughts and search the case systematically for the requested information before beginning to write. Complete sentences are required for agency reports, so Barbara asks students to write in complete sentences, a wise sign of student preparation.

To raise awareness of grammatical and stylistic errors, Ken Gewerth of the Criminal Justice Department created an editing exercise using the student's own writing. By taking examples of poor grammatical construction and poor punctuation and having students correct their own errors, students are faced with the real expectation—that writing needs to make sense in Criminal Justice—not just English Composition. This reinforces the importance of writing skills no matter what class a student takes. Hopefully, they haven't sold their handbooks!

Professors and teachers at SVSU have a common goal—to educate competent graduates—and this kind of "essay" feedback indicates our partnership in reinforcing the writing skills of these students. Space doesn't permit publishing lists of essay questions, but rest assured, an understanding of the subject matter is our goal—short of mind-reading we have few choices left to measure the understanding of the subject matter save the "essay test."

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The following is a list of key words, what they ask, and an example of each for your reference.

Words	What they ask	Example
Define	Give the exact meaning of the topic. How is it different from everything else of its type?	Define Marx's concept of alienated labor.
Describe, Discuss	Tell what happened or what the topic is. Concentrate only on primary or most important features.	Describe the conditions on the ships that brought slaves to America and discuss one rebellion that took place on a slave ship.
Explain why	Tell the main reasons why the topic happened or happens.	Explain why the ocean tides are not at the same time every night and why they are not always the same height.
Illustrate	Give one or more examples of the topic, relating each to the topic.	Primitive tribes usually have rigid family systems. Illustrate this point, using one of the tribes studied this semester.
Relate	Show how the topic has an effect on something else, the connection(s) between two things.	Relate the evolution of the horse to the changes in its environment.
Summarize	To give all the main points of a topic; to reduce it without changing it.	Summarize Galileo's main discoveries.
Trace	Give a series of important steps in the development of a historical event or a process or any sequence of happenings.	Trace the events that led up to the Civil War.
Agree or Disagree	Give your opinion about a topic. You must express a positive or negative opinion. Support your opinion from appropriate sources.	The first six months of a child's life are the most important period in its emotional development. Agree or disagree.
Analyze	Break down the topic into its parts and explain how the parts relate to each other.	Analyze the structure of Beethoven's Fourth Symphony.
Critique, Criticize	Break the topic into its parts (analyze); explain the meaning (interpret); and give your opinion (evaluate).	Criticize Peter Singer's argument that all animals are equal.
Evaluate	Give your opinion about a topic. You may make both positive and negative points, but you must come to some conclusion about the relative weight of good and bad points.	Evaluate the importance of protein molecules in a cell.
Interpret	Explain the meaning of the topic. Give facts to support your point of view.	Interpret the meaning of the election statistics given on page 12 of your text.
Justify, Prove	Give reasons to show why the topic or assertion is true. Use examples.	Justify, from a Southerner's point of view, the need for slaves in the ante bellum South.
Could...	Determine if the topic is capable of what is being asked. Your response should include, but go significantly beyond, a yes or no answer.	Could Hitler have won World War II if he had defeated Great Britain in 1940?
How would...	Determine the probable reaction to the topic in the circumstances provided. Support adequately.	How would President Truman have reacted upon discovering the Watergate burglary?
What would happen...	Based on what you have already learned, determine the probable outcome of a new set of circumstances.	Concentrated solutions of urea (8M) act as a denaturing agent on proteins by disrupting noncovalent bonds. What would happen to the configuration if the protein was dissolved in a lower concentration?

Courtesy of Rosalie Riegle Troester's, *Essay Tests Handout*

In General Speaking, It Gave Me a Deep Impression

by Tom Hearron

I don't deserve this grade." Holding the paper, she stands beside my desk, the corners of her mouth turned down in a pout. Her brown eyes don't meet mine.

I look at the paper. A few usage errors. Marginal comments: "I'd like to hear more about this." "I'd like an example here." "OK! This is really clear." "I like how you state this idea." Closing comment: "Some really good ideas, but they need to be organized better. More examples would help clarify things." The grade: B+.

"Really?" I say. "Have you read my comments? Could you read my handwriting?"

"Yes." She brushes back shiny black hair over her shoulder.

"So what's the problem?"

"I read the papers the other members of my group did." Is her lip trembling? "They're all very much better than mine. B+ is too good a grade for this paper. You must be very kind."

Welcome to teaching English in China, where students complain that their grades are too high.

How often do American college students, when they turn in a paper, say, "Please show me how to make this better?" Or when getting back a paper that you've praised, how often do they say, "Please tell me some place I can improve. Isn't there *something* wrong?"

I, along with my wife, Patricia, spent the 1992-93 year working as exchange professors at Shanghai International Studies University. Our students, high school teachers from far-flung provinces selected after rigorous screening, were in a two-year program to improve their English skills and learn new methodologies for teaching English when they returned home. In China, higher education is so rare that students accepted into universities are grateful for the chance to learn more. Also, thanks to Confucius and a tradition in which education was

essential for social advancement, teachers are treated with the utmost respect, regarded as surrogate fathers or mothers. Or as the proverb goes, "Teacher for a day, parent for life." And as China opens more to the outside world, a command of English is seen as essential. One sign of this: each city has a park with an "English Corner" where students can practice English with each other. And when a native speaker is spotted in the area, the students congregate like photographers around a celebrity.

With small classes and the intense one-on-one pattern of the teaching materials, close relationships spring up quickly. And because the students were older (most around 30, with husband or wife and the one legal child back home), Patricia and I seemed more like peers than authority figures. Frequently we had gatherings at our apartment to make *jiaozi*—Chinese dumplings dipped in a fiery sauce spiced with garlic and tons of cayenne peppers—or for a "traditional American Thanksgiving" (well, almost) of chicken with chestnuts, mashed potatoes and sweet potato pie.

Initially some of the students, found us—well, strange. Trained in the traditional grammar-translation method (a month on a 500-word text, memorizing vocabulary and dissecting structures) some didn't know how to take my informal approach. One student, for example, asked if I would lecture on the use of the past subjunctive. I obliged her, but only to the extent of saying that the past subjunctive was seldom used. Still, the department was kind to us and supportive of our teaching. "Don't worry," I remember my Chinese officemate saying. "The students *expect* Americans to be a little strange." A good thing, for I once demonstrated the meaning of "going over the top," not with rigorous analysis of the use of the preposition, but by scrambling over the teacher's desk and dashing, bent low, through swarms of machine gun bullets.

Fortunately, times are changing in

China. Now being institutionalized by standardized textbooks used throughout China, a newer method is being used: the *communicative*. This method stresses *extensive* reading—getting the "gist" of a passage without looking up unfamiliar words—rather than the older style *intensive* reading—worrying a passage for months like a dog with a bone. Also, the communicative method stresses speaking and listening instead of reading and writing. Part of the impetus for change, no doubt, comes from the depressing reality that after four years of studying English, few can speak or understand the language with any competence. No wonder, with classes of 50-80 students chanting drills like, "I am about to write a letter. You are about to write a letter. He is about to write a letter." If I taught that way, three classes a day, six days a week, I would be about to throw up.

Patricia and I decided that, though being attuned to the sensibilities of a different culture, we would teach American-style, with lots of life, energy and humor—qualities not generally practiced in Chinese education. We also decided that, unlike some of our foreign colleagues, we would not give our students English names but would learn theirs, despite a bewildering profusion of Zhous, Zhaos, Zhus, Zhengs, Zhangs, Yangs and Wangs. We diligently studied the class photos (some of them from high school), and soon the students emerged as discrete personalities, so that we wondered how we ever could have mixed Wang Jing up with Wang Ying. From there we could move to the next stage: learning how to *pronounce* their names.

Most of my teaching was in an integrated-language course that met six hours a week. With materials provided by the British Council, it taught the four language skills through a combination of pair work, small group activities, and individual exercises. The result was one-on-one teaching where I could circulate, check answers, mon-

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In General Speaking (continued from page 5)

itor oral exchanges and answer questions. I also lectured two hours a week on American literature. (It was an elective, the dean of the department explained, but all the seniors would attend because it was required. I never did figure that one out.)

Patricia taught oral English to first-year students, as well as two sections of what was billed as "Writing for Academic Purposes." As soon as she saw the uninspiring materials used by the previous teacher, however, she decided that the students needed fluency more than punctuation rules. So, she instituted a writing workshop, using journal entries composed in class that the students would then take home to revise and edit after she commented on them. The results were nothing short of staggering. Students who initially could barely squeeze out 50 words in an hour were soon writing whole pages. In reading the journals, she made no comments on grammar or punctuation, but instead commented on or asked questions about the content.

Usually they wrote about their lives. And what interesting lives! Graduating from high school during the Cultural Revolution, they were sent to work in the fields and learn from the peasants, but they continued to study English, even though doing so was illegal. One student, after planting rice all day, would study English by candlelight, a blanket over the window to hide her crime. At first, they seemed puzzled by Patricia's method. One dutifully answered in his next entries all her marginal questions, a process that continued until he finished a new entry with, "Forgive me for asking, but why do you want to know these things you ask about?" Patricia's response: "I ask because I want to understand what you're writing." Another student wrote, "You're the first teacher who ever was interested in what I wrote, rather than in how I wrote it."

At year's end, she organized an editorial committee to assemble an

anthology of student writings, which the committee decided should be called "Bamboo Shoots After Spring Rain." The title, they explained, meant that their writing skills had grown just as bamboo shoots have a surge of growth after a spring rain. To watch, with six gathered around a notebook computer, as they composed rejection letters to those whose works hadn't been chosen, was to see the writing process at its best.

Oh sure, there were frustrations. The text for American literature had to be typed on mimeograph stencils until Paul Munn (thanks, Paul!) provided copies of an anthology. The classrooms were unheated in winter, when parkas and endless cups of hot tea were needed to keep warm. The students wore ingenious gloves whose fingers could be buttoned back to allow note taking. And at times the immense pressure to succeed resulted in a bit of dishonesty: in the American lit course 52 students managed to hand in 55 quizzes, including three with the same name on them. Although I didn't report the matter to the dean, he learned of it and conducted an investigation that resulted in nine confessions.

Overall, though, I enjoyed the teaching and the learning immensely. Our colleagues were congenial and welcoming, serving us wonderful meals in their homes and including us in departmental excursions to nearby beauty spots. We attended banquets and parties hosted by the students, at which we posed for hundreds of photos, and I even became used to the custom of being expected to perform something. At the first party I collaborated with Patricia and a British colleague on a shaky version of "Red River Valley" and stumbled through a Uyghur folk dance, but by year's end I had moved up to performing what the students said was a creditable job on Beijing Opera arias. And at year's end we rode the train for three days from Shanghai to Xinjiang Province and spent two months sightseeing and vis-

iting our students at home. In town after town, village after village we were honored guests, paraded around to friends, colleagues and relatives. Some of my finest memories are of our students' mothers and fathers, beaming with pride as their children translated effortlessly back and forth. With many of the students we became good friends, and we still correspond.

Even today, Patricia and I use some of our students' "Chinglish"—literal renderings into English of Chinese phrases, like "In general speaking" and "It gave me a deep impression." After awhile this seemed a natural way to express things. It still does.

English 112 as a Foundation Course

Just before fall semester of 1992, the English Department held a workshop to discuss the goals of English 112. The workshop was made up of both full-time and adjunct faculty who shared syllabi and assignments and discussed pedagogy. By the end of the workshop, four ideas emerged that might serve as goals for the English 112 course. These ideas were:

- the importance of teaching students to deal with secondary sources,
- the importance of teaching students to write to an academic audience,
- the importance of teaching argument, and
- the importance of teaching the research process.

Dealing with Secondary Sources

In dealing with secondary sources, students learn that there are other and more well-founded opinions than their own. Reading secondary sources also provides students with examples of the genre they are expected to emulate. Workshop participants felt that in English 111 students are often far too self-involved, and in English 112 we must move them outward in order to teach them that there is more than one viewpoint and that it is not alright to hold on to comfortable ways of seeing things. The best way to get them "out of themselves" is by having them read extensively in secondary sources.

Students must also learn to evaluate and choose sources that are acceptable in academic writing. For instance, they must learn to recognize why articles found in Education Index are usually more valid for a paper on mainstreaming than are those found in Reader's Guide.

Writing to an Academic Audience

Which brings us to the second goal: teaching students to write to an academic audience, an audience versed in academic prose and its conventions. The English 112 instructor becomes a "representative reader" who teaches students the standards demanded in

academia, such as careful reasoning, clear organization, attention to correct documentation and attention to grammar and punctuation. By doing so, the instructor moves students away from merely "giving my opinion." Students learn that their ideas must be backed up with material from secondary sources (and valid ones at that), and they learn the demands of a broader and better-educated audience.

Teaching Argument

Teaching argument is a good way to move the students away from dealing with only their ideas and expose them to a variety of other ideas. Reading various secondary sources lets students confront and work with a number of viewpoints. They must then achieve some sense of coherence among the ideas and learn to focus on one central argument. Students, then, learn to take a stand and defend it.

Teaching the Research Process

Extensive reading in secondary sources, careful attention to an academic audience, and emphasis on argument are key components in the research process. The research process is integral to all disciplines, and if students are unable to learn to put it into practice, their chance of academic survival is slim. What students learn in English 112, then, are skills needed to survive in academic life and life in general. We must teach them to be intellectually curious as well as how to satisfy that curiosity.

This is a tall order for one freshman-level course. However, given the small number of writing classes beyond 112, we must aim at giving students the tools they need to work effectively in their field of study.

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