



## HOW DO I GET MY STUDENTS TO COMPLETE READING ASSIGNMENTS?

The nutshell summary:

- ❑ Make the textbook an explicit learning device that is separate from, but complementary to, what you do in class.
- ❑ Provide reading assignments that guide the learner to what is important and what they should be sure to learn from the reading and before they come to class.
- ❑ Hold students accountable for reading. This can be accomplished through the use of reading quizzes, just-in-time-teaching warm ups, or reflective free-writing that engages them with the text before class. Alternatively, or in addition, accountability is realized by necessary student preparation for low-stakes grades on active and cooperative learning assignments during class time.
- ❑ Be willing to demonstrate strategies for effective textbook reading and comprehension.

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### **Background**

If you are a veteran college teacher these facts probably will not surprise you:

- One out of five college students self-report that they frequently come to class without completing the readings or other assignments that were expected to be completed before class time (NSSE, 2008)
- On any particular day, college instructors can expect somewhere between 20% and 40% of students to comply with reading that was assigned for that day (Hobson, 2004).

At the same time, more than 50 percent of students at four-year schools and more than 75 percent at two-year colleges lack the skills to perform complex literacy tasks (Baer et al., 2006). These students cannot interpret a table about exercise and blood pressure, understand the arguments of newspaper editorials, compare credit-card offers with different interest rates and annual fees, or summarize results of a survey about parental involvement in school.

Text reading is an essential aspect of basic literacy. Most post-college learning does not happen in environments that resemble college classrooms, yet new knowledge must be obtained, and processed for relevancy and application. Nearly all post-college learning will rely at least in part—in many cases almost entirely—on graduates' abilities to read and to make sense of what they are reading. Most instructors, therefore,

appropriately persist in selecting and assigning reading despite the statistics stated above.

What may be lacking, however, is an appreciation that students do not always share with faculty the same value for literacy (Leamson, 1999) because they have so often succeeded without reading. Students treat textbooks as reference sources rather than as learning tools.

OSET encourages a view where it is important for students to learn how to learn independently from text and to see, within the overall structure of the course, the essential learning opportunities offered by reading. A lecture-dominated classroom, where the instructor repeats the content and illustrations of the text does not enforce the value of reading. Likewise, classroom lectures and activities that make little or no use of the textbook discourage reading or even obtaining the textbook. This web resource explores the phenomenon of why students don't read and counter it with pedagogies that not only improve document literacy but also lead to higher level in-class learning. We also explore how instructors can take some responsibility for shaping students' reading skills.

### ***Why Don't Students Read?***

Terry Doyle (2008) interviewed dozens of students and discovered that they do not read because they assume, from past experience, that the instructor will present the important information in class. Students make decisions about completing reading, or other assignments, based on what is going to be important for passing or getting a high grade in the class. They ask themselves, "Is text reading essential for success in the course?" When students encounter many classes where the answer is "no" then they come to accept that the "required textbook" is not really necessary and that doing the reading assignments is a waste of time. Observations by Schwartz and Fischer (2006) suggest that "for the student, the textbook itself is a problem to overcome. What is important? Why is it important? How can he or she come to understand the concepts (and, of course, do well on the tests or essays)?"

Visitors to OSET commonly ask two questions: "why don't my students read the book?" quickly followed with "and why don't they come to class?" Conversations with these instructors usually reveal a generalizable scenario that connects these two questions:

- The reading assignments are vague (e.g., "read Chapter 5 for Monday") without guidance to what the learner should learn from the reading.
- The instructor's lectures cover the reading content during class time.
- PowerPoint® handouts or other detailed lecture notes are provided on the course website.

In this scenario, students make choices. Since the instructor covers the necessary material in class, there is no need to read the text. Or, since there is nothing to learn in class that is not also in the text, the learner can spend class time attending to other interests and obligations, especially since the lecture handouts are available online. Some students may simply take advantage of these online postings and attach little

importance to either reading the text or attending class. As we highlight in the next section, the keys to using the textbook as a learning device and to enhance literacy lie in providing learning experiences that are tied directly to the text while still providing learning opportunities in class that are not redundant with the text.

Another critical impediment to reading before class is the reading abilities of the students. Bean (1996) and Leamson (1999) argue that many students lack the reading comprehension skills necessary for college-level texts. The literacy studies of Baer et al. (2006), mentioned above, support these claims. On the other hand, Brost and Bradley (2006) worry that student under preparation becomes too easy an excuse; “Many assume that preparedness is the chief barrier to compliance. We feel that this may get the cart before the horse: the acquisition of reading skills depends, after all, upon compliance with assigned reading.” Effective instructors, therefore, design reading assignments with explicit guidance to students that help them develop stronger reading skills. Especially in courses enrolled by large numbers of first-year students, instructors may need to provide resources that encourage under-prepared students to become better readers.

### ***How Does Instruction Incorporate and Encourage Text Reading?***

The research on reading compliance and student literacy development suggests that instructors play a vital role in getting students to read. Most college-level instructors were academically inclined college learners who not only complied with most reading assignments but knew how to efficiently find what was needed in the textbook. These same skills and motivation are not necessarily shared by all students. Instructional approaches can, however, improve these critical scholarly abilities not only so that students learn the subject better but, even more importantly, so that students learn how to read and make use of what they read as an important literacy outcome of their college education. This section explores easily adopted pedagogical strategies that improve student learning from reading. These strategies fit into three contexts: before the assignment is made, while the learner is reading before class, and using the reading in the classroom.

#### **Setting up the reading assignment in advance**

Students must always have a purpose for reading and this can be aided by spending a little time in class before starting the next chapter, or section of a chapter, to explain (1) what is to be achieved from reading in the text, and (2) how the text will set up students for the necessary learning outcomes and upcoming in-class activities. This preview may be essential to the learning success of students who are less competent readers or who have insufficient experience in making meaning from reading assignments on their own—the preview engages them to know what to gain from the reading.

Bean (1996) specifically addresses methods for awakening student interest in upcoming reading assignments. As an alternative to the verbal preview, the instructor could

administer a short, nongraded pretest over upcoming reading that provides students an introduction to what is to come and where their knowledge gaps exist. This exercise also helps students understand what is most important to learn from the reading. Another preview technique is to set up a problem that the students will seek to solve in a later class session using information found in the next reading assignment.

Nothing makes it clearer that the textbook is part of the course than when the instructor talks about the text in class. Consider including the textbook as a part of your course preview on the first day. That preview can include projecting key graphics or photos from each chapter included in the course. This way you are simultaneously introducing your students to the topics they will encounter and to the importance of the textbook to achieving their learning outcomes.

### **Learner engagement with the reading before class**

When teachers say that “all of the chapter” is important or that anything in the chapter is fair game for a test, then students feel that every word deserves equal attention and to focus on facts rather than comprehending concepts. Instructors should provide purposes for reading, which permit the reader to focus on some parts while skimming or skipping others—this *is* what efficient readers do (Doyle, 2008). Students want to know what they should “get” from the reading, and cite vague, unguided reading assignments as a reason for noncompliance (Brost and Bradley, 2006).

Providing guidance with reading assignments. Explicit reading assignments, like the one shown on the next page, provide guidance that improves reading compliance. The assignment specifies sections to concentrate on and questions that should be comprehended *before* coming to class. These instructions and questions permit the learner to triage the reading with a clear understanding of what is important. Explicit reading assignments can also point to expected areas of challenge and suggest resources for students to use on their own. A reading assignment can also point the learner to web sites that present or illustrate a key point in a different way from the text.

The example reading assignment also points out potential payoffs by using key concepts from the reading during upcoming in-class assignments. These learning activities, described on another [web page](#), promote learning and assessment that builds on pre-class reading; compliance with the assignment is a prerequisite for successful completion and grade achievement on the in-class learning activity.

Contrast the example reading assignment with a conventional syllabus entry stating that Chapter 5 includes the topics of the upcoming week’s classes. Which approach is more likely to guide the student to not only comply with the reading assignment but to reach a necessary level of learning from the text? More elaborate reading assignments are not easily incorporated into a hard-copy syllabus. However, they can be provided as separate handouts or as postings on the class website, including within a course management system. When posted online, students are able to look ahead and gauge the level of work that they will need to invest during upcoming weeks. Preparation of the reading assignment also guides the instructor to design a course where the reading

expectations align with in-class learning opportunities that then combine to motivate mastery of learning outcome.

### **Assignment for Monday:**

#### **Read before class today:**

##### **Chapter 5, Section 5.1: Climate Basics**

#### **Check your reading comprehension: Be able to answer these questions before coming to class:**

1. What is *albedo* and how does albedo affect climate?
2. What is a *greenhouse gas*? What is the *greenhouse effect*?
3. What aspects of air pollution cause climatic cooling, rather than warming?
4. How do volcanic eruptions impact climate?
5. How has the atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide changed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century? What is the prevailing explanation for this change?
6. Why do most deserts exist near 30 degrees north and south latitudes?
7. Explain two ways that mountain ranges and high plateaus affect climate.

*In Class* you will apply the reading to interpretations of the causes of global warming and to explain the climate of New Mexico.

#### **Additional Resource:**

There are some Flash® animations on the web site that describe *Global Warming, the Coriolis Effect, and Global Wind Patterns*. These animations may be helpful to your comprehension of the key parts of this topic.

*If you are interested* in reading more about climate and current issues in climate change and global warming, check out these sources:

"The discovery of the risk of global warming," by S. R. Weart, *Physics Today*, January 1997, p. 34-40. (PDF file can be downloaded from the Online Resources page on the web site)

For the most recent, detailed scientific assessment of global warming, see: The Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was published in 2007. Summaries can be viewed by clicking [here](#).

The Pros and Cons of Reading Quizzes. Some instructors seek to achieve reading compliance by administering reading quizzes. These quizzes might be administered online before class, implemented with paper and pencil, or facilitated by "[clickers](#)" at the beginning of class.

There are several things to keep in mind if choosing to implement reading quizzes. The first is that reading quizzes are not popular with students (Brost and Bradley, 2006) and in some cases are viewed as punitive (Sappington et al., 2002). Unpopular assessments not only are demotivating to learners but they can negatively impact teaching evaluations.

Reading quizzes are more readily accepted by students when they recognize a worthwhile learning activity. Reading quizzes can substitute for or compliment questions provided in a reading assignment with an emphasis on guiding student self-assessment and metacognition of what they know or don't know that may be relevant to in-class work and future exams. As low-stakes formative assessments, reading quizzes help students understand what is important from the reading and, if administered beforehand online, provide feedback on learning. This feedback is not provided by simply listing questions with the reading assignment. But, when students take an online reading quiz, they find out if they are ready for what is coming in class.

Henderson and Rosenthal (2006) argue that most reading quizzes tend to focus on very low-level objectives because the instructor cannot yet expect confident mastery. If the quiz becomes only a matter of hunting for terminology, then the reading quiz fosters shallow, rather than deep approaches to learning from text. Such a reading quiz also tends to be teacher-centered by focusing on a few things that are asked about rather than finding out what the student did not understand from the reading.

Henderson and Rosenthal's (2006) concern also applies to questions provided with reading assignments but it need not cripple the learning opportunity that comes by assessing student learning from text prior to in-class work or lecture. When including reading questions with an assignment or as a reading quiz, be sure to explain the extent to which these questions are meant to guide learning from reading versus learning from a combination of in class and out of class learning experiences. In other words, should students use reading questions and reading quizzes as study guides for exams, or are they low rungs on the scaffold of learning, such that your exams will assess deeper, higher-level understanding that results from work with textbook content in class? Be sure that you are not misleading students into thinking that the low-level questioning of the reading quiz, which was primarily meant to see that they made some meaningful contact with content before class, will also resemble the higher-level learning that you expect on exams.

Before-Class Alternatives to Traditional Reading Quizzes. [Just-in-time teaching \(JITT\)](#) is a method of reflective learning that asks the learner to focus on what they do not understand *before* coming to class. JITT centers on short, web-completed assignments that ask students to apply key concepts and reflect upon what they do not understand. Most instructors use JITT "warm-ups" to engage students with text reading prior to class. The JITT questions focus student attention on what to learn from the reading and allow the instructor to determine what concepts are mastered from the reading and which need attention in class. The just-in-time label refers to the instructor adjusting what he or she does in class based on the student learning that is revealed by the pre-class online assignment. Focusing in class on what a large number of students did not understand from the reading makes best use of time while minimizing redundancy of reading and lecture. The JITT approach also appeals to students when they experience instruction that is a direct response to what they are having difficulty understanding. The questions could be multiple-choice questions that your course-management system will assess for you, or could be a selection of short-answer questions that require students to apply their reading. Either way, the effective JITT warm up always ends with the "muddiest point" question: *What aspect of the reading did you find most difficult to understand? Or, if you feel that you understood the reading completely, what topic would you most like to learn more about?* The muddiest point question requires the learner to think metacognitively about their reading, which is a key component of learning, and allow the instructor, at a glance, to see where class time should be spent. JITT warm ups are distinct from traditional reading quizzes because warm ups explicitly assess what the learner *does not know* and uses student responses to guide in-class instruction, which also is more motivating to the student than a compliance-oriented quiz.

Reflective free-writing (Kalman, 2007; Kalman et al., 2008) asks students to write metacognitively about a reading assignment before coming to class. Although this objective is similar to JITT, reflective free-writing is less structured, assignments are not completed in response to online questions, and the instructor does not see the learners' writing until after class. The assignment asks students to write something about each section/chapter of text reading and to leave that writing with the instructor when they attend the next class session. The learner writes down what they feel is the key concept, or concepts, in each section of the reading along with what they do not understand about the concept or wish they knew more about. The "free-writing" label emphasizes that students are asked not to worry about the details of grammar, spelling, capitalization, and sentence structure in what they write, but rather to let ideas flow freely from mind to paper. Instructors who use reflective free-writing find that students (a) make better sense out of what they read, (b) better grasp what they do not understand, and (c) commonly are able, while writing, to sort out misunderstandings on their own.

What is important about any kind of reflective writing based on reading assignments, including the muddiest point question, is that it requires the student to connect information in the reading with what they already know. This connection permits new abstract conceptualizations by drawing new insights and is typically metacognitive, as well. Otherwise, reading is only done to compile factual information.

### **Learner engagement with the reading during class**

A survey by Friedman and others (2001) found that, where attendance was not recorded, students skipped natural science classes more than any other subject area. The same research showed that, among the key motivators for attending class is acquisition of knowledge that cannot be obtained from text, web site, or others' notes, desire to ask questions in class, and working on assignments in class. OSET's [active learning web page](#) explores the types of activities that engage student learning during class time and that permit higher-level learning than is typically accomplished by listening to a lecture. These activities are predicated on the assumption that students make first contact with facts and concepts before class and then apply them during class. This is where reading assignments align with in-class activity. Textbooks direct student attention to the critical concepts but these concepts still need to be linked to an understandable goal that is linked to activities that allow the student to construct understanding rather than only repeat presented concepts (Schwartz and Fischer, 2006).

When Brost and Bradley (2006) examined reasons for student noncompliance with reading they found students felt that instructors needed to use the reading better during class time. Where class-time instruction does not clearly link to pre-class reading the students do not see, or believe, a causal connection between preparation and performance" (Sappington and others, 2002). In most classes, students do not experience classroom experiences that link text reading to grade success on exams. Boyd (2003) found, through student surveys, that the linkage of reading to what happens in class is the greatest motivator for student reading.

Here, then, is a simple solution: In-class activities should build on the reading rather than only rehashing what is in the text. Holding students accountable for reading need not always be explicitly linked to quizzes completed before class; reading can be implicitly linked to the graded work (assignments, clicker questions) that students do in class. Where active, cooperative learning engages students with the subject matter and with each other during class, learners quickly appreciate the value of coming to class prepared and reading compliance increases. Surveys of students (Smith, 2008) show that they prefer reading before class in order to work actively in class rather than listening to lectures and then doing homework on their own. The instructor's responsibility is to see that the well-structured reading assignments, perhaps accompanied by reading quizzes, JITT warm-ups, or reflective free writing, consistently prepare the student for in-class learning; both the reading and the in-class activities must, as well, be aligned with stated learning outcomes and what will be assessed on exams. In addition, when instructors make students responsible for text by using it for in-class work we send the message that not all of the learning in the course needs to be mediated through the instructor (Bean, 1996).

Connecting the text reading with what you do in class does not require elaborate in-class exercises or pre-class assessment. When lecturing with PowerPoint®, include textbook page numbers in your slides in order to relate key concepts to where the student can learn from reading in the text. Ask students to help you list the three most important points from the reading on the board at the beginning of class, so that your lecture outline is tied to the textbook. Go around the room and ask students to name one important point, new discovery, or question that s/he has about the reading. If you use [write-pair-share activities](#) in your class, then you can select text illustrations as prompts for student reflection, interpretation, and discussion.

It is also important for the instructor to demonstrate the positive value of the textbook. Even carrying the textbook to class with you suggests that it has a place in the classroom (e.g., students may need their book to complete in-class assignments)—leaving it in your office can send the opposite message (Bean, 1996). Although you may not like all aspects of the text, do not dwell on the negatives, because that devalues the book in the mind of the novice reader. Speak positively about the book; and introduce alternative information and points of view without being negative.

### ***How Can Instructors Help Students Improve their Reading Skills?***

Almost all instructors confront the challenges of students whose reading and study habits do not seem up to the task of succeeding with college-level work. The learner-centered instructor assumes some responsibility for helping students develop the necessary reading skills. Assisting students become better readers need not consume large amounts of classroom time. Some guiding suggestions can be provided in handouts or by directing students to reading-center resources on your campus or to a useful website. An excellent website, with resources for both instructors and students,

is [College Reading Success](#) provided by the Literacy Program at Western Kentucky University.

A commonly cited strategy for reading texts (e.g., Doyle, 2008) is to turn headings and subheadings into questions and then seek answers. Instructors may need to model this behavior of reading to understand answers to questions because textbooks, and lectures, leave many students struggling to develop their own understanding as opposed to simply re-presenting what is in the book or lecture notes (Schwartz and Fischer, 2006). While this may require some upfront time early in the course, once students develop confidence in learning from text you will be able to expect more learning from text later in the course.

Bean (1996, chapter 8) offers specific guidance on helping students to read. Among the many suggestions is that instructors can illustrate how expert readers commonly make notes about their reading, in the margins or elsewhere, that help to make sense of new understanding or make note of what is not understood. This approach is in contrast to a student's expectation that expert reading is synonymous with speed reading. It is also important to distinguish note writing from highlighting. If instead of highlighting, the reader writes out the point of the text and why it is important there is a greater tendency to make understanding rather than simply coloring the book. The instructor can do a marginal mark up of a few pages of the text and share copies with students to model this strategy.

Bean (1996) also urges instructors to help students understand the importance of making sense of reading as they go. Consider emphasizing the value of re-reading a section to assure learning, rather than making the assumption that if it is not understood on a first reading, then the learner should wait to have the instructor explain it in class. That process typically initiates an unproductive cycle where the instructor concedes to always explaining everything because students are poor readers.

Novice readers commonly do not appreciate the different purposes of text passages and it is commonly worth the time to go through some text in class and discuss what is intended (Bean, 1996). Suggest to your students that they work on recognizing the functions of different sections of text: "here is a key concept," "here's an example or application of the concept," "this section highlights evidence to support a conclusion," "this paragraph summarizes what I've read previously that is applicable to what is coming up." You can have students go through part of the text and label each paragraph with a "What it does" statement in addition to summarizing "What it says" in terms of a take-home point. This type of exercise works well as a write-pair-share activity early in a course.

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