

## TEACHING CRITICAL READING

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A survey of Foundations courses undertaken in 2002 demonstrated that almost without exception all courses included a focus on improving the critical reading skills of students. Hopefully this handout on **Teaching Critical Reading** will be of assistance in this undertaking. It is divided into four parts:

**PART ONE** discusses the problem of getting students to read and offers some strategies;

**PART TWO** is a useful excerpt on teaching reading skills which distinguishes between reading for comprehension, rhetorical strategies for reading, and reading critically. [From Tom Greenwald, Joan Page, Jan Rehner and John Spencer. Teaching Critical Skills: A Manual for Course Instructors. Centre for Support of Teaching, 1992, 31-33.]

**PART THREE** offers some strategies for using *A Guide To Active Reading and Asking Questions* and teaching the assignment on *'Reading In Different Voices'*.

**PART FOUR** is a student handout entitled *A Guide To Active Reading and Asking Questions* which discusses time management and reading, active reading strategies, various ways of 'asking questions' of texts, and different types of questions.

**PART FIVE** offers an example of a critical reading assignment *Reading in Different Voices* which focuses on developing the skills to read course texts critically and analyse scholarly materials for essay research. In this assignment, students are asked to assess one course reading using three different voices: the voice of the author, an evaluative voice, and a personal voice.

This material is available in printable formats on the Foundations website [www.arts.yorku.ca/sosc/Foundations](http://www.arts.yorku.ca/sosc/Foundations). Feel free to adapt the material to make it relevant to your courses.

## **PART ONE: GETTING STUDENTS TO READ**

A serious frustration for instructors is that students do not read the assigned material. This is a problem across disciplines and years. It is critical that you stress the importance of reading, and learning to read effectively to students.

The amount that students will read varies. We should expect this variation in the same way we expect a range of student skills and aptitudes. There are at least three general problems:

\*students do not allocate the time necessary to do their reading;

\*Students may not understand the difference between reading and preparing, and so do not get as much out of the articles as they might, and are not then ready to engage in class discussion;

\*Students do not know how to deal with difficult material and it often stops them from continuing reading.

## **STRATEGIES THAT ENCOURAGE STUDENTS TO READ**

**a) Testing Strategies:** Although testing may not be the best pedagogical approach, it can be effective in motivating students to prioritize reading. Consider including questions on mid term and final exams that require students to summarize and/or use course readings actively. You may hand out such questions ahead of the exam so students will understand what kind of preparation they need to do.

Use in-tutorial reading quizzes.

One social science faculty member assigns a question every week on the readings or on a reading. In a number of tutorials during the year, students are given unannounced quizzes on this question. In their answer, students need to demonstrate that they had done the reading. Students are aware there will be periodic quizzes but not when.

**b)Task Driven Strategies:** Students are asked to do some directed preparation on the readings: write questions, answer questions, summarize, identify concepts etc.

One social science faculty member uses an 'entry ticket' approach to tutorial. In order to come to tutorial, students need to complete a one-page commentary on the readings. TAs did not read carefully or comment on these commentaries, nor were they handed back to students. Rather they were used as the basis for a participation mark.

**c) Teaching Strategies:** Students may not read because they do not have well-developed skills for reading material they do not immediately understand. They get defeated by the words they don't understand, the difficulty of the reading, the length of the reading etc.

Some suggestions:

\*Show students how to peruse a text by considering the title, the introductory and concluding paragraphs and the subheadings. A useful exercise is to have students write questions based on the subheadings. For an example, see student handout below: *A Guide To Active Reading and Asking Questions*.

Students will be surprised at how much they can learn about an article this way. Encourage them to use this strategy with every text.

\*Do the exercise on reading and time management. Students need to recognize that reading takes a long time and build this time into their planning

### **A NOTE FOR STUDENTS ON TIME MANAGEMENT AND READING**

Most students, especially those in first year, seriously underestimate the time it takes to read and prepare course material. In fact, reading is probably the most time-consuming and important of all the activities you will undertake as a university student. Not only must you allocate sufficient time to do your reading, but also to develop the critical skills that will help you process what you read.

Studies show that students think they ought to be able to read a page per minute, but in fact 4-6 minutes per page is a more realistic estimate. Test yourself: for one of the course readings, estimate how long it will take you to read it. Then time yourself. The more you are aware of the time required, the better able you will be to plan effectively.

\*Teach students not to get stopped by words or sections they don't understand. Often if they keep reading, the material will become clear. If it doesn't they can bring directed questions to the tutorial, their study group, or post a question to a course listserv.

**d) Collaboration Strategies:** Encourage students to share the readings among their study group and read **for and with** each other. For example, all students could 'peruse' the articles, but one student could read one article carefully and share this learning with other members of the study group. Discourage them from just memorizing notes that other students have prepared on the readings.

See also "Will they do the Readings?" by Katherine Bischooping in CORE 10, 3 (April 2001): 7-8.  
<<http://www.yorku.ca/cst/core/vol10no3/bischooping.html>>

## **PART TWO: TEACHING READING SKILLS**

Excerpt from Teaching Critical Skills: A Manual for Course Instructors (Tom Greenwald, Joan Page, Jan Rehner and John Spencer, Centre for Support of Teaching, 1992, pp. 31-33).

### **Reading for Comprehension**

Ultimately we want our students to read critically, to be able to evaluate an author's argument and to relate that argument to other texts, to course concepts, and to their own experience. But reading critically assumes having effective strategies for reading for comprehension, and though we understandably expect that students in university are in control of such strategies, this is often a false assumption. Before achieving the goal of having students read critically within a discipline, it is usually necessary to spend some time teaching them strategies for reading for comprehension.

University usually places new demands on student reading, demands for which students are often not prepared. Many students approach their reading in a way that was appropriate for the purposes emphasized in high school, and still promoted in many university courses: read-to-write-exams. This conception of the reading process leads students to see the objective of their reading as being to remember everything they read, so that each idea, indeed each sentence, is seen as having equal value. They therefore do not differentiate among evidence, argument, claims, purpose, illustration and explanation, let alone establish a hierarchical relationship among these various elements in the texts they read. It is useful then to teach students to read for argument rather than for content; to teach them that the key comprehension objective in most of their reading is not to memorize every piece of information, but to find the controlling thesis of the text, and to identify the main supporting evidence given for that argument.

The tendency for students to read for information rather than for argument is reinforced by their tendency to use highlighter as they read. This technique is usually used to identify information to be remembered. However, highlighting is generally not an effective method for reading for argument: firstly, it basically encourages reading for only two levels of ideas: those highlighted and those not; secondly, it is difficult to make comments with a highlighter; and thirdly, highlighting cannot be erased. I encourage my students to consider using a pencil as they read. Pencil is erasable; this encourages the idea that as a text is read and reread, the reader's conception of the text and her purpose for reading it changes. By being able to alter the previous marking of a text, students are encouraged to think of their understanding of the text as fluid. In addition, pencil can be used to make notes, which is effective for identifying argument and for adding the reader's critical view. Indeed, writing as one reads is a powerful strategy for reading critically. Finally, pencil allows a hierarchy of ideas and information to be identified as the student reads, since the key argument of a chapter can be marked differently than main supporting evidence, and so on. I try to illustrate this technique to students by copying a few pages of text they are reading on overhead, showing them how I used my pencil and explaining the focus of my reading. In contrast to many of them, who usually highlight the majority of a text, I also show how little of the text I marked, which, I point out, is a major consequence of reading for argument rather than for information.

### **Rhetorical Strategies**

Recent research suggests that a noticeable factor that separates student readers from more experienced readers is that the more experienced readers bring rhetorical strategies to their reading as a matter of course. Novice readers tend to take the text at face value, naively accepting what they are reading as some kind of unmediated truth. They essentially read for content, for 'knowledge-getting'. Experienced readers on the other hand are very conscious of the author, of her purpose in writing the text her ideological perspective, her disciplinary background, what she has included and what she has excluded from her text. As well, the experienced reader brings her own agenda consciously to her reading; she is very aware of her purpose in reading the text, and knowingly brings her own knowledge (or lack of it), and her own experiences to her reading.

Teaching students to read rhetorically is crucial for teaching them to read critically. There are a number of ways to encourage this more active reading in your students. Go over the chapter of a text the students are reading and make explicit the context issues -- your conception of the author and of

your own perspective, for example -- that you were aware of as you read. Rhetorical strategies can also be emphasized by having student read and compare varying perspectives on the same issue. It can also be effective to have the students be explicit about context factors in class discussion. Simply illustrating that there is no one truth, that information is mediated by the author's purpose and culture is, surprisingly, a revelation to many students.

### **Reading Critically**

Reading critically essentially entails directly extending the strategies for reading rhetorically, but doing so explicitly within the disciplinary context of the course. While rhetorical strategies primarily emphasize more generic responses such as an author's intent, reading critically is fundamentally discipline based. Teaching critical reading necessitates teaching student the modes of inquiry, kinds of evidence, hypotheses and assumption used in the discipline, and showing them how to apply these directly to their reading. Fundamentally, then, reading critically means developing a range of questions appropriate to the discipline which the reader asks of the text she is reading. It is useful to construct, with your students, such a series of questions that might be used in evaluating a text within your discipline, and applying those questions to certain texts.

### **Activities and Assignments**

There are a number of activities and assignments that you can use with your classes to promote effective reading. Modeling the process you use when reading can be effective. Simply taking the students through a chapter in a text they are reading and demonstrating the strategies you used in reading it can be quite effective. Point out what you consider to be the chapter's key argument and why; identify the main pieces of supporting evidence, illustration and explanation; discuss how your conception of the author's intentions influenced your reading of the text; make explicit the assumptions and background knowledge you brought to the text; list the kinds of questions you asked as you read; relate your reading to the course issues and other readings you deem appropriate. It is useful to do this exercise a number of times through the term with a variety of texts.

Consider making it an ongoing expectation that students will identify in writing the central thesis of each text they read, along with an explanation as to why, possibly supported with appropriate evidence from the text. Students could write regular journal entries in which they might be expected to critically evaluate an issue raised in that week's readings. Writing abstracts of articles or book chapters can also be an effective means of promoting effective reading for comprehension. As well, students could work in small groups which would analyze a text, creating a series of appropriate questions to ask in order to apply an effective disciplinary approach to the text.

### **PART THREE: STRATEGIES FOR USING A *GUIDE TO ACTIVE READING AND ASKING QUESTIONS* and TEACHING THE ASSIGNMENT ON '*READING IN DIFFERENT VOICES*'**

This section offers some strategies for using *A Guide To Active Reading and Asking Questions* and teaching the assignment on '*Reading In Different Voices*'.

#### *A Guide To Active Reading and Asking Questions*

This Handout can be discussed in an early tutorial. Students can be divided into work groups, each group writing four questions -- one for each level -- on one of the assigned readings. The quality and effectiveness of the questions can be assessed by the whole class. For several weeks, and occasionally throughout the year, have students bring questions on the articles.

Establish an on-going practice of students writing such questions. Given that writing questions encourages students to read the articles carefully, this task can help emphasize the difference between **reading** and **preparing** material.

See also "Asking Questions" [http://www.usask.ca/tlc/gs\\_handbook/gsh\\_discussions.html](http://www.usask.ca/tlc/gs_handbook/gsh_discussions.html) and "Types of Questions Based on Bloom's Taxonomy" <http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/questype.htm>. These handouts focus on the types of questions that instructors ask students rather than training students to ask various kinds of questions.

#### *'Reading In Different Voices'*

\*Ask students to read over the assignment and bring questions to the tutorial. In class discussion about the assignment, ask students to answer the following questions:

- \*what is the purpose of this assignment?
- \*what does this assignment ask you to do? (for example, compare/analyse)
- \*what skills does this assignment ask you to use?
- \*do you need any clarifications -- of terms, expectations, etc?
- \*does your understanding of the assignment agree with that of your fellow students?

\*Identify a course reading for this exercise (not the one for the assignment). Break students into three groups. Ask each group to do **one** of the voices required in the assignment and then share it with whole class. This exercise helps students to see the difference among the voices. Students tend to have the most difficulty with the evaluative voice.

\*Students also have some difficulty identifying concepts. You might want to spend time each week in the first month having students identify concepts in the readings.

Distinguish between conceptual and empirical material (information, statistics, descriptions). Students coming from high school tend to focus on empirical material and do not understand that their emphasis needs to shift to conceptual and analytical tools.

\*Structure exercises where students summarize the major **arguments** in an article. Use these summaries as vehicles to help students distinguish argument from evidence. This exercise will also help students do their annotations.

\*Post-teach the assignment: the week before you return the assignments, ask students to read over their copies, list the strengths and weaknesses in the essay, and identify one improvement they could now make.

In class, have students work in pairs and read each other's assignment. The reader should list the strengths and weaknesses in the essay, and identify one area for improvement. Students can then compare what they said about their own essays with what their reader's assessment. (Suggestion from Rachel Hurst, TDGA, Social Science)