READING IS FUNDAMENTAL:
ENCOURAGING STUDENTS TO DO THE READING

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INTRODUCTION

“How do I get my students to do the reading?” is the siren song of college instructors everywhere. We desperately want our students to prepare diligently for class, but are often disappointed. Many instructors perhaps no longer truly expect students to complete the assigned reading, and instead adjust lectures and class activities to compensate for that lack of preparation. Indeed, research confirms what we all might already suspect and observe in our own classes: relatively few students actually complete the reading assigned to them. In one study, Clump and colleagues (2004) found that on average, students complete only 27% of readings before class, and less than 70% before an exam; Hobson (2004) confirms that only 20 – 40% of students comply with assigned reading. and the National Survey of Student Engagement (2008) reveals that reading practices don’t really improve as college students progress through school, with a quarter of first year students and 20% of seniors self-reporting that they frequently don’t complete assigned reading before class. Further, it seems that fewer adults and students read in general, whether for learning or simply enjoyment (Nilson, 2010; Starcher & Proffitt, 2011).

However, most instructors recognize that reading and preparing for class is an important part of the learning process! Perhaps we need texts to “cover” material that we can’t explicate in class due to time constraints (Ryan, 2006). More importantly, more exposure to content through reading helps foster deeper learning for students, for as Nilson (2010) contends, “Their first exposure to the material must be on their own outside class because if they come to class unfamiliar with the material, they can’t do anything with it” (p. 211).

Given the important role that reading and out-of-class preparation can play in our students’ learning, it follows that instructors continue to seek out ways to encourage greater compliance. In this paper I will provide a brief overview of some of the causes of non-compliance, and address some suggested strategies for fostering more (and more effective) student reading.

WHY DON’T STUDENTS READ?

Before considering strategies for encouraging students to complete the assigned readings, it is crucial to develop an understanding of and appreciation for the reasons that students don’t read in the first place. It is likely impossible to capture all of the potential reasons, but here are a few that continue to rise to the surface.

• Students have poor reading skills. Research and experience suggest that current college students are not as proficient at reading as we might expect them to be (Bean, 1996; Huang, 2015; Lei, Bartlett, Gorney, & Herschbach, 2010; Nilson, 2010; Starcher & Proffitt, 2011). While our students certainly know how to
read in the most basic sense, they likely need help learning how to “fish academic texts,” as John Bean puts it (1996, p. 133), or read closely and analytically rather than superficially. Experienced academics know that deep reading takes time and effort, but our students are significantly less knowledgeable about, experienced, and skilled in that process. They may even be doing the reading (or believe they are reading because they are rapidly skimming the text), but are not engaging with the text in a thoughtful way. And teachers’ willingness to recapitulate the reading for struggling students helps create what Bean (1996) calls a “vicious circle”: the instructor’s repetition of the text “(I have to lecture on this material because students are such poor readers’) deprives students of the very practice and challenge they need to grow as readers (‘I don’t have to struggle with this text because the teacher will explain it in class’)” (pg. 134). In other words, our students don’t read well, so we explain it for them, so they don’t learn to read well... As a result, our students don’t get the experience that they need, missing out on the enhanced content and disciplinary reading comprehension that practiced textbook reading can provide (Ryan, 2006).

Student self-confidence might also play a role in reading compliance and overall motivation (Lei et al, 2010; Tuckman, 1991). Carol Dweck’s work on mindset (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Yeager & Dweck, 2012) might suggest that students with a “fixed” theory of intelligence (i.e., academic challenges are a result of being “dumb,” an unchangeable state of being) perhaps avoid difficult reading tasks because the challenge feels insurmountable, regardless of effort or value (Starcher & Proffitt, 2011). Even if they know that the reading is important, they might simply feel like they can’t succeed and as a result, don’t bother trying.

Brost and Bradley (2006), however, argue that students’ lack of preparedness is exploited as an excuse for non-compliance. They write: “We feel that this may get the cart before the horse: the acquisition of reading skills depends, after all, upon compliance with assigned reading” (pg. 107). They add that solutions that aim readings at unskilled readers may even serve to worsen the problem and “devalue the role of reading in learning, reducing students’ expectations to read independently” (pg. 107). Indeed, in their own study they found that both skilled and unskilled readers complied at approximately the same rate.

- **Students don’t see the value in reading on their own.** Some authors (Clump, Bauer, & Bradley, 2004; Hobson, 2004; Ryan, 2006) report that many students tend to value the instructor’s lecture over the text as primary source of information or simply see no connection between reading and academic success, choosing to rely solely on class attendance and opt out of reading assignments. The provision of instructor slides or other detailed lecture notes/handouts could potentially exacerbate this student perception of reading as unnecessary busywork (Center for Teaching Excellence, n.d.). Further, as Nilson (2010) points out, many college students succeeded in high school without completing the reading and remain confident about their ability to repeat that performance in college. Brost and Bradley (2006) even propose that universities might inadvertently *select* for students who were able to succeed in lower divisions without doing the reading. Unfortunately, in some cases, students’ confidence or belief that the reading is pointless is borne out by a lack of consequences for not reading. Moreover, perhaps in an effort to ensure
that all the important course material is covered in some way, many instructors lecture over the readings in class “as if [they] don’t expect [their] students to do them either” (Nilson, 2010, pg. 214). And certainly students will continue to value instructor lecture over readings if they know that the instructor will simply present the important information in class (Doyle, 2008).

Similarly, students might choose not to read because they don’t understand the relevance of the text or the role it is meant to play in the learning process (Brost & Bradley, 2006). Indeed, this may be the case, as the authors also discovered that half of the faculty in their study did not use their assigned readings in an apparent way during class time. It certainly makes sense that if there is no perceived payoff or observable need for doing the reading (Nilson, 2010), students will instead prioritize other activities.

- **Students are just not as excited about the topic as we are.** It’s likely no surprise that many of our students don’t share our level of interest in the material we teach, particularly those in lower level courses. We as instructors and academics have cultivated years of learning and research in our own disciplines because we had some innate attraction to them, while our students may be simply taking our class because it is required by the institution. Lei and colleagues (2010) note that higher compliance levels in higher-level courses could be attributed to those students’ intrinsic interest in their chosen course of study. It follows, then, that our students might be less motivated to spend time reading our carefully chosen texts simply because they don’t share our enthusiasm for the content (or have not yet acquired our enthusiasm for it!). And given the many demands on our students’ time and attention, whether those demands be jobs, family, extracurricular activities, sleeping, working out, or engaging with social media (Hobson, 2004; Nilson, 2010; Starcher & Proffitt, 2011), the call to spend a few hours reading material that they assume is boring is likely a very weak call indeed.

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**GETTING STUDENTS TO READ**

Given the complex system of influences at work de-motivating students, there are a multitude of suggestions for promoting student reading. Some strategies rely on purely extrinsic motivational tactics, while others strive to inspire more intrinsic motivation within students. *(For a more comprehensive overview of student motivation in general, please see Adam Smith’s paper “How Do I Motivate my Students?” available [here](#).)* Of course, not every strategy will work for every instructor’s needs, class logistics, or teaching philosophies, but perhaps amongst the suggestions that follow there will be a few ideas that are appealing and/or feasible.
Extrinsic motivation: Compelling students to read

Perhaps the most easily identifiable (and often more easily implemented) strategies for encouraging reading compliance are those that rely on extrinsic motivation, or those that offer some form of external reward or punishment to students. Extrinsic motivators are often controversial in the field of teaching and learning. Their supporters might argue that they are effective in providing tangible consequences for students, are logistically feasible, and ultimately achieve the desired goal. They can likewise serve to provide additional grades (always a meaningful currency for students), thus rewarding those students who take part with higher grades. For instance, Sappington, Kinsey, and Munsayac (2002) take a pragmatic approach and contend that “the student bears responsibility for preparation” and “ultimately students and the greater society are better served by preparation than the lack of it” (pg. 274). Detractors, however, would argue that extrinsic motivation serves to undermine rather than foster students’ love of learning (Starcher and Proffitt, 2011) and is ultimately demotivating to their long-term learning process (Center for Teaching Excellence, n.d.; Weimer, 2015). Wherever your teaching philosophy lies regarding external motivators, here are a few often-suggested strategies that can be employed to varying degrees in pursuit of encouraging reading compliance.

- **Quizzes.** Reading quizzes (announced or unannounced) and other forms of required assignments such as in-class presentations, journals, and questions based on the reading are likely the most-utilized form of external motivator. These kinds of assignments are certainly effective in providing incentive for students to complete the reading, since they can directly affect students’ final course grade and are within their control to a certain degree (Lei et al., 2010). A study by Hatteberg and Steffy (2013) asked students to rate a set of techniques for effectiveness in getting them to do the reading, from required techniques like quizzes to optional questions and being called on randomly in class; they found that the required and announced techniques were rated more highly by students than the optional or unannounced components. In other words, students admitted that techniques that forced them to read (and that they knew about in advance) such as scheduled quizzes or writing assignments were more successful in getting them to read than pop quizzes, cold-calling, or optional reading guides.

Quizzes in particular might be one of the more controversial techniques, despite their effectiveness in coercing reading compliance. First, while students might admit to the effectiveness of quizzing, they don’t typically like them (Brost and Bradley, 2006) and may view them as punitive (Sappington et al, 2002). And if a teaching strategy is particularly unpopular with students, it could ultimately have the opposite effect on their motivation and even negatively affect evaluations (Center for Teaching Excellence, n.d.; Sappington et al, 2002). Second, and perhaps more importantly, others such as Roberts (2011) argue that strategies such as quizzing, particularly multiple choice testing/quizzing or quizzing in search of a particular answer, rewards only surface learning and does not foster deep or long-term learning. Henderson and Rosenthal (2006) likewise note that reading quizzes are essentially teacher-oriented because they can assess only what the teacher thinks to ask about. Nevertheless, if simple preparation is the primary goal, and deep learning is promoted in other ways, then reading quizzes can be a low-stakes, easy strategy.

Taking all of this into consideration, quizzes still function to encourage and assess student preparation.
and understanding. As such, they can indeed be implemented effectively in the classroom, and might be easier to incorporate into the logistics of larger classes than some of the other strategies addressed here. Instructors looking to incorporate reading quizzes or other similar assignments might consider utilizing a variety of methods of assessment that will engage all parts of the brain and foster deeper learning (Hatteberg & Steffy, 2013). (See the online resources listed at the end of this paper for suggestions, especially “How to write effective questions for evaluating deep learning,” available here.)

Further, quizzes need not only take on traditional forms -- multiple-choice exams that are administered during class and focus on terminology and identification. If logistics allow, quizzes could certainly include short-answer questions that ask students to explain their initial understanding of a concept or engage in lower-level analysis or application, thereby moving past surface learning. Quizzes can also be administered outside of class via an online course management system and even offer students multiple attempts, providing them with guidance on what they should focus on in the reading. Instructors should also consider taking time to go over quizzes or even allow students to correct their wrong answers, which has not only shown to increase compliance (Lei et al., 2010) but also allows students to learn from their mistakes.

- **Cold-calling.** Another simple (though perhaps not always effectively executed) strategy is the classic cold-calling, or randomly calling on students to answer questions about the reading. While this strategy was rated lower in effectiveness than required quizzes and assignments in the study by Hatteberg & Steffy (2013), it is one that many instructors rely on to ensure that students will come to class prepared. This strategy can be part of a formal “class participation” grade, or simply rely on the pressure to avoid discomfiture in front of peers (Starcher & Proffitt, 2011).

While cold-calling is often perceived as uncomfortable at best, and punitive or aimed at “embarrassing” students at worst (Dallimore, 2005; Starcher & Proffitt, 2011), it can be implemented in ways that incentivize preparation without the humiliation factor. In fact, some research has shown that the practice, when executed with care, can increase student comfort with class participation as well as increase the number of students participating (Dallimore, Herntenstein, & Platt, 2012). In one study (Dallimore et al., 2004), many students confirmed the benefits of the practice, noting: “everyone came to class prepared and on time… this elevated the energy in the classroom and heightened and improved the learning experience” (pg. 112). The key to successful cold-calling is clearly a warm and supportive rather than vindictive classroom environment. Instructors should create a norm of participation and inform students that the practice will be implemented from day one, as well as give students time to think when needed (Dallimore, 2005). For instance, an instructor might allow students a minute to write in advance or think about questions in groups, or forewarn them that she will be asking questions about a certain topic during class. An instructor might even invite responses from particular students later in class (e.g., “Jill, I’m going to ask you to talk about the theme of loneliness in Winesburg, Ohio in a few minutes…”). Other supportive strategies include allowing students to decline responding if desired, and providing students
with second chances to recover from earlier weak responses (Dallimore, 2005). Many instructors find ways to utilize cold-calling that is patently random in nature in order to ensure that the practice is fair, such as drawing names out of hat, using playing cards (“I want the person who has the 3 of Diamonds to answer this...”), using the class roster, or even throwing a Koosh ball or rolling a many-sided die. Instructors should also respond with encouragement to students, strive to incorporate open-ended questions with a variety of possible responses, and avoid negative behaviors such as sarcasm (Dallimore, 2005).

- **Reading Questions and Presentations.** Providing students with questions related to the reading that they must respond to either prior to or during class is another potential strategy that can serve dual purposes; not only does it encourage compliance, but can also provide guidance of sorts to students as they work to complete the reading, helping them navigate the text and discern what is most important, fostering deeper reading (Hermida 2009). Again, when employing this strategy, it is crucial that the instructor actually utilize the questions (and readings!) in some way, either during in-class discussion, or for other kinds of credit in order to prevent students from perceiving the task as busywork. If aiming to promote closer reading and more critical thinking with this practice, instructors should be sure to provide discussion questions that probe beyond terminology (which students might easily locate in bold headings without actually reading closely).

An alternate version of this strategy is to ask students to provide their own discussion questions based on the reading, which would certainly require closer reading and critical thinking. Such questions could be presented during class time or online prior to class, allowing the instructor to peruse the students’ questions and responses in advance and draw on them during class discussion. In more advanced courses, instructors could take this strategy one step further, arranging for student facilitators or discussion leaders (Huang 2015). Henderson and Rosenthal (2006) describe their own use of “reading questions” in their Physics courses, requiring students to submit one or more questions after each reading, identifying concepts that are still unclear to them (much like a “muddiest point” activity one might use during class, but for credit). They found that this practice compelled students to read while also providing the instructors with valuable information about student comprehension.

Some instructors recommend student presentations as a format for demonstrating that they have completed the reading, assigning individuals or groups of students responsibility for various readings or chapters over the course of the semester. This method can be valuable for encouraging close reading and practicing skills such as summary and analysis. However, the practice can likewise be time-consuming depending on the size of the class, and as Starcher and Proffitt (2011) note, might only ensure that the presenting students have completed the assigned reading at any given time.
Intrinsic motivation: Inspiring students to read

While external motivators might be more familiar as methods for encouraging reading compliance, there are also several options for inspiring intrinsic motivation within students.

- **Teach reading skills.** Since we know that students’ academic reading skills and general reading practices are less developed than we might expect or hope, it can be valuable to take time to teach our students some of those important skills; making the reading process less daunting and our expectations clearer could make students more inclined to oblige. It can be especially valuable to provide students with guidance for reading in general as well as within our given disciplines. As Bean (1996) notes, for instance, students might not realize that scientists and historians have vastly different reading strategies. Similarly, they may be unfamiliar with the organization or style of an academic text. Nilson (2010) suggests giving students the “grand tour” of the text before they even begin, working with them to identify elements such as organizing structures, thesis, and point of view (pg. 214). Other suggestions for bolstering basic skills include teaching students how to identify transitions and verbal signals (such as comparison words, cause-and-effect words, or illustration words), and teaching them how to take effective notes and mark their text, even modeling those strategies for students (Bean, 1996; Hobson, 2004; Nilson, 2010). Instructors might also inform students that behaviors such as taking notes when reading, summarizing and organizing new information, etc., continue to be linked to higher grades (Grasgreen 2013). *(For more information on students and note-taking skills, please see “Notetaking in the 21st Century: Tips for Instructors and Students,” available [here](#).)* If time allows, it could be worthwhile to instruct students on some proven reading methods such as the SQR3 (Survey-Question-Read-Recite-Review) method (Nilson, 2010).

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ON IMPROVING STUDENTS’ READING SKILLS


  *This classic text offers a wide variety of suggestions for helping students read and engage with difficult texts, including assignment ideas.*

- **Resources on the SQ3R Reading method:**
  - [https://www.niagara.edu/assets/listpage/S-Q-3-R.pdf](https://www.niagara.edu/assets/listpage/S-Q-3-R.pdf)

- **Resources on Active Reading, from the Dartmouth Academic Skills Center:**
  - [http://www.dartmouth.edu/~acskills/success/reading.html](http://www.dartmouth.edu/~acskills/success/reading.html)

It is further important to recognize that novice readers likely do not appreciate the various purposes of texts, or realize that they are allowed to question or engage critically with them. As such, an instructor might consider helping students learn how to engage in rhetorical analysis and identify textual elements such as context, bias, argument, and validity (Hermida, 2009). Bean (1996) proposes teaching students how to write “what it says” and “what it does” statements to help them understand structural function.

Taking class time to teach students how to be better readers, either at a basic or more advanced level, might seem unattainable to many faculty, particularly those who teach...
large classes or content-heavy courses that must maintain a strict schedule (Brost & Bradley, 2006). Nevertheless, the returns on this practice could resonate far beyond that single course, for as Nilson (2010) contends, “if we don’t help our students learn how to navigate reading assignments, they will leave our classes having learned very little, not least of which is how to learn” (pg. 214).

- **Preview and promote the reading.** There are a variety of ways to preview the reading for students that can serve to “sell” the reading to less-interested students as well as provide some guidance. Nilson (2010) notes that “we can make some students want to do the readings simply by promoting them,” suggesting that instructors can use the syllabus to explain the purpose and value of the texts, or even provide rationale for selecting them over other options (p. 218). It can also be worthwhile to promote the readings each day or week, providing insights into what questions they will answer, putting them in context of the course material, and explaining their real-world relevance and purpose (Hermida, 2009; Nilson, 2010). Hermida (2009) even provides reading guides each week, offering questions that help guide and focus students. Bean (1996) likewise offers some creative suggestions for rousing student interest in the reading, such as non-graded pretests that preview the content, show gaps in knowledge, and ideally communicate the importance and interesting qualities of the reading. Instructors might also set up a problem for students to solve or a case study to discuss using information from the reading (Center for Teaching Excellence, n.d.). Ultimately, even the simple act of talking about the text in class can help convey the significance of reading as well as prepare students for the task, and if students have a sense of why the reading material is important, or why the instructor is passionate about it, then their motivation to engage with it should increase.

- **Offer choices.** Integrating some level of choice related to reading could also be motivational for students. Research has shown the benefits of providing choice to students, including greater student ownership and engagement with work as well as improved self-determination (Allington, 2002; Chan et al, 2014; Huang, 2015). Wang and Eccles (2013) further note that when students have the opportunity to make choices, they are more likely to “feel interested and to value learning activities” (pg. 19). Some possible strategies for integrating student ownership and choice include allowing students to select a topic within the course’s scope about which they would like to develop expertise and facilitate discussion (Huang, 2015); providing a small selection of readings about a given topic/each topic from which students might choose individually; inviting students to propose a relevant reading on a given topic; or even leaving one reading option open for a class vote (for instance, in a literature course, an instructor might provide 3 – 4 possible texts, and invite the class to decide as a group which one they will read together). If a choice of text is not feasible (i.e., in classes that utilize only a single textbook), then perhaps a choice of one or more topics would be. It is essential to note, however, that when offering choices to students, an instructor should bear in mind levels of student development; too *much* choice could overwhelm lower performing or younger students (Wang & Eccles, 2013), so treading the line of moderation is advised. Wang and Eccles assert, “…choice can be motivational when the task options are of appropriate difficulty and when it comes with adequate structure support” (pg. 20). In the end, the goal is to provide students with enough freedom and ownership of the material and task to tap into their own interests and create
personal meaning, but not so much that students feel anxious or lost.

And a few more basic recommendations …

- **Stop lecturing over everything in the assigned reading.** This advice is relatively self-explanatory. As noted earlier, if instructors use class time to rehash the important content from the readings without adding to it, then it follows that students will ultimately choose one or the other – class attendance or reading the text – to maximize their time while still succeeding in the course.

- **Integrate the readings during class.** While instructors should not lecture the readings, they should also not completely ignore the readings. If instructors do not make the readings an integral part of the course, then students will undoubtedly perceive them as unnecessary. As such, instructors should use class time not to rehash the readings, but to build on them and clarify their content when necessary (Center for Teaching Excellence, n.d.; Nilson, 2010). Readings should be linked to class activities not just through accountability measures (such as quizzes), but in truly meaningful ways through application, discussion, reflection, presentations, writing, and other strategies (Center for Teaching Excellence, n.d.; Hobson 2004).

- **Consider the practical qualities of the text.** The first step to getting students reading is getting students to actually purchase the text; some reports suggest only approximately 20% of students buy books at all (Boyd, 2003). As such, an instructor might work to consider cost while selecting texts, or at least make students aware of the various locations and online sites that might offer discounted prices. Boyd (2003) allows her students to purchase older editions of a given text, or even select other comparable texts. In addition, perhaps instead of an expensive text, instructors could provide links to equally useful (and free!) online articles. Beyond the cost of the text, it can also be worthwhile to consider the organization of a textbook (is it reader-friendly and easily navigable?) as well as other pedagogical features (does it offer useful diagrams or discussion questions?). Students might also appreciate knowing the instructor’s rationale for selecting a particular text. Finally, Hobson (2004) recommends revisiting the assumption that college courses *must* have a text, writing, “most college teachers can name courses they have taken or taught where the course text(s) added little, if anything, to the learning process” (pg. 2). If the text is truly not necessary to the learning objectives of the course, then perhaps it need not be included at all.

- **Assign a reasonable workload.** Instructors should also take time to consider the amount of reading being assigned to students. Nilson (2010) contends that we are inclined to assign reading loads that are too heavy for students’ reading abilities. Hobson (2004) recommends applying a “less is more” approach to determining course readings, with a list of fewer, carefully chosen selections that won’t paralyze students with the perception of an impossible workload. Instructors should also consider the relative difficulty of the reading (Volk, 2012). The readings that are assigned, then, should align clearly and
meaningfully with course objectives and activities. *(For more insights on reading loads, see Volk’s “Size matters: How much reading to assign (and other imponderables)”, available [here.]*

**CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

The dynamics influencing students’ willingness and ability to prepare for class and complete reading assignments are undoubtedly complex, and that complexity is reflected in the myriad potential strategies for encouraging compliance. The suggestions considered here are certainly not exhaustive, and all techniques will likely not work for all instructors or situations. Nevertheless, if instructors appreciate these dynamics and work thoughtfully to design courses that consider the needs of students, aim for deep learning, and work to help students meet meaningful objectives, then perhaps reading can become more fundamental for all involved.

**ADDITIONAL ONLINE RESOURCES**

- 11 strategies for getting students to read what’s assigned. (2010). Faculty Focus Special Report.  
  [https://www.canadacollege.edu/inside/CIFETL/getting_students_to_read.pdf](https://www.canadacollege.edu/inside/CIFETL/getting_students_to_read.pdf)

- Getting students to do the reading: Pre-class quizzes on WordPress. (March 25, 2010). *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.  

- Academic study tips related to reading from Cornell College’s Academic Support and Advising: “Reading a textbook for true understanding” and “Reading novels.”  

  [https://blog.peerinstruction.net/2012/12/12/how-to-write-effective-questions-for-evaluating-deep-learning/](https://blog.peerinstruction.net/2012/12/12/how-to-write-effective-questions-for-evaluating-deep-learning/)

- Getting students to do their assigned readings, by Michelle Schwartz from the Learning and Teaching Office at Ryerson University.  
  [http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/handouts/student_reading.pdf](http://www.ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/handouts/student_reading.pdf)
REFERENCES


