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# Attending to the Act of Reading: Critical Reading, Contemplative Reading, and Active Reading

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## Attending to the Act of Reading: Critical Reading, Contemplative Reading, and Active Reading

**Paul T. Corrigan**

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Maybe our students read like this. They sit alone at a familiar desk, midmorning sunlight coming in the window. They sip water and snack on almonds. They mark the pages of the text with a pen as they read, underlining select passages, jotting comments, exclamation points, question marks in the margins. Dictionary and notepad lay open. Cell phone set on silent. They work through the text slowly, rereading passages, making connections, asking questions, having ideas, being inspired...

Or like this. They sit in the library, under harsh florescent lights, in middle of the afternoon, well after lunch. Grogginess settles in. Coffee would be nice. They turn the pages, look at all the words, understand many of them. They pass through page after page, dutifully, without engaging. They do not write on the text or reread anything. Now and again, they catch themselves zoning out, rub their eyes, and keep going...

Or this. They sit on a sofa in their dorm room late at night, music blaring, social media buzzing, friends coming and going, pizza boxes and soda bottles everywhere. They skim the text while waiting their turn in a video game tournament. They think they've got the gist. It is about the economy and stuff...

How students read influences how they learn. In particular, in order for students to learn to read *more deeply* or on a *higher level*, they need to learn to read *actively*. While many scholars and teachers appear to take active reading

for granted, possibly assuming students will come into such "study skills" on their own, I propose that we should make concerted efforts to help students understand and adopt such habits as underlining, writing comments in the margins, asking questions, rereading, and so forth. In this essay, I survey recent work on critical reading, contemplative reading, and active reading and present a set of practices for teaching active reading.

### Why Active Reading Now

Some may wonder: why write about active reading now? Compared to other aspects of reading—like what, how much, or how critically student read—the practice of active reading has the distinction of being not complicated, not controversial, not cutting edge, and, therefore, not an obvious subject for current inquiry. I can imagine some readers responding with a shrug. "Active reading? Sure. Of course. What's the big deal?" I suggest that several factors (pedagogical, scholarly, and personal) invite further discussion.

Sandra Jamieson demonstrates that teachers and scholars sometimes assume that college students do or should have reading skills that they actually do not have. Few teachers spend much time teaching skills like active reading. Some may find such skills too basic to spend time on. Some may feel that how students read is up to them. For others, how students read may simply be "out of sight, out of mind." But many students come to college without effective reading practices. Even the stronger readers often have significant room to grow. Carol Porter-O'Donnell argues that if we do not teach students to read actively, we leave it to "chance" (83). Leaving how students read to chance seems imprudent in light of the difference active reading makes. Vicki S. Gier et al. find that when students read a text already highlighted but poorly so, they have more trouble remembering and understanding what they read but that when they highlight



the same text again for themselves in, say, a different color, the setback disappears (70, 79). We can assume the significance of active reading only increases when we want more from students than just recall and comprehension.

More basically, taking for granted how students read seems particularly problematic when we cannot take for granted that they will read. Mary E. Hoeft reports on several quantitative studies that find that college students read assigned texts with a “basic level of comprehension” less than a third of the time (2). Rebekah Nathan points in the same direction in an ethnographic study. Between socializing, taking classes, and working, most students are strapped for time. To make time, students commonly “simply don’t do the required readings for class.” In some cases, Nathan estimates, “the professor would be lucky if one-third of the students read the materials at a level of basic comprehension” (122). Like teachers, students have to prioritize. In deciding what to read, they take cues from their teachers (115). She finds that the juniors and seniors she interviewed “don’t casually or lightly discard assignments” but opt out of reading an assigned text when they think that they will not take a test on it, use it for homework, or discuss it in class (137-38). What applies to getting students to read in the first place must apply all the more to getting them to read actively. Whether teachers take reading for granted or not, students tend to follow suit.

If the present need and opportunity for teachers to teach active reading provide impetus for this discussion, several scholarly conversations do as well. Mariolina Rizzi Salvatori and Patricia Donahue observe that interest in reading with respect to teaching writing and teaching literature “has waxed and waned over the years” (“Stories” 212). Following the heyday of reader response theory several decades ago, reading went underground for a while. But it appears to have undergone a “revival” lately (213). Salvatori and Donahue celebrate this recent turn but confess they don’t know what to make of it (200). I imagine that renewed interest in reading

will provide opportunities to step forward in understanding reading. I offer that it also provides an opportunity to step back: to survey, connect, and integrate various aspects of the recent work on reading, to work out, for instance, the relationship between critical reading and active reading.

Beyond writing and literature, reading plays prominent roles in broader ongoing discussions of teaching and learning. Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa write that less than one third of college students in their survey reported taking even one class the preceding semester that asked them to read at least forty pages a week. Arum and Roksa blame limited reading for limited learning (94, 71). Of course, if quantity matters, so does quality. The National Center on Education and the Economy calls into question whether students in the first semester at community colleges read difficult enough texts or do complex enough work with what they read (24). Noel Entwistle reports on research that ties how students read to how they learn. While some students focus on understanding, others focus on remembering. Not surprisingly, those who “actively” look for understanding end up understanding better than those who do not (24). Rob Abbott proposes that when students learn to read “actively and critically,” they pass a “conceptual threshold,” a breakthrough in intellectual development (192-93). Others call for more attention to teaching reading skills in a wide range of contexts, including math classes and large lecture classes, which are not usually associated with such a focus (Horning “Reading”; Helms and Helms; Rhoder; Gogan; Tinkle et al.). Alice Horning goes so far as to argue that “reading needs to be taught in every class, in every term, every time” (“Elephants”). The recent work on reading within the fields of writing and literature, including work on active reading, can contribute to these broader conversations.

Finally, I confess that personal factors also motivate this discussion. I recall learning to read actively as a college student. Taught not to write in books as a child, I actually

resisted annotating while reading for about a year into college. When I finally let myself do it, encouraged by several professors, I wrote lightly and only in pencil in case I wanted to erase. Today, like many serious readers, I find it hard to read without a pen in hand. Looking back, I see that it was only after learning to write in my books that I learned to read critically and contemplatively. This has led me to see the practices as deeply connected. I experienced active reading as the gateway to deep reading and want to facilitate that kind of development for my students.

### Critical Reading

Critical reading and contemplative reading represent two common aims regarding reading for teachers of literature and writing (and other disciplines). To use spatial metaphors, we might say that we want our students both to read at a higher level and more deeply. We want students to distance themselves from the text in order to contextualize it, analyze it, and understand its difficulties. We often also want students to be drawn into the text in order to be changed through the encounter. Recent work on critical reading takes on what critical reading means and how to teach it. Michael Warner calls critical reading “the folk ideology of a learned profession, so close to us that we seldom feel the need to explain it” (14). Commonly understood aspects of critical reading include “critical distance” between text and reader and a “self-conscious” stance (20). But Warner points out that critical reading is a historically embedded practice, meaning different things in different times and places, and asks us to think carefully about the range of ways of reading that we consider critical and uncritical (19).

Writers often define critical reading in terms of what they want their students to do. Most commonly, they want students to attend to complexities and rough edges, both in the texts being read and in their own initial interpretations of them. Patricia Donahue wants students to move past

orderly readings to messy ones. She advocates a “kind of misreading” that pursues “the wild dialogue inscribed within language” (2). Similarly, Salvatori, Arlene Wilner, and Robert Scholes want students to “engage...their reading difficulties” (Salvatori, “Reading Matters” 200), work back and forth between “sympathetic engagement” and “critical evaluation” (Wilner 175-177), and remain “open and flexible with respect to the play of meaning” (Scholes 217). Nancy L. Chick, Holly Hassel, and Aeron Haynie call such practices “reading for complexity” (402). Some writers look to promote complexity and multiple interpretations specifically by asking students to revisit and revise their own interpretations over time. Gary Weissman understands initial readings as initial drafts, whether written down or not (46). Phoebe Jackson, John Muckelbauer, and Sherry Linkon likewise see critical reading as a process in which students “revise their thoughts” (Jackson 114), “challenge their own thinking” (Muckelbauer 92), and “deepen or complicate their own readings” (Linkon 278).

Several writers consider how this kind of textual work requires contextual work. Some take up the contexts from which texts come. While Scholes wants students to situate texts historically and rhetorically (44-45), Linkon wants them to situate them “in their cultural or critical context” (278). In a more specific case, Joanne Diaz teaches students “to critically assess how books are selected, edited, published, and promoted, who makes those editorial decisions, and how cultural artifacts are released into the world” (442). Other writers focus more on the contexts in which texts are read. In this sense, reading contextually means reading introspectively, as Salvatori puts it (“Conversations” 446). She seeks to guide students to a metacognitive awareness of the “moves” they make when reading (446). Donahue likewise teaches students how what they bring to the text shapes their initial understanding of it. Certain assumptions regarding, say, symbolism and unity may make certain interpretations more or less “obvious.” Donahue asks students to read against

those assumptions (8). Paul Heilker believes that students' "assumptions about reading and about texts" prohibit critical reading, especially the assumption that reading means finding rather than making meaning. But where Heilker sees "intellectual baggage" (135), Don Bialostosky sees luggage. In Bialostosky's view, "the problem...is not that students read literature with the unexamined resources they use to engage in everyday discursive exchange but that they check those resources at the classroom door." Therefore, he wants students to "reflect upon" what they already know about reading in order to use it better (113).

After describing what critical reading means, writers often offer ways of teaching it. Many teachers attempt to teach critical reading by *modeling* it for students, whether through lecturing, discussion, or assigned readings. But students need more than that if they are to develop critical reading skills. We might also overtly explain what critical reading means. Robert Scholes urges "simplifying and clarifying the ways of reading we have already learned to use" (215). More importantly still, students must practice for themselves. While many teachers assign term papers asking for fully developed interpretations, several writers propose using shorter essays and activities to focus on specific skills. Donahue encourages teachers "to design writing assignments that instruct students in the processes of critical thinking and close analysis" (4). She proposes a sequence where students write an initial interpretation followed by multiple rereadings, while considering along the way how prior assumptions about reading shape these interpretations (5-9). Salvatori similarly asks students to write responses to texts and then to write reflectively and evaluatively about their own responses ("Conversations" 447). To teach students to read critically with respect to aspects of editing, formatting, and so forth, Diaz has students compare versions of short early modern texts published in a current anthology with images of original manuscripts available in digital archives and then interpret

the small differences that appear between versions (442). Linkon describes a course focused entirely on giving students "direct guidance on the process of developing their own interpretations of texts" (261). Students read, research, and write short interpretations; then they read, research, and write more in order to complicate those interpretations. Without having to produce a final interpretation by the end of the semester, they may engage in the process of critical reading more freely.

### Contemplative Reading

Contemplative reading introduces dimensions of depth and inner growth (Corrigan, "Inner Growth" 1). Understood broadly, contemplative reading has to do with "attentiveness, presence, dialogue, and community," and "slowing down" (Corrigan, "Painting" 171). While critical reading may involve taking an aggressive approach, contemplative reading involves taking time to "to really listen" (Corrigan, "Silence" 10). Jay Wright describes contemplative reading when he asks poetry readers "to create the act of becoming aware, attentive, active and transformed...to accept the poem's challenge and to listen to, walk along, sing along and be with the poem... 'to become' with the voices...to reach for wisdom..." (5-8). Contemplative reading by no means holds the same universal status as critical reading. Some teachers and scholars may consider it suspect. Nonetheless, its long tradition continues in recent work on reading.

Some writers place contemplative reading within the tradition of contemplative pedagogy. David Kahane wants to motivate students to live differently with respect to the suffering of the poor but finds ideas about ethics and information about injustice "insufficient." People rarely change through "careful analysis and critical reflection" alone. Understanding people's disconnectedness from the suffering of others as rooted in their own "alienation" from themselves, Kahane proposes that students need to "be supported in

contemplative practice” to come to terms with “their own and others’ suffering.” To this end, he teaches mindfulness, the practice of attending with “compassionate detachment” to one’s thoughts and fears (49, 53). In one mindfulness activity, he asks students to spend five minutes meditatively reading a paragraph from the text. He asks them to “try to dwell on it simply, reading repeatedly whatever aspects caught their eye, and seeing what meanings emerged” (57).

Other writers describe contemplative reading more broadly. In *The Art of Slow Reading*, Thomas Newkirk encourages readers “to be continuously present” (2). Contemplative reading requires “sustained acts of attention” and speaks to “the human need for depth and reflection” (5, 11). It calls for “older practices of reading—memorization, annotation, meditation, performance—that for millennia helped readers engage deeply and hold on to what they have read” (7). Newkirk even offers that readers might try “meditative breathing” (6). Scholes promotes “receptive” and “mindful” reading (44). Miriam Marty Clark finds it “deeply worthwhile” simply to help “students to become adults who read widely and with engagement, who take pleasure in thinking about what they read and sometimes make connections between it and their own lives” (326). Charles Suhor connects contemplative reading to wonder, paradox, and generosity and recommends reading aloud, reading silently, pausing before discussion, having patience toward the text, and being willing “to find nothing” (29-32). Howell Chickering wants students “to understand that poetry is alive, dangerous. The encounter with a strong sensibility not your own can change your life, or at least some of your ideas and feelings, perhaps forever.” He asks students to read and reread, aloud (271). Ann Jurecic offers that “the practice of reading literature slows thought down” and that “a book provides a rare opportunity for sustained focus, contemplation, and introspection.” She calls for reading in ways that develop empathy (24).

Critical reading and contemplative reading represent distinct ways of reading. Still, readers may practice both, even at the same time. Moreover, these two ways of reading share certain qualities. At root, both take reading as more than a means for gathering information. When we read critically or contemplatively, we engage with the issues at hand, with the writers whose texts we are reading, with our own thoughts and feelings, and with the language itself. Such practices matter not only in writing and literature but in all disciplines where teachers and students must wrestle with significant and complex texts in order to do the work of the discipline. Serious reading in its various forms sits at the heart of the intellectual process and purpose of higher education. Still, teachers often do little directly to help students develop advanced reading skills. Recent work on critical reading and contemplative reading invites teachers to slow down, meet students where they are, and walk them forward step by step through the process of learning to read more deeply and on a higher level. I find this work incredibly useful and timely, and I argue that many students may benefit if we take it one step farther.

### Active Reading

Many teachers and scholars appear to see such practices as underlining, writing comments in the margin, and rereading simply as “study skills.” I propose we see active reading as integrally connected to higher/deeper ways reading and teach it accordingly. Of course, as Bialostosky points out, reading carefully “doesn’t guarantee” students will understand and respond, and students sometimes understand and respond without reading carefully (112). Still, when they read carefully, they are surely more likely to understand and respond in ways that we want them to. Critical reading and contemplative reading rest on the foundational practices of active reading. For that reason, as Karen Manarin writes, we should “pay attention to how students read” (294). We should



pay attention to what they actually do with the text when they read.

Of course, what active reading looks like varies according to technology, genre, preference, and purpose for reading. We read printed, paperbound books differently than papyrus scrolls, audiobooks, brail books, websites, and interactive text in apps. We need to learn more about how to read actively in digital environments, as Jingyan Lu and Liping Deng show. Websites prove stubbornly difficult to mark up. Electronic readers often have tools for annotating built in, but not always. And even when they are there, students often do not know how to use them. So we have to allow for a range of practices. We cannot teach a supposedly *timeless* method for active reading. But we can teach certain practices that have been established *over time* as effective by those skilled at critical and contemplative reading, namely, scholars and teachers.

James Ira Allen surveyed established scholars about how they read to document what such practices include. Two stand out. First, these readers read in particular places. Whether in the library, at work, or a favorite chair at home, whether in silence or with some kind of background noise, they “create places” that feel “safe for reading” (103). Second, they “interact with the text” in a physical way. Allen observes that “touching the text is crucial” for them, whether through “bringing in colors with highlighter and Post-it notes; making certain words and phrases stand out; [or] writing paraphrases, summaries, and arguments in the margins” (104-5). The respondents focused, at least partially, on the “action, not necessarily on the meaning of that action” (105). What they wrote when they marked their texts was not necessarily more important than that they wrote and marked them.

Salvatori offers a telling glimpse into whether students take up the same practices. In a class discussion, a student offered an interpretation that was widely off the mark. On a whim, Salvatori asked to see her text, “picked it up, flipped

through it,” and found it “highlighted rather sparsely.” What the student marked and left unmarked shed light on her interpretation. Asking to see other students’ texts, Salvatori just found what one might expect: “Many had left it untouched (their reasons varied from not wanting to mark their books so that they could sell them to assuming that putting pen to page would interrupt their concentration, arrest their speed). Others had highlighted it, some methodically, others erratically” (“Conversations,” 447). This observation led to a fruitful discussion, with students comparing what they marked and why. Reflecting on the incident, Salvatori writes, “That class made it possible for me to turn a rather mechanical ‘study habit’—the highlighting of a text—into a strategy, one that can make ‘visible’ the number and the intricacy of strands in a text’s argument that a reader...pays attention to, and that can show how the selection, connection, and weaving of those strands affects the structuring of the argument a reader constructs” (447). She stresses the meanings that the marks make visible and not the act of marking itself (“a rather mechanical ‘study habit’”). While she calls for sustained attention to “the act of reading,” she finds this activity more valuable for teaching students to reflect on how they already read than for teaching them how to read (446, 448). However, her story actually highlights the importance of doing both.

Sheridan Blau compares how students and teachers read in another telling anecdote. On separate occasions, he gave students in a class and teachers at a workshop a difficult sentence and asked them to interpret it. The students gave up almost right away. When they did not understand at first glance, they concluded they could not understand at all. As far as he could tell, none of the students “read the passage more than once or took any time to try to figure it out” (29). In contrast, the teachers read and reread the same sentence, some of them “more than five or six times” (30). The difference between the groups is not that teachers can

understand difficult passages and students cannot but that we know what to do with difficult passages while students do not. We know, above all, to read and reread when we want to understand more clearly, critically, or deeply. Blau suggests we can teach students the same by “mak[ing] reading processes visible” (215).

We might begin teaching active reading by telling students how and why. Several recent (and recent edition) textbooks do just that. In *Beginning Theory*, Peter Barry clearly articulates both the practice and purpose. First, students should flip through the text, get a feel for it, and read the opening and concluding paragraphs. They should also write down some questions to answer while reading. Doing this, he writes, “makes you an ‘active’ reader rather than a passive one, and gives your reading a purpose.” Then students should read the text through: “Use a pencil if the copy is your own to underline key points, query difficulties, circle phrases worth remembering, and so on. Don’t just sit in front of the pages. If the book is not your own jot *something* down on paper as you read, however minimal.” After reading, students should think over what they have read: “Jot down some summary points. ... Spell out some of the difficulties that remain.” Finally, at least a day later, students should review the text and notes, see what they remember and what questions still remain, and reread parts of the text. He urges students not to settle for “a superficial overall impression gained from... desperate skim-reading.” “However daunting the material,” he encourages, “you have to make your reading meditative, reflective, and personal. Try to become a slow reader” (4-5).

Other textbooks give similar advice. In *Ways of Writing*, David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky ground what they say about reading critically in asides on giving “generous attention” to a text; “making marks in the margins or underlining passages that seem interesting or mysterious or difficult”; taking notes in journal while reading; and rereading multiple times (7-10, 19). In *The Elements (and Pleasures)*

*of Difficulty*, Salvatori and Donahue offer that to overcome difficulties in reading, students should try slowing down, annotating, and paying attention to their reading processes (137). In *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*, Sylvan Barnet and William E. Cain show students how to annotate a text, ask questions, and record their first responses (11-12, 25). In *Writing, Reading, Research*, Richard Veit and Christopher Gould tell students to read with a pencil in order to stay alert, to mark things to come back to later, and to stimulate their own responses. They also recommend recording summaries, question, reactions, quotations speculations, and patterns in a reading journal (87-105).

These textbooks explain active reading. But simply explaining will not usually suffice. We might also set up activities that demonstrate for students firsthand the value of active reading, like the ones Salvatori and Blau describe. We might have students move from reading to writing in such a way that writing notes while reading fits seamlessly into a larger practice, as Jackson encourages (112). We probably should use a range of strategies. Most students need instruction, exhortation, practice, feedback, reflection, and perhaps more before practicing active reading well and on their own.

### Practices for Teaching Active Reading

In what follows, I describe the practices I use to teach active learning, which include establishing active reading as an orientation, defining active reading in terms of specific practices, making time for active reading, having students write reading responses, having students keep a reading log, having students self-assess their reading practices, and using multiple practices to promote active reading. While I use these practices most often in first-year and second-year writing and literature courses, one can adopt/adapt them for more advanced students and other disciplines. Individually, they are not new ideas. In particular, having



students write reading responses has been a staple in teaching writing and literature for a long time. Several writers already specifically recommend them for promoting active reading (e.g. Flitterman-King; Panek; Gordon). My purpose here is to present an array of practices and to show how they together can make up an integrated active reading pedagogy. Though I rarely use all of them in a single course, I do use a combination to reinforce active reading throughout the term. What is important is that the focus on reading not be an afterthought but be built into the structure of the course from the beginning.

### *Establishing Active Reading as an Orientation*

I begin promoting active reading by talking to students about its significance. I tell them that reading is the heart of the course. That reading is more than looking at words in the order they appear on the page. That what they get out of reading depends on how they read. That the minimum required for each assigned reading is to read thoroughly. I tell students these things at the beginning of the course, give it to them in writing, and remind them regularly. I often even take a page out of Peter Barry's textbook (literally) and pass out photocopies of his advice about becoming "a slow reader" and reading in a "meditative, reflective, and personal" way (4). I also add that while skimming is sometimes appropriate, for instance, when looking up specific answers in a textbook to study for an exam or reading headlines to get the gist of what's going on in the world, skimming does not suffice with texts that are complex or need to be engaged, such as the ones we will read in the course. I try to establish active reading as an orientation. I want students to understand active reading not as a few tips or a matter of personal preference but as the foundation to a whole approach toward reading and learning that leads toward deeper engagement and, eventually, deeper thinking.

### *Defining Active Reading in Terms of Specific Practices*

I also make sure to define for students what active reading means in terms of specific practices. Some of the practices are physical and others are intellectual. They include:

- Writing on the text, underlining, circling, putting notes and questions in the margins.
- Rereading select passages.
- Asking questions.
- Spending time with the text.
- Looking up unfamiliar words that cannot easily be understood by context clues.
- Reading in a place without distractions.
- Reading at a time when one is awake, fresh, and alert.
- Seeking to understand and then to move beyond understanding to have something to say about the text, whether in the form of considered responses, probing questions, connections made between parts of the text or connections between the text and things outside of it.

Of these practices, I find marking on the text particularly important because of how it leads to the other practices and because of how it makes the reading that takes place outside of class visible in class. As the course progresses, I coach students on these practices in writing and in class. I keep an eye out to see how well students mark up their copies of the texts and comment on what I see from time to time. "Why didn't you write on your text?" "Look how well you marked that up." When students resist writing in their books, I encourage them at least to use sticky notes. Occasionally, at the end of a class session or in an email to the students before the next, I say something like, "The reading for next class will be particularly difficult/important/interesting/etc. so I want to you to really engage it. Make sure to read in the ways that I've been teaching you, writing on the text, underlining, circling, taking notes, asking questions, rereading certain passages, and so forth." Sometimes I include directly in the course calendar



similar comments about a few select readings, perhaps mentioning specific definitions they will want to look up. Through ongoing coaching, I define active reading in terms of specific practices not just once at the outset of the course but also in brief reminders throughout the term.

### *Making Time for Active Reading*

Students cannot read well if we do not give them enough time to. When they have to read hundreds of pages a week, they cannot do more than skim the material. But if we assign relatively short readings or work through longer texts in short passages, they can spend more time reading carefully and less time just getting through. In cases where large amounts of material absolutely must be covered, we can ask students to pay careful attention to select passages, with the understanding that they will skim the rest. Several times a term we might ask students to read, say, an article for one class and then reread it for the next class in order to dig into it more deeply. This makes rereading not just encouraged but required. Though students will cover less material with these practices, they will more likely get something out of it. We can also make time for active reading during class. Before discussion, we can bring in as a handout a short passage for students to read out loud or point to a particular page from the homework for them to reread. During discussion, we can ask students to connect their comments to specific passages, which gives occasion for returning to the text, rereading a few sentences, and commenting on them. Making time for active reading not only allows students to practice it but also indicates to students something about its importance.

### *Having Students Write Reading Responses*

Asking for written reading responses promotes active reading in several ways. Such responses encourage students to read in the first place. They give students occasion to pause and reread passages they have already read, if only to look

for lines to quote. They also motivate students to underline, take notes in the margins, and think about responding while reading the first time, since they will likely discover writing the responses easier after having done so. We can use journals, blogs, discussion boards, paragraphs, one-page essays, and so on. We can structure the assignment loosely or tightly. In one course, I ask students to blog about their reading before coming to class. I give them broad guidelines and examples of specific approaches they might take in any given response. The blog posts have to be at least 300 words long and engage the reading. I encourage lots of short quotations. Students can discuss a particular line or short passage or a problematic element in the text or give a creative response. When I want them to practice a specific skill, I give them a specific prompt for the day. In another course I take a more structured approach, having students complete a reading response template that asks them to practice the same set of skills on each text, quoting, summarizing, asking questions, and giving a reflection.

#### *Quotes*

- Copy out 3-5 of your “favorite” quotes. Include page numbers.

#### *Significant Points*

- List several significant points. Write them in your own words. Paraphrase and summarize properly.

#### *Questions*

- Write 3-5 significant questions of your own that the text gives rise to.

#### *Reflection*

- Write your own thoughts, responses, and reflections on the reading. At least 200 words.

Asking students to discuss specific details helps push students to read actively. Switching up the instructions from time to



time helps ward off perfunctory responses due to routine. Assessing responses in batches or in a portfolio (rather than individually) helps make grading them manageable.

### *Having Students Keep a Reading Log*

I sometimes have students record how they read on a chart that they fill in as the time goes on and turn in periodically. They write down what percentage of the assigned reading they've read for the day and how thoroughly they read it and then sign their initials to attest that the record is accurate.

Percentage Read	Thoroughness	Sign Initials

For the "thoroughness" column, I give the following instructions:

- *Not reading* obviously does not count. If you fail to read before class, indicate this on your log with a small dash or line, like so —.
- *Skimming a text* or *reading most of it* also does not count. To be sure, skimming or partial reading is all that is needed with certain textbooks, newspaper articles, or dictionaries. But this is not so with the kinds of things we will read in this class. If you only manage to skim or read part of the assigned reading before class, indicate this on your log with an *S*.
- *Reading the entire text all the way through once* is a good start. But it is only a start. It does not count as thorough reading. If you have only read the assigned reading all the way through only once, indicate this on your log with an *O*.

- The minimum assignment for each class is that you *read thoroughly*. This means reading the entire text, underlining, taking notes in the margins, pondering things, asking questions, and rereading certain passages. If you have thoroughly read the assigned reading before class, indicate this on your log with an *R*.

If students keep accurate and honest records, the log turns into a snapshot of their reading practice over time. Of course, even though I ask them to sign their initials, students can obviously put down on the chart whatever they want, whether they have actually read well or not. But I intend for the chart not to tell me how well students read as much as to prompt students to think about that on an ongoing basis.

### *Having Students Self-Assess their Reading Practices*

Having students periodically write self-assessments of how they read invites them to think about it in a more sustained way. In one course, I give students the following instructions at the middle and the end of the term. I ask them to put time into thoughtfully and thoroughly writing the self-assessment, carefully thinking about their performance and giving specific examples to support their claims.

The minimum required for reading in this course is thorough reading, which means reading the entire text, taking notes, pondering things, asking questions, and rereading certain passages. With this in mind, rate the quality of your reading to date on a scale of 1-5:

1	2	3	4	5
Poor	Below Average	Average	Above Average	Excellent

Explain your rating in writing.



Of course, students can say whatever they like in their self-assessments. Notably, few students rate themselves as “poor” or “below average.” But the purpose of this exercise is not to determine how well students have read so much as to get them to think about that in a thorough and concrete way.

Some examples will show how this works. One student wrote:

For this course, I have thoroughly read everything. Each of my texts [has] been read at least once, and many parts of them more than once. If you were to look over my texts, you would see many markings, questions, and observations off to the side. When I do not understand a text or part of the texts, I reread it several times to try to get some ideas about what it could possibly mean.

This response shows that the student knows what the practices for active reading are and understands how active reading connects to deeper understanding. Another student wrote:

Whenever assigned a reading I make sure that I thoroughly read through it at least twice and take notes as I go along. Another thing I do is I try to read from different perspectives each time. I would say my reading isn't Excellent due to the one time I read and gave myself an *O* [“once through” on the log]. This was because I was feeling ill that week and was sleeping so much that I only read through the text once and took minimal notes.

This student's comments on succeeding and on not succeeding both contribute to her understanding of active reading. Also notable is the self-awareness evident in the connection she makes between not feeling well and not reading well. One more student wrote:

I think that this class, so far, has taught me how to really engage myself with what I read. I have not been, in the past, an avid reader, but after this class, I have learned that being an avid reader doesn't necessarily mean that I read a lot, but rather tha[t] I read well. [. . .] I think that by becoming an engaged reader, I will become an overall better person because I will be more aware of people and things around me.

This self-assessment casts active reading in a narrative of

leaning and connects growing as a reader to growing as a person. The student explains that she used to read in one way but now reads in another. She also suggests (and I tend to agree) that the practice of active reading will likely help her become generally more aware. When students assess in writing their own reading practice, they reinforce what I teach. They describe the practice in their own words and in terms of what they have or have not done. Just as importantly, they consider for themselves what practical differences they have experienced between reading actively and not reading actively. Their own experience provides the evidence.

### *Using Multiple Practices to Promote Active Reading*

Individually, any of these practices may impact how students read. But I find an integrated approach more effective, combining multiple practices in order to weave attention to the act of reading into the fabric of the course. If I tell my students about active reading but do not hold them accountable or give them enough time to practice it, few students will follow through. But if I promote active reading in more than one way and on more than one occasion, more students will start to read more actively.

### **How Students Respond**

How do students respond to active reading? Do they take to it? Does it make a difference? In my experience students do appreciate the focus on active reading and it does make a difference, eventually if not initially. When I encourage and require active reading, I find class discussions and student writing more engaging and meaningful. Do students agree? When I asked students in one class to write about this, all of those who responded affirmed that the approach to reading taught in the course had helped them. Most of them also indicated that they would take something of the practice with them for the future. One or two confessed that, even though active reading had helped them, they would prefer not to



practice it because it was more work than the way they had read before.

One student shared that she learned to “not just follow through the motions of reading, but engage myself in the text.” Another student offered, “If there is anything that I learned as result of being in this class, [it is] to slow down and take my time when I read.” This student went on to explain, “In the beginning, I was a bona fide skimmer who gladly accepted the basic and general idea of the text that I was reading but after being introduced to the various ways of approaching a text, I refuse to be satisfied with one answer or idea to the text.” Yet another explained how becoming an active reader helped her become an active learner:

In the past I have just read texts for classes as quickly as possible just to get through it. My thought process in the past has been if I get it, good, and if I don't, I guess the teacher will tell me tomorrow what it means. Reading actively really helped me to learn to look for meaning on my own and not just rely on the answers being given to me.

Another student described her experience with a particularly challenging text. “At an earlier time in my life,” she wrote, “I would have read this text once through, been very confused, set it aside, and waited to learn almost its complete meaning from the teacher who assigned it. But after learning this new *active* approach to reading, I was able to pull meaning from certain confusing lines on my own...” The same student continued:

Normally this [referring to a particular passage] would have befuddled me completely, and if a teacher did not hit on these lines specifically in class, I would have refrained from asking questions and remained befuddled. But since I took the active approach to reading this passage, I looked up [some contextual information], reread the passage to gain a personal understanding of what I thought the author was trying to say...and noted the passage on my hard copy to ask questions about it in class...

She concluded that “the approach to reading for this class has

been very beneficial for my understanding and growth as a reader.” Finally, another student described an incident where she experienced the contrast between reading actively and not reading actively. She confessed that on her first reading of one text she “didn't really savor [it] enough to get anything deep out of it.” But then:

The morning before class, I reread the entire story and I was so surprised by all of the things that I found meaningful. When my reading group went over the story together, each of us had passionate insight to add and as we kept digging in to the story, we began to question life, politics, and our society as a whole. I would never have gained all of this from one quick read-through. I am grateful for the experience to dig deeper into this story.

Some of these responses read like testimonies and, perhaps, even like testimonials. I present these students' words not to prove but to illustrate the worth of teaching active reading. While some of these students may just be telling me what they think I want to hear, others genuinely find active reading to have profound implications for school and life. Still others find at least it worthwhile and enabling. When they do not understand a text or when they sense there is more to it than they get, rather than staying “befuddled” (as the one student put it), they know how to slow down and take another go at it.

### “What Students Need Most...”

Linkon calls for more than just telling and showing students how to read critically. “What students need most is to practice,” she writes. “They need to practice the small steps in the process, the crucial analytical turns and habits that scholars use seemingly instinctively. This requires us to break the process down into smaller, incremental steps” (271). I propose that the same principle applies to active reading. If we leave up to chance how students read, then some will learn to read actively, while others will not. But if we tell students how, show them, give them practice, hold them accountable,



and ask them to reflect on the difference it makes, then we will help more students develop a foundational skill for learning, thinking, writing, and otherwise participating in the intellectual culture of higher education and beyond.

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