

Cornell Notes as Book Report

A note for teachers

This project was born of a desire to try a different approach to a book report with high school juniors.

- I wanted to differentiate the task of a book report into something that wouldn't overwhelm struggling readers but would still allow stronger readers to challenge themselves.
- I wanted to prevent students from procrastinating and plagiarizing.
- I wanted to see what students thought about as they read.

This project succeeded beyond my expectations in all of those areas.

One gauge of success: I had a greater percentage than usual of students who completed the assignment on time. Even better, more students than usual handed this assignment in late. This means they didn't give up when they missed the deadline; they kept going until the assignment was finished. Altogether, I had far fewer zeroes than usual. Students were confident that they could handle this assignment.

The assignment sheet (next page) outlines the requirements of the assignment and provides models for students who haven't written Cornell Notes before. Many of the questions listed at the bottom come from a forum at ProTeacher.com. Those who posted them acknowledged that they had come from a variety of other sources. The questions are not original with me.

The Cornell Notes project took about 3 weeks. After students selected books, I explained the task and its deadline. We took a few minutes to do the math: how many pages of reading per day for your book? How many Notes per day? I gave students a blank calendar, and they wrote down a target of pages and Notes for each day. ("By next Tuesday I should be on page 79. I should have 7 Notes written.")

To keep it interesting, I offered extra credit. Each day during the three weeks, I would draw 3 names at random. If those students could show me that they were on target and had written the agreed-upon number of Notes for that day, they received extra credit points, enough to make it worth their while. That way I could also be sure that students were reminded of the assignment every day.

On the day the Notes were due, I did something unexpected: I handed out markers and asked students to draw a box around their 5 best summary/response passages. I announced that those were the ones I would read and grade. I would still check that the Notes were complete, but I would only grade the 5 the students marked. In doing this, I asked students to think critically about their writing.

Overall the quality of work I received was slightly higher than usual. I never caught myself wondering whether a passage was plagiarized, and I enjoyed seeing how students respond to their reading. I was able to grade them quickly – about 5 minutes apiece – and still feel I was reading accurately. I am very happy with this reading/writing task, and I'm planning to use it again next semester.

Cornell Notes and Reading

Directions: As you read your book, pause and write at least 20 Cornell notes. Put a summary in the left column and a substantive response in the right. The notes need to be word processed or legibly written in blue or black ink. They can be on notebook paper as long as everything is stapled together. Here is an example:

What I've read	How I respond
Chapter 4: There's a big party. Everyone wants to meet Mr. Darcy because he's rich, but he refuses to dance with any of the young women, and he is rude to most of the men. His friend tells him he should dance with Elizabeth, but he says she's not pretty enough. He doesn't know that Elizabeth can hear him when he says this.	Chapter 4: Mr. Darcy may be rich, but his manners are poor. He is acting like a snob. I like the way Elizabeth won't let his attitude bother her.
Chapter 5: Charlotte Lucas and Elizabeth discuss the party the next day. Charlotte says that Jane should encourage Mr. Bingley to pay attention to her, but Elizabeth says it's too soon. Charlotte says it's best not to know too much about someone before you marry them. Elizabeth is surprised.	Chapter 5: Charlotte and Elizabeth are best friends, but they don't think about things the same way. I wonder if Charlotte is saying things like that because she isn't married. Would she marry someone she doesn't know very well, just to have a husband?

Use these questions to help you with your Cornell Notes:

- I wonder why ...
- I don't see how ...
- I think...
- I can't believe ...
- Why did ...?
- This makes me feel ...
- This reminds me of ...
- The genre of this book is ____ because ...
- I agreed/diagreed with the author about ...
- If I were the author I would have changed the part of the story when ...
- My feelings about (character, book) changed when ...
- I am like or different from the character ...
- Some important details I noticed were _____. They were important because ...
- One thing that confused me was when ...
- I can imagine what ____ looked/sounded/felt/tasted like.
- The most important word/phrase/idea in this passage is ____ because ...
- It bothered me when ...
- I was surprised ...
- I can't really understand ...
- I expected it when ...
- I began to think of ...
- I think ____ will happen next.
- When I finished reading, I thought ...