

**A Study of the Reading Comprehension Skills of English Majors at Two Midwestern Universities,
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English professors often assume that students can read the novels and poetry assigned for their courses. However, like many of our colleagues, we have come to question that assumption. To gain some insight, we conducted a reading test from January to April 2015 to record what happens when 85 college English majors read a literary text completely on their own, with no help from instructors or guidance from other students.

In general terms, our study was designed to test how college students create meaning while they read. For our reading sample, we chose the first seven paragraphs of Charles Dickens' 1853 masterpiece, *Bleak House*. The first paragraph of the reading sample is stated below.

LONDON. Michaelmas term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn Hill. Smoke lowering down from chimney-pots, making a soft black drizzle with flakes of soot in it as big as full-grown snowflakes—gone into mourning, one might imagine, for the death of the sun. Dogs, undistinguishable in mire. Horses, scarcely better; splashed to their very blinkers. Foot passengers, jostling one another's umbrellas, in a general infection of ill-temper, and losing their foot-hold at street-corners, where tens of thousands of other foot passengers have been slipping and sliding since the day broke (if this day ever broke), adding new deposits to the crust upon crust of mud, sticking at those points tenaciously to the pavement, and accumulating at compound interest.

Students read each sentence out loud and then interpreted the meaning in their own words. A principal concern for us was to test whether the subjects had reached a level of "proficient-prose literacy," which is defined by the U. S. Department of Education as the capability of "reading lengthy, complex, abstract prose texts as well as synthesizing information and making complex inferences". Literary prose can be difficult to comprehend because it requires the ability to interpret unfamiliar diction and figures of speech. Dickens' novel worked well as an example of literary prose because his writing contains frequent complex sentences and language that often moves from the literal to the figurative. Our assumption was that English majors, who study similar types of literature and are trained in poetic language, should be able to look up unfamiliar references and understand most of the literal meaning from this novel's first paragraphs.

Because we wanted to see how well students could read a complex text on their own, we told the facilitators not to help the subjects interpret the text. Instead, facilitators were there to record how subjects were understanding the material and to stop them every few sentences to request an interpretation. The taped recordings show that facilitators followed this training and politely refused any request for help from subjects. Facilitators also provided subjects with access to online resources and dictionaries and told them that they could also use their own cell phones as a resource. If subjects did go to Google or an outside website for help, the facilitator recorded that fact. At the end of each reading study, the facilitator asked each subject a brief series of questions on what the subject thought would happen next and their comfort level in reading the rest of the novel. These questions were designed to see how well our subjects understood the passage and how they perceived their own success with reading the text. All responded that they believed that they could read the rest of *Bleak House* with no problem.

we placed the 85 subjects from both universities into three categories of readers: problematic, competent, and proficient. A summary of our major conclusions gives some basic data for our ensuing discussion:

- 58 percent (49 of 85 subjects) understood so little of the introduction to *Bleak House* that they would not be able to read the novel on their own. However, these same subjects (defined in the study as problematic readers) also believed they would have no problem reading the rest of the 900-page novel.
- Problematic readers often described their reading process as skimming and/or relying on SparkNotes.
- 38 percent (or 32 of the 85 subjects) could understand more vocabulary and figures of speech than the problematic readers. These competent readers, however, could interpret only about half of the literal prose in the passage.
- Only 5 percent (4 of the 85 subjects) had a detailed, literal understanding of the first paragraphs of *Bleak House*.

Overall, we found that problematic readers had no successful reading tactics to help them understand *Bleak House*, so they became quickly lost and floundered throughout the reading test. Competent readers were not so lost because they came to the reading test with a larger vocabulary and could thereby understand more of Dickens' language. They were, however, as likely as the problematic readers to avoid translating more difficult language or extended figures of speech. The only active readers were in the proficient group (five percent of the test subjects). These readers immediately recognized when they were lost and were able to turn back and use successful tactics to understand the meaning of each clause and phrase in an extended sentence.

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