The Prepared Practitioner

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Getting Students to Read

In the December 2007 edition of the National Education Association's *Advocate Online*, Linda Nilson, director of Clemson University's Office of Teaching Effectiveness and Innovation, discusses ways teachers can encourage students to complete—and understand—assigned class readings.

You are probably already familiar with some strategies to help students learn how to learn from texts. Strategies include modeling the relevant skills, leading in-class exercises for students to practice (and receive feedback on how they are doing), and then providing independent practice for students to complete on their own.

I recently spoke with Devon Day, a nationally board-certified reading specialist who specializes in helping students with low-reading abilities. Day echoes the importance of teaching students prereading strategies (not to mention strategies to increase comprehension during and after reading). Students must be taught how to identify the main ideas in a passage, she says. Day stresses skills teachers take for granted that students often lack—everything from recognizing the importance of headings or the first and last sentences in a paragraph, to being able to read functional text, such as a phone book.

Day points out how the tone and style of writing in sources such as textbooks may be more foreign to students than teachers recognize; textbook authors may come from very different backgrounds than the students reading their books. Day also accents the importance of teaching students about key vocabulary words before they read an assignment, which makes sense for all students, but particularly for students still learning academic English. This is a prime example of how strategies designed to help English language learners benefit all students.

An example Nilson mentions is having the teacher lead an in-class exercise in which both teacher and student underline (or highlight) key parts of a photocopied text—no more than 10%—then justify their choices. Students can then compare what they mark with what the teacher marks. The teacher may additionally get a better sense of how students are (mis)understanding an assignment, too.

Students need to be held accountable for completing reading assignments. Possibilities include written homework (e.g., reading summaries, responses to teacher questions, responses to questions or problems in the book, concept maps), a short in-class quiz, in-class written exercises, and free writing about an assignment's main topic.

Day is also a strong supporter of these sorts of activities because they provide varying ways for teachers to check for students' understanding. She notes how students from some cultural backgrounds have been taught by their families to avoid communicating with their teachers out of respect—even when completely lost. Along the same lines, teachers need to understand that students who communicate with someone other than the teacher are not necessarily being disrespectful. Sometimes students are checking for understanding with someone who they feel is "safe." Cooperative learning and other activities that encourage students to talk about readings in their own words can be quite helpful, perhaps even essential. This is especially true, Day says, when student absence rates are high and the chance of students making up missed work is low. Thus, the activities can benefit multiple students—those who are retelling readings in their own words, those using the time to check their own understandings, and those learning about ideas from parts of the class in which they were absent.

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One way to encourage students to take these exercises seriously is to allow their use during tests. Nilson suggests doing this with what she calls a "mind dump," where students spend 5–10 minutes writing everything they remember from an assigned reading at the beginning of class; the teacher collects the work and then returns it to students when they take their next test.

As the teacher, you need to respond to students with very low-reading abilities, help all students learn how to learn from text, structure class to encourage student reading, and hold students accountable for assignments. Nilson and Day believe students will be more willing and able to do assigned readings than they would otherwise be if teachers spend time helping them learn to understand text and gently hold them accountable for trying to understand assigned readings. The payback comes later when you spend a little less time lecturing and a little more time directly helping students learn.

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Reference

Nilson, L.B. 2007. Why students skip the readings. *Advocate Online* (Dec.). *www2.nea.org/he/advo-new/front.html*