

Chapter 9, Helping Difficult Students Read Difficult Texts, in the book, *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, by John C. Bean. Second edition. Published by Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Imprint—[www.josseybass.com](http://www.josseybass.com).

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Whenever teachers discuss problems with student writing or critical thinking, they inevitably turn also to problems of student reading. Just as speaking and listening skills are intertwined, so too are writing and reading skills. Many of today's students are inexperienced readers, overwhelmed by the density of their college textbooks and baffled by the strangeness and complexity of primary sources and by their unfamiliarity with academic discourse. Armed with a yellow highlighter but with no apparent strategy for using it and hampered by lack of knowledge of how skilled readers actually go about reading, our students often feel overwhelmed by college reading assignments. The aim of this chapter is to suggest ways that we can help students become stronger readers, empowered by the strategies that we ourselves use when we encounter difficult texts.

### **Causes of Students' Reading Difficulties**

Before we can help students improve their reading skills, we need to look more closely at the causes of their reading difficulties. Our students have, of course, learned to read in the sense of achieving basic literacy. Except for an occasional student with a reading disability, college students do not need to be taught reading in this ordinary sense. Rather, they need to be taught to read powerfully. In the words of a sociology professor collaborating with a reading theorist (*Roberts and Roberts, 2008*), students need to become "deep readers," who focus on meaning, as opposed to "surface readers," who focus on facts and information. Drawing on cognitive research in reading, Judith and Keith Roberts (2008) explain that deep reading is processed in "'semantic memory' (rooted in meaning) as opposed to 'episodic memory' (tied to a specific joke, gesture, episode, or mnemonic to aid recall) (p. 126). Deep readers, they claim, interact with texts, devoting psychological energy to the task:

A good reader forms visual images to represent the content being read, connects to emotions, recalls settings and events that are similar to those presented in the reading, predicts what will happen next, asks questions, and thinks about the use of language. One of the most important steps, however, is to connect the manuscript [they] are reading with what [they] already know and to attach the facts, ideas, concepts, or perspectives to that known material [p. 126].

The question we face as educators is how to teach and foster this kind of "deep reading." In this section I identify eleven contributing causes of students' reading difficulties.

#### ***1. A School Culture That Rewards Surface Reading***

*Roberts and Roberts* (2008) make a powerful case that our current school culture, which allows savvy students to get decent grades for minimal effort, cultivates surface reading. They argue that the prolific use of quizzes and other kinds of objective tests encourages "surface learning based in... short-term memorization for a day or two... rather than deep learning that is transformative of one's perspective and involves long-term comprehension" (p. 127). Moreover, they argue, many students don't value a course's "big ideas" because deep learning isn't needed for cumulating a high GPA. (They cite evidence that nearly half of college students spend less than ten hours per week on out-of-class study, including time for writing papers and studying for exams.) Students like multiple choice tests, the authors say, because most objective testing allows students "to skim material a few days before an examination looking for the kinds of facts, definitions, concepts, and other specific information that the particular instructor tends to stress in examinations" (p. 129). When students apply a cost/benefit analysis, they see, quite rationally, that deep reading "may be an unwise use of valuable time if there are no adverse consequences" (p. 129). In short, unless we as teachers evaluate student performance at the levels of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, "reading at that deeper level will not occur" (p. 129). (For an in-depth critique of school cultures that promote surface learning, see *Weimer*, 2002.)

## ***2. Students' Resistance to the Time-on-Task Required for Deep Reading***

Roberts and Roberts rightly identify students' desire to avoid the deep reading process, which involves substantial time-on-task. When experts read difficult texts, they read slowly and reread often. They struggle with the text to make it comprehensible. They hold confusing passages in mental suspension, having faith that later parts of the text may clarify earlier parts. They "nutshell" passages as they proceed, often writing gist statements in the margins. They read a difficult text a second and a third time, considering first readings as approximations or rough drafts. They interact with the text by asking questions, expressing disagreements, linking the text with other readings or with personal experience.

But resistance to deep reading may involve more than an unwillingness to spend the time. Students may actually misunderstand the reading process. They may believe that experts are speed readers who don't need to struggle. Therefore students assume that their own reading difficulties must stem from their lack of expertise, which makes the text "too hard for them." Consequently, they don't allot the study time needed to read a text deeply.

## ***3. Teachers' Willingness to Lecture over Reading Material***

Once students believe that a text is too hard for them, they assume that it is the teacher's job to explain the text to them. Since teachers regularly do so, the students' reading difficulty initiates a vicious circle: Teachers, frustrated by their students' poor reading comprehension, decide to lecture over the assigned texts ("I have to lecture on this material because students are such poor readers"). Meanwhile, teachers' lectures deprive 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").

#### ***4. Failure to Adjust Reading Strategies for Different Purposes***

Inexperienced readers are also unaware of how a skilled reader's reading process will vary extensively depending on the reader's purpose. *Sternberg* (1987) argues that college students—facing enormous amounts of reading— must learn to distinguish among different reading purposes and adjust their reading speed accordingly. Some reading tasks require only skimming for gist, while others require the closest scrutiny of detail. Sternberg gave people a reading comprehension test consisting of four passages; each of which was to be read for a different purpose—one for gist, one for main ideas, one for detail, and one for inference and application. He discovered that good readers varied their reading speed appropriately, spending the most time with passages they were to read for detail, inference, and application. Poor readers, in contrast, read all four passages at the same speed. As *Sternberg* puts it, poor readers "do not discriminate in their reading time as a function of reading purpose" (p. 186). The lesson here is that we need to help students learn when to read fast and when to read slowly. Not every text requires deep reading.

#### ***5. Difficulty in Adjusting Reading Strategies to Different Genres***

Besides adjusting reading strategy to purpose, students need to learn to adjust reading strategy to genre. Students tend to read all texts as if they were textbooks—linearly from first to last page—looking for facts and information that can be highlighted with a yellow marker. Their tendency to get either lost or bored results partly from their unfamiliarity with the text's genre and the function of that genre within a discourse system. Learning the rhetorical function of different genres takes considerable practice as well as knowledge of a discipline's ways of conducting inquiry and making arguments. Inexperienced readers do not understand, for example, that the author of a peer-reviewed scholarly article joins a conversation of other scholars and tries to stake out a position that offers something new. At a more specific level, they don't understand that an empirical research study in the social or physical sciences requires a different reading strategy from that of a theoretical/interpretive article in the humanities. These genre problems are compounded further when students are assigned challenging primary texts from the Great Books tradition (reading Plato or Darwin, Nietzsche or Sartre, or an archived historical document) or asked to write research papers drawing on contemporary popular culture genres such as op-ed pieces, newspaper articles, trade journals, blogs, or websites.

#### ***6. Difficulty in Perceiving the Structure of an Argument as They Read***

Unlike experts, inexperienced readers are less apt to chunk complex material into discrete parts with describable functions. They do not say to themselves, for example, "This part is giving evidence for a new reason," "This part maps out an upcoming section," or "This part summarizes an opposing view." Their often indiscriminate, almost random use of the yellow highlighter suggests that they are not representing the text in their minds as a hierarchical structure. To use a metaphor popular among composition instructors, these

students are taking an ant's-eye view of the text—crawling through it word by word—rather than a bird's-eye view, seeing the overall structure by attending to mapping statements, section headings, paragraph topic sentences, and so forth.

### ***7. Difficulty in Reconstructing the Text's Original Rhetorical Context***

Inexperienced readers often do not see what conversation a text belongs to—what exigency sparked the piece of writing, what question the writer was pondering, what points of view the writer was pushing against, what audience the writer was imagining, what change the writer hoped to bring about in the audience's beliefs or actions—why, in short, the writer put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard. They have difficulty perceiving a real author writing for a real reason out of a real historical moment. Also, inexperienced readers often fail to appreciate the political biases of different magazines and newspapers or the theoretical biases of different academic journals and presses. These problems are closely related to the following one.

### ***8. Difficulty Seeing Themselves in Conversation with the Author***

Possibly because they regard texts as sources of inert information rather than as arguments intended to change their view of something, inexperienced readers often do not interact with the texts they read. They don't ask how they, as readers in a particular moment in time, are similar to or different from the author's intended audience. They don't realize that texts have designs upon them and that they need to decide, through their own critical thinking, whether to succumb to or resist the text's power.

### ***9. Difficulty in Assimilating the Unfamiliar***

Developmental psychologists have long noted the "cognitive egocentrism" of new college students who have trouble walking in the shoes of persons with unfamiliar views and values (*Kurfiss*, 1988; *Flavell*, 1963). No matter what the author really means, students translate those meanings into ideas that they are comfortable with. Thus, to many of our students, a philosophic Idealist is someone with impractical ideas, whereas a Realist is praiseworthy for being levelheaded. The more unfamiliar or more threatening a new idea is, the more students transform it into something from their own psychological neighborhoods. The insight of cognitive psychology here is that these problems are related neither to stupidity nor to intellectual laziness. To use language from brain research, learners must build new concepts upon neural structures already in their brains, and sometimes older structures need to be dismantled before new ones can be built (*Zull*, 2002).

### ***10. Lack of the "Cultural Literacy" Assumed by the Text's Author***

In the jargon of reading theorists, students do not have access to the cultural codes of the text—background information, allusions, common knowledge that the author assumed that the reading audience would know. Knowledge of cultural codes is often essential to making meaning of the text (See *Willingham*, 2009, pp. 25-52, for a review of cognitive

research on reading comprehension and background knowledge.) So significant is this cause that E. D. Hirsch has tried to create a national movement promoting "cultural literacy," lack of which he claims is a prime source of students' reading difficulties in college (*Hirsch, 2006; Hirsch, 1988; Hirsch, Kett, and Trefil, 1987*).

### ***11. Difficulties with Vocabulary and Syntax***

Inadequate vocabulary hampers the reading comprehension of many students. Using a dictionary helps considerably, but often students do not appreciate how context affects word meanings, nor do they have a good ear for irony or humor. Moreover, the texts they read often contain technical terms, terms used in unusual ways, terms requiring extensive contextual knowledge, or terms that have undergone meaning changes over time. Additionally, students have difficulty tracking complex sentence structures. Although students may be skilled enough reading syntactically simple texts, they often have trouble with the sentence structure of primary sources or scholarly articles. When they are asked to read a complex sentence aloud, their errors in inflection reveal their difficulty in chunking grammatical units; they have trouble isolating main clauses, distinguishing them from attached and embedded subordinate clauses and phrases.