



How to Get Students to Read What's Assigned

SPECIAL REPORT

MAGNA PUBLICATIONS



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Enhancing Students' Readiness to Learn

Jennifer L. Romack, PhD

Over the years, I have probably said, "Have you done your reading?" more times than I care to count. But as the years passed, it became apparent that more and more students weren't doing their assigned reading and were not ready for class.

Several semesters ago, out of sheer frustration, I stopped talking during one of my lectures. I turned up the lights, walked to the chalkboard, and wrote in quite large letters, "Are you ready for class today?" I underlined the word "ready," faced the class, and let about five seconds of silence simmer uncomfortably. Finally, I asked the students to respond honestly and anonymously to my question on a sheet of paper.

I collected the responses and quickly tallied the results. Seventy-five percent of the class responded "no." Only a few responded "yes." Most interesting were the students who responded, "I think so." I asked with disbelief, "How can you not know whether or not you are ready for class?" To this day, I have not forgotten how they answered:

"Well I read the chapter a few days ago, but I don't really remember anything."

"Right before class I studied all of the bold text in the chapters."

"I looked over the graphs because they're

usually in your PowerPoint."

I had two pedagogical revelations that day. First, I never communicated to my students what it meant to be ready for class. And second, I never made them accountable for being ready. I decided to remedy both omissions.

I began by declaring explicitly in my syllabus what I expected of my students. Here's what my syllabus now says: "Learning is not a spectator sport. Fundamentally, the responsibility to learn is yours and yours alone. For learning to happen in any course, you must take an active role in the process. For our class, you are expected to come to class 'prepared' and 'ready to learn,' which requires you 'to read' and 'to study' the assigned reading 'before' you come to class. Being prepared for class enables you to construct a knowledge base on which subsequent learning rests.

"During our class, we don't 'cover' content, which means I talk less to get you to talk about what you are learning. You will be engaging in Learning Tasks (out of class and in class) that require you to (a) use a variety of reasoning strategies to address issues and problems, and (b) write reflectively about what you are learning, how it relates to what you already know about the content, and how it relates to

your life. Your performance on these tasks will be evaluated using a Learning Task Rubric, with a minus indicating unsatisfactory performance (55 percent), a check indicating work that satisfactorily meets expectations (75 percent), and a plus indicating strongly engaged, high-quality performance (100 percent). Learning Tasks cannot be made up and late Learning Tasks are not accepted.”

What I teach hasn’t changed much over the years. But when I introduced the readiness concept into my course, what changed was “why” and “how” I teach.

When preparing for class, I focus on why and how the content (i.e., the process) will be delivered to the students. Learning tasks are designed with two main goals in mind: students attaining learning outcomes and getting students motivated about learning. Being ready for a learning-centered class takes more work, for students and for the instructor. Those students who come prepared and actively engage in class need to be rewarded

for their learning, and those who don’t need to be held accountable. Assessment practices, therefore, must align to an instructor’s explicit expectations.

I have developed the scoring rubric chart to evaluate student performance on learning tasks. To qualify for a +, a student’s work must meet four of the six criteria. Since implementing a readiness component into my course, I have discovered that the weighting of this component affects the quality of student preparedness and motivation. The first semester I weighted it at 15 percent.

Based on student feedback collected over numerous semesters, I have gradually increased the weighting so that it now counts for 25 percent of the course grade, and I’m seriously considering increasing it to 30 percent.

This readiness concept is not discipline specific. Therefore, I welcome you to either use the concept as it currently exists or to revise it and refine it according to your needs.

Score	Criteria and Standards
+	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpretation of content is completely accurate. • Identifies and describes precise and explicit supporting evidence (facts). • Strongly connects new content to previous learning (elaboration). • Strongly integrates new material to a personal life experience. • Draws an accurate conclusion based upon interpretations, connection, and integration. • Provides a strong reason(s) for the conclusion.
✓	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpretation of content is somewhat accurate. • Identifies supporting evidence; description is somewhat accurate or clear. • Satisfactorily connects new content to previous learning. • Superficially integrates new material to a personal life experience. • Draws a somewhat accurate conclusion based upon interpretations, connection, and integration. • Provides an adequate reason(s) for the conclusion.
-	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interpretation of content is inaccurate; facts are misleading. • Supporting evidence is missing, incorrect, or irrelevant. • Fails to elaborate or elaboration is extremely weak. • Fails to integrate or integration to a life experience is vague. • Conclusion drawn or reasons supporting it are inadequate or missing.

Getting Students to Read

Maryellen Weimer, PhD

Getting students to read their textbooks is like pulling hen's teeth! Even syllabus language just short of death threats, firmly stated admonitions regularly delivered in class, and the unannounced quiz slapped on desks when nobody answers questions about the reading don't necessarily change behaviors or attitudes. Rather, students remain committed to seeing to get by without doing the reading, or only doing it very superficially, or only doing it just prior to exam dates.

Most of us know the problem is bad but most of us don't have the courage Jay R. Howard did. He started and continued surveying despite grim results. Only 40 percent of his students reported that they usually or always did the reading. Grades and reading were linked. Of the students who got C's, D's and F's, only about 31 percent of them reported that they usually or always doing the reading as compared with 54 percent of students who got A's and B's. Even so, I think most of us would cringe if we found out that 40 percent of our best students were not regularly reading the assigned material.

I admire Howard for facing the truth and trying to do something about it. He developed a quiz mechanism—it's described in the article referenced below—and he reports data showing that it changed students reading behavior dramatically.

“Getting students to read their textbooks is like pulling hen's teeth!”

What I'm seeing more clearly now is that we can't just bemoan the fact that students don't read. Furthermore, we don't really get anywhere by assigning blame. And finally, doing what we've been doing, mostly threatening and quizzing, isn't solving the problem. The better solution involves designing the course so that students can't do well without reading. The better solution involves assignments that require students to do more than just passively

read. The assignments must be structured so that students engage and respond to the reading.

A number of faculty have already arrived at this

conclusion and like Yamane (reference below), they have written about the effective ways they are getting students to do the reading.

P.S. As I regularly remind you, don't worry that these articles are written by faculty who teach sociology. If you assign textbook reading, these assignments can be used or adapted to your discipline and style. One of my favorite things about teaching is that we can learn much from and with each other.

References: Howard, J. R. (2004). Just in time teaching in sociology or how I convinced my students to actually read the assignment. *Teaching Sociology*, 32, 385-90.

Yamane, D. (2006) Course preparation assignments: A strategy for creating discussion-based courses. *Teaching Sociology*, 36, 236-248

What Textbook Reading Teaches Students

Tracey E. Ryan, PhD

// “Do we really need to buy the textbook? It’s so expensive!”

“Can’t you just summarize it for us?”

“Would you just tell us what parts will be on the exam?”

“It was so long and so boring. I couldn’t get through it!”

Quotes like these indicate that many of our students want us to help them with the hard work of extracting difficult material and new vocabulary from their textbooks. They may use the term “boring,” but what they really mean is difficult and time consuming. In turn, we sometimes fall into the trap of summarizing the textbook in our lectures and our PowerPoint presentations.

Our students do appreciate a good textbook summary and may even reward us with positive feedback when we highlight text



material with flashy, multimedia presentations. In my experience teaching psychology at the university and community college level, I have been flattered by student praise for “making the concepts seem easy.” Recently, however, I am finding myself troubled by the trend of making it seem easy for students. I have been reminding myself and my students that there are important reasons why they should do the hard work of reading the textbook on their own. I decided that the list I’ve created might be useful to others who have students like mine— students who would rather have me read the text and then tell them what they need to know.

1. Many of our students are poor readers.

They often don’t know how to extract key information from the textbook, even when the textbook is “user friendly” and written at a lower reading level than a standard college text. I discovered this by asking my novice students to read out loud in class. If you’ve never done this, I recommend that you try it. Many of my students stumble with the vocabulary and sentence structure. When we require them to read the textbook in advance, we give them the opportunity to improve their reading skills and build vocabulary.

2. Most of our novice students know little about the structure of their textbook, how the chapters are organized, and how each

section is painstakingly validated with current research. Most don't preview and scan the text before reading, as expert readers usually do. We help students understand and appreciate how professional and technical material is formally presented when we require that they read the course text. This will better prepare them for what they will be asked to do later in most professions.

3. Textbooks today are filled with captivating pictures, helpful pedagogy, and interesting, real-life case studies and examples. This is in contrast to many of the textbooks that we read as undergraduates. Textbooks today provide students with many different opportunities for learning, but only if they are read.

4. From careful reading of the text students can come to see the value of having a second professor in the course, the author of their textbook. This second professor repeats what he or she said exactly, as many times as the student needs to read it. And students often get to know the author when the text is written in a personal tone with

real-life examples presented from the author's personal or professional experience.

5. When students grapple with the text before class what happens during class makes much more sense. Such prior preparation results in students having a deeper understanding of key concepts and makes it easier for them to integrate those concepts into their own lives.

6. They learn the difference between informed and uninformed discussion. When students have read the material before class, discussions in class are richer and more fun, not just for the teacher but for the students as well.

7. Coming to class prepared and with some background knowledge transforms students from passive to active learners. They stop doing stenography and start doing the kind of critical thinking that promotes learning.

For these reasons, it is worth the effort it takes to get students to come to class having done the reading!

Reading Textbooks: The College Plague

Dimple J. Martin, PhD

First, let's acknowledge this universal epidemic. College students despise reading textbooks and e-books that cover content with academic information. Fortunately, I discovered a cure for the reading plague that only requires five teaspoons of ingestion: 1) survey 2) question 3) read 4) retrieve and 5) review. In

my class, I have found the SQ3R Method to be a step-by-step approach to learning and studying from textbooks. Although it took my students time and practice to master this method, it has been valuable in regards to preparing students for more content-driven class discussions, increased retention and understanding

of information, strategic study skills, and test preparation.

At the beginning of each semester, I introduce to my students the SQ3R Method—it was originally devised to read college textbooks in a systematic approach. Students need to understand that this approach is completely different from casual reading; instead, it is a strategy for productive academic reading. In my attempt to get students to be more intentional and actively engaged, I began to embed the SQ3R Method into my instruction.

SQ3R Method

The SQ3R Method is a reading comprehension and study skills method named for its five steps: survey, question, read, retrieve and review. This method was introduced by Francis R. Robinson in 1946. In class, students receive several copies of a graphic organizer to use when reading, along with an explanation of each step. The template explains:

1. Survey: Record important titles, subtitles, captions, subheadings, graphics, illustrations, highlighted text and vocabulary words from the chapter (students are not reading at this point.)

2. Question: Turn each heading into a question before you start to read.

3. Read: Read to find the answers to the questions and write the answers below.

4. Recite: In your own words, write what you have just read. Write summary sentences that paraphrase the key ideas and main points.

5. Review: Write the important details from the chapter. Create a short outline, or concepts map of what you read, or what you need to remember to do well on the test.

In completing each step, I found that many students benefited from step 4 (Recite). When students were given an opportunity to write in

their own words about a key idea(s), they were able to fully understand core concepts about different theories and principles. This led to expert understanding that was preceded by enriched classroom discourse.

SQ3R Student Survey

At the end of each semester, I like to get feedback from my students. I do this because their feedback helps me to improve the quality of my instruction. In all that I do, student test data and feedback guides my instructional decision making. The fall 2019 student survey responses revealed:

- Does the SQ3R Strategy hold you accountable to read your textbook/ebook?

- 94%- Yes 6%- No

- Does the SQ3R Strategy help you to retain information from the textbook/ebook?

- 79%- Yes 21%- No

- Does the SQ3R Strategy help you to “chunk information for understanding what is being read?

- 94%- Yes 6%- No

- Does the SQ3R Strategy help you to prepare for taking a test?

- 86%- Yes 14%- No

- Have you transferred the SQ3R Strategy to other courses that you are taking?

- 7%- Yes 93%- No

- Does the SQ3R Strategy contribute meaningful classroom discussion

- 100%- Yes 0%- No

From my students' feedback, I can conclude that the SQ3R Strategy has been effective in my classes. In order to generate its effectiveness, I had to guide my students through consistent rehearsals which required repetition.

This allowed information to convert from short-term memory to long-term memory.

However, to my chagrin, I was surprised that students did not transfer the use of the SQ3R Strategy to other classes. As I began seeking

for reasons why, students explained that the strategy “actually” required them to read and held them accountable for attending classes prepared. In other words, the students did not want to intentionally read with purpose.

In my future efforts to get students to understand the importance of the SQ3R Strategy beyond my class, I must change their

mindsets through sharing data outcomes regarding their grades and demonstrating how self-efficacy drives success. Overall, the SQ3R Strategy helped my students improve their comprehension, efficiency in reading, and study skills.

Reading Circles Get Students to Do the Reading

Jane Gee

In my course, the required reading is intensive and extensive. Students must read multiple texts that range across disciplines, genres, history, and culture. The goal of this interdisciplinary course is improvement of critical reading, writing, and thinking skills. My students, like many others, live complicated lives. Add to that the fact that many are not particularly good readers or people who like to read, and the result is students arriving in class not

20 to 30 percent of the students have done the reading. He writes, “Faculty face the stark and depressing challenge of facilitating learning when over 70% of the students will not have read the assigned readings.” When students don’t do the reading, they hear about the text, but they do not actually experience it or do anything that develops their reading skills.

Given these realities, I decided to revisit Literature Circles, first introduced in the

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having done the reading. When that happens, the teacher becomes the best student in the room. She talks about the text while students dutifully listen—or appear to listen.

The findings from the reading compliance research have remained consistent over the years. Hobson reports (in IDEA Paper No. 40, published by Kansas State University) that on any given day and for any given assignment,

mid-1990s by Harvey Daniels for grades 3 through 8 in Chicago and described as small, peer-led discussion groups whose members have chosen to read the same text. Basic educators have found them enormously successful. I wondered whether they might work in my undergraduate course. Since not all the reading in my course is literature, I decided to call them Reading Circles.

I told my students that the success of their Reading Circle depended on two things: everyone coming prepared by having read the assignment and everyone participating. In my humanities course, the four texts are traditionally chosen by the teacher, but wanting to be student-centered, I decided to let the students choose two of the texts. Annotated bibliographies were distributed early to help students make informed choices. I formed the groups based on their choice of text. In some cases, two groups needed to be formed, as I limited group size to six, given the roles I wanted students to fill in the groups:

- **Discussion director**, whose job was to keep the group on task, help the group understand the reading, ask good detail questions as well as general questions, listen intently to the group members and respond to ideas, and make sure everyone participates.

- **Summarizer**, who presents a brief, concise summary of the day's reading, places everything in chronological order, and is able to answer any clarifying questions.

- **Illustrator**, who uses details from the text to help group members better understand the reading and selects significant elements that make connections to course themes.

- **Literary luminary**, who selects quotes that are especially significant, descriptive, or controversial; makes an interesting or engaging plan to have group look at particular passages; and is able to explain the significance of passages.

- **Connector**, who makes strong detailed connections cross-textually, historically, and culturally to the notion of what it means to be human and engages other group members in

making similar connections.

- **Questioner**, who uses a mixture of various levels of questions to engage group members and engages the group with critical thinking of the issues and course themes.

I gave students the rubric I used when evaluating how well they filled their roles. When I joined a Reading Circle I did so as an observer and guide, not as a teacher or participant. Each circle made a 20-minute presentation of one significant aspect of their text in any way they chose. There have been dialogues, interviews, plays, speeches, and debates. The structure of the activity can be adapted to fit a variety of reading assignments.

After a semester of using this technique, overwhelmingly my students reported that the activity "greatly impacted" their learning. On average, with four sections students self-reported their reading compliance rate to be 38 percent in an ESL section and 55 percent in my three other sections. After the activity, students reported a rise to 66 percent in compliance in the ESL section and 85 percent on average in the other sections.

Reading Circles empower students by letting them choose what they read. The assigned roles give them a purpose to read. They gain self-confidence as they learn to be responsible for their learning. Their reading skills develop. They have experience presenting their ideas. And they discover the joy of working with others to understand textual material. For me, observing the students at work in these groups was immensely satisfying. My students were in class having done the reading.

How to Get Your Students to Read What's Assigned

Sara Jane Coffman

How often have these scenarios happened in your classroom?

Scenario 1: *You ask a question in class, but all you see are blank stares. It's a straightforward question about the reading and guess who hasn't done it?*

Scenario 2: *A student comes to your office complaining that he studied for the quiz but couldn't remember anything he read!*

Scenario 3: *Your students turn in essays based on the reading assignment, but their papers are extremely superficial. They may have read the material, but they didn't really understand it beyond the most obvious level.*

Unfortunately, these scenarios happen regularly in many college classrooms. The questions are: How do we get our students to read what's assigned? And how do we get them to read at more than just a superficial level?

To begin with, we need to determine why students haven't read the assignment. Reasons range from not buying the book to poor time-management skills to not knowing how to read a college textbook. Reading is a dying art. I'd like to share nine suggestions that get students doing the reading and, more importantly, show them how and why.

1. Spend at least one class period at the beginning of the course looking at the textbook with your students. Explain why you chose the book and show your excitement

about it. Walk them through the structure of the book, pointing out your favorite features. There may be a "To the student" section near the beginning with information on how to read the book. Key terms may be highlighted with advance organizers, structured overviews, or colored boxes in the margins. There may be mini quizzes throughout the chapters so students can test their understanding. Explain how all these features can help students read and learn the material. Are there interesting tidbits about the author you could share? Better yet, could you arrange a conference call with the author and have him or her talk about the book? Hearing the author being excited about the book has a great effect on students.

2. Encourage use of supplemental materials connected with the textbook.

There may be a study guide, online links, or an audio version of the book. Students have different learning styles, and their varying needs can be met by different information formats.

3. Explain the importance of new terminology. Vocabulary is used precisely in academic fields, and new terms are the building blocks for new concepts. Show your students how to make flash cards with the new term on the front, and the definition in their own words on the back. Rote memorization is one of the least effective ways to learn new

material; translating the textbook terms into one's own words is one of the best.

4. Teach your students to identify key ideas by writing notes in the margins, using sticky notes, and rewriting important concepts into a notebook. These activities make reading active rather than passive.

5. Prepare three to five questions for each reading assignment and have your students write answers before coming to class. Get students on board with this activity early in the course. Grading their worksheets can be time consuming—you'll need to develop some efficient approaches, but your students will benefit greatly by having something to turn in. You'll benefit by having students able to intelligently discuss the material.

6. During class, have students turn to specific pages and read through the graphic material or a key section. Using the book in class helps to establish its importance. You might start out by explaining the material, but at some point start asking students to provide the explanations.

7. Teach students to ask questions about the reading material. Use the five "w's" (and

one h)—who, what, when, where, why, and how. Curiosity and learning should be linked. Sometimes we need to show our students how to be curious.

8. Before each exam, explain what percentage of the questions will come from the text and offer some sample questions.

Explore with students the different kinds of questions: literal questions (which require simple memorization), inference questions (which require deeper thinking), and application questions (which require them to explain a concept they've learned in a new context).

9. Invite the students who don't do well on your first exam to your office for individual appointments, and spend some time working with them on their reading skills. Have them read aloud and ask them to process the information back to you. Effective learning includes being able to verbalize written material. Your listening ear and encouragement may well be the event that opens new doors for them.

We don't have to just imagine a classroom where students come prepared. We can take actions that make it more likely to happen!

Ten Strategies for Promoting Accountability and Investment in Reading Assignments

Rebecca Bodish, EdD, and Ellen Spencer, EdD

As teachers, we see value in what we assign students, but students don't always appreciate the relevance or understand the purpose of their assignments.

Required readings are a great example of this disconnect. However, when students have some input into their learning, their response to assignments (yes, even reading assign-

ments) changes. Rather than requiring fill-in-the-blank reading guides or giving weekly quizzes to “motivate” students to do assigned readings, professors can give students some alternatives. We can design those alternatives to give students greater choice and responsibility for their learning, thereby making the assignments more meaningful. Here is a collection of reading assignment alternatives we use and recommend.

1. Non-structured Notes: Allow students to submit notes on assigned readings in various formats. These formats may include a detailed outline, graphic organizer, poster, summary paragraphs, or other visual representations of the material. Different format samples can be shared with the entire class or within small groups to stimulate discussion of the readings.

2. Written Conversations: Prepare prompts (questions or short quotes from the reading) one per sheet of paper, which are then passed around the room with students responding to the prompts or posing related questions. Alternatively, prompts can be put on posters and hung around the classroom. Students walk around adding their responses to the posters. Written conversations can last 10-15 minutes or the entire period. They can be used with the whole class or in groups. We like written responses because they provide introverts a



non-threatening way into the conversation and they give us great formative assessment feedback.

3. Dialogue Journals: Each student starts a journal. After certain reading assignments, they write an entry that connects the reading to a personal experience or content in another course, or they summarize the key points of the reading. The entry ends with a question. Journals are collected and then passed out at random. Now students provide their own response to the first entry or they're assigned a new entry, and the journals continue to be passed around. At the end of the semester, the journal returns to the original owner.

4. Related Research: Let students research and select their own readings about a course topic. With beginning students you might need to provide a list of possibilities or suggestions as to where to find relevant readings. Letting students select readings deepens content knowledge and enlivens classroom discussions with multiple perspectives. Or, after students choose a reading and complete it, they switch readings with a partner and come to the class discussion having completed both readings.

5. Compare and Contrast: Have students use visuals such as Venn diagrams or other graphics to generate ideas, make valuable connections, and deepen understanding of content. They can do this with partners, in small groups, or as a large group discussion. This approach leaves students with a visual representation of the material, along with the ideas and perspectives provided by their peers.

6. Justify Your Thinking: After students complete a reading assignment, they write a brief summary identifying which course objectives were met through this reading assignment. They explain how and why the reading met the objective. This approach demonstrates that readings are assigned with

purpose and helps students fulfill the course objectives.

7. Debate with a Twist: Take a reading assignment and have half the students take a particular position in response to what they read, and the other half develop a list of open-ended questions related to the reading. Students then defend their position and respond to the open-ended questions. This alternative sets the framework for rich classroom discussions while encouraging critical thinking and giving students the chance to try out various arguments. Switch the roles with subsequent reading assignments.

8. Own the Assessment: Have students create their own evaluation method for a reading assignment. This could be a checklist, rubric, summary, or other tool. What they create can be used for self-assessment or exchanged with a peer who uses the tool to provide formative feedback. Ownership in the assessment increases participation and motivation, and the understanding of what's needed to make the finished assignment "good."

9. Speed Sharing: After students complete a reading assignment, form two single-file lines facing each other. Students share one idea, pose a question, or make a connection to what they read with the person directly across from them. After a predetermined time (say one minute) they rotate to the next person in line and share something different. This approach has lots going for it: it's fun and allows students

to meet others in the class; it exposes students who have not done the reading at the same time it provides them information about it; and it forces students to have more than one idea, question, or connection from the reading. We encourage students to have the reading with them so they can refer to it and use it to trigger more ideas.

10. Silent Chalk Talk: Write the main topic and subtopics on the board. Have students write their ideas, connections, and questions. We let students use their reading materials to write quotations and drawings. It's interesting to see how the ideas build on each other. The amount of time devoted to this activity can change. Be sure there is time at the end for students to review what's been written about the reading. In larger classes the activity can take place in groups. Teachers can incorporate some of the students' contributions when they talk about content contained in the reading.

Opportunities for collaboration with readings and other assignments increases engagement, builds knowledge, and turns classrooms into learning communities. Our students bring a wealth of experience to the classroom. Building on these experiences and broadening perspectives of students takes place organically when they are allowed to make their own discoveries and given opportunities to learn from each other. Moreover, when students are engaged and invested they are more likely to complete assigned readings.



An Activity That Promotes Engagement with Required Readings, Even in Large Classes

Ashley Harvey, PhD, LMFT

On the first day of class, I often say something like this to my students: “Nothing floats my boat more than great discussion. Nothing promotes great discussion like having completed the readings. And nothing promotes completing the readings like having points attached to it.”

Encouraging students to complete the course readings is an age-old problem. When I was a graduate student, Douglas Sprenkle, now a professor emeritus at Purdue University, used a primary and secondary reaction discussion format that inspired thrilling class discussions. Years before discussion boards, Professor Sprenkle divided the class into two groups that alternated between serving as primary and secondary reactors to weekly readings. Primary reactors were the conversation starters, required to e-mail the class a critical reaction to weekly readings (what we liked, did not like, agreed with, and disagreed with) no later than 24 hours prior to class time. Secondary reactors

were to read the readings and the primary reactions and then come to class prepared to continue the conversation with statements like these: “In their primary reactions, Beth and Miguel both mentioned X. My thoughts are this ___ but a question I have for the group is ___.” I have since used Sprenkle’s primary and secondary reaction format via discussion

boards in dozens of small (i.e., with fewer than 20 students) on-campus and online courses—simply adjusting the length and complexity of the readings and the primary

reaction (250–400 words) to suit the course level. Sometimes students alternate being primary and secondary reactors for each set of readings; sometimes they are both primary and secondary reactors for the readings—meaning that they must all post online before class, read each other’s postings, and then continue the conversation in class.

However, making this approach work in large classes was much more challenging. How could I use the primary and secondary format

“Nothing floats my boat more than a great discussion. Nothing promotes great discussion like having completed the readings.”

in classes of 100 students? With the help of some excellent teaching assistants, I now have a reaction discussion format that I have used in more than 25 large classes. Here's how I do it:

1. First, I divide the class into discussion groups of 5–7 members and assign 2–4 relevant readings for each reaction discussion, with 6–8 reaction discussions over the course of the semester.

2. In their groups, students sign up for two primary and two secondary reactions. If there are eight reaction discussions over the course of the semester, students earn points for four of them and simply participate in the other four. For each reaction, the discussion groups typically have two members who post primary reactions that week and two members who are secondary reactors that co-lead the small-group discussion. Not all students in the group are motivated by points to do the readings each week, but I find that if more than half complete the reading, this is enough to create a rich, small-group discussion.

3. Primary reactors are charged with beginning the conversation by posting their critical thinking about the readings no later than 24 hours before class (this is guided by the questions that I post for each reading). Primary reactors are also asked to post questions they would like the secondary reactors to consider bringing to the small-group discussion. Secondary reactors are asked to use their own thinking about the readings, as well as questions and ideas from the primary reactors, to develop a written outline of at least seven key points or questions that they use to lead or co-lead their 15–20 minute small-group discussions. During the in-class discussion time, teaching assistants visit each group to ensure that secondary reactors have written outlines in front of them, which they then turn in at the end of the

discussion.

4. Once the small-group discussion is complete, I ask one secondary reactor from each group (or I randomly pick half of the groups) to share one interesting thing their group discussed. Thus, in a class of 100, I typically have 10–15 speakers sharing questions or thoughts that arose in their small-group discussions. As each secondary reactor stands and shares with the class, I paraphrase what he or she says and tie it into other related comments that I have read in the primary reactions or heard in class discussion groups. I also may extend the comments shared by the secondary reactors with related research. If my previously posted questions for the readings are not fully covered by large-group discussion, I pose them to the class and offer my own thoughts.

5. Last, we send frequent reminders. Prior to each reaction, a teaching assistant sends out three e-mails. The first goes to the entire class, reminding them of the reaction readings and my questions to consider for each reading. The second is sent to the assigned primary reactors, reminding them to post on the course website no later than 24 hours prior to class. A final e-mail goes to the secondary reactors, reminding them to come to class with an outline and prepared to lead a discussion on the readings.

In addition to promoting critical thinking and motivating students to complete the readings, this approach enables students form deeper connections with the material and one another, despite the large class size. An added bonus for me is that I am more aware of students' preexisting knowledge and can tailor my lectures as needed.



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