

# My Students Won't Read!

## Part One: The Reason Why

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"Do you think this class will be a lot of work?"

"I don't think so. I've heard that the prof is really nice."

"How much did you pay for the textbook?"

"Almost \$100! I wonder if I'll really need it."

"I doubt it. My friend took this class last semester and got a C+ just from going to lecture."

"So are you planning to buy the textbook?"

"No way! This teacher covers all the important stuff in lecture anyway."

It's hard to argue with such student logic. After all, many of our students have made it into college with only the most rudimentary of language skills. Every semester, they aim for that "barely passing" grade, and most of the time they achieve it. Certainly there are exceptions. For example, my office neighbor teaches a course that is prerequisite for entry to the nursing program. When he arrives for work in the morning, he has students lined up outside his office waiting to ask questions about the homework assignment. However, this is not the norm at Delta—or at most community colleges.

If we faculty are going to challenge the status quo, we have our work cut out for us. It is with embarrassment that I relate the following story.

Some years ago, while teaching college-level English, I concluded that weak reading skills were largely responsible for the educational lethargy of my students. So I went back to graduate school, received training in reading education, and returned, eager to tackle prevailing attitudes. I signed up to teach my first reading course and found a text, *The Fight in the Fields*, that was both interesting and culturally relevant to my students. This book chronicled the rise of Cesar Chavez and the farmworker movement right here in the San Joaquin Valley.

The students really enjoyed our class meetings. There was only one problem. They weren't reading the text! They kept coming to class unprepared... and I blinked. Mind you, this was a reading class, yet I ended up summarizing each chapter and posing provocative discussion questions so that our time together was not completely wasted. And yes, most of the students passed based solely on what they learned during class discussion.

After this false start, I realized the immensity of what I was up against. Although I wish I could say I had a sudden breakthrough, what I've experienced instead is incremental progress, one semester to the next, as I have come to better understand my students and the options that are available to me as their instructor.

Since reading is as natural to me as breathing, it took me time to appreciate the difficulty my students have with reading. It's not that they *can't* read. They're fully capable of decoding words off the page. However, they resist reading because (a) it is truly hard work for them and (b) they're convinced they can achieve their goals in life without developing solid reading skills.

In Part Two, we'll examine the three levels of reading comprehension, appreciate why reading is such hard work for students, and make clear what we faculty must do to change this paradigm.

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### Part Two: The Three Levels of Reading Comprehension

Before I was able to create any shift in my students' attitude toward reading, I had to understand what they experienced when confronted with unfamiliar texts. It dawned on me that I had once been in a similar predicament.

After completing my undergraduate coursework in mathematics, I thought it would be cool to return to school and study "something fun" such as literature. I naively entered a graduate program in English and signed up for a couple of graduate seminars. The reading was heavy, but I enjoyed it. I'll never forget coming to class all prepared (so I thought) to "talk about" *Wieland*, the first novel of the semester. I had rehearsed its complicated story line, itemized its characters, and carefully determined the book's theme. However, the ensuing discussion left me in the dust. Only much later did I realize what had happened. My classmates were discussing the book from all three levels of comprehension whereas I was stuck at Level One.

#### The Three Levels

1. **Literal comprehension:** what does it say?

This is the skeletal starting point, consisting of a text's main idea (or thesis or theme) and major supporting details. It answers the overt WHO, WHAT, WHERE, and WHEN questions. Yet even literal comprehension is challenging if the text contains difficult vocabulary or if the reader is unfamiliar with the subject matter. Most of our students are at (or still struggling with) this level of reading comprehension.

2. **Interpretive comprehension:** what does it mean?

Here we ask HOW and WHY the text is organized the way it is. We must consider the author's tone, bias, inferences, audience, and purpose. Since these are usually implicit rather than explicit, they require a more sophisticated understanding.

3. **Critical analysis:** what is our evaluation?

Only after moving through the first two levels can we decide what the text means to us individually and as a community of readers. Do we agree with the author? Do we approve of the manner of presentation? Will it move us to action of any kind?

#### Decision Time for the Professor

Given these three levels of reading comprehension—and the fact that moving up the scale is no simple matter—instructors must make choices. First, what level of comprehension is necessary? Will literal comprehension be sufficient? This will vary from discipline to discipline. In a basic anatomy class, it is probably sufficient for students to learn the various body parts and their functions. Nurses don't need to ponder very deeply whether or not the organs of the human body might be arranged in a more optimal manner. (Surgeons and bio-engineers, however, will certainly do so.) Wherever bias is possible, as in the social sciences, level one comprehension will not be sufficient.

Instructors must also have a clear understanding of the purpose of their reading assignments. It is not enough to ask students to read the textbook simply because this is customary. Here then are some questions for reflection: Will the textbook provide information that students will not receive in lecture? Is it intended to reinforce what students hear in lecture? Or is it intended to introduce lecture material? The answers to these questions will determine whether a textbook is really needed and, if so, how it ought to be used. If the textbook is one that students will want to keep as a lifelong reference book, there is very good reason for wanting them to develop extreme familiarity with it. How to do so will be the topic of Part Three, our final installment.

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## Part Three: Helping Students Become Readers

Only after we are committed to making reading an inescapable activity and have decided how it will be integrated with lecture are we ready to motivate and guide students into the reading process. Students are surprisingly open to this once they become convinced there is no escape. “This is the first book I’ve ever completely read” is a comment reading instructors hear on a regular basis. Students are genuinely proud of themselves once they have mastered some basic habits and skills. Here’s how to make it happen:

### Before Students Read

The instructor first needs to INTRODUCE the reading. This sends the message that the reading is truly important, piques interest, and supplies the initial motivation that many students require. There are several ways to introduce a reading assignment:

- Raise a relevant question. For example, “What would you do if...”
- Tell a story—perhaps a personal one—that connects with the reading.
- Inform students how they can expect to be assessed after they read (see further below).
- Explain what students can expect to take away from the reading, i.e. why it is worthy of their time.

Next, the instructor will help make the reading ACCESSIBLE. There are two big obstacles to comprehension of any text: (a) lack of prior knowledge and (b) vocabulary. When students complain that a particular text is “boring,” that is an indication that they have little-to-no prior knowledge of the subject matter—no “schema” from which to draw. Since new knowledge must always connect with prior knowledge, students often require help in setting up this mental filing system. Instructors can put the reading in context by providing an overview of the subject matter and supplying essential background information. Similarly, unfamiliar vocabulary is a barrier to comprehension. If students encounter too many new words, they will give up. Instructors can pre-teach the most important of these words or, at the very least, make a list of them and pronounce each out loud so that the text will not be their first encounter with the word.

If students still struggle with comprehension, instructors can provide additional “scaffolding” by supplying students with worksheets that will guide them into finding the important information.

### While Students Read

Encourage students to write in their textbooks. Instructors can model this by providing examples of annotated passages where only the main points are highlighted.

### After Students Read

Two things are essential—and in this order!

- **ASSESSMENT.** Every time a reading assignment is made, students must somehow be held accountable for it by means of quizzes, class reports, etc. Moreover, this assessment should constitute a significant part of the student’s final course grade. Keep in mind that assessment is itself a learning activity and therefore inherently worthwhile. Experiment with open v. closed-book quizzes and solo v. partner (or group) work. A welcome by-product of top-of-the-hour quizzes is that they encourage punctuality.
- **DISCUSSION.** Devoting time to class discussion of the reading reinforces its importance. In addition to the instructor-asks-question-student-gives-answer pattern, try jigsaw exercises, discussion circles, or have students formulate test questions.

Good luck!