Pre-Reading Strategies: Connecting Expert Understanding and Novice Learning

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When I first started mentioning pre-reading strategies to the students I work with, they responded with looks of panic. In one class, a student raised her hand and pleaded, “Please don’t tell our instructor to give us any more reading. I am begging you.”

Much to the relief of this student and all the others, I suspect, pre-reading strategies are not about more reading assignments. Rather, they involve activities that are used before students tackle the existing readings for a given course. When used regularly, pre-reading strategies provide a great way for instructors to make their expert understanding accessible while encouraging students to gain a novice intellectual foothold within a new discipline. Next time you announce a reading assignment, try one of these strategies to spark a discussion before your students read:

1) Build a framework: Asking students to take a look at the syllabus is an easy way to help them understand an instructor’s design for a course. I have my students scan the syllabus and then venture a guess as to why the next class period’s topic has been planned for that particular week. To promote that discussion you might ask: What readings from the previous class periods might help you to understand this new topic? Why do you think this topic comes before some of the others planned for later in the semester?

2) Scan for the low-hanging fruit: Consider introducing students to a textbook by asking them to open to an assigned chapter and scan the pages. Encourage them to look for pictures, headings, bolded words, and any charts/graphs. After a minute or two, ask them to suggest what they think the particular chapter addresses. Try asking: What are some of the most important aspects of this chapter? How do you think this chapter is organized? What would you highlight on a given page and why?

3) Make connections: To help when students encounter an assigned group of readings, have them take those readings out and set them side by side. Give students a couple of minutes to think about how this group of readings might fit together. They might ascertain that by skimming the titles, the headings, and the abstracts (if any), and deciding on the purpose of each reading. You could promote that discussion with these questions: How do these readings support the next class period’s topic? Do the readings provide opposing perspectives or different disciplinary traditions? Would any of the readings be better understood if approached in a particular order? Why or why not?

4) Search for roadblocks: Many times, instructors assign an integral reading that is packed with lots of discipline-specific terms and/or acronyms. The use of specialized language can prevent students from understanding and finishing assigned readings. During a pre-reading session you might have students scan an article and circle any terms that might signal a “roadblock” to understanding. You could compile a list of these terms and make them the focus of a discussion.

5) Uncover the structure: As students progress through a discipline, they will eventually encounter academic writing. An easy way to acclimate students to this kind of professional writing might be to ask them to analyze the parts of a peer-reviewed article. Then, talk about why this format would be required by an academic journal. I often ask my students this summarizing question: How do these specific parts, when taken together, create a compelling academic argument?

6) Contrast the style: When instructors assign readings from a range of genres, the rationale behind the choices is not always clear to students. After giving students a chance to scan the structure, tone, and format of each reading, they can be asked to talk about appropriate occasions for certain writing approaches. Try asking students these questions: What does one particular style provide that another might not? Why would one of these styles be more compelling for certain audiences?

This list represents a few of the possible strategies teachers can offer so that students learn to make sense of challenging reading material on their own. By allowing the frameworks of a discipline and the careful choices of an instructor to become clear, the “disconnect” between expert understanding and novice learning begins to disappear.