8.2 Promoting Active Reading for Better Comprehension of Difficult Texts


Quotes from MiraCosta students reflecting on their experiences with reading:

- “I feel overwhelmed by my doubts of my capabilities as a reader.”
- “I want to be able to respond to a reading I am uninterested in and learn how to gain an interest in it.”
- “Each semester, time after time, class after class, book after book, I struggle to get through the class and cry when I ‘can’t’ do the assignment or feel like I’m doing it incorrectly due to the lack of understanding I had of the book or even the assignment itself…my ‘fear’ of the amount of reading we would have to do, rated higher time after time, class after class, semester after semester.”

Do the above quotes sound familiar to you? As instructors, we’ve often observed that our students seem to struggle with the readings we assign, and that they may in fact fear reading itself. Many of our students tend to “shut down” when they encounter difficult texts rather than embrace that difficulty and strategize ways to understand what they’re reading. Students need to become more aware of themselves as readers and what they do during the reading process. The Difficulty Paper is one assignment to help students identify when texts challenge them and actively strategize ways to tackle the difficulty, thus gaining more meaningful understanding of the text at hand. Adaptable to all levels and disciplines, the Difficulty Paper is a useful assignment for instructors to support student reading. See assignment.

Students seem to respond positively to this assignment, as seen in these excerpts from Reading 830 students’ Difficulty Paper reflections:

- “Originally, I thought this assignment was ‘difficult’ even after having the directions. Once I put the steps into action, everything just flowed nicely. I now think this paper/assignment was of great purpose and that it helped us to find better ways to enjoy reading. It also helped us to understand that there are many ways to do this, and the best way may include not using one specific strategy, but a combination of multiple ones, and I think it worked. Thanks for assigning it!”
- “I didn’t want to do a difficulty paper because I didn’t want to try something that I struggled with again, but when I did, I embraced the difficulty and learned what methods are best to use in certain subjects and readings.”
- “I couldn’t even believe that a method like this could change my way of thinking and understand what the story, text, or other reading might have to say. I never even thought that just a little reading strategy could help me solve a reading problem.”
Our Reading 830 students frequently use this assignment to better understand readings in their other courses. We invite you to incorporate this assignment in your classes as one means to support student literacy. An electronic version of this assignment is available on the GIFTs website. Please contact us if you would like sample Difficulty Papers.

Difficulty Paper: Assignment Sheet

The purpose of this assignment is to help you pay greater attention to what your mind does as you read and to allow you to explore a text in greater depth. In particular, I want you to learn about difficulty in reading—to recognize that in difficulty lies rich promise for interesting discoveries. All readers encounter difficulty, and we are exploring how to recognize it and use it to revise a reading.

Part 1 (Initial Observation): DUE ___________________

Read through the text and notice any places that make you stop and think. Look for sections that particularly confuse or interest you (it might help you get started to look back at your annotations). What was confusing about the author's message? What other aspects of the text were difficult to understand (i.e. vocabulary, ideas, evidence, author’s style, language, etc.)?

Now write a 1-2 page detailed description of your experience: what, specifically, did you focus on as you read? What, specifically, did you find challenging about these sections? What might you want to know more about? Try to be as specific as possible about which sections have you focused on and what your mind was doing as you read these sections.

Part 2 (Question and Plan): DUE ___________________

1. Looking back at what you wrote in Part 1, clarify one main question you want to investigate further.

2. Formulate a plan of action (1 page) in which you devise some approaches* you will use to answer your question, such as rereading a previous chapter, reading with a dictionary, reading with lecture notes, and/or using annotation**. Be sure you explain not only what the strategy involves, but also what you hope to accomplish by using it.

Part 3 (New Insights): DUE ____________________

Here's where you put your plan into action. First, re-read the text—all the way through—using whatever approach you have chosen. Then write approximately 2 pages in which you reflect upon the text with a fresh perspective. What new insights did you gain? In what ways did your understanding change or shift after re-reading the piece?

Note: please include at least 3 quotes from the text to support your ideas.

Part 4 (Reflection): DUE _____________________

In this section (approximately 1 page), please reflect on the effectiveness of your approach. You might wish to consider questions such as the following:

In what ways did your strategy help you to revise your initial reading? How might you change your approach, if you were to do the assignment again? Did your inquiry lead you to ask additional questions? What do you see as the value or purpose of this assignment?

Thanks to Jen Levinson, City College of San Francisco, for this modified assignment based on Mariolina Salvatori's 1996 “Conversations with Texts: Reading in the Teaching of Composition.” *College English*, 58, (4), 440-454.
Some different types of reading strategies may include: writing short summary notes of each paragraph or section, comparing and contrasting the author’s experience with your own, making stars next to ideas which you understand and question marks next to confusing ideas, recording predictions about the text and ideas, and identifying a central theme throughout the text.

Some additional reading strategies include:

**Foggiest and Clearest Points**, in which students record notes as they read about which points were confusing to them and which points are clear. Students should also make connections between foggy and clear points to help improve their understanding of confusing aspects of the text.

**PPPC (Preview, Predict, Pre-read, and Code)**, in which students preview a text for main ideas, make predictions about those ideas and what message the author will make, read the first line or so of every paragraph to get the “big picture” of the text, and code (take notes) their responses to the text.

**KWL+**, in which students activate schema, improve their comprehension, set a purpose for reading, and improve reading motivation by asking the following questions as they read: “What do I know about the topic? What do I want to know? What did I learn from the text? What do I still want to know about the text and topic?” The students record their responses as they read the text. (See GIFT 7.2 also.)