

Principles to Remember When Assigning Readings in Online Composition Classes

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Imagine that you show up for a class, but instead of finding a teacher, engaged students, and materials, you find an empty classroom with a large book on the desk. On the board is written: “Read chapters 1-3. Take online quiz.” How would you feel?

The scenario above¹ can sometimes be the perceived experience of online students when we assign readings, yet as teachers it can be challenging to guarantee compliance and make material engaging without assigning more “busy work” to add to our grading.

What follows are some recommendations for how to assign and teach readings in online Composition classes. If you would like more details about any of the recommendations, please email me at the address above.

1. Consider the challenges that online students have or perceive

Recent studies and CSU student surveys identify several problems that students face when reading. They:

- May feel that they are “teaching themselves” when they read in an online class and perceive that teachers are not doing their jobs.
- May have limited time to conduct extensive reading if they are working or have families.
- Often feel that online activities take more time than in-class work.
- Often are used to surface reading and not deep reading.
- May not understand the need to adapt reading strategies for different purposes.
- May not be used to reading texts written for other audiences. May not understand the genre or rhetorical contexts of assigned texts.
- Can have challenges with language and syntax. For ESL students, texts may be over a students’ “language threshold” (how much vocabulary they know), so they have to spend more time decoding.



2. Select readings judiciously

As all good rhetoricians know, we must consider our audience and purpose when disseminating a message. The same goes for assigning readings. Think about the following questions:

- Do we need to assign the whole chapter? Which pages are most important for what is being practiced this week? We must show that we have selected the readings purposefully.
- How suitable is the text for the students in the class? Is it about a topic that everyone will be able to understand? If not, is that OK?
- In addition to readings, are there other ways to present the material (a short online video or an infographic, perhaps?) that could provide some variety to the course materials for the week?

¹ This scenario is adapted from Darby & Lang (2019). All sources are cited at the end of this document.

3. Make the course personal

Imagine that you had time in class to introduce a reading and get students excited – what would you say? In an online class, we also have the opportunity to show our enthusiasm. Here are some ideas:

- Tell students why we are excited about the reading. Why did we choose it?
- If a reading is hard, tell them that even we find it difficult, but explain why it is worthwhile.
- Introduce the context/exigence and who the author is – tell a story. This could even be in a very short video.
- In a brief assignment, we can ask the students to identify the rest of the rhetorical situation as they read: Who do they think the audience is? What is the purpose?
- Ask students to connect certain ideas to their own personal experiences. What did they think about this issue before they read this? What are some new ideas from the reading?
- Introduce the major concepts they will learn about. Explain why you think these are important. This is a form of scaffolding that can be very helpful for many students.
- Tell students we are eager to hear their ideas, and we want to know what they think.
- When possible, allow students to choose from a small selection of texts.



4. Teach and practice metacognition and critical reading skills

Academic reading at the college level is a skill that must be developed. Students can progress more quickly when we explicitly teach how to read academically. These are especially important in 100-level courses. The following activities may be useful:

Level	Activity	How it works
CO130	Reading inventory	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ This can be a discussion, a short journal entry, a chart, or just a series of questions. Ask students to make a note of the different kinds of texts they encounter during a normal day or afternoon. What genres? What purposes for reading? What reading speed? We can model this by including our own example of a few texts.
CO130/ CO150	Identifying rhetorical elements discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ PART 1: Ask students to take a picture of a piece of writing that they find interesting or meaningful (this can be ANYTHING – a recipe, a postcard, a book they’re reading etc.). They should post the picture to a small-group discussion and explain why the text is meaningful. As we would in class, we can join the discussion by posting our own examples.➤ PART 2: Ask students to look at someone else’s post and comment on the audience, purpose, and genre of the text. Also, encourage students to comment on others’ ideas – do they agree with the different analyses?
CO130	Close and critical reading skills discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none">➤ PART 1: In small discussion groups, ask students to list the different strategies they use to read an article closely and critically.➤ PART 2: At the end of the week you should have a good inventory of skills to practice and reinforce. We can compile the list and add our own ideas for students to look at.

CO130/ CO150	Guided reading video (model)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Following on from the close/critical reading discussion, create a screencast video to model how you might read an online text both closely and critically. Include prediction, annotation, clarification of concepts, questioning, etc.
CO130/ CO150	Student annotation with google docs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Ask students to annotate an article using features on google docs (or with textbook annotation features if they are available). Require just 2-3 specific strategies that they can demonstrate.
CO130/ CO150	Find the thesis discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ PART 1: Find an article, video, etc., where thesis identification is tricky. Ask students to identify the main message and post their idea to a small group forum. (Other posts could initially be hidden.) ➤ PART 2: Ask students to comment on each other's ideas (with your assistance). Do they agree? Does the thesis summarize all the other main ideas in the article? Could it be expanded upon?
All levels	Concept map/graphic organizer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Provide students with a concept map or graphic organizer with missing elements. Ask them to complete the rest of the diagram with ideas from the article, video, etc. ➤ OR, ask students to draw a map of how the ideas relate to each other. They can do this online or take a photo. Make sure you provide an example of what you are looking for.
All levels	Reading journal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ This could be an online version of a WTL where you ask students a few short questions and to connect a text to their experience. Just be careful because frequent journals (especially if they are not read or commented on) can seem like busy work.
All levels	Reading guide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ A reading guide can be used to help students identify main ideas from a specific reading. This can be especially helpful with longer, more complicated texts.
All levels	"Six hats" thinking exercise	<p>This is usually a professional group exercise where different members put on different hats (representing different roles) to problem solve an issue. It can be applied to critical reading practices in different ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Students can engage in small group discussion where different group members take on different hats to consider a text. White = neutral, objective, facts and summary; Red = gut reactions; Yellow = positive ideas and positive applications; Black = negative ideas and negative applications (devil's advocate); Green = creative possibilities of application or alternative ideas; Blue = checking that everyone is on task. ➤ We can also create a guided reading homework assignment where a student tries on all the different hats.
All levels	Synthesis and comparison of texts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ When we want students to understand a particular concept (e.g. constraints or various concepts of audience) we can have them read and watch a few different texts to build on their understanding. Students could complete a graphic organizer or table as a form of note taking. For example, students might read a textbook excerpt, watch an online video, and review Bitzer's "The

		<p>Rhetorical Situation” and take notes specifically on exigence, constraints and audience.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ If students are reading about a particular theme (e.g. renewable energy), they could complete a Venn diagram or some other kind of visual to compare and contrast ideas from the readings. ➤ We should be careful not to assign <u>difficult</u> texts all at once. Readings can be staggered over a couple of weeks so that concepts are <u>gradually</u> understood, developed, applied, and questioned (e.g. Rogerian theory → questioning Rogerian theory). Assigning three difficult readings concurrently with no scaffolding or application might be challenging for students.
All levels	The good old reading discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Ask students to discuss and apply a reading in small groups. Be sure to replicate in-class discussion as much as possible by giving specific prompts, joining in yourself, and playing devil’s advocate. For example, we can give students sample papers to read and ask them to rank them according to different grading criteria.

5. Provide clarification when needed

- What are students generally getting wrong?

When we assign the activities above, we can use student work as formative assessment to improve our teaching practices. We do not have to respond to every single post all the time. Instead, if we see that several students are not understanding a concept, we can write a **quick announcement** or a **short video** for everyone to explain and clarify some concepts. Sometimes we may be able to anticipate what the issues may be (e.g. understanding Bitzer’s concept of rhetorical exigence; finding the thesis in a difficult text), but we must make sure that students actively engage with a text first.

6. Provide low stakes, fun opportunities for application and role play

In face-to-face classes, we engage students in group activities to help them practice concepts they read before class. These activities help students practice their understanding in a low-stakes environment. Here are some activities that could be used online:

CO130

- **Party description:** After reading/learning about the concepts of purpose and audience, students describe a recent party they attended for their parents, their friend, and their teacher. They justify their choices. This could be a homework assignment or a discussion post.
- **Email of complaint/praise discussion post:** In small groups, individuals post a short letter of complaint or praise they would send to a store, restaurant, business, or individual. Students explain the choices they made in order to achieve their purpose with their audience. They give each other feedback on how the letters could be revised. *An even better version is to have students write real letters/emails that they send.*

CO150/CO300

- **Funny commercial or website analysis:** Students read about and then discuss use of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos* or logical fallacies used in commercials. This can be a discussion post or a quiz/HW assignment.

- **Logical fallacy marketplace.** Students choose a ridiculous patent design from <http://totallyabsurd.com/absurd.htm> and then try to sell their patent using as many logical fallacies as possible. All this takes place on a discussion forum where students can comment on each other's product ideas.
- **Alien landing role play discussion:** To learn about stakeholder perspectives and values, students role play different stakeholders who are concerned about a UFO that has landed at Hughes stadium at CSU. Different stakeholders may include: Fort Collins residents, genetic scientists at CSU, The Northern Colorado Mutual UFO Network, the US Military, and the aliens themselves. Students must explain what they care about (their values) and what they think should happen next. Throughout the week, they then appeal to different groups to try to persuade them to change their minds.
- **Rogierian zombies discussion post:** This is adapted from an activity created by Sharon Grindle. The zombie apocalypse is taking place, but the zombies have mutated and are beginning to remember what it is like to be human. In a discussion post, the group members prepare for a summit where they will use Rogierian argumentation methods to communicate with the zombies. They each present their ideas for validating the zombie's position, stating common ground, and finding a solution. Throughout the week, students review each other's ideas and decide which arguments/approaches that they can present at the upcoming summit.

7. Use reading quizzes thoughtfully

I have saved this principle for the end, because research shows the importance pushing students to critically engage with texts. However, reading quizzes can be very helpful in online classes. These can be used in the following ways:

- Testing and information recall do help students retain knowledge. We can focus quizzes on concepts that we want students to learn so that those ideas are emphasized.
- When we do not have time to review low-stakes journals or homework assignments, pre-set multiple choice quizzes can be a good way to encourage students to read. They can also give us a quick idea of how well students are understanding the concepts.
- We can use regular quizzes to check understanding before (and therefore in addition to) students applying concepts from a reading. These kinds of quizzes could be taken open book/open note and students can take them any number of times.

Main Take-Aways:

1. We must always aim for more than just compliance.
2. We must carefully consider what we want students to get out of any reading we give.
3. We can share our excitement and passion.
4. We can try to engage students in discussion and active thinking as we would in a face-to-face classroom.



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