

Improving Students' Reading Comprehension

Most college teachers, especially if they are teaching lower-division courses, have experienced the difficulties many students have with reading comprehension. The 2006 ACT report on college readiness in reading states: "Only 51 percent of 2005 ACT-tested high school graduates are ready for college-level reading." It goes on: "Unfortunately, the percentage of students who are ready for college-level reading is substantially smaller in some groups ... male students, African American students, Hispanic American students... and students from families whose yearly income is below \$30,000." That describes many of the student populations at our university. What is a faculty member to do?

As students with these problems enter the classroom, faculty can help with a number of things: They can refer students to academic support offices such as the Reading Program or the Learning Center on the 4th floor of the Library. But they can also try to incorporate into their classes some tips for students to put to good use. Here are a few examples of what you can have your students practice in or outside of class, or how you can counsel individual students who seem to have particular problems with their reading assignments. They come from Dianna Van Blerkom and Patricia Mulcahy-Ernt's 2005 book *College Reading and Study Strategies*.

Reading for Different Levels of Comprehension:

What students learn from a text assignment depends on the reading goals they bring to the text, which in turn reflect different levels of comprehension. Blerkom & Mulcahy-Ernt distinguish three different levels of comprehension: Literal, inferential, and critical comprehension. Here are some questions to ask for each of these levels:

Literal Comprehension

1. What is the main topic of the text?
2. What are the key points mentioned in the text?
3. Who (if any) are the primary people discussed in the text?
4. If this text describes an event or a story, where and when did it occur?

Inferential Comprehension

1. What is the main point presented in the text?
2. How do the details connect with the main point?
3. What predictions can I make about the information presented?

Critical Comprehension

1. What is significant about the topic?
2. What is the author's opinion or point of view?
3. What is the author's background and how does that relate to the topic?
4. Are the author's points valid?
5. How is the main topic presented?
6. What textual information informs my own thinking about this topic? (p.65)

Finding the Main Idea:

One of the key issues for poor readers is the task of identifying what the main ideas are in what they are reading. Students need to be able to do this at the paragraph level. Here is a practice activity for your students:

Read p. ___ in your textbook and for each paragraph, answer the following questions:

1. The paragraph topic is (write two words):
2. The main idea of this paragraph is (write one complete sentence):
3. One example that supports this main idea is (find one complete sentence in the paragraph):
4. Another example that supports the main idea is (find another complete sentence in the paragraph): (p. 286)

The main ideas are often explicitly stated in a paragraph, mostly at the beginning of the paragraph, less often as a concluding sentence, and sometimes embedded somewhere in the middle. Things become more difficult for students when the main ideas are **implied** rather than explicitly stated. Under those circumstances, two techniques help with finding those ideas: Looking for “signal words” and for “organizational patterns.” The two go usually hand-in-hand. Following B.J.F. Meyer (1985), there are five different organizational patterns (or text structures) to show the reader what to look for. Each one is associated with a number of typical signal (or transition) words that indicate the author’s line of thinking and thereby help locate the main idea.

Description: Textbooks use description to define and explain new concepts. Look for characteristics, attributes, and other information that identifies the concept, which usually turns out to be the main idea. Signal words indicating description include: *for example, to illustrate, for instance.*

Collection: A collection is a grouping of items that may point to one of three different purposes: (1) to simply enumerate a list of things that are of equal importance (such as in a bulleted list); (2) to sequence things in a particular order (such as in a chronology of events) with signal words such as *first, second, next to begin, and finally*; or (3) to classify things according to common characteristics (particularly popular in the biological sciences) with signal words such as *similar to, like, member of, type, class*. The main idea will vary depending on which type of collection is used.

Comparison: In a comparison, the main idea focuses on both the similarities and the distinctions between two or more items in a group. Signal words include: *similar...different, in contrast to, like...unlike, however, although, but, on the other hand.*

Causation: Some main ideas are hidden in a “cause and effect” organizational pattern. The author presents a causal relationship that explains why something occurs. Signal words for this pattern are: *because, as a result, thus, consequently*, or words such as *cause, influence, and effect.*

Response: Longer text segments usually contain a mix of the above organizational patterns. Finding the main point here requires the reader to look for a central theme, an overarching question, or a unifying goal. Typically the author’s goal will be to respond to a question, explore a problem, or present and explore solutions. In problem-solution passages, the organizational framework usually is to (1) present the problem, (2) define and explain the problem, (3) explore possible solutions, and (4) present a conclusion. Looking for the topic and intent of the author leads to the main idea.

Following these clues will help students become more thoughtful and purposeful readers. All it takes is to provide specific practice opportunities for students to work on these skills.

D. Van Blerkom and P. Mulcahy-Ernt. (2005). *College Reading and Study Strategies*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.
B.J.F. Meyer. (1985). “Prose analysis: Purposes, procedures, and problems,” in B.K. Britton & J.B. Black, eds., *Understanding Expository Text*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, pp. 11-64.
ACT. (2006). *Reading Between the Lines*. <http://www.act.org/path/policy/reports/reading.html>

