*When Writers Ask for Help with Reading: Ideas for Consultants*

**First meeting(s) of term:** review syllabi/reading assignments and general approach

*Try to identify together what the reading load is going to look like – how many pages per class period, what sort of reading (textbook, articles, novels, etc.) You might try:*

* Asking which kinds of reading is the student most anxious about, and why
* Helping to map reading deadlines onto a calendar
* Helping to assess how much time the reading will take (if they think having some idea about time required will reduce their stress)
* Looking at example(s) from their assigned readings of particular types of text and discussing how they differ as reading tasks, e.g., a poem versus an article introduction, a page or two from a novel versus a textbook

*In a general way, you might discuss how the student approaches reading and share with them any strategies of your own you think might be useful. Have they thought about:*

* **Where** they read most effectively. What environmental factors might they consider – e.g. good light, type of seating, whether they work better in monastery quiet or Blue Monday surroundings . . . )
* **When** they read – experts say reading is more efficient in daylight hours
* **How** they read - treating reading like an official “job” and going to a particular place at a particular time to do it can help.
* How they deal with distractions – turning off the Facebook links or making “to-do” lists/schedules to diminish mental distraction in the form of worrying about getting everything done.
* Taking mini-breaks (getting up and moving around) every 20/40 minutes (or whatever works for them).
* Here’s a video on reading improvement:

<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~acskills/videos/video_ri.html>

I*n a more specific way and hands-on way, you might help them to:*

* *Prioritize* between readings for the week, or for their next class, i.e., discuss which might be ok to *skim*, and which need *close reading*? Were there any clues about this in what the professor emphasized in class or in the syllabus? (Important because a big problem is balancing careful reading/comprehension with time it takes to do the reading)
* Identify the *purpose* of the reading. Is it just for context, or does it really unpack an idea or theory? Will they have to write a Moodle post or a paper based on the text? Are they looking for a general theme, or specific examples? Are they looking for tone or style or subtext? (If you can’t work this out together from the available materials, you might be able to encourage them to try and find out by asking questions in class or in office hours.)
* Think about *note-taking strategies* etc. (depending on the purpose of the reading).
* Work out if they need *cultural or academic context*/background to understand a particular reading that you might be able to describe because you happen to know the cultural background, the discipline or the course. If you don’t know, or are not comfortable offering your own take on it, can you do some very basic brief research together (Google, Wikipedia, etc.)?
* Talk about and demonstrate *pre-reading strategies* (if your student doesn’t already use them unconsciously). These metacognitive habits can save time and make reading more efficient, but students sometimes resist them because they sound like extra work. You can help by explaining that pre-reading can be fast once they’ve acquired the habit.

*Pre-reading: Previewing a text can provide contextual information to prevent misunderstandings and give some sense of direction and purpose. Model this type of pre-reading strategy (maybe more than once as you discuss different readings).*

* It could be important to notice things like whether a given reading is part of a longer text or complete in itself, how it is structured, and whether it includes a list of contents or chapters, footnotes, endnotes, an index, etc. Figure captions can be important in some science papers, e.g., geology (the things to notice are often discipline-specific – share what you know).
* It might also be important to know when a text was written/published, e.g. history, psychology, and for what purpose or audience it was originally written.
* Finding out (or having the student recall) some facts about the author and their general agenda or position may also be useful.

*Then, looking more closely at the text itself, but before the student actually begins reading, model the types of questions effective readers ask themselves (from Manzo, Manzo & Thomas, 2009):*

* *Translate:* What do the title/subtitles/ first few sentences etc. seem to *mean* (-what is this mainly all about)?
* *Recall prior knowledge and experience (aka activate schema):* What do I know about this already? What experiences/class discussions/other classes/other readings does it remind me of? How might this fit into the goals of the course as described on the syllabus or during the first week of class?
* *Engage:* What might be really interesting about this?
* *Predict:* What are the main things I might learn from this?
* *Set Purpose:* After I read this, what should I be able to do or say about it?

You might also, along with the student, skim a page or two (or the introduction and conclusion of an article, for example), circling or underlining words that look unfamiliar or that seem important. A skimming exercise like this might:

* Help to identify main ideas, answer the pre-reading questions more thoroughly, and possibly allow the reader to think of some reading questions (that they hope the text can help them answer).
* Help to identify key terms, jargon, or field-specific language
* Lead to a discussion of challenging words or of how the person deals with unfamiliar vocabulary
* Illustrate how different readers notice different things