3. TEACHING STUDENTS EFFECTIVE READING AND WRITING SKILLS

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Introductory Remarks:

It is a popular lament across Canadian universities that students simply don't read anymore, and as many of us are probably aware, there is a strong correlation between poor reading habits and poor writing skills. After all, a lack of exposure to quality writing hardly permits the creation of one's own quality writing. But there is another factor involved here at the university level that, unfortunately, sees continued and hands-on development of literacy skills as the job of "someone else," usually meaning elementary or secondary schooling. At each level of a student's schooling, however, they are expected to perform at a higher level: more context, more analysis, more awareness of language use, and so on. Student reading requires our direct attention, and the benefit is that teaching effective reading rolls over into learning effective writing strategies by extension.

This document introduces TAs to a simple but time-tested approach to effective reading that equally incorporates writing into its process. It is a technique that lends itself to use in tutorials, in lectures, or any other teaching and learning opportunity. From there, we will discuss different methods of organizing information gleaned from our source materials. Finally, this document will apply these methods to the writing process.

Please note that none of this is intended to reinvent the wheel. Rather, it is a reminder that a systematic approach to teaching will spare both you and your students grief in one particular area: student writing. After all, better comprehension of the materials produces more competent students who are capable of expressing themselves, and more competent and expressive students produces a happier and more satisfied TA. Most importantly, providing our students with these types of tools produces the autonomous, self-directed student which we all desire.

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ACTIVE READING

Practicing Active Reading:

Like Active Learning, this is simply the process of getting every student reading and understanding the designated course materials. While many feel students should be doing this on their own, we all know they don't. Furthermore, independent reading without direction provides no guarantee that students either understand or can synthesize the materials in relation to the course's aims. In a tutorial setting, there are a number of ways to encourage active reading:

- Read a passage aloud and ask students to interpret it.
- Use a divide-and-conquer approach: small groups tackle single sections of a reading and really pull it apart, coming together with their colleagues at the end to create a comprehensive understanding.
- In a discussion setting, walk through the main points of a reading, asking students to relate it to the course aims, etc.

All of these are easily done in an hour-long tutorial. For those who do not lead tutorials, these kinds of suggestions can be easily given in assignment feedback. One reading method, called the **SQ4R Method**, can be used both in-class and as a suggested technique for independent reading. This method teaches not only effective reading habits, but also encourages active questioning of the materials being read in a systematic way that progresses from basic comprehension to deep analysis, and ultimately to synthesis between readings, lectures and other course content.

SQ4R Method:

Survey

A quick scan—table of contents, preface, dust jacket summary—that is taken in context with any given week's theme or topic.

Question

Pose a question relevant to the reading's and the lesson's subject (ex. "How did women support the war effort from 1914-1918?").

Read

Find the answer to your question, while also noting other peripheral items of interest as they occur.

Respond

Put away the text and answer the question in *your own words*. In answering, think of a better, more precise question one could ask about the materials (ex. "What role did class play in the types of women's war support during 1914-1918?").

Record

Cite specific pages that help answer your question(s), and highlight key passages or quotes to support your response(s).

Review

Place the question and its answers in the broader context, thinking about the other course materials and the course objectives. This should be done frequently so it is up to date.

Other web sites go into greater detail than above (see: http://www.lib.uoguelph.ca/get-assistance/studying/effective-studying/sq4r-studying, for example), but this simple summary can easily be printed and distributed to your students as a guideline for their own reading. The challenge for us, as TAs, is in its application. We must show *how* to use it and *justify* its use.

The best justification tends to come through utility, and the SQ4R Method was designed with utility in mind. For instance, consider the steps involved and what they actually do:

1. Survey – provides a general overview and warms the reader to the ideas contained in the text.
2. Question – starts the active reading process by placing a central idea at the heart of the text.
3. Read – but not just blind reading, this is reading with intent as determined by the question.
4. Respond – this begins the writing process because it encourages note-taking and summarizing.
5. Record – a fundamental part of the writing process in history is collecting sources and references, which is what happens here.
6. Review – begins the organizing process of longer assignments by comparing notes taken on different materials and considering their relationship(s).

In the previous document, the section on "**Active Learning**" lists a number of shorter and longer activities to try in class. ***Reading and writing should always be part of those activities***—even if it is something as simple as asking a student to cite their sources during a class discussion. In effect, a tutorial's structure is closely related to the SQ4R Method, in which we introduce students to ideas, ask students to question them, get them to provide synopses, challenge them to think more broadly, and finally relate the lesson to the bigger picture.

Sample Activities incorporating the SQ4R Method:

Lineup:

Who: The whole class.

Instructions: Students stand along one wall in the class, with one end of the wall representing "total agreement" and the other "total disagreement." Based on the readings, the TA makes statements that are increasingly grey in value, asking students to agree or disagree and move toward the appropriate spot on the wall, with the centre being "neutral" or "ambivalent." The objective is not to confuse them with obscure facts, but rather to get them to explain their positions and promote discussion.

SQ4R Step(s): Questioning, Responding, Reviewing

Jigsaw:

Who: Small groups.

Instructions: Give each small group a specific question, for which they must find an answer in the readings. Once the groups agree on a response to their question, including finding appropriate citations and quotes as necessary, one person from each group goes to another group (i.e. groups now consist of one representative from each of the original groups). Taking turns, each person shares their question and response with the others, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the readings for the week.

SQ4R Step(s): Surveying, Questioning, Reading, Responding, Recording

Jeopardy

<u>Who</u>: Individuals.

<u>Instructions</u>: At the end of each class, each student comes up with one question related to something specific and relevant in the readings. The TA collects these and uses them as the basis for a quiz game to help review for tests, exams or assignments. The TA should feel free to tinker with the questions to make them more pertinent.

<u>SQ4R Step(s)</u>: Questioning, Reading, Responding, Reviewing

In general, you want students to incorporate readings into the discussion, not merely use them as the basis for discussion. Encourage your students to read their evidence aloud, cite page numbers, use authors' names, and so on.

ORGANIZATION TECHNIQUES

Getting Organized:

There is not a History course out there that asks students to regurgitate the findings of a single text or lesson. Invariably, our discipline asks us to make bigger connections between individuals and their societies, household politics and more global concerns. In order to make these connections, a strong foundation in reading comprehension is essential, and reading with intent is at the heart of that process. Going beyond, however, requires synthesis. Synthesis is the practice of comparing and contrasting information and identifying how seemingly disparate pieces form part of a whole. Whether a student is writing an essay, studying for an exam, or even interpreting the daily news, synthesis is an essential skill that follows from the previous information on the SQ4R Method.

In fact, the SQ4R Method is itself an organizational tool that starts with basic facts and stats, moving through analysis and refinement of ideas, and ending with comparison. That comparative aspect, moreover, demands that we review the process from the beginning and with classification and categorization in mind.

- Surveying starts the categorization process.
- Question/Read can be generalized to identify category trends, or made very specific to find nuanced differences between readings.
- Respond begins the outlining process.
- Record begins adding crucial references and citations for evidence.
- Review asks that we read through it all again to ensure coherency.

A need for variation, however, tends to mean we don't want to keep flogging the same approach. Fortunately, there are plenty of organizational tools that feature aspects of SQ4R.

The main type of organizational tool people tend to use in more qualitative disciplines is the "Idea Map." These range from the fairly simple, like the traditional "brainstorm," to the detailed and complex, like the "argument map" covered at the end of this section.

Sample Organizational Tools

Simple Matrix

This tool can be used to start an organizing process, with the advantage being that it can be added to as a course progresses and more readings are added. Though it does not allow much room for any sophisticated comparative work, its advantage lies in the fact that it keeps information manageable, and has the capacity to show all the materials of a course in a single page or two. This is generally a tool of simplified categorization. For example:

Author	Dates	Major Work(s)	Main Ideas
Edmund Burke	1790s	Reflections on the Revolution in France	French system already workable, but is being abused Revolutionaries not reflecting on why certain things exist Etc.
Immanuel Kant	Mid- to late-1700s	What is Enlightenment?	Reasoned obedience the greatest public good Enlightened leadership knows what's best and commands obedience

Main Idea Map

A more sophisticated tool than the simple matrix, the MIM focuses on something more specific and usually explicitly comparative rather than a simple listing of key traits. For example:

Comparing 19th C. Conservatism		
Burke	Tolstoy	Nietzsche (?)
Main Idea: Progress is good, but should be approached cautiously and with past values and rationales respected and understood	Main Idea: Liberalism leads to crass materialism and individualism, resulting in a superficial society and social disharmony	Main Idea: Categories of "good" and "evil" are merely self-serving categories, not morals, and thus the concept of progress is questionable
Implications: Collective knowledge of our ancestors is more valuable than our knowledge in the moment.	Implications: Individualism causes people to lose sight of common bonds, as well as social order	Implications: The powerful promote morality to keep people in their "rightful" place.
Conclusions: Revolts are revolting!	Etc.	Etc.

Argument Map

Taking things one step further than the MIM, the argument map can be used when one has already outlined a number of details but now needs to put them in the service of answering a specific question. For example:

Essay Topic: How do Burke and Tolstoy's brands of conservatism compare? Identify at least three topics they address, and try to account for similarities and differences according to cultural and historical context. Thesis:
Leadership Burke: Leaders should respect the systems of checks and balances in their society while exercising their authority responsibly Tolstoy: Leaders should be intimately connected to commoners in order to understand them Similarities: both positions require a degree of enlightenment from leadership in order to continue justifying their rule Differences: Burke tends to prefer institutional checks and balances coupled with formal education, while Tolstoy prefers direct interactions with one's subjects and intimate knowledge of local issues qualifying as "enlightenment" Transition: for both, their leadership ideals are very much rooted in...
Tradition
Etc.
Concluding Remarks:

   Putting these tools into use requires only a small amount of planning on your part: think about when assignments are due or when midterm exams are coming up, and plan to use one or more of these tools leading up to them. If you are planning for a test and have the luxury of questions ahead of time, have the students start working on their responses in class by incorporating the latest materials into their study notes.
   Having looked at how to read and how to begin the organizing process, we can now move on to the writing process. As TAs, we recognize that knowledge of the course content and awareness of historical details is not enough. The main point is that just as we have to make our lessons intelligible based on our understanding of core content, so too students have to express themselves through course content.

TEACHING EFFECTIVE WRITING

Reading, Organizing, Writing:

   Firstly, one can start by showing, at every opportunity, how other authors express themselves. Most writers tend to have someone they admire and wish to emulate, so showing our students high quality writing is a good starting point. Sometimes it is even more important to show them poor writing and ask them to find ways to strengthen it. Establishing expectations of student writing, and providing them with a checklist of key components can be very beneficial

for them, since they can then use the checklist during the editing process to ensure they've met expectations.

The following items summarize key elements of essay structure, and four types of phrasing that are commonly required in written assignments.

Essay Structure

- Introduction
    - o Presents the broader topic being considered, or the research question
    - o Lists main points of consideration within that topic
    - o Contains the thesis
- Body
    - o Addresses main points systematically, or logically
    - o Each paragraph is a distinct topic with an introductory sentence, evidence furnished and explanation given
    - o Key ideas should be related back to the thesis with regularity
- Conclusion
    - o Contains the three R's: restate (the argument), retrace (the steps taken to get here) and relate (the argument to a bigger picture)

Sentence/Phrase Types

- Thesis Statement:
    - o A claim + points to support the claim = thesis
    - o Ex. "Aboriginal peoples continue to be marginalized in contemporary Canadian films through filmmakers' insistence on the use of white protagonists, nation-building themes and depictions of aboriginal peoples as being in decline or dying."
- Topic Sentence:
    - o Used at the beginning of a paragraph, it introduces a single point of argumentation
    - o Ex. "In Nazi propaganda, communists were frequently portrayed as hedonistic, thereby heightening a sense of unease about them."
- Signal Phrase:
    - o Used to integrate evidence, quotations or paraphrasing
    - o Ex. "Vivian Sobchak says a photograph 'cannot be inhabited' because it is a discrete moment in time. As such, she says 'it does not really invite the spectator *into* the scene.'" (and of course include the citation!)

- Transition Phrase:
    - o Used at the end of one idea (or paragraph), in anticipation of the next
    - o Ex. "The ontological debate in photography initially orients itself around a photograph's specific moment in time, but the dimensions of space in photographs achieve equal prominence in later thought."

Writing Checklist:

For TAs who are not using a rubric, which would already form the basic template for student writing, you may consider providing your students with a checklist they can run through during the preparation, writing and editing phases of their work. Transparency ought to be a high priority for educators, and while some may interpret such matters as being too much hand-holding, these are already materials readily available to students—provided they know where to find them. As a primary learning resource, and especially given that most of our interactions with students occur with the most inexperienced university learners, identifying and showcasing these resources is part of our role in the classroom. The following is a synthesis of multiple web resources and teaching aids. It can be printed and provided to your students long before an assignment is due, and likewise can be used in class to promote best practices in writing.

Essay Guidelines

- Introduction:
    o Is the topic clearly identified? Is it too broad or too narrow?
    o Are the main points of the argument clearly stated?
    o Is there a thesis statement?
- Body Paragraphs:
    o Is each introduced by a topic sentence? If topic sentences are read in order, do they provide a rough synopsis of the argument as a whole?
    o Is each paragraph answering an implied question related to the thesis?
    o Is there an appropriate amount of evidence to support the claim(s)? Is it the appropriate type of evidence?
    o Is paragraph order logical and rationalized?
- Conclusion:
    o Are the three Rs present (restate, retrace and relate)?
- General:
    o Is there an evident research methodology?
    o Are the quotes integrated properly into sentences? Are they interpreted and contextualized?
    o Are sources diverse, both secondary and primary? Is variation in source materials explained adequately and reasonably?
- Technical:
    o Do the essay's citations, bibliography and title page follow the Chicago Style Guide?
    o Is phrasing varied, or repetitive?
    o Is the paper too descriptive, or is it argumentative?
    o Is the grammar of a high quality?

Naturally, any or all of these points can be modified, added to, or deleted outright to suit your needs. The main point, however, should be to train students to notice these things, remark on them, and spot them in their own work. We cannot expect our students to become experts in these concepts without frequent exposure and use. Consider, also, that these questions are intended to stave off our students' most common anxieties about writing. Teach them how to recognize and emulate good writing from the start and your life—and theirs!—will be much easier by the time assignments come due. Good luck!