

1-1-2008

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### Recommended Citation

Mix-Thibault, Julie Ann (2008) "How to Improve Reading Proficiency and Interpretation While Teaching Writing," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 23: Iss. 2, Article 9.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1123>

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# How to Improve Reading Proficiency and Interpretation While Teaching Writing

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## Creating Meaning

Throughout the twenty-two years I have been involved with Freshman Composition at the university, I have often noted the glorious opportunities for improving reading proficiency, including interpretation, in the writing classroom. Some writing faculty, however, insist on writing assignments disembodied from reading material altogether, removing students from opportunities for reading enhancement. At the other end of the spectrum are those of us who insist that our student writers have opportunity to improve both their reading proficiency and write in response to readings. Also, we insist that they “read” visual or oral texts and respond in writing. We are convinced that “good reading” makes for “good writing.”

As for reading, we understand the goldmine of creative potential during reading on the students’ part and recognize our responsibility to help students unearth their treasures. That is, we recognize how readers can engage in constructing and creating meaning during the reading process if they are taught how to do so. The text is not simply the author’s anymore. We ascribe to Tierney and Pearson’s theory in *Composing and Comprehending* wherein the reader is actually a planner, composer, editor, and monitor—four facets of the writer’s persona reciprocated in active reading. At the same time, we understand how writers benefit from assistance with reading maneuvers, which develop understanding at various interpretive levels, even though, ironically, such maneuvers frequently require an appreciable foundation in reading.

It is a cyclical, synergistic phenomenon: Students who partake in the craft of reading improvement improve their reading proficiency, thereby paving the way for grasping even more sophisticated understandings. Then, when they put the pen to the page, they have already experienced broader understandings that help to enrich their production of written texts. This inherent reciprocal nature of how reading and writing interface, even at the most basic level, is explained by Stanley B. Straw:

*The knowledge sources that inform reading and writing are, I think, identical. Both draw on the same knowledge bases such as episodic memory, visual memory, syntactic and semantic knowledge, world knowledge, and lexical knowledge. The act of recognition in reading then can be conceptualized as the same as the act of generation in writing. (81)*

Of course, at the interpretive level, also, students stand to improve their quality of written text if they dig deeper for meaning during reading and are taught to apply the same level of intensity to their writing. They usually must be taught because they do not ordinarily do it on their own (Stein 152). Overall, therefore, if we wish students to become better writers, then we need to help them to become better readers. If we leave reading improvement up to the students alone, we find that it is only those who read voraciously who become better readers. With no real direction to follow, the majority of the students, at least the students in my experience, are not likely to read voraciously and do not improve their reading proficiency. As a result, their writing frequently suffers.

So what can we do? How do we help students to become better readers and, therefore (in many cases at least), better writers? We must arm ourselves with methods that work to insure enthusiastic responses—methods that do not bore us, or our students, to death. One place to turn for answers is the field of Composition Studies, to scholars who have examined the connections between reading and writing.

## Engaging Techniques

Noted researchers in Composition Studies (e.g., Augustine and Winterowd; Bartholomae and Petrosky; Brandt; Bruffee; Flower et al.; Goleman; Lunsford; Salvatori; Sternglass) maintain that students who read actively in conversation with the text are automatically integrating their background knowledge on the topic, no matter how rudimentary. To introduce and guide students into active reading, I begin by demonstrating a process that they can quite readily use. I begin by purposely easing students into active reading by situating them in texts *that hold an intrinsic interest for them--something relating to their backgrounds*. Then the students and I preview the text (read first and last paragraphs, first sentences of each paragraph, and discussion questions). I set students up for meaningful interaction with the text by showing them how to probe for “significances” through examination of objects that are presented.

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## Familiar Object Association

A specific example involving a challenging, yet interesting reading selection clarifies the technique: When reading about Maya Angelou’s graduation from eighth grade in her autobiographical book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sing*, many of my freshman writers are drawn to the topic because of their own experiences, but struggle with advanced vocabulary and unfamiliar references. I have learned that while they may ultimately understand the basic story of Maya’s graduation, they often cannot appreciate the nuances of the sensory perceptions, for example, and do not initially understand the link between apparently insignificant details and the significance of the action. *They do not realize the power that they inherently possess*. In anticipation of this situation, after previewing the reading selection with them, I refer them to sections of the story where there are objects or items (concrete nouns), for their consideration.

I suggest they concentrate on the flowers in Maya’s backyard garden or on the cool dirt of the garden sifting between her toes on the morning of her graduation. Or I ask them to consider the exquisite yellow dress her mother had hand sewn for the ceremony. I encourage them to delve for the deep, rich messages found in those seeming insignificances which actually take on the tenor of “significances”—those points of interest with which they “connect” during reading. If they focus on Maya’s graduation dress, for example, even though they may be unfamiliar with “shirring,” they can connect with Maya’s mother’s love demonstrated through her intricate hand sewing on the handmade dress and, also, connect with Maya’s pride upon wearing it.

During debriefing after the reading, I encourage them to look into their own lives for symbols of love and pride, perhaps in terms of homemade or handmade items, so that they may come away with a deeper understanding of Maya, her mother, the dress, the importance of graduation day to parents and the communities during that time, and even of the mother-daughter relationship. In a real sense, this metaphorical teaching deeply connects students with the reading and enables them to have something interesting and worthwhile to say in their writing, even though initially they may have sworn they had nothing to say. I go a step further, though, to ultimately apply the merits of what is gleaned through reading to writing.

I act as the “collaborator,” referred to by Frank Smith, who suggests that even children in grade school need an interested collaborator who eases them toward thinking like writers during reading. He further suggests that they need to be convinced they can imagine written production of texts of interest while they are reading material of interest to them (565). Students at any age, however, can be assisted with thinking of themselves as writers during reading, and in the case of this metaphorical connection (through familiar object association), I, as a collaborator, help students to understand how one item can spark a deeper connection into various complexities of the whole text for reading and writing purposes. Students come to realize a type of reading and writing empowerment; therefore, and through learning this strategy, associating familiar objects with theme or action in collaboration with a mentor, they begin to become more aware of their choices as readers and writers.

### **“Stretching” Students Beyond the Familiar**

When familiar object association is not an option, however, how do writing instructors help students to connect with readings steeped in unfamiliar historical and cultural underpinnings? Clearly, students should be “stretched” beyond the familiar, according to scholars who have focused on the associations between college student reader/writers’ cognitive development and background knowledge resources (e.g., August; Bizzell; Daiute; Flower; Flower and Hayes; Foertsch; Kellogg; Lunsford; Shaw; Sternglass). These experts have concluded that unprepared college students and, indeed, even better prepared college students must be challenged beyond the boundaries of familiar ideas and attendant terminology to grow as readers, writers, and thinkers. Freshman writers, therefore, are faced with the seemingly impossible task of “stretching” based on what they do not know, but instructors can help to reconcile their unprepared students’ varied backgrounds with the thwarting demands of academic prose. How? What is suggested here actually extends to under-prepared students at various grade levels.

First, an instructor can educate students on historical and cultural underpinnings by questioning the students on the underpinnings, assuming, of course, the instructor has done her/his homework. *When students share what they know, even in bits and pieces, collectively they begin to create a structure for understanding.* The instructor can augment the information by way of select comments and then, if appropriate, help students to *predict* what is to come in the reading, again drawing upon the strength of the group’s collective knowledge. Second, after this pre-reading exercise, instructors can use an additional effective instructional method to address the issues prior to a reading/writing assignment, one I use in my classroom. It takes time, but it is worth it. I visually depict the historical backdrop or key concepts in the pending reading, via a slide show, photos, or film. I include related poetry, artifacts, and music to deepen the students’ appreciation and understanding. A detailed model of an instructional unit I use in my classroom provides illustration of this process.

### **Building Background Knowledge: An Example**

For a reading and writing assignment on the short story,

“Fear,” by Peter Mahoney, set in Viet Nam during the War, students first examine a bracelet worn in remembrance of a prisoner of war (from my experience) and copies of letters of communication written between key political leaders. Then students view a slide show of actual war scenes, accompanied by background music and a brief reading of related poetry, usually by a student volunteer. They view the slides twice, initially with the music tailored to focus on the patriotic dimension of the War, via Barry Sadler’s anthem, “The Green Berets,” and then with the music focused on the catastrophic dimension of the War, via a solemn, classical heart-rending sonata. Students respond informally in writing after each slide presentation, having vicariously experienced some of the War’s aspects. I elicit key words from them that come to mind and make a mind map of the words after each exercise for them on the board. I encourage them to partake by telling them that nothing is right or wrong. The students use the key words in a response paragraph, one in which they freely talk about or to the slide images. They can say whatever they wish. Then they study a fact sheet on the War. The facts combined with the imagery evoked by the poetry and the actual images on the slides often serve to enlighten students on the incongruities of the War. These elements along with the response paragraph better position students to connect in significant, insightful ways during the full reading of the short story.

To capture in-process reflections during the full reading (which is done aloud so that they experience proficient prose aurally and visually), the students jot down in the margins notes or insights gleaned and underline key words that “grab” them. They become *active* readers. They share their reflections aloud informally. Then, during the writing process, they are encouraged to integrate their perceptions and insights. I circulate and make suggestions to students while they are writing. Ultimately, writing a structured piece in response to “Fear” becomes a more rewarding experience for students because they have connected with the historical and cultural underpinnings and are more “in the know.” This multi-media based approach is very useful for building background schemata and fostering active reading, but other methods that focus on establishing contextual understanding and connections

are also worth investigating.

Perhaps, however, some of you are asking: “Isn’t it unrealistic to expect all of the students to begin to be able to ‘talk back’ to texts—to ruminate and respond, especially to more challenging texts?” Actually, yes it is. Granted, if they are not particularly fluent readers to begin with, they have one strike against them. *Foremost, many of the students have been schooled in one-dimensional reading*—a largely boring act in most cases. They have been taught that the author had a particular meaning in mind and a reader’s task is to discover it. To address this issue, I suggest another more intense strategy for connecting students with challenging texts, such that they can “talk back.” I use the term *identification* when referring to this strategy.

### **Guiding Students to Use “Identification” as a Strategy**

“Identification” is perhaps best explained in the doing: The instructor immerses students into readings on specified topics, but only after having provided them the opportunity to establish working terminology and conceptual frameworks for the topic areas. The key here is that *students provide themselves with their own working terminology*, i.e., with the vocabulary needed to use when conceptualizing and interacting with the text. David Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky conceived of the basic strategy, providing it in a course for their freshman writers who seemed “powerless... when asked to do something with what they read” (22). After involving their students in some preliminary personal writing on the topics of change and identity, their topic of note, Bartholomae and Petrosky asked students to work in groups to construct working terminology in preparation for interpreting outside readings on the topics. Via their working terminology and concomitant conceptual frameworks, then, the students became actively engaged in negotiating the outside readings, selecting “*significances*”—*points of interest with which they somehow identified*—and interpreting them in light of the agreed-upon terminology. Even when students were initially unable to comprehend the global picture of a text or to intuit its multiple conversations, they were frequently able to initially identify with several specifics and to ultimately make connections. They would ask themselves, “Why did I choose this ‘significance’? It has a meaning for me. Let me use our terminology to

identify what that meaning is.”

This model augments the students’ referential resources and command of language. It allows initial access to those students lacking confidence who ordinarily would choose to remain uninvolved. Although Bartholomae and Petrosky regard their basic reading and writing course as an effective entity unto itself, and although they have developed a following of professionals who employ the methodology and/or debate the merits annually at professional conferences, even the most casually observant instructor can appreciate the value of enhancing a student’s proficiency through this type of technique.

### **Familiar-to-Unfamiliar Elaboration: Encouraging Students to Engage in Internal Dialogue**

Actually, I use a productive model of the familiar-to-unfamiliar elaboration process as a reading-writing strategy with my students. I usually begin with the riveting but short essay, “Up from Misery,” containing a gut-level tale of a commonplace, miserable alcoholic, by William F. Buckley. As we read aloud, I ask the students to “*talk back*”—checking off “significances,” points of personal connection of their choosing, and then, during their own closer reading, to write specific personal notes to or about the primary character, the alcoholic, in the margins. Due to Buckley’s sophisticated language and style and despite other experiences with “talking back” and my explanation of how to “talk back” during reading, some of my students do not grant themselves license to engage in internal dialogue during reading. They do not “give a voice” to an otherwise “mute text,” in Mariolina Salvatori’s terms (137). They seem to believe that the author is an authority whom they have no right to question or approach.

To foster more authoritative student involvement in active reading, and because many persons have had at least some experience with a substance abuse addict and understand chaotic repercussions associated with addiction, I ask the students to express themselves freely, although I protect their anonymity. *I begin by providing an example of my own musings, as I “talk back” out of the experience I’ve had with a friend.* Consequently, in informal, sometimes emotive prose, the students also partake. Sometimes they weave a web of intrigue similar in intensity to Buckley’s

web of intrigue. I use the opportunity to help students discern between report and emotive language, asking them to remove emotionally charged words, having provided some working examples. When they proceed to write (in report language) a structured response, they are far different individuals from those who would have written without interaction based on their own “connections.” Students often have much more to say, in the first place, but what they have to say is deeper, somehow, than what I would have ordinarily seen.

Overall, then, I have found that students who derive enriched understandings and insights from active reading techniques often arrive at more critical, stimulating points of view and provide better-grounded discussions. Familiar object association, establishment of collective prediction, depiction of historical backdrop and key concepts, reflection on paper and aloud, “identification” through self-established terminology, and “talking back” may not guarantee good writing, but using these strategies is worth it for “taking the plunge” into the world of meaningful, active involvement with the readings.

### **Plain Old “Common Sense” Approaches**

A couple of common sense approaches, pre-reading approaches, connect students deeply with the impending reading and help to provide them with a better store of ideas from which to draw during writing. First, to experienced readers, common sense dictates that perusing a substantive text before a full reading of that text can be advantageous. It can, however, be worthwhile for even the most basic readers. Of all the pre-reading strategies available, the specific “previewing” technique is fundamental to strengthening involvement with and comprehension of complex materials. Basic readers can learn the strategy, learn the reasons for it, and adopt it as a common sense practice for future reading. The preview process is easily orchestrated and widely endorsed by study skills specialists who promote use of the Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review (SQ3R) study technique, wherein previewing activity is referred to as the “survey” (Robinson).

The instructor and students begin by constructing a general framework for understanding the text, reading the title and the author’s notes (if provided) and speculating

on the content (as was similarly suggested by Tierney and Pearson in their article on schema theory). A reader reads the first paragraph, the first sentence of each body paragraph, and the last paragraph. (Reading aloud, as mentioned previously, is a means for basic readers/writers to experience proficient prose aurally and visually.) If topic headings are provided, they are turned into questions. If important, unfamiliar words, likely to stump the reader despite contextual clues, are involved at any point in the process, the instructor may simply wish to provide explanation. Lastly, a reader reads the discussion questions accompanying the lesson. The discussion questions often reveal the skeletal progression of the text and can be superimposed as a “map” during active reading of the entire text. To avoid unnecessary confusion, the instructor may wish to limit the number of questions for critical overlay to two or three, rewriting them if they are ill constructed.

Well-constructed questions span the various levels of comprehension, such as literal, inferential, analytical, and applicative (the latter in relation to demonstration of knowledge through application). If interpretive questions are not included by the author/editor, it is incumbent upon the instructor to formulate questions of a higher thinking order, to pique the students’ curiosity and to get them thinking deeply. As I have said, more thoughtful reading often results in more thoughtful writing. Instructors can point out to students how they (instructors) have enhanced the questions, allowing for varied, deeper ways of looking at the reading. They may wish to model creation of a range of questions and later, in an exercise, allow students to go through the process themselves. In any event, in my classroom, I make certain we conduct a preview of the reading before I dismiss the class. *I do not ever tell students just to go home and read the selection.* I always provide them with a backdrop for their reading, so that they do not face the reading “cold” and so that they bring something to the reading, some underlying connections.

Finally, since students will be responding to a reading, it is a good idea to provide them with the writing prompt up front, prior to any pre-reading or reading that they do. Usually, *writers that read with the writing task in mind are more connected and, therefore, better prepared for writing purposes.* Why? Inherently, readers have purposes

and goals; that is part of their mental representation in discourse construction (Flower, "Introduction" 13). If the purpose in our students' case is to connect with the reading through the writing prompt, the students have nothing to lose. They only stand to gain. They are better prepared for writing their papers. For example, relating to Shirley Chisholm's, "I'd Rather Be Black Than Female," a clearly structured essay, I have asked my students to read to and then to write on the comparison of both elements of Chisholm's argument in order to answer the question, "Does Chisholm grant adequate time and provide adequate evidence to convince the reader of her claim?" It's clean and neat. I have the students read to answer that question and the discussion questions. I have found that students are served well by deliberately focusing on the writing task with some informed guidance.

The intrinsic value of focusing readers for their writing tasks has perhaps best been described not only by Linda Flower, but also by her colleagues in *Reading-to-Write*. Although their project involved acclimating college level readers (as opposed to more basic readers) to various task-representations for their papers beyond the scope of this application, the significance of focusing readers on the writing task in acknowledgment that reading can shape that task is not level specific. For the sake of impromptu writing, however, the instructor can pop the writing prompt on students at the point of execution having already prepared students ahead through providing discussion or "think ahead" questions in anticipation of the impromptu writing. Ultimately, what is important is that the students do not go into the writing "cold."

### Conclusion

Students who connect with and invest in texts they are reading, using their bolstered background schemata, pre-reading techniques, and individual associations, begin to perceive, in terms of what they know, in terms of what they know how to do, and in terms of what they are learning how to do. Each category is strengthened. As mentioned throughout this article, exposure to the suggested techniques does not automatically result in fluent, sophisticated diction and phrase manipulation or well-developed text on the part of students. However, it often does serve as a basis for marked improvement. Also, instructors usually find

themselves more deeply engaged in the interpretive and the aesthetic than they have been both during preparation of materials and during in-class teaching sessions involving fresh, effective methodologies.

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- Adapted from a previously published article, "Improving Literal and Interpretive Reading Proficiency in the Writing Classroom: The Power of 'Connection,'" *Michigan Reading Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 2 (Winter 2003).

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