# Comp Quickreads

**CSULA Department of English** **February 1, 2010**

## Reading Strategies Revisited

### Basic Reading Strategies

- Good readers **preview** the reading by reviewing the table of contents, chapter titles, headings and subheadings. They attempt to understand how the text is organized *before* they start reading.
- Good readers identify a **purpose** for reading: Why am I reading? What do I hope to get from the reading (information, ideas, pleasure)? How will I know when I've accomplished my purpose?
- Good readers place the reading in **context**. When was it written? By whom? For what purpose? What genre does it belong to and what conventions are associated with that genre?
- Good readers **read quickly** but are prepared to **re-read**. Does the writer always use topic sentences? Are paragraphs mostly filled with different kinds of evidence all supporting the same claim? Can parts be skipped or quickly skimmed?
- Good readers **engage** with the text, ask questions of the text, agree with it, disagree with it, relate it to other readings, and note when it confuses them.
- Good readers are able to **summarize** the text and frequently will **reflect** on the experience of reading. What is its main point? What was most/least effective about it? What problems did I encounter while reading?

Repeatedly in the Composition Conversation on invention, participants called attention to the centrality of reading and discussion as an invention strategy. The most recent Composition Conversation focused specifically on reading and the strategies that teachers employ to help students become better readers.

In a recent survey of first-year writing students at CSULA, 30% of respondents characterized their reading ability as average or poor with that figure rising to nearly 50% for students placed in ENGL 095. Given this level of dissatisfaction, it isn't surprising that, as one instructor stated, students often claim to "hate" reading. Clearly for many students, reading is difficult and a source of frustration. To overcome those frustrations, participants offered a range of strategies.

First, participants noted the importance of making reading explicit and devoting class time to discussing the reading and how to read the reading. One place to begin is the course reader. Most composition readers and reader/rhetoric texts contain an introductory section on reading strategies, such as "Getting the Most Out of Your Reading" in *Models for Writers*, or "Active Reading, Critical Thinking, and the Writing Process" in *50 Essays*. *Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum* not only devotes an entire chapter, "Critical Reading and Critique" to the subject, but discusses effective reading processes and strategies in virtually every section of the text. These resources provide effective overviews of the reading process and reinforce the practices of effective readers.

But simply asking students to read about reading isn't enough. Participants agreed that significant class time must be devoted to discussing texts and modeling strategies for understanding texts. We might take for granted that students have read and understood the assigned reading, but while they might have "read" it, they often have not understood it in the ways we expect. Some students might struggle to understand what they have read because they have limited active vocabularies, which as one instructor noted can be addressed through explicit attention to vocabulary development through journal writing and even instruction in using a dictionary.

Other strategies focus on more global understanding of texts. Some instructors ask students to write summaries of texts, a task that is common in the classroom, but universally acknowledged by teachers of writing to be more difficult than it appears. Some have students "quickwrite" about a reading at the beginning of class to help them focus on the key questions of the text. Others use "recollection" units, where small groups are asked to come up with global summaries of a reading.

All students, however, benefit from focused attention to questions of meaning and significance. What is the writer saying? What is the significance of that? Questions of the first type ask for summary and focus on what might be called the information content of the reading. Questions of the second type ask for analysis and draw attention to rhetorical purpose and the writer's strategic choices. Discussion that focuses on questions about meaning and significance, and small groups that enable students to discuss such questions, produce two key results: students come to a shared understanding of a text, and students begin to understand that meaning is constructed through deliberation and conversation.

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This article is also available online at compconversations.blogspot.com. Comments and suggestions should be directed to Jim Garrett at jgarret@calstatela.edu.