

Strategies That Foster Critical Reading

This guide offers strategies faculty members can use to foster careful reading and critical thinking.

Provide Guidance before Each Reading—Make Them Curious

Professors can provide pre-reading questions before each reading to frame and promote critical thinking tasks for the next class period. Presenting general questions or directives, such as “How do these concepts apply to the workplace” or “Bring to class next time how these ideas and questions relate to what we talked about in the last unit,” give students specific strategies to work with as they read. Using specific questions or directives, such as “What piece of evidence in the argument do you find the most persuasive and why?” or “Think about the strengths and weaknesses of her research methodology,” can foster substantive and interactive discussions that tie into the learning goals of the course.

Bottom Line: You can pose reading questions, ideas to consider, and connections to think about before students do the reading.

Estimated Levels of Time and Energy Required for:

Faculty to prepare:	Low
Students to prepare and/or respond:	Low to Medium
Faculty to respond, analyze, and/or grade:	Not applicable

Use Reading Quizzes that Promote Critical Thinking & Productive Discussion

In *Engaging Ideas*, John Bean notes that some researchers argue that quizzes “promote surface rather than deep reading” (168). Instead of focusing on facile answers, however, one way to use quizzes is to model the type of critical thinking—application, analysis, synthesis, evaluation, argument—you want students to do as they read. The instructor can then use the quiz as a springboard to discussion.

For example, here are four sample short-answer questions from a quiz in a professional editing class:

- The author relates an editor can estimate costs “per hour, per page, or per job” (354). Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of one of those three options. (2 points)
 - *Context:* The chapter didn’t cover advantages and disadvantages, but the question makes students articulate them. As the instructor went over the quiz during class, the students discussed the advantages and disadvantages of all three.
- Provide one specific point made in the chapter about project management that you find really important and explain why you think it’s really important.
 - *Context:* This question requires the students will have read the chapter and asks them to offer a specific point they find important with reasons why.
- Discuss the importance of a “review conference” related to client projects (372).
 - *Context:* This question highlights an important concept (recall) covered in the chapter and asks students to explain why they are helpful.
- When you provide feedback to a client, the author suggests you use “I” and “you” in different situations. Explain the reasoning behind using those pronouns in different situations, and then you need to argue for or against this recommendation. (3 points)

- *Context:* The question asks students to recall the reasoning, and thus specific points from the reading, but it also calls for students to argue with or against the recommendations.

Bottom Line: Instead of using multiple choice or true/false reading quizzes, you can craft short-answer questions to create an expectation of close reading, to model critical thinking skills, and to promote discussion from the student’s point of view.

Estimated Levels of Time and Energy Required for:

Faculty to prepare:	Low
Students to prepare and/or respond:	Medium
Faculty to respond, analyze, and/or grade:	Medium

Use the KWL Tool—Know, Want to know, Learned

For a multitude of reading assignments, Shelley Reid offers the KWL tool that can help students as they’re introduced to new concepts, ideas, problems, issues, and debates. Either as part of a participation, homework, or daily work grade, professors can require students to present answers to these questions, which promotes a process approach to reading:

- List 3-5 things you already know about this topic
- List 3-5 things you want to know about this topic
- List 3-5 things you have learned after doing this reading

Instructors can use the KWL in various ways—to assess students’ prior knowledge, to address what needs to be covered that’s not in the reading, and to work with and complicate what students gained from the reading.

Bottom Line: The KWL tool models a process approach to reading and can energize and focus discussions centered on what students learned, and it can let you know what students need to understand.

Estimated Levels of Time and Energy Required for:

Faculty to prepare:	Low
Students to prepare and/or respond:	Low to Medium
Faculty to respond, analyze, and/or grade:	Low

Create an Analytical Tool for Reading Material

While Bean recommends that professors should talk about their own reading process (169) and show their own “note-taking and responding process” (170), instructors also can provide analytical reading tools for analyzing texts.

For example, in a course that has students look at arguments, instead of just looking at an article’s strengths or weaknesses, the professor could have students use Richard Fulkerson’s tool for examining evidence—STAR: sufficiency of grounds, typicality, accuracy, and relevance (44-5). For upper-division courses, professors could craft their own discipline-specific analytical tools for reading material.

Bottom Line: You can create a discipline-specific reading tool to promote the type of thinking and analysis you expect from students.

Estimated Levels of Time and Energy Required for:

Faculty to prepare:	Medium initially to Low later
Students to prepare and/or respond:	Varies
Faculty to respond, analyze, and/or grade:	Varies

Play the Believing & Doubting Games

As both Bean and the WAC Handbook showcase, the believing and doubting games made famous by Peter Elbow are effective strategies for showing, as Bean puts it, “the reader’s double role of being simultaneously open to texts and skeptical to them” (176). When the class is working with a scholarly article or a contested way of doing things in a profession, the instructor can direct students, either via discussion or an in-class writing, to inhabit others’ perspectives without hacking away at evidence and assumptions. They play the believing game to see others’ perspectives without judging them negatively. When playing the doubting game, that’s when students look for illogic, weaknesses, gaps, blind spots, and faulty assumptions.

Bottom Line: Either through discussion or short in-class writing activities, you can use the believing and doubting games to help students see multiple perspectives.

Estimated Levels of Time and Energy Required for:

Faculty to prepare:	Low
Students to prepare and/or respond:	Low
Faculty to respond, analyze, and/or grade:	Low to Medium

Assign Students to Bring Their Own Discussion Questions

Instead of the instructor being responsible for crafting a large set of discussion questions for a reading, having students create and use their own discussion questions puts them in charge and responsible for discussion and their learning. While it’s probably smart for the professor to create some questions and points to have ready if discussion lags, turning over the power of discussion to students can still address the learning goals and content of a course, but it’s simply directed by students. One important note is that instructors need to talk to students about how to craft good discussion questions (ones that can’t be answered with a “yes” or “no”) before doing this strategy.

Bottom Line: By making students responsible for crafting discussion questions, you can still cover what needs to be talked about; students direct the discussion, and you fill in gaps where needed.

Estimated Levels of Time and Energy Required for:

Faculty to prepare:	Medium
Students to prepare and/or respond:	Medium to High
Faculty to respond, analyze, and/or grade:	Medium

Have Small Groups Present & Discuss

Bean has a whole chapter in his book—“Chapter 10: Using Small Groups to Coach Thinking and Teach Disciplinary Argument”—and he covers a lot of ground in that chapter. As he relates, using small groups (three to six students) to analyze readings or sections of reading material is an often-

used strategy. The instructor can craft critical thinking tasks for the whole class, or the professor can assign specific questions to separate groups. Whatever the method used, small groups should designate a presenter and a recorder to document the group work, and then the presenters for each group provide their findings during class. The notes or “minutes” of the group can be turned in for some manner of grade such as a participation grade.

Bottom Line: You can use small groups in multiple ways to analyze difficult reading and to focus students’ critical thinking skills germane to the course.

Estimated Levels of Time and Energy Required for:

Faculty to prepare:	Medium to High
Students to prepare and/or respond:	Medium to High
Faculty to respond, analyze, and/or grade:	Medium to High

Implement a Presenter→Respondent Format

This strategy is a modification of the present-and-discuss method above. Like an instructor would do with assigning small groups questions, the professor assigns specific questions related to a reading and then expects that group or individual students to present their thoughts. One flaw of the present-and-discuss method is that students who are not assigned the question or critical thinking task may tune out what is being said when students present their ideas. To address that issue, after someone or a group has presented findings, the professor can either call on others or ask for volunteers to respond to what was said by the student/s who just presented. These are the respondents. Or the instructor can ask the students who presented to pick respondents. Regardless, respondents should agree, disagree, question, and complicate what the others students said, but they must provide reasons for their ideas just like the presenters did.

Bottom Line: By using the Presenter→Respondent method, you can have students closely examine important readings, and the respondent function ensures they are also actively listening to peers’ ideas.

Estimated Levels of Time and Energy Required for:

Faculty to prepare:	Medium
Students to prepare and/or respond:	High
Faculty to respond, analyze, and/or grade:	Medium

Designate Discussion Leaders & Let Them Lead

Donald Finkel made the hands-off method to teaching famous in his book *Teaching With Your Mouth Shut*. Finkel’s argument is that the professor’s role is to simply act as a learner like students. While Finkel does not promote discussion leaders in his book, a modification of his approach would be an instructor making specific students responsible for leading discussion or activities related to the reading material each day. The professor gives power over to the students, and everyone works with the material. If there is silence, the professor is also quiet, which often makes students talk because they hate silence.

Bottom Line: A hands-off approach to covering the reading material can show how you are also a learner, and students will do a lot of work to discuss the reading if they know you are not going to bail them out.

Estimated Levels of Time and Energy Required for:

Faculty to prepare:	Low
Students to prepare and/or respond:	High
Faculty to respond, analyze, and/or grade:	Low to Medium

Assign Double-Entry Notebooks

In an old-fashioned notebook or through journal entries in Word documents, students can select important points, passages, and ideas from reading material. They write them in the left column. In the right column, students respond to those ideas. As both Bean (178-79) and Reid relate, the right column is for the student's reasoned responses and connections to other ideas. Reid provides these instructions for students: "Use the right column to respond or talk-back to the author's point: try to be vivid rather than general, to speak your mind rather than to 'translate' ('...by this the author means...'), to question or extend rather than just say "I agree" (say *why*), to make connections to other readings or experiences. You will write more, perhaps twice or three times as much, in the right column than in the left. Show what's in your head that might not be in some other reader's head."

Bottom Line: You can use a double-entry notebook or journal to understand what students are getting out of the reading material, and this assignment also models the reasoning, connections, and arguments students should be making.

Estimated Levels of Time and Energy Required for:

Faculty to prepare:	Low
Students to prepare and/or respond:	High
Faculty to respond, analyze, and/or grade:	Medium to High

Implement In-Class Writing Activities Based on the Reading

The EIU WAC Handbook on the Writing Across the Curriculum webpage (<http://castle.eiu.edu/~writcurr/>) provides two sections on writing-to-learn activities and exploratory writing activities. These short and easy-to-grade writing assignments can be assigned during class or as homework to reinforce critical thinking skills related to disciplinary content. Some examples are minute papers, analytic memos, directed paraphrasing, paper prospectus, various journals, and written dialogues.

Bottom Line: You can use short writing assignments to help students learn the ideas, debates, and concepts related to the subject matter of a course.

Estimated Levels of Time and Energy Required for:

Faculty to prepare:	Low to Medium
Students to prepare and/or respond:	Varies
Faculty to respond, analyze, and/or grade:	Varies

Create Short Writing Responses That Focus on Critical Thinking, Not Summary

Instead of requiring writing that requires summary, some faculty focus their short writing assignments on application, evaluation, analysis, and argument. In fact, in Nowacek's study, she found that having students do "reaction papers" made students intently focus on what they had to

say about the reading material rather than just summarize it. While summarization is a helpful first step, Nowacek found the reaction papers “contained the greatest number of and variety of interdisciplinary connections” (83) among the cohort of students she studied who were taking three different courses at the same time with the same faculty members. In the group she studied, the reaction papers were ungraded but required, so “the fact that the reaction papers were ungraded likely made them a safer space to make connections visible” (84).

Bottom Line: Instead of short writing assignments that summarize, you can have students produce short assignments that focus on reactions or disciplinary habits of mind in a low-stress assignment.

Estimated Levels of Time and Energy Required for:

Faculty to prepare:	Low to Medium
Students to prepare and/or respond:	Medium
Faculty to respond, analyze, and/or grade:	Varies

Use Classroom Assessment Techniques (CAT) That Promote Learning

Angelo and Cross’s *Classroom Assessment Techniques: A Handbook for College Teachers* is an excellent resource for faculty who want to use various methods to see what students are learning and use assignments that connect to critical reading. The book provide 50 CATs to choose from, but below are some of the more popular CATs:

- 1: Background Knowledge Probe
- 6: Minute Paper
- 7: Muddiest Point
- 9: Defining Features Matrix
- 16: Concept Maps
- 19: Problem Recognition Tasks
- 25: Student-Generated Test Questions
- 31: Everyday Ethical Dilemmas
- 40: Diagnostic Learning Logs
- 44: Group Instructional Feedback Technique
- 46: RSQC2: Recall, Summarize, Question, Connect, and Comment
- 48: Reading Rating Sheets

Bottom Line: You can use CATS to assess where students are in their learning related to reading material.

Estimated Levels of Time and Energy Required for:

Faculty to prepare:	Varies
Students to prepare and/or respond:	Varies
Faculty to respond, analyze, and/or grade:	Varies

Works Cited

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