

# Strategies to Help Your Students Read Effectively and Efficiently



Columbia University  
Graduate School of Arts &  
Sciences Teaching Center

## How to Get Your Students to Read What You've Assigned

### 1. Sell your students on the reading

Explain why you selected the reading. Describe its purpose and value and relevance to the course. Be explicit about the connection between the reading and other class projects and assignments.

### 2. Situate the reading assignment in a broader intellectual context.

Whether the book is fiction or non-fiction, it is part of a larger cultural conversation. Help your students understand where it fits in.

### 3. Teach expert reading strategies

Help the students become expert readers. You know how to read efficiently; share your tips.

If it is a work of non-fiction, you know how to identify the author's thesis and trace the development of the reading's argument.

If it is a work of literature, you know the importance of asking questions. Here are a few: Why did the author choose a particular title? What is the setting? Who's the protagonist and does the protagonist evolve over the course of the work? What is the relationship between the protagonist and the narrator? What themes or issues does the work explore? What motifs run through the work? What characters, actions, or situations beg to be taken symbolically?

### 4. Provide study questions.

Study questions help students focus their reading.

### 5. Make students responsible for completing the reading.

Consider requiring a response paper or an online posting. Or you might begin your class by asking students questions based on the reading.

## Students the Secrets of Effective Reading

**Secret 1. With works of non-fiction, read from the outside in.**

*1. Start with the title.* What does it suggest about the book's argument?

*2. Look at the table of contents.* How is the book organized?

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3. **Read the introduction and conclusion.** What is the book's thesis and its place in a disciplinary debate?

4. **Read chapters' first and last paragraphs, and then the topic sentences.** What are the chapters' major themes and arguments?

**Secret 2. Ask What? Why? Where?**

1. **What is the book's controlling argument?**

2. **Why is the author making this argument?** To challenge a rival interpretation? To advance a political agenda?

3. **Where is the argument weak or unconvincing?**

**Secret 3. With works of literature, read the text from multiple perspectives:**

a. **The aesthetic:** How does the author use language, style, tone, and characterization to engage and manipulate the reader?

b. **Read between the lines:** What subtexts, deeper meanings, allusions, and symbolism do you see?

c. **The "human condition":** What does the text tell us about the human condition: about human nature or love or families or growing up?

d. **The "politics of literature":** What political or ideological beliefs, values, and ideas underlie the text?

e. **Cultural criticism:** What assumptions does the text make about femininity or masculinity, whiteness or blackness, civilization or nature, race or class? Does the text support the dominant views of its time or subvert them?

f. **Reader response:** How might different readers—male, female, African American, Latino, working-class, gay or lesbian—read and experience the text?

g. **The ethical:** What are the moral implications of the ideas advanced in the texts.