BOROUGH OF MANHATTAN COMMUNITY COLLEGE

& READING

WRITING ∨ ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

SPRING 2020 NEWSLETTER

Hello BMCC Faculty,

Congratulations! You've made it to the end of an unpredictable and impossibly difficult semester. The BMCC WAC Program has also been navigating the move to (social) distance learning, adapting our workshop programming to Zoom, and developing faculty tip sheets on online discussions and commenting (see page 4 for the link).

Not to be derailed, we present you with this semester's newsletter which focuses on the intimate bond between reading and writing. In light of the move of all classes online [and 50% online in fall], writing takes on an even bigger role in student learning; now most student assessment and interface with professors happens in writing. So where does reading fit in here? How much time and energy can we reasonably expect students to be able to devote to course reading? How do I usher students through a difficult but essential text in my discipline? Articles in this newsletter address these questions by adapting WAC principles and exercises to promote attentive, substantive reading.

Stay safe and healthy!
Your 2019 - 2020 WAC @ BMCC Team

SO HOW MUCH READING CAN I ASSIGN?
BY JACK CRAWFORD

"Why don't students do the reading?" Let's take this classic exasperated exclamation seriously. There are a host of reasons students do not complete the reading we assign them, many of which boil down to access and attention. We can address access by making reading available in multiple forms, when possible. Widely disseminate readings as PDFs and make them available online and in class. (Consider the college OER program! Contact Jean Amaral or Gina Cherry for more information.) Attention may seem like the bigger stumbling block. Students may not complete readings when they get bored or tired but this apathetic explanation may obscure the reality that students do not feel like they have the tools for grappling with a given text. And this is where WAC principles can come in handy.

1. Quantity over quality: when we give a lot of reading, students can feel overwhelmed and try to digest everything by skimming the surface. Help direct their attention by offering specific, directed instructions for reading assignments.
2. Redundancy: when we lecture over the reading, we teach students that it is strategic for them not to read! They know their professor will digest the reading for them and repeat the most salient points. Instead, incentivize students to complete reading by avoiding direct repetition of readings in lecture and by making sure there is some (even low-stakes) assessments for reading assignments.
3. Genre confusion: students do not always realize that the strategies they used for reading in one class might be useful for tackling a new genre. Help them make this connection. How is annotating in the sciences different from annotating a novel? A scholarly paper?
4. Authority: students new to college may not see themselves as having the authority to respond to or especially to criticize authors. Help students access this authority with exercises that ask them to take a rhetorical/subject position in relation to the text. Try out Peter Elbow's Believing and Doubting Game. Or, let's say you are studying the 1913 Armory Show that introduced US audiences to much European abstract art. Have your students write a response to a reading on the show not as themselves but from the position of a critic, an attendee, or an included artist.

This is all to say that while there is no one answer to the question "how much reading can I assign?" the more you scaffold reading assignments and communicate directly with students about what you expect them to get out of readings the longer you can expect to hold their attention.

For specific tips on what these writing assignments might look like, check out Ryan's piece on the next page....

THEORY IN THE CLASS (R/Z)OOM
BY SHOUMIK BHATTACHARYA

As the other articles in this newsletter have pointed out, getting students to actively engage with readings assigned for the class can often be challenging. This is even more true when it comes to the much dreaded grouping of texts collectively called "theory". Theoretical writings, while fundamental to fields as diverse as physics and art history, are often seen as inherently mystifying and "hard". While there are many reasons for this perception of theory, including trends towards obfuscation in some theoretical writings, we all hope to provide students the confidence to engage with it comfortably. Many WAC pedagogical principles can be helpful to this end.

Most of the tips and suggestions mentioned in this newsletter are of course also helpful with thinking about dealing with theory in the classroom. It is just another genre of texts students are assigned to read. The need to stress specific sections or concerns as things to read for is especially relevant. However, as theory is often articulated in a different tenor of language, preparing students for a different kind of reading experience might be necessary. For example, it is often helpful to explain the reason for assigning a text, with respect to the syllabus and the learning goals of the course, as well as the specific historical context it was produced in. This context allows for students to situate the text, to try and find some stability in a reading that might be dealing with a lot of information and perspectives that they have not encountered before.

Assigning informal writing or journaling assignments as homework with these texts is also a helpful way to raise questions and concerns that can help guide targeted and generative classroom discussions. In-class writing in groups or individually also helps ground the students and gives them a basis to engage in discussions of theory that might otherwise feel intimidating. These informal and low-stakes writings are very helpful in making the seminar a space for exploration and thinking together. This is especially important when assigning theory as students often feel the point of reading is to have mastered. It is helpful to make clear that class discussion is a space to think through a text, especially theory, together.

Another, almost cliché, suggestion is to pair theory with in-class video or audio supplements. While teaching Edward Said's Orientalism, a text heavy in jargon and targeted specifically at literary and philological scholars, I often find it easier to pair it with popular speeches and music videos from Youtube. Pairing Orientalism with Chimamanda Adichie's Dangers of a Single Story TED talk or Cardi B's Bodak Yellow music video or both as topics of an in-class free-write assignment, all combinations I have tried, often opens up the conversation by bringing in an angle the students feel comfortable expressing their opinion on. While we have all seen the parodies of trying to teach Shakespeare through rap, leaning into one's own knowledge and experience of popular and non-academic knowledges can often help students feel comfortable to lean in to engaging with theory.

Building Critical Reading Skills
By Ryan McElhaney

Knowing how to engage with text is one of the most central skills a student is expected to have. Yet, just as no one is born writing well, so too with reading. It is important to think of reading assignments as a tool to help students build critical reading and thinking skills. Below are a few tips for designing reading assignments to build critical reading skills.

Model Effective Reading Strategies in Class

Using class time as a way to model good reading practices can be extremely helpful. If you've noticed a number of your students are struggling with a particular concept or argument, select a representative passage and read that passage together in class. Highlighting areas of the text that you have found or still find difficult to interpret can signal to students that difficulty (and working through it) is a normal part of the reading process, and that they should feel comfortable contributing to discussion even if they do not understand everything. You may also wish to model techniques you use while you read: how you select what to highlight, what you write and how often you write in the margins, etc.

Give specific guidance for how to approach a reading assignment

Reading assignment instructions are often fairly general. "Read such and such pages. Be prepared to discuss." Providing specific guidance with reading assignments encourages the practice of specific reading skills. If a part of the text is especially difficult, give your students a brief framing (3-4 sentences) of that section as part of the assignment. If there is something essential in the text, highlight it for your students. If you want your students to identify central parts of a section, ask them to rewrite that section of the text in your own words or to come to class with what they take to be the three most important points written down.

Scaffold Reading Skills

Advanced readers perform many actions at once while reading. They highlight important passages, rearticulate complex ideas in their own words, summarize parts of the text, compare it to others, critique its arguments, add their own, etc. Each of these skills requires practice. Indicate to students that they should focus one of these skills for each reading assignment and give examples of what successful application of the skill looks like. Focus on more basic skills first. As the semester progresses, move on to more complex ones. You might start by asking students to define three core concepts that appear in the text one week, ask them to use those concepts in writing a summary the next week, and to critique those concepts later in the semester. A helpful resource in deciding how to sequence the reading skills you wish to build is Bloom's taxonomy, which organizes critical thinking skills from basic to advanced.

Pair Reading Assignments with low stakes writing

To help focus students' reading practice, one can pair reading assignments with low-stakes (ungraded) writing assignments. If you want your student to focus on comparison or critique, have them bring in a short piece of writing in which they compare two texts or critique a central passage.

Vary Reading Assignments and Include Low Stakes Reading

Consider the type of texts you are assigning and how they may be used to help students build their skills. Assigning textbook sections, encyclopedia entries, and literature reviews early in the semester (or paired with specific readings) can help prepare students for more challenging texts. Furthermore, just as one need not grade every piece of writing that you ask a student to complete, some reading assignments can be low-stakes as well. One can assign "high-level" texts, and let's students know that they will not be evaluated based on their understanding of the material (thereby decreasing the stress a student might feel in struggling with the text). One can also pair low-states reading assignments with low-stakes writing, encouraging the student to engage with the text critically even though they will not be evaluated on it.

THIS SEMESTER, WE AT WAC, LIKE SO MANY OF YOU HAD TO ADAPT OUR CURRICULUM TO DISTANCE LEARNING HALF WAY THROUGH THE SEMESTER. WE CONTINUED TO HOLD TRAINING WORKSHOPS AND INTRODUCED A NEW CROP OF FACULTY ACROSS DEPARTMENTS TO WAC PEDAGOGY.

OUR FELLOWS ALSO DEVELOPED AND RAN A SERIES OF REFRESHER WORKSHOPS FOR WI FACULTY AND WROTE HELPFUL TIP SHEETS FOR INCORPORATING WAC PRINCIPLES INTO (ASYNCHRONOUS OR SYNCHRONOUS) ONLINE CLASSES CHECK THEM OUT ONLINE: HTTPS://WWW.BMCC.CUNY.EDU/ACADEMICS/WAC/WAC-PRINCIPLES/

The spring 2020 WAC cohort takes to Zoom! From left to right, top to bottom:
Max Papadantonakis (WAC Fellow), Jack Crawford (WAC Fellow), Julie Applebaum (Art & Music), Boyda Johnstone (English), Christa Baiada (WAC Coordinator, English), Satenik Margaryan (CRJ), Anika Thrower (HED), Holly Messitt (WAC Coordinator, Englsih), Ewa Barnes (ALL), William Camponovo (WAC Fellow), Ryan McElhaney (WAC Fellow), Angela Florschuetz (English), Cheryl Christopher (Allied Health), Shoumik Bhattacharya (WAC Fellow), Daniel Prelipcian (CRJ), Linta Varghese (Ethnic Studies).

Building Multilingual Students' Reading Skills Through Informal Writing
By Jules Salomone-Sehr

You have surely taught many multilingual students in your courses at BMCC, and realized that they face unique challenges when reading the texts you assign. Their vocabulary is usually less comprehensive. They often have a hard time parsing complex grammatical structures. They might struggle with idioms. They often lack the background knowledge required to make sense of cultural references. It typically takes longer for them to get through their reading assignments. And to make things even more challenging, all these difficulties combine with difficulties that fluent English speakers grapple with when reading meandering novels, florid poetry, and conceptually perplexing texts.

So how can you help multilingual students to overcome these reading challenges (without burdening yourself with an unmanageable workload)? Below, I suggest a bunch of WAC-inspired tips that all make use of informal writing. These tips, by the way, should greatly benefit students who grew up speaking and reading English too! Bear also in mind that according to WAC pedagogy, you don't have to read all the informal writing you assign to your students—so you won't bite more than you chew when assigning the written exercises I present below.

Journaling new vocabulary. You might consider inviting students to keep a journal where they write down the definition of each new word, expression, and discipline-specific term they come across, together with a sentence where that word/expression is used. Not all students know how to use a dictionary, so you might want to model in class how you look for a definition when you don't know the meaning of a term. You could even invite students to share their journals on Blackboard (for instance by using the wiki tool), hence transform this informal writing assignment into a collaborative exercise. Thanks to their journals, students will build a repository of linguistic tools that they should use when completing their class assignments.

Recommend Audio Tools. Many apps will read the text of your choice to you.* You could encourage students to use such audio tools. This way, they could develop their listening skills, as well as get a sense of how to pronounce English words. (As a multilingual student myself, I am always baffled by the fact that in English, the spelling of a word tells you very little about its pronunciation!)

Translanguaging annotations. You could encourage multilingual students to annotate assigned readings in the language of their choice. After all, these students should feel free to use whichever linguistic tool they prefer whenever they try to work through a tangle of conceptually challenging thoughts (provided, of course, that eventually they complete their formal assignments in English).

The incomprehensible assignment. To deepen everyone's reading, you could ask students, every now and then, to pick an idea or passage from the assigned reading that they found awfully confusing, and to try and explain why they just don't get it. You could even start class by having students pair up, read each other's assignment, and commiserate about how hard the reading was. This exercise might help multilingual students realize that everyone struggles with reading, even fluent English speakers. Additionally, the small class discussions might contribute to creating solidarity between multilingual students and fellow students (whether multilingual themselves or not).

Encouragements. Multilingual students who are still acquiring English make progress every day, even when no one (not even themselves) might be able to tell. So, don't skimp on encouragements: sometimes, it's all it takes, for a multilingual student, to find motivation to keep completing their reading assignments.

Digital versus Paper-based Texts
by Federico Di Pasqua

Professors and adjuncts in the US are experiencing a growing pressure to adopt digital texts in their classes, and the pandemic has, understandably, accelerated this process. Although screen-based readings can offer economic and pragmatic advantages—in particular with regard to free-access online textbooks and e-readers—it is imperative to understand the pedagogical implications of reading and learning on computer-presented texts. Beyond the screen-reading hype, recent scholarly findings about largely unknown or neglected effects of screen-based texts warrant more critical debate, in the pedagogical community, about the adoption of digital texts. Let us turn to recent findings about digital readings in order to become more mindful while assigning screen-based texts.

1. Reading texts on a screen presents issues of navigation. As the reader is asked to scroll within a given document, this navigating process hampers readers' ability to gather information as the screen-based text's spatial instability poses a further cognitive burden on the learner—unlike a paper-based reading.
2. The intangibility of a digital format challenges readers' memorization. Lacking visual and tactile cues, learners struggle to retrieve information as the digital format does not allow the same understanding of a text's structure offered by the fixity of a text printed on paper.
3. Readers of digital texts experience issues of self-assessment of their learning process. Studies show that, unlike the medium of print, the electronic text is perceived as better suited for quick and superficial readings and it is, therefore, conducive to less focused analysis. This perception is due to the habit of readers to consider most online content they perused, such as social media posts or memes, unsuitable for learning.
4. The lighting conditions of the screen support is known to produce visual fatigue on account of the emitting light and the so-called blue light featured by many devices. A solution could be the implementation of screen supports like the ebook that are based on electronic ink and are, therefore, more reader friendly. Let us also keep in mind that during pandemic most students are overexposed to screens.
5. Finally, instructors and administrators ought to be aware of the profit motive of private providers of digital services, who might seek to push for their product, such as paperless and e learning curriculum, free from concerns about the learning outcomes of such digital environments. A famous case is the implementation of Mark Zuckerberg's Summit Learning program in Kansas and Brooklyn — abruptly suspended on account of students and parents' protests.

The points raised by these pedagogical studies do not advocate for a top-down ban on screen-based texts, as we all know, especially during this pandemic, how helpful and emancipatory paperless assignments can be. However, these researches compel teachers and administrators to carefully assess the opportuneness of introducing digital-readings vis-a-vis paper texts and, when possible, assign either format on a case-to-case basis.

Further readings:
- Ackerman, R., & Goldsmith, M. (2011). Metacognitive regulation of text learning: On screen versus on paper. Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied, 17(1), 18–32.;
- Dyson M., & Haselgrove M. (2013). Reading linear texts on paper versus computer screen: Effects on reading comprehension.
- https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/21/technology/silicon-valley-kansas-schools.html

Using Low-Stakes Writing to Re-Engage Reading Discussions in the Classroom
by William Camponovo

As a poetry teacher, I've often heard students say: "I hate reading poetry." But I've come to recognize that reticence comes not from any innate hatred of poetry, but something like a fear of it. Reading literature produces anxiety!

It is important, then, to demystify texts with our students. Many students believe there is a "secret meaning" in a literary text that they have to "solve" like a detective. But in fact we teachers know that texts are complex, asking open-ended questions or proposing problems that don't have easy solutions. This is as true in literature classes as it is in business classes.

So how do we address this resistance to reading? Through writing, naturally! In my classes, I employ low-stakes exercises to get students to read while writing. In a poetry class, I give them a text in which I remove the last line. I ask students to write their own, whatever pops into their heads. No one knows the real final line, so all are on an equal playing field. We analyze the poem as a group, and then I ask students to share their lines. Again, because no one knows the actual "answer," no one feels pressure that they're wrong. We re-group and discuss the ideas of the poem and students reflect on why they intuited the ending they did. They share, brainstorm, and revise their line before we discuss the actual final line as a group.

This exercise demands that students think through the text: how does it use language, or point-of-view? The activity asks them to pay attention to moments that surprise them, and it ensures they participate with a sense of excitement. In a very direct way, they have a conversation with the text. How would they end it, if it were theirs? How would they challenge the reader?

Another version of this exercise I call "Making Reading Bad." I will give the students a short paragraph from something like The House on Mango Street, and we'll close-read and analyze together. Then, I'll ask the students to re-write it so it becomes, well, bad. Sap it of imagery. Make the sentences clunky. Screw up the grammar. In doing so, students reverse-engineer the passage, thus showing the literary qualities that make reading, in a word, pleasurable. In making the passage bad, they recognize--through actual interaction and connections with the text--that they are not passive recipients, but instead integral readers.

Of course, these are two specific literature exercises that couldn't work for every discipline. But what I am advocating for is thinking through how you might get students to assume a more direct conversation with topics or texts in your classes. For example, a philosophy class might encourage students to imagine a dialogue between John Locke and Plato. Or a business class might have students assume the role of CEO of Facebook: what changes would they make to the platform for users, and why? What might the economic consequences of those changes be? For these activities, the goal is not to have the instructors control everything (and thus grade more, and read more), but instead to make students the active agents of the exercises.

After all, there is a reason many of these low-stakes writing activities fall under the term "role-playing": it is no small thing to encourage play in our classrooms. Doing so can place the reading the students do in new, dynamic contexts. Meaningful reading stems from authentic engagement, and that comes clearly when we de-mystify our texts.

CONTACT US

ASK A FELLOW:

BMCC Faculty can seek assistance from our writing fellows by sending an email to bmcc.wacfellows@gmail.com. We can offer:

- feedback on an assignment before sharing it with students
- help developing a rubric
- suggestions about low-stakes activities or mini-lessons related to elements of writing
- discussing specific problems concerning commenting or grading
- to bounce ideas off someone concerning what is or isn't working related to writing or writing-to-learn in your class

Email us at:
bmcc.wacfellows@gmail.com

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Access our Tip Sheets and previous newsletters on the WAC @ BMCC site:
https://www.bmcc.cuny.edu/academics/wac/wac-principles/

Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL):
owl.english.purdue.edu/owl

The WAC Clearing House:
wac.colostate.edu/intro

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