

How Do I Get Students to Read Their Assignments Before Class?

Presented by:

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Here are abbreviated descriptions of assignments that encourage students to read before class. Also included are several short quotations from the articles referenced.

“When given an assignment, some students feel they have met their obligation if they have forced their eyes to ‘touch’ (in appropriate sequence) each word on the pages assigned. How can we entice students to read the materials we assign, and how do we help them develop strategies for deep comprehension and retention of the material?” Roberts and Roberts, p. 125-126

Reading response assignment

Students have 29 reading response assignments; they complete 25 for 3 points each, the equivalent of an exam. They can complete the assignment using any of these options and are encouraged to use a variety.

Connecting to the text

- Underline key ideas – mark in the margins, make comments, insert question marks.
- Go back through underlining and margin notes and write five “big” questions that represent key concepts in the chapter.
- Answer at least two of the questions or write a commentary on why they represent the chapter’s core ideas.

Summarizing the readings and visualizing the key ideas

Do one of the following:

- Make a visual or graphic organizer that includes important concepts in the chapter. (Samples of visual and graphic organizers are included in the article.)
- Make a chart that shows the most important concepts.
- Make several lists of organized ideas related to the chapter.

Reading response journal

- After reading the assignment, respond with a question or two or make several comments in a response journal.

Studying as a group

- Talk with one or two classmates about important ideas in the readings. Have one person record who participated in the group and write up the key concepts that were discussed.

Create a song or a rap

- The song or rap covers the material in the reading. Make an audiotape and submit it.

Reference: Roberts, J. C. and Roberts, K. A. (2008). Deep reading, cost/benefit, and the construction of meaning: Enhancing reading comprehension and deep learning in sociology courses. *Teaching Sociology*, 36 (April), 125-140.

Explaining why instructors assign textbooks...

“The obvious answer is that reading assignments expose students to ideas and information that we want students to understand. Researchers have argued that in addition to simply acquainting students with content, ‘reading is the platform from which critical thinking, problem solving and effective expression are launched.’” Howard, (p. 385)

Just-in-time quizzes

Students complete a two-question online quiz two hours before the start of class. The first question is multiple-choice and is graded by the computer. It’s worth one point. The second question is short-answer and requires the students to summarize and synthesize content in the assigned reading. This question is worth between one and three points.

The instructor grades the quizzes during the two hours before class, and he uses some of the short-answer responses to launch a discussion of the reading in class. (If students don’t want to be credited for their responses, he asks them to provide aliases when they submit the quiz). Using good responses shows weaker students what a good answer looks like, and using weaker answers provides the opportunity to demonstrate how an answer can be improved.

Reference: Howard, J. R. (2004). Just-in-time teaching in sociology, or: how I convinced my students to actually read the assignment. *Teaching Sociology*, 32 (October), 385-390.

Course preparation assignment

Each of these assignments is structured the same way: there’s an introductory statement, an objective for the assignment, some relevant background information and the actual writing assignment (an example is included in the article). Students bring the completed assignment to class – if they aren’t in class, they do not get credit for the assignment.

Students either get credit for doing the assignment or they don't. The instructor looks to see if they've made a serious attempt to complete the assignment. If they haven't, they get one written warning and the chance to rewrite. After that, credit is deducted.

“The reading, thinking and writing the students do to complete the CPA prior to class provide a solid foundation for high level engagement with the course material. I do not have to spend time lecturing about the topic, because they have already had a first exposure to the material.” (p. 238)

In class, students spend the first 10 minutes integrating their individual answers. When the whole class convenes, each group reports one of its findings. The teacher creates a diagram of these on the board. This takes about 20-Minutes. He gives students the opportunity to provide more complex answers in a second 10-minute discussion period. Then that material is integrated into what was suggested previously.

Reference: Yamane, D. (2006). Course preparation assignments: A strategy for creating discussion-based courses. *Teaching Sociology*, 34 (July), 236-248.

