

Encouraging Students to Pre-Read

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Teaching and Learning Services

Five Motivational Tips

We know that reading is part of how students will move down the path to becoming experts, but we also know that students don't always do the readings we assign. Research indicates that only 20-30% of students complete readings regularly if readings aren't associated with marks. This applies to other types of pre-work too! You may expect your students to have watched a video, listened to a piece of music, or completed a series of calculations prior to class time.

Pre-reading allows students to be prepared for class discussions and allows for deeper thought during lectures or class activities. Students who haven't prepared may be confused or miss important points that are predicated on the content of readings.

Marks can help with compliance, but it's also important to help students understand why the reading/viewing/listening is important and to help guide them in how to get the most out of their assigned work. In other words, you need to help students see the purpose of the readings and then provide a framework to help them develop their ability to independently work with course materials.

The tips presented here are a great place to start, but we also encourage you to check out the paper by Kerr and Friese (2016), where many more tips are presented (citation on the right →).

1. Provide Guided Reading Strategies

You might think that the reading clearly points to one particular conclusion, but students don't always see it. Make a list of key questions that they should be able to answer from the reading, and then link those questions to class content. That way you can build on the readings in class, and students see why the reading was assigned.

Students need to see value in assigned work. If readings are not explicitly referenced in class, students learn to devalue pre-reading, so be sure to reference readings during class time.



Further Reading

For more information about this topic, please see the following resources:

Berry, T., Cook, L., Hill, N. & Stevens, K. (2010). An exploratory analysis of textbook usage and study habits: misperceptions and barriers to success. *College Teaching*, 59, 31-39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2010.509376>

Kerr, M.M., & Friese, K.M. (2016). Reading to learn or learning to read? Engaging college students in course readings. *College Teaching*, 65, 28-31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/87567555.2016.1222577>

Padilla-Walker, L.M. (2006). The impact of daily extra-credit quizzes on exam performance. *Teaching of Psychology*, 33, 236-239. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15328023top3304_4

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Five Motivational Tips Continued...

2. Only Assign What Is Necessary

Students are practical and that means they are going to decide what is – and what is not – worth their time. They don't always make the right call, but their judgements are based on the information available to them. If you've assigned more readings than are necessary, or more than students can reasonably balance, they may not bother doing any of the readings.

- Is this at an appropriate level of difficulty for this level of class? Content that is very advanced might be better for in-class analysis rather than independent reading.
- Is this a 'need to know' or a 'nice to know'? Consider having two lists, for both required and optional reading, so that students can prioritize.
- Are you going to go over it in detail in class? Students often resent sitting through a lecture that is a direct replication of what they read. Your lectures should refer to the readings, but not reiterate them.
- Is the entire book necessary, or just one chapter? If students know you are choosy about what you assign, they will be more likely to do the expected work.

3. Guide Students to Read in Your Field

We've all seen the over-highlighted pages, where everything but "the" and "and" are bright yellow. You have learned over your career how to read/listen/view effectively. Help students develop those skills through tip guides that outline the process that you go through when you approach content (E.g., How to read like a historian; How to watch like a director). For example, do you read the summary or abstract and then skip straight to the conclusions before reading the whole paper from start to finish? Give students some insight about how experts do what they do.

4. Actively Engage Students About the Readings

There are lots of active learning techniques that you can use to facilitate student engagement in the assigned readings, such as jigsaw interviews, fishbowl discussions, or pro-con-caveat techniques. (Ask an educational developer in TLS if you want more details!) If students know that the readings are necessary to engage fully in classroom activities, they'll be more likely to complete them.

5. Make Reading Quizzes or Assignments

These can be part of the overall grade for the course, or you may choose to create them as extra-credit opportunities. The risk that should be considered is whether the quizzes or assignments are meaningful. If they're too surface-level, then students may learn to read superficially. One method is to have students indicate which parts of the readings aren't clear to them, and what questions they have. Cognitively, this promotes deeper processing of the content and gives you a sense of where the students are at.

Bonus Tip: Give Students Choice

Create a curated list of readings, all of which would complement the course topics, and let students choose which ones they read. Class discussions can involve compare/contrast or peer-teaching. Increasing autonomy can increase motivation!

