

# Unprepared to Read

## Michael Neal Morris

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During my first semester as a college student, I took a weightlifting course designed for students majoring in Physical Education. Students in my class were either athletes or planning to be coaches of athletes or both, so the workouts were not for the average student. Although I had not officially been an athlete in several years, I did not have too much trouble keeping up with the requirements of the course. I had been physically active in high school, mostly playing soccer. Even after my soccer career ended, I kept in shape by playing pick-up games of whatever sort were offered—I'd even learned to play racquetball—or by running and swimming.

The physical demands of the course, while challenging, were not overwhelmingly difficult because I was already in the habit of exercising. But college students, in general, do not have such practices concerning reading, or if they had them, they have been mostly forgotten. So, when they are required to keep up in their average history, English, or psychology class, they might be able to manage, but not so well. It is like asking a forty-year-old man who hasn't so much as jogged in twenty years to run a marathon.

These problems are compounded in the lives of community-college students. I surveyed my four sections of Freshman Composition I (English 1301) and found that sixty-nine percent of them say their work schedule keeps them reading for their college classes. I'm sure it will surprise no teacher to note that sixty-three percent of my students said that a personal/social schedule gets in the way of course reading. Many of these students also have either not been given or have not accepted all the tools for good reading.

In addition, eighteen percent of the students I surveyed said they were never read to as children. Almost forty-five percent told me they were read to once a week or less. Many of their parents stopped emphasizing reading for enjoyment when the young person entered school, so reading became a chore, and not even an important way to receive information. I did not ask how many of these students saw their parents read, but we do know that when parents do not read, their children are also less likely to do so.

Furthermore, one of the biggest problems people run into with writing has to do with how they were taught to read. Most see reading as a matter of decoding

information. Each letter or word is merely a picture they attach to sounds. If their vocabulary is not large or their comfort level with reading in general is small, then the decoding process is made much more difficult in classroom situations, again because in college one is there to learn, not perform. Most of our students are passive readers who run their eyes across the page hoping before they are halfway through that the instructor does not give a pop quiz.

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Many of my students have had experiences with reading that were less than helpful in forming their habits. For instance, most have had a coach for history who spent time having them fill out worksheet after worksheet, usually with fill-in-the-blank questions that required the students to find answers that were already italicized or otherwise demarcated so that they were easy to find. This sort of assignment is easy to cheat on. A few students have remarked that all they had to do was copy the work of the smartest kid in class. Tests came directly from these worksheets, so studying was not a matter of reading material and writing about it, but merely regurgitation of stale facts and dates.

I've had several students who have told me that their history teachers spent much of their time showing game films or some other unrelated activity during class time. "I didn't give a damn about football," one student told me, "but I wasn't going to complain." When I hear things like this, I am not surprised to find a student who misses class and then asks, "Did we do anything important?"

Many of us were supposed to read *Romeo and Juliet* in high school. I remember my teacher bringing a recording of the play to class and playing it as we "read along." What actually happened is that a few students pretended to read while the teacher graded papers. The others were more obvious about their attempts to circumvent the process. I wrote letters to my girlfriend about how boring my English class was. Some kids passed notes between them. Many slept.

When I tell students about my experience with *Romeo and Juliet*, many of them say the same or similar things happened to them. They also tell me that all they remember of the play is the "hard" language and that it was boring. Oddly, many high school English teachers choose this play because they think teenagers can "identify" with it more readily. Many use it because they know they can show the Leonardo DiCaprio movie.

Another way that some English teachers hurt their students as far as reading goes is to assign passing grades to essays that obviously show that a book has not been read or that a subject has only been explored as far as a general encyclopedia will take them. More than one student has told me that they just read the cover or book jacket or the summary of the novel in *Cliffs Notes*, and based every main point on some generic observation. I'm often the first teacher who has actually required they support their

points with specific references to the text they are writing about. Consider then how many students are hurt even further because they were able to take their papers from the Internet. Most of these have not even read their own “work.”

Further, we live in a culture that often encourages taking shortcuts to success. This problem occurs in education all the time. By the time many students reach high school, they have learned, through a variety of means, to buy into the myth that reading is not necessary. I’ve heard many stories about students who made good grades (or at least acceptable ones) by skimming *Cliffs Notes* or borrowing the notes another student took or by just remembering what the teacher said in class. Some even pride themselves on getting out of high school by writing mostly “B.S.”

Over fifty percent of my students told me that they read three or less hours per week in high school. I did not ask how many hours they should have read, but twenty percent said that all their reading concerned class work. Students have varying degrees of understanding about how much reading they are assigned in college, but most do acknowledge that it is much more than in high school. Only a few believe that taking short cuts to reading (like only reading chapter headings and bolded material, getting notes from classmates, or getting material from places such as *SparkNotes*) has helped them in college the way the same shortcuts have helped them get by in high school.

One problem that continues to baffle me is when students, particularly in literature course, tell me that they are “visual learners,” who get more out of what they see than what they read. Of course, I know this is a matter of personal discipline, but to demonstrate how false the assumption is, I have given some quizzes over reading material after the class has had a chance to watch a film version of story or play we are covering. I always tell them that watching a film is no substitute for reading. But often the questions are vague enough that even if the students only watched the film they would be able to get most of them right. Time and again the average grade for these quizzes is pretty much the same as for quizzes over works we watched no film over. Students rarely, however, take notes over movies, and so the film may well have been a passive exercise for them.

For a number of reasons, most students do not see any connection between what they do for one class and what they do for another. Glenn Newman, a political science teacher at Eastfield College, told me that some students once got upset at him for asking them to do some math, though the exercise concerned statistics and was clearly related to a concept he was trying to teach about the political process. Students often enter college with such a fragmented understanding of how knowledge is acquired and how knowledge builds upon itself, so that they are often lost even when holding the road-map. A culture that tells them, “Just get through the class. Don’t worry about how it

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applies to your future,” encourages them to get less than they could. As my friend Theresa Starnat, director of our Learning Assistance Center, once told me, “Education is the only business where students want less than what they pay for.”

I am amazed at the number of students who will not bother to do any reading for a subject in their major. Most do not even know that magazines and journals are available to them which contain articles about the very fields they expect to spend a lifetime

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working in. And when the students learn about such publications, they are ignored until one has to write a paper. Once students get out of school, many do not see the need to actually keep up in their fields. Many students have told me quite directly, “I do not intend to ever read anything unless I absolutely have to for a class.” This attitude implies that the only thing necessary is to get through the class itself. If students feel this way about the subjects they supposedly care about, how can we get them to read for subjects they are not interested in?

Recently I told a class that I was philosophically opposed to giving reviews for exams, and received a number of pinched-faced expressions of anger and wide-eyed expressions of fear. I said that I did not mind going over the format for a test and giving the class some suggestions

on how best to prepare, but I was not going to spend an hour of class time going over what I’d spent six weeks teaching. They had heard the lectures, read the course material, and practiced the skills. My explanation did not help many feel better.

I believe we do a disservice to our students when we continue to encourage the poor habits they have learned through what sometimes is twelve years of organized babysitting. I am not saying we should ignore these people, expecting them to figure it all out, so that only the strong survive. That is academic hazing and has no place in a democratic society. There are things, however, that we can do to improve the situation.

It is also unfair and unreasonable to have college teachers teach students what they failed to learn in high school. One thing we could or should do is ask high schools and middle schools to revisit what they do as far as reading is concerned and how that pedagogy works to prepare students for college. Since community colleges are more a part of the communities they live in, this should be easier than for universities. It would help if high school teachers in all subjects were actually encouraged to have their students read more and do less “busy work” that is easier to grade, but which actually does not teach.

All of the essays students in my Composition I class write require them to respond in different ways to readings I assign. The first four essays (three essays done partially in class and one done in a “testing” situation) involve students reading five articles or essays from their textbook *American Voices*. The student will choose one of these to write about but are required to read all five because I want to stress to them that good

writing is about making good choices. The class is given a pop quiz to 1) make sure they do all the reading and 2) help them become more active readers. The quizzes are short and only require them to be familiar with the main ideas and support in the readings. Students also write short, informal pieces that ask them to demonstrate their understanding of the things they read and define terms or compare ideas about the general subject. During the workshop/peer review stage, I have them address at least one concern about how well or carefully the article was read and how the article was used in the student paper.

The general subjects for these four essays are different and the ways I ask them to respond are also different. The idea is to have students read with different goals, much like we ask them to learn to adapt their writing to different purposes. In the first essay, students respond to essays and articles about the subject of personal identity. The second paper asks students to discuss what they have learned about the particular group written about in an article. The third paper is about role models. Students apply one or two main ideas from an article to a person they see as being in a position to be a role model. The fourth "Midterm" essay is done in class. No informal writing or group work is done to prepare the student for the paper. No revisions are allowed. The general subject is the Internet. Students are given three to five prompts to choose from, each of which necessitates utilizing two of the five articles.

One important goal for the last three major essays in my first semester composition course is to prepare students for their next English courses and for writing in other courses by asking them to taste (bitterly, some say) the subjects of Argument, Research, and Documentation. Two papers go through the process described above and one is a test. Instead of five readings on the same general topic the articles are about different, perhaps more controversial, topics. The first of these asks students to add "research" to their paper by utilizing either a web page about the topic or interviewing someone. Here I stress that good research is about learning to ask the right questions (or the right people) and that how they read these "texts" could make a difference in building credibility as a writer. The second of these later essays adds the parameter of using two sources outside the textbook. One must be a book or article from a print publication. The other source must come from the Internet or an article from the school's online databases. In this essay, the student must develop a clear argument that demonstrates that at least two positions on an issue have been looked at carefully.

In the last essay, the Final Exam, I again give the students a variety of prompts to choose from. Each prompt asks students to look at their reading over the course of the semester and construct an argument about one or more of them. For example, one prompt asks the students to explain why a favorite article should be required reading

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for all college students (or why a detested article should be eliminated from future editions of the textbook). Another prompt requests the student apply one or more articles to other subjects they are taking and show how the study of each subjects is related.

In the end, I wish I could do even more about the attitudes many of my students bring with them when they enter the college classroom. It would be more than nice if all of us could inspire the love of great words, written and read, as Robin Williams' character

does in *Dead Poets Society*, but we know that in the span of each semester's fifteen weeks there is only so much we can do. I do, however, remain optimistic.

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A few years ago, I taught a rather challenging group. One man was openly offended and hostile that I actually meant for him to read the assigned essays and articles and eventually dropped the course. Another man, however, came nearly every day in his jeans, western shirt, and befuddled expression. He always set his cowboy hat beside his desk as the period began each day. For the first few weeks he came complaining about how hard the reading was, but I could tell he did read the material. During discussions he often prefaced his remarks with "I don't know nothin' 'bout this, but . . ." And

then, in his own broken way, he would make observations about the reading that were often quite profound, sometimes moving. I don't know that he left my class with a great love of the written word, but he did the hard work of reading and tried to do better all the time. I don't remember what his grade was, but I do think he was a success because he did not allow past experiences or a culture that diminishes reading's importance to dictate his present commitment to learning.

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