Writing to Read Difficult Texts

Successful reading at the college level involves an array of practices and skills, which vary across disciplines and which are not always made explicit to students.

Difficulties Students Face

**Understanding the Reading Process**
Some passages and kinds of texts demand to be read slowly; some can be read more quickly. Similarly, some can be read once, and others demand multiple re-readings. How do you determine which method or style of reading to employ?

**Understanding Different Reading Strategies**
Reading serves many different purposes. We read some texts to get the gist, some to abstract an argument, some to analyze meanings, and some to gather evidence. How can you tell what kind of reading is demanded by an occasion or assignment?

**Perceiving Structure**
Different sections of texts serve different purposes. How can you differentiate between conclusions, premises, rhetoric, examples and introductions, in the absence of obvious and familiar markers?

**Assimilating the Unfamiliar**
When faced with ideas that are strange and new, most readers tame them so that they resemble other, more familiar concepts. How can you push yourself to interpret and understand ideas outside of your own experience or comfort zone?

**Appreciating Rhetorical Context**
Every text is part of a particular cultural, political and/or literary context. How can you tell what conversation a text is participating in and how that conversation is shaping the points it makes and the language it uses?

**Noticing That Writing Is (Mostly) Dialogical**
Much reading is about entering a dialogue with the author, not about extracting facts or information. How can you remain both open to and skeptical of a text’s claims?

**Cultural Literacy**
Many authors assume a certain level of cultural literacy: background information, allusions, common knowledge, etc. How can you gain access to those hidden elements? How do you know what to look up and where?

**Inadequate Vocabulary**
Many texts contain technical terms, words used in unusual ways, or phrases whose meanings have changed over time. How (outside of always reading with a dictionary nearby) can you expand and develop your vocabulary?
Complex Syntax
Primary sources and scholarly articles use complex sentence structures. How can you navigate complicated grammar?

Differences Between Disciplines
Different disciplines and historical periods use very different forms and styles of writing. How can you navigate these differences and prepare yourself for the various kinds of reading they require?

Adapted from John C. Bean’s Engaging Ideas

Assignments

Text Annotation
Teach students to underline significant or striking sections of their reading, writing responses and questions in the margins.

What It Says and What It Does
Beside each paragraph of an assigned reading, have students write one sentence summarizing what it says (summary) and one sentence describing what it does (purpose in relation to the text as a whole).

Before and After
For each assignment, have students write: "Before I read this text, the author assumed I believed …" "After I read this text the author wanted me to believe …" and "The author was / was not successful in changing my views because …"

Questions
Either before or during class, have students write down their questions about what they have read. These can be questions for the narrator or author, or questions they would like someone like you to explain. They can then exchange questions with another student and write possible answers for each other.

Double–entry Notebook
Before reading, have students draw a line down a piece of paper, dividing it into two sections. They will use the left–hand side of the paper to write down quotations or ideas that strike them as they read. They will use the right–hand side to write their responses and reactions (thoughts, feelings, associations, questions, confusions, connections) after they have completed the reading.

Triple–entry Notebook
Add an additional column to the double entry notebook (above). In the far–right column, have students describe the function or purpose of each passage they have chosen. In small groups or as a class, have students discuss the similarities and differences in how they read and
interpreted the text. They may also discuss the relationship between the center column (their responses) and far-right columns (their analyses).

**Focused Free-write**
Have students pick one line from an assigned reading and free-write a response to this line (why it interests them, how it relates to the rest of the text, etc.). Share free-writes or use them as a jumping-off point for class discussion.

**Visual Note-taking**
Have students draw diagrams, flowcharts, maps or outlines of a text.

**Believing and Doubting**
First, have students read a text and try to agree with everything the author says. Next, have them read the same text and disagree with everything. Finally, write a paragraph describing the experience and different elements of the text each reading highlighted.

**Translation**
Have students “translate” a passage into plain English or re-write a text with a different audience in mind (such as a kindergarten class or specialized professionals).

**Super-close Reading**
Have students select one or two sentences from a text. As a class or in groups, analyze every single word of those sentences, including grammatical structures, connotations and ambiguities. Come up with as much information as possible to understand how those sentences create their meanings.
In the appreciation of a work of art or an art form, consideration of the receiver never proves fruitful. Not only is any reference to a certain public or its representatives misleading, but even the concept of an “ideal” receiver is detrimental in the theoretical consideration of art, since all it posits is the existence and nature of man as such. Art, in the same way, posits man’s physical and spiritual existence, but in none of its works is it concerned with his response. No poem is intended for the reader, no picture for the beholder, no symphony for the listener.

Is a translation meant for readers who do not understand the original? This would seem to explain adequately the divergence of their standing in the realm of art. Moreover, it seems to be the only conceivable reason for saying “the same thing” repeatedly. For what does a literary work “say”? What does it communicate? It “tells” very little to those who understand it. Its essential quality is not statement or the imparting of information. Yet any translation which intends to perform a transmitting function cannot transmit anything but information – hence, something inessential. This is the hallmark of bad translations. But do we not generally regard as the essential substance of a literary work what it contains in addition to information – as even a poor translator will admit – the unfathomable, the mysterious, the “poetic,” something that a translator can reproduce only if he is also a poet? This, actually, is the cause of another characteristic of inferior translation, which consequently we may define as the inaccurate transmission of an inessential content. This will be true whenever a translation undertakes to serve the reader. However, if it were intended for the reader, the same would have to apply to the original. If the original does not exist for the reader’s sake, how could the translation be understood on the basis of this premise?

1) Read the above excerpt as you would in preparation for class discussion. In addition to any other notations, write down the main idea of the passage.

2) Examine the markings you made: Did you underline particular passages? Did you circle any words? Did you write questions or words in the margins?
3) Analyze your markings: Why did you make these markings? What kind of a class discussion do they prepare you to have? How do they help you to prepare for this discussion?

4) How did you locate the main idea of the passage? Did you use underlining, writing, or marginal notation to help you locate, articulate, or remember it?