

## When is Writing Also Reading?

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**Abstract:** Students who demonstrate perennial difficulties with researched writing typically have poor reading skills. Those who do not improve significantly as readers and writers in first year composition, if they do not drop out, often struggle throughout college. Even when students are given explicit and enhanced instruction in reading and adjustments are made to curriculum to address demonstrated student weaknesses, a lack of synthesis skills is still evidenced in student researched writing for upper-level writing. Teachers at all levels across all content areas must realize that many students misunderstand or cannot understand the content being taught, and strategically unwrap assigned readings so that students can progress as writers and readers of complex texts. Instructors who want students to read for content should teach summary skills. Instructors who want students to read structurally and analyze conventions of genre must explicitly direct students how to analyze and interpret complex text. Post-secondary instructors must reach agreement on how to coordinate instruction in reading and writing, especially in writing intensive classrooms where students are assigned complex texts.<sup>[1]</sup>

*"Many students are not able to read in the ways faculty would like" (Horning, 2007).*

Horning (2007) states that many college writing assignments require students to "adapt, restructure, or synthesize knowledge in order to answer complex questions" that the increased use of multimedia complicates working with diverse texts. Adler-Kassner and Estrem (2007) also note that most teachers expect students to "work through and interpret complex ideas from readings and texts" and to "engage in multiple modes of inquiry using texts" (p. 37). Yet in the college classroom, many instructors expect that students enter the class being able "to read" and are shocked, regularly, when students "can't, don't, or won't" engage with assigned texts (Horning). Teachers in postsecondary settings usually assume that student writing will "become a dialogue" with ideas found in texts, and thus instructors despair when students passively depend on the instructor to tell them how and what to believe, thus failing to engage as readers or writers.

With Common Core State Standards driving K-12 curricular changes, many K-12 teachers are learning to use strategies so as to engage students in close reading, meta-analysis, and synthesis, but post-secondary instructors rarely understand how unfamiliar student readers are with any kind of text beyond short, simple expository and creative works. Our colleagues in K-12 have long understood the syntactical differences that make texts more or less accessible to readers, but most college instructors do not have the flexibility that primary and secondary grade-level teachers have when accommodating readers with weaker skills. To address student problems with reading,

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Horning advocates overt teaching of analysis, summary, and synthesis skills, with a fuller understanding of how specific disciplines use texts. Post-secondary instructors must realize that reading skills displayed by good readers are "fast, not precise, and not strictly or even mostly a visual activity." Less-advantaged and less capable readers will need to gain fluency by re-reading as recursive and guided practice. Adler-Kassner and Estrem (2007) also advocate more explicit discussions or directions: If instructors want students to read for content, we must teach summary skills. If we want students to read structurally and analyze conventions of genre, we should explicitly direct students to analyze and interpret.

## Institutional Background

At the University of South Carolina Aiken (USCA), student reading skills have been a primary concern for English Department faculty who teach First Year Composition (FYC) and for the institution as a whole. Institutional data posits that USCA's students are similar to (or slightly worse than) national norms. Recent USCA institutional research using the ETS Proficiency Profile (2011) to assess entering and graduating students' reading skills demonstrates that barely half of the students enter with the most basic level of reading proficiency, with 45% testing as marginal or not proficient.

The USCA English Department annually assesses a sample of Freshmen Folders for reading and writing skills, collecting data during annual program reviews to identify areas of continued weaknesses. Additionally, the USCA English Department administers a writing proficiency requirement known as the Writing Proficiency Portfolio which requires every student seeking a degree to submit a writing portfolio for competency review before the senior year. The latter requirement is described in the USCA Bulletin:

The Writing Proficiency Portfolio (WPP) requires students to further develop and apply skills and competencies from the composition sequence to other university writing contexts. The WPP consists of three course-related papers, including researched writing, to exemplify the student's best writing in the English language. Additionally, the student must submit a well-developed Reflective Cover Essay to explain the student's rationales for the portfolio selections. Since the late 1990's, the primary general education assessment requirement at USCA has been the Writing Proficiency Portfolio (WPP). Affecting every student's progress towards degree completion, the WPP is a de facto WAC/WID assessment. Various departments and schools also use WPP data in their own program reviews, so student abilities (or lack thereof) with reading skills tend to show up dramatically in relationship to various disciplines on WPP scores.

Results for over a decade of Freshman Folder and WPP assessments provide additional evidence that USCA students lack reading skills because many of our students struggle mightily and persistently with researched writing. When students consistently demonstrate weakness in use of sources and synthesis of texts in their writing, and when these weaknesses persist throughout their academic tenures, it is reasonable to examine the reading skills which both first year students and continuing students bring to the writing tasks that they complete in their general education classes as well as in their disciplinary studies.

## A Call to Action

It is time to ask what faculty can and should learn about teaching students how to read complex texts by examining practices and assumptions. In our reading and writing classrooms, we should explain explicitly why and how we want students to address the texts that we assign.

To address problems with student reading, at many college campuses an academic industry in student support services has been put in place to deal with the traditional first year students' lapses in proficiency, primarily to increase retention and affect graduation rates. USCA's supporting enterprises for students have grown significantly over the past decade. Along with providing designated first-year academic advisors, expanded tutoring and a writing center, the USCA Academic Success Center also promotes a First Year Reading Experience. This summer reading has recently been linked to USCA's Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) to comply with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). By embedding the First Year Reading into a critical inquiry course (CI) required of all entering freshmen, faculty at USCA are becoming more focused on the key issue of substantive reading of a long text, as well as critical reading, thinking, research, and writing. According to the USCA Academic Affairs website, "All freshmen must take Critical Inquiry (AFCI 101) in their first semester of enrollment at USC Aiken. During CI, students must demonstrate the ability to present detailed information from relevant sources to support their conclusions and recognize varied points of view" (Feb. 2013). In short, students must demonstrate adequate reading skills.

As an instructor of 30+ years and through institutional assessments of student writing, I've grown increasingly concerned about how lapses in student reading proficiency are related to weaknesses in student writing and critical thinking skills in measurable ways. At this point of our institutional work with student reading proficiencies, we need consensus where none exists. We currently have multiple initiatives which could inform each other but which operate in separate spheres of the university. The First Year Composition requirement has always been invested in developing students as readers and writers, of course. The newly implemented Critical Inquiry (CI) course as well as a newly implemented Writing Intensive (WI) requirement could complement and expand the instructional methods for close reading that are espoused in FYC, but with the CI course being taught by a diverse group of instructors from many disciplinary areas, a more concentrated effort must be given to reading skills and information literacy.

## What is Being Done?

As USCA's Director of Writing Assessment, I work with a rich milieu of triangulated data to examine transfer of reading and writing skills through our students' disciplinary experiences. Since 1991, I've overseen our institutional writing assessments. I have analyzed thousands of student reflections about their reading and writing; I've also directed a three-year reading diagnostic (2008-2010) to complement our annual Freshman Folder sample. More recently, I've advocated through the Critical Inquiry and Writing Intensive settings for more attention to student reading skills in every discipline. I have my own assertions about the best ways to address problems with my own students in FYC who — as Horning (2007) describes — *don't, won't, or can't* - but I am especially sure about this reality: Over half of our students demonstrate perennial difficulties with researched writing tied specifically to their poor reading skills. Students who read poorly when they enter FYC currently do not improve significantly as readers and writers and continue to struggle in their major programs.

Even when students are given explicit and enhanced instruction in reading, even when adjustments are made to curriculum to address demonstrated student weaknesses, we continue to see woefully low scores in synthesis skills in researched writing. I've tracked our annual Freshman Folder sample to compare first year student skills to students' mid-career writing proficiency portfolios. Not surprisingly, the same sets of weaknesses that poor readers display in FYC are demonstrated when they are juniors and seniors, particularly in areas of source synthesis. Consistently, scores for both Freshman Folders and Writing Proficiency Portfolio submissions indicate that students carry problems with source synthesis forward into their disciplinary writing, with average scores for source use of 2.1-2.3 (on a scale of 5) in both their first-year and junior-level writing.

Overt teaching across the disciplines, especially in writing-intensive classes, must equip students to master analysis, summary, and synthesis. Teachers across disciplines will have to engage in continuous dialogue with students and with faculty in other disciplines about how we ask and expect students to work with texts, to read and write across the disciplines. We must explore our own practices as academic readers.

According to ETS (2011), baccalaureate (liberal arts) colleges I and II regularly admit entering first year students with weak reading, writing, and math skills. To be considered "proficient" in reading, at a marginal level on the ETS Proficiency Profile, a student "should be able to synthesize material from different sections of a passage, recognize valid inferences derived from material in the passage, and identify accurate summaries... [and] discern the main idea, purpose, or focus of a passage..." (p. 9). ETS learning objectives correspond neatly with the USCA's English Department's goals for "reading expository prose" in that our first year composition instructors expect students to comprehend content, analyze structure, and interpret rhetorical features of text. But how well do our FY student skills in reading and writing transfer?

I also regularly consult with colleagues in other disciplines to assist with questions about WAC and WI requirements and assessment. While my focus is typically on student writing skills, a conversation with a colleague in biology helps to illustrate why a lack of reading skills underlies much deficiency in student writing in the disciplines. When a student (named Erin here) demonstrated weaknesses in her proficiency portfolio, I asked the biologist teaching the course to explain what he expected from students on his assignment. This biologist had assigned an eleven-page article which summarized research studies (a meta-analysis) on genetic engineering of agricultural crops. The biologist expected students to summarize the article and to address four specific questions. He expected students to do "close reading." He had selected a very accessible text with predominate textual clues. The text used headings that relied on a question-to-answer format, with paragraphs that used explicit transitions as textual markers: "What is special about genetic engineering? One important difference is.... A second difference is...."

The biologist also aligned pre-writing expectations with standard "writing-to-learn" practices. He first directed the student reader to comprehend the article, using a questioning strategy that could be described as "right here, right now" (McMahon, 2008). Once the reader identified parts of the text that were significant, the instructor directed the student to "think and search" which would lead the student reader to make predictions, analyze connections, and synthesize information: "What is the probability of developing crop species with no pests? Why?" Finally the biologist guided students to evaluate and connect understanding in a two-page report: "So how does what we are doing with fruit flies fit into this discussion?"

Even with these explicit strategies embedded in the text and the instructor's guidelines, Erin is not able, as a junior in biology, to realize that she is being coached. Erin's review was flawed in many ways. Since she had also been asked to reflect on her writing, with her permission, Erin's stated reflection provides additional insight into her lack of skills as a reader and a writer. She acknowledged having problems by attributing her weaknesses to lack of experience, commenting that in most biology classes, "I have not been assigned to do research papers." She did not know how to read the research. She was confused by the features of the meta-analysis.

Instructors across the curriculum often voice their dismay about student writing to me. I am most disheartened when these instructors tell me that because of a predominance of students like Erin, they have abandoned giving assignments that require students to read and write. It's just too time-consuming, they claim, to do this kind of teaching and evaluation. Thus students like Erin often admit having little experience with writing in their WPP and lament not having enough papers to meet this

requirement effectively. WAC/WID research has demonstrated the importance of teaching students how to read and write within their specific disciplines, and as instructors, we simply must not give up on making assignments that challenge students to struggle and engage with texts.

## FYC, Freshman Folders, and Diagnostic Reading

Instructors of first-year composition classes traditionally teach reading and note-taking skills at the beginning of a writing class, but even these instructors do not specifically focus on reading skills per se. Perhaps instructors will include some teaching of information literacy, perhaps with assistance from librarians, but generally our concerns in composition focus on thesis and argument, development and organization of thoughts, and review of language or grammar as needed. When introducing the research process, we spend class time on how to find sources that are relevant and timely, with some attention to avoiding plagiarism through careful note-taking strategies. But we don't often define expectations for "good reading."

For two decades, I have annually collected samples of first year writing, which are evaluated as part of our regular program review. Tracking a stratified sampling of our entering freshmen through our FYC sequence allows the English department to evaluate data so as to make changes in our curriculum. Freshman Folders, as the sampling is termed, has been and continues to be the primary site where we can assess the reading and writing skills of our freshman class. This annual assessment data demonstrates perennial student difficulties with researched writing. After years of curricular tweaking, shared expectations at workshops, and development of explicit assignments and instructional strategies, student synthesis of source material has stubbornly resisted improvement during the FYC sequence.

To look more closely at student reading, with support of the USCA Institutional Research office and with the cooperation of first year instructors, pre and post diagnostic reading assessments were added to the annual Freshman Folder sampling. After all identifiers were removed from work submitted by students who volunteered to participate in the study, the sample was coded so as to abide by CCC Guidelines for the Ethical Treatment of Students and Student Writing in Composition Studies. The process of doing so was challenging and time-consuming, but after two pilot years, our refined pre/post reading assessment yielded data that helped us to realize that our students have many problems with basic comprehension and summary.

Initially we required four reading diagnostics: pre/post English 101 (Composition) and pre/post English 102 (Composition and Literature). Because the assessment required instructors to designate two classes each semester to the assessment, the four required diagnostics became too intrusive, so in the third year of our research design, we limited pre/post data gathering to the second course in our FYC sequence. Specifically we asked all instructors of Composition and Literature to require pre and post assessments during a "fiction module" taught in the course. This module emphasized close reading as the primary skill to be evaluated. Given the emphasis on close reading in our curriculum, we predicted that students would demonstrate significant gains. Results on the post diagnostics, while slightly better than on the pre/sample, did not substantially demonstrate student growth or change.

For this particular reading assessment, on the pre-test for comprehension, students scored an average of 2.7 (on a scale of 5); on their post-test for comprehension, students scored an average of 3.8 (a decided improvement). On the pre-test for analysis skills, students scored a 2.2, and on their post-test for analysis, the same students scored a 3.2. Finally for interpretation skills, on the pre-test, students scored a 2.5; on their post-test, they scored a 3.6. Therefore students improved in comprehension, in analysis, and in interpretative skills after a period of very explicit instruction. But

on their Freshman Folder scores, their scores for use of sources stayed persistently lower than any other category: on average, this same group of students scored a minimal 3 (on the scale of 5) for their synthesis of source material in their researched writing. Explicit testing for reading indicated improvements, but the application of those skills in their writing seems less certain.

In hindsight, I should not have anticipated getting significant gains based on a short writing sample initiated by a student's cold reading of a story in a class setting. Reading processes are recursive, requiring dialogue and feedback, along with revisions of perceptions and readjustments. Just as instructors expect that student writers will need time and consultations to rewrite their papers, instructors should also understand that student readers will need supportive class discussions and time to reflect on reading selections.

In Composition and Literature, USCA students are introduced to literary criticism and thus read numerous creative texts: stories, poems, and plays. Coming to consensus about a diagnostic text that students could read, summarize, analyze, and interpret within a traditional fifty-minute class structure forced instructors to make considerable compromises when selecting pre/post readings for assessment purposes. Very short stories like Chopin's "Ripe Figs" and Cicero's "Eleven" did not guarantee that students would be challenged in similar ways. Without fuller understanding of lexical components or textual accessibility features, deciding on a relevant pre/post reading selection was like taking shots in the dark. Trial and error produced data that seemed reliable enough at the time, but in hindsight, I wonder.

Even with the inherent difficulties in assessment design, the data gathered by instructors of FYC on student reading has been generatively useful to departmental discussions about the FYC curriculum. As a starting point, rubric design has forced instructors to reconsider and articulate our terms, especially those associated with analysis tied to genre. In sum, efforts to assess reading skills in first year composition have been informative to a small group of concerned instructors in the English Department. However, the time intensive nature of this particular assessment works against any institutional assessments of reading skills in upper-level writing intensive courses.

## Reading and Writing across the Curriculum

It may be typical for those involved in institutional writing assessment to add additional requirements when it is deemed that more information is needed. If one institutional requirement pushes students to improve skills just a tiny bit, the tendency to add even more institutional requirements is often justified as a way to keep student learning momentum going in a positive direction.

In 2011, as part of general education reform, faculty at USCA additionally instituted a requirement for three Writing Intensive (WI) courses after FYC. The Writing Intensive Requirement is described on the USCA Academic Affairs website as follows:

After successful completion of AEGL 101 and 102, students will complete 3 courses officially designated as writing intensive (WI) - a minimum of one course each year until 3 have been completed. Students must take a minimum of one WI course within their major.

All WI courses require the equivalent of at least 15-20 pages of word-processed written work as part of the overall grade.

In 100- and 200-level courses, writing might consist of shorter assignments (perhaps 8-10 two-page papers or 4 three- to four-page papers, etc.), essay exam responses, and/or writing-to-learn assignments (these might include journal assignments, brief responses to readings, short research assignments, responses to peer writing, lab reports, etc.). In 300- to 400-level courses, longer papers might be more appropriate (perhaps 2 ten-page papers, or 1 ten- and 2 five-page papers). Particularly for longer papers, including research papers, students should have the opportunity to benefit from the instructor's comments on development, organization, use of appropriate style guidelines (APA, MLA, etc.), coherence, clarity of ideas, and grammar as they revise and edit their papers.

For the purposes of affecting student learning, each WI class must include explicit instruction in writing with feedback and chances for revision. The student writing must also be relevant to the type of writing practiced in the field and use of the appropriate style sheet. The WI instructors should also include explicit instruction in reading strategies relative to their disciplines. In some respects, the entry-level CI class, currently taught by diverse faculty from across the disciplines and majors, would be an excellent place to initiate more conversation about how to teach reading skills within the Critical Inquiry framework. One of the primary foci for the CI course is information literacy, and a core assignment for students entering the academic discourse of the university is based on how to select reliable and relevant source material. The course module for information literacy is led, appropriately, by the university's librarians, but the instructors — who represent all areas of study from art to sociology — could better inform the introduction of reading academic journals with a little more attention given to this instructional need. Furthermore, instructors of institutionally designated WI courses should pay more attention to the students' reading abilities so as to provide the explicit kinds of instruction that will lead to better comprehension, analysis, and synthesis of sources.

## Benchmark Understandings

Randy Bass (1998), reflecting on the scholarship of teaching, identifies student deficiencies in reading as a "problem" that most teachers try to "fix," but which can also be problematized as a potential area for research and scholarship. Realizing that he had little insight into why some students did poorly, he began to question if students who succeeded in his classes had actually acquired the understanding of the course. Were these students who simply entered the class with high levels of skills? He reflects on teaching an honors English course in American literature in which he had assigned historian Francis Parkman's *Oregon Trail*, so that students could explore 19th-century beliefs. Then he happened to overhear a good student say, "I can't believe that Professor Bass thinks this is a good book" (p. 15). He realized that even if he had taken the time to clarify his intentions for using the book — which he admittedly had not — his freshmen would not have been able to grasp that he knew the book was "full of arrogance and self-aggrandizement" and that these very characteristics made the book "important" as a window into the "way of seeing in the 19th century."

To work with students' entering knowledge and skills, Bass advocates diagnostic probing at the beginning of a course or activity. Quoting from Laurillard's *Rethinking University Teaching*, Bass states that teachers must realize how students misunderstand or cannot understand the content being taught and find ways to unwrap assigned texts so that students can progress and learn. Similarly, Horning advocates strategically highlighting particular reasons that any of us uses a reading selection: Is the text being read for content, as part of a process, or to illustrate a structure?

According to Horning, using strategies that she describes as "overt teaching" can help students to master analysis, summary, and synthesis. Teachers across disciplines will have to engage in dialogue with students and with faculty in other disciplines to make our expectations more obvious and clear to students when they work with texts, to read and write across the disciplines, as well as to explore our own practices as academic readers.

Reading is sponsored by diverse and various constituents in academic settings, so naturally definitions of what constitutes good reading will differ. We must consciously question and articulate how our disciplinary roles as sponsors of literacy are associated with our particular reading assignments (Brandt, 2001). We must explicitly share our expectations with students about performances that we identify as good reading in our classrooms. We must become more aware as instructors about the possible mis-directions that we unintentionally give to students.

If we want students to read strictly for content, we must teach strategic summary skills. If we want students to analyze genres, we must explicitly direct analysis and interpretations. We should be willing to seek out instructional methods for developing summary skills, well-developed across K-12 instruction, which can also inform students' post-secondary work.

## Conclusions

Building consensus about our expectations for student reading and writing between First Year Composition, Critical Inquiry, Writing Intensive courses, and the USCA Writing Proficiency Portfolio assessments is an important step to take as an institution since USCA students are required to take both a Critical Inquiry course, two sections of FYC, and three additional Writing Intensive requirements.

More broadly, this institution's currently undefined expectations might be seen as a cautionary tale against adding more requirements which require more assessments before there are explicit connections. Expectations about student reading skills should be explicitly addressed. It remains to be seen if USCA's stakeholders can reach agreement on how to coordinate instruction in writing and reading intensive classrooms. With such potential at stake for student learning, our collectively taking steps to strategically teach reading skills in FYC, CI, and WI courses, to engage more deliberately in the scholarship of teaching, would be a good place to start.

Assessment of student reading should be a common concern across a university's campus, not a singular skill to be housed in an English department or a First Year Writing program. As may be typical of most institutions, the responsibility for writing (and reading) assessment at USCA has been delegated to the relatively few English faculty who are specifically charged to deliver instructional practices in reading and writing. Some faculty in other disciplines have begun to assume more responsibility for delivery of instruction in critical thinking (CI) and in writing (WI). The time is ripe for more attention on explicit instruction and practice as well as for more research and assessment of student reading across the curriculum as well.

## Appendix - Reading Skills Evaluation (revised 4/10)

|                                                             | 5                                                                    | 4 | 3                                                | 2                           | 1 |
|-------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---|
| <b>Comprehension of Content</b><br><i>What does it say?</i> | Comprehensively and accurately summarizes essential elements of plot |   | Adequately summarizes essential elements of plot | Fails to comprehend content |   |



|                                                                                                                        |                                                                                |                                                  |                                    |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| <b>Interpretation</b><br><i>Why did the author write this piece?</i><br><i>What is its theme, message, or meaning?</i> | Fully reasons, expands, and draws generalizations about principal theme(s)     | Adequately expands or generalizes about theme(s) | Fails to express or tackle meaning |
| <b>Analysis</b><br><i>How does it work?</i>                                                                            | Explains which elements of literature contribute most significantly to content | Adequately identifies elements of literature     | Fails to analyze structure.        |

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## Notes

[1] This research has been conducted in full compliance with CCCC Guidelines for the Ethical Treatment of Students and Student Writing in Composition Studies.

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