

# Reading: Securing Its Place in the Writing Center

Alice S. Horning

Oakland University  
Rochester, Michigan



A quick look at the findings of Rebecca Moore Howard and Sandra Jamieson's *The Citation Project*, a national study of a sample of 174 students' actual citations in research writing done at sixteen different institutions, makes clear that students are reading less and less as they do "research" for college-level papers in writing courses and a variety of other subject areas. Similarly, concerns about a national epidemic of plagiarism suggests that if and when students do read source materials, they do not understand them well enough to use them effectively and ethically in their own work. These two trends, among others, point directly to the need for a concept aptly captured in Ellen Carillo's recent book title, *Securing a Place for Reading in Composition*. But beyond the composition classes Carillo mentions, every discipline also needs to make a place for reading. And because writing centers serve every discipline, the need for a stronger focus on reading lives in our writing centers too, as G. Travis Adams pointed out in a recent special issue of *Pedagogy* that was devoted to reading. Specifically, writing center clients need our help with the reading they do to support their writing development. The national statistics from major studies, both quantitative and qualitative, make clear the need for such writing center assistance (see next section). Three strategies discussed here—the use of graphic organizers, an evaluation heuristic, and a summary strategy—are specific approaches writing center consultants can use with clients to improve their writing by helping them more effectively read their research sources. These approaches, though not exhaustive of reading strategies consultants can put to good use, can equip students with reading tools for use in every course and with many writing tasks.

## EVIDENCE OF STUDENTS' READING PROBLEMS

Sometimes, people think that the "students can't read these days" trope is over-used and inaccurate. After all, the widespread use

of smart phones, tablets, and social media suggests that young people are doing more reading and writing than ever. However, quantity and quality are not always related when considering the reading and writing abilities and practices of college students. The reading that students are asked to do in college and their careers generally involves more than the 140 characters allowed in a tweet. A number of recent studies, both quantitative and qualitative, point to students' substantial problems with college reading, so the kind of reading ability students in college need warrants careful appraisal.

On the quantitative side, large scale studies examine students' reading abilities in different ways. Perhaps the largest of these studies is ACT's annual summary of the results on the Reading portion of its test, which is used at many institutions for admission and placement. According to the 2015 report, 46% of the 1.9 million students who took the test that year scored at or above 22 on the Reading section. ACT argues that such a score in Reading is needed to be "successful" in college, which ACT defines as a student returning for a second year of study with at least a 2.0 GPA. It's worth noting that the 46% represents a decline from the 51% of ACT takers who scored at or below the cutoff score in 2006, when ACT did a major study of students' reading performance. Other large-scale quantitative studies on student reading have produced similar findings (cf. National Assessment of Educational Progress [NAEP], Project SAILS, and the Citation Project). Writing center staff may consider the 2015 ACT results in this way: it's possible that half the students coming for help lack the reading skills to do effective and ethical research and to write about their findings appropriately.

It's easy to criticize these large-scale studies for many reasons: they use short passages to assess students' reading abilities through multiple choice questions, are usually time-limited, and do not measure students' abilities to read and analyze an extended argument such as might appear in a scholarly article or a book. These assessments also do not look closely at what students are able to do. For that, qualitative studies are useful, but they produce essentially the same findings. Daniel Keller's *Chasing Literacy*, which looks at digital reading; David Jolliffe and Allison Harl's close look at all reading by twenty undergraduates; Charles Bazerman, Kelly Simon, and Patrick Pieng's work with graduate students; and Michael Bunn's classroom-based study of students' reading all offer detailed examinations of small groups of students working with reading and writing assignments. The message writ-

ing center staff can find in this research? Consultants should understand that students may have reading problems at the root of their writing problems. In helping students with their writing, particularly when sources are involved, consultants can be more effective if they know how to pay more explicit attention to the reading demands of all assignments. All the studies mentioned here and discussed elsewhere in this issue show that consultants need to know much more about effective reading and how to use this knowledge in their writing assistance work with students.

To increase writing center staff understanding of reading, writing center administrators have a number of options. One possibility is to turn to reading specialists who may be faculty in a school or department of education or psychology. Faculty members with expertise in reading who are willing to provide a training session for writing center consultants could explain the basic psycholinguistics of reading and may be able to facilitate a discussion of the role reading may have in tutoring writing students. If faculty members are not available to provide this kind of help, consultants may want to read at least two helpful books: Ken Goodman's *On Reading*, published in 1996, continues to provide a basic overview of the psycholinguistics of reading. Also, Stephen Kucer's *Dimensions of Literacy*, now in its 4th edition, although explicitly addressed to teachers, presents the essential features of reading and makes relevant reading/writing connections. Additionally, several journals in our field have published special issues on reading in the last few years, including *Reader* (vol. 65-66, 2013-2014), *ATD: Across the Disciplines* (vol. 10, 2013), and *Pedagogy* (vol. 16, January 2016), all of which might prove useful.<sup>1</sup> And, of course, if funding allows, bringing in an expert to talk and work with consultants on reading strategies that can be used in writing center sessions would be valuable. I have held such sessions at my own university's writing center, and the consultants reported they found the insights they gained immediately useful. Consultants who take a course on peer tutoring as a prerequisite to working in a writing center might also have the opportunity to learn about reading in such a course; the techniques discussed below could be offered in such a course or as part of on-going training or staff development.

### **MONDAY MORNING: USEFUL APPROACHES**

With an eye on a typical writing center session of 45 minutes or so, I offer three specific strategies that consultants can use with clients engaged in research writing to help the clients learn to think critically about their source material: graphic organizers,

an evaluation heuristic for any kind of source material, and a 25-word summary. When clients bring in research tasks, consultants may help them learn to apply these strategies in one session or in a series of sessions.

### **1) GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS**

This strategy asks clients to use a graphic to help them grapple with and understand a text's arguments. If the text a client is reading offers a comparison/contrast argument, for instance, the consultant and client can draw a line down the center of a sheet of paper and then list the different arguments offered in the text. They may also use a similar graphic to articulate and list the client's agreements or disagreements with the views expressed in the text. Another graphic, a flow chart, might work for a text that explores a process, while a timeline, yet another graphic, might be useful with historical material. Creating a visual, whether on paper or on a screen, can help clients recognize the structure of discussions in a text and may lead them to a better understanding of it. This strategy can be especially useful with English Language Learners, who may not be familiar with typical Western rhetorical arguments. William Grabe's research with second language readers, for example, shows how these students and many others can benefit from using graphic organizers.

### **2) AN EVALUATION HEURISTIC**

A recent study by the Stanford Education Group shows that many students have limited ability to evaluate materials they find as they search for sources. Using a heuristic—a structured insight-building strategy—to help writing center clients learn how to judge the quality of sources can be an extremely helpful approach to improving reading and writing. Shawn Lombardo, an Associate Dean of University Libraries at my institution, Oakland University, designed what I often say is one of the best handouts ever created for a text evaluation approach often mentioned in first-year writing texts. Although this particular heuristic is intended to help students evaluate websites, I find the questions associated with its six topics can effectively be applied to any kind of source material.

1. *Authority*: Who is the author/developer of the website? What qualifications does s/he have for creating this site/page? What organization/company/person hosts the page (i.e., where is it located)? (If you're unsure, try shortening the page's URL to determine the organization or company that's hosting the site.)

2. *Currency*: Is the page or site current? Maintained regularly? When was it last updated?
3. *Relevancy*: Is the information relevant to your topic?
4. *Accuracy*: What facts can you check to ensure that the information contained on this website is correct?
5. *Objectivity/Bias*: Is the information presented objectively? What kind of bias do you think the author(s) of this page may have?
6. *Appropriateness*: In your opinion, is this site a good source of information? Is it a scholarly source? Would you use it in a paper? Why or why not?

While consultants can hardly sit with clients to co-read a whole article or book, the heuristic (especially when altered to match the genre of a source) can guide clients and consultants to think about whether to include a particular source in the research for a written project and how to make such choices. A consultant might review a source or several sources with clients through the lens of such a heuristic, or the consultant may help clients determine additional work needed to evaluate the sources effectively after the writing center session.

With this heuristic, Topic 5 questions about bias and objectivity give students the most difficulty, so consultants need to be prepared to help clients understand bias and objectivity and ways to read critically to recognize both. Still, such a heuristic can provide writing center clients and consultants with an open-ended strategy for thinking about and discussing sources. Furthermore, once clients internalize the heuristic, they can continue to use it to make effective decisions about their sources, which will improve their reading significantly and should, in turn, improve their writing.

### **3) A 25-WORD SUMMARY**

This approach, outlined by Bazerman in a newly available version of *The Informed Writer*, requires that readers try to grasp and share the essence of a text by capturing it in only 25 words (cf. Chapter 3). Boiling down the content of a text's main ideas and details to a 25-word summary often proves difficult when students begin to try it out. However, this strategy encourages repeated readings and careful analysis of a text and ultimately can be a highly effective tool to improve students' reading of assigned material as well as their reading of materials for their own writing projects. In my classes, students often see the 25-word limit as

a challenge and will debate among themselves about whether a peer's summary captures the source's ideas accurately, which is exactly what effective reading should enable students to do.

Trained writing center consultants can help clients learn about writing from sources by supporting the reading (or rereading) of the material at hand to prepare for the summary and may want to excuse themselves or give clients some space as the clients work on an outline for the summary or draft and revise the summaries. If accompanied by insights about the source's rhetorical strategies, the summarizing strategy can lead, eventually, to appropriate synthesis of multiple sources and ethical (e.g., non-plagiarized) use of them in our clients' work. This strategy cannot be used easily when clients want help with a paper due in a day or a few hours, but it can be used effectively when students seek writing center help during the early stages of a research assignment.

Careful reading with the above strategies—making use of graphics, evaluation heuristics, and summaries—can lead clients to a fuller understanding of their material. Patchwriting, poor paraphrase, and inaccurate summary are less likely to occur, reducing plagiarism as well.

## **SECURING A PLACE FOR READING**

The writing center is an important resource at nearly every campus for helping students develop the critical literacy skills they will need to function effectively in their academic, personal, and professional lives. We know that effective academic writing entails the ability to read efficiently so that students can read source materials, news articles, web postings, and all kinds of other material critically. And there is plenty of quantitative and qualitative evidence that many of the students currently on our campuses don't have the skills to read in the ways they need for success during college and beyond graduation. Writing center consultants can play a key role in helping students develop their reading abilities, as demonstrated by the discussion of how graphic organizers, the evaluation heuristic, and the 25-word summary strategies can be incorporated rather easily into the writing center setting and consultation. Through such strategies, the writing center can help secure a place for reading in all college writing work and can help students develop their reading as well as their writing abilities.

### **NOTE**

1. Full disclosure: I was the guest editor for the ATD issue, and have an article in *Reader*.

## WORKS CITED

- ACT. *Reading Between the Lines: What the ACT Reading Test Reveals about College Readiness*. 25 Oct. 2006. <[www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/reading\\_highlights.pdf](http://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/reading_highlights.pdf)>. Accessed 25 Aug. 2016.
- ACT. "The Condition of College and Career Readiness 2015." <[www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/CCCR15-NationalReadinessRpt.pdf](http://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/CCCR15-NationalReadinessRpt.pdf)>. Accessed 1 Aug. 2016.
- Adams, G. Travis. "The Line That Should Not Be Drawn: Writing Centers as Reading Centered." *Pedagogy*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 73-90. doi:10.1215/153142003158637.
- Bazerman, Charles. *The Informed Writer*. <[wac.colostate.edu/books/informedwriter/](http://wac.colostate.edu/books/informedwriter/)>. Accessed 23 Dec. 2016.
- Bazerman, Charles, Kelly Simon and Patrick Pieng. "Writing about Reading to Advance Thinking: A Study in Situated Cognitive Development." *Writing as a Learning Activity, Studies in Writing*, vol.28. Edited by Perry D. Klein, Pietro Boscolo, Lori C. Kirkpatrick, and Carmen Gelati. Brill, 2014, pp. 249-76. doi: 10.1163/9789004265011\_012.
- Bunn, Michael. "Motivation and Connection: Teaching Reading (and Writing) in the Composition Classroom." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 64, no. 3, pp. 496-516.
- Carillo, Ellen C. *Securing a Place for Reading in Composition*. Utah State UP, 2015.
- Goodman, Kenneth S. *On Reading*. Heinemann, 1996.
- Grabe, William. *Reading in a Second Language: Moving from Theory to Practice*. Cambridge UP, 2008.
- Head, Alison J. *Learning the Ropes: How Freshmen Conduct Course Research Once They Enter College*. December 5, 2013. <[ssrn.com/abstract=2364080](http://ssrn.com/abstract=2364080)>. Accessed 25 Aug. 2016.
- Howard, Rebecca Moore and Sandra Jamieson. "Researched Writing." *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies, 2nd. ed.* Edited by Amy Rupiper Taggart, Brooke Hessler, and Kurt Schick. Oxford UP, 2014, pp. 231-47.
- Jamieson, Sandra. "What Students' Use of Sources Reveals about Advanced Writing Skills." *Across the Disciplines*, vol. 10, no. 4. <[wac.colostate.edu/atd/reading/jamieson.cfm](http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/reading/jamieson.cfm)>. Accessed 3 Aug. 2016.
- Jolliffe, David J., and Allison Harl. "Texts of Our Institutional Lives: Studying the Reading Transition from High School to College: What Are Our Students Reading and Why?" *College English*, vol. 70, no. 6, pp. 599-617.
- Keller, Daniel. *Chasing Literacy: Reading and Writing in an Age of Acceleration*. Utah State UP/UP of Colorado, 2014.
- Kucer, Stephen, B. *Dimensions of Literacy: A Conceptual Base for Teaching Reading and Writing In School Settings*, 4th. ed. Routledge, 2014.
- National Assessment of Educational Progress. *Are the Nation's Twelfth-Graders Making Progress in Mathematics and Reading?* 8 July 2016. <[nationsreportcard.gov/reading\\_math\\_g12\\_2013/#/](http://nationsreportcard.gov/reading_math_g12_2013/#/)>. Accessed 25 Aug. 2016.
- Project SAILS. *Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills*. 1 Aug. 2016. <[www.projectsails.org/Home](http://www.projectsails.org/Home)>. Accessed 25 Aug. 2016.
- Stanford History Education Group. *Evaluating Information: The Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning*. Stanford, CA. 22 Nov. 2016. <[sheg.stanford.edu/upload/V3LessonPlans/Executive%20Summary%202011.21.16.pdf](http://sheg.stanford.edu/upload/V3LessonPlans/Executive%20Summary%202011.21.16.pdf)>. Accessed 6 Dec. 2016.