

Getting Students to Complete Required Readings

Getting students to complete pre-class readings before the class in which they are discussed is a frequent challenge for instructors. When students don't complete them prior to class, it negatively impacts the quality of the class discussion.

A recent review of several studies on this subject found that the most frequently cited reasons students for not doing readings was "a work schedule that does not allow time for reading" and "student social life." The most frequently reported reason for completing a reading, regardless of class size, was respect for the professor, which nicely dovetails with most instructors' feeling of lack of respect by students when they do not complete the readings (Hoeft).

The same summary cited a study in which students who didn't complete readings were asked for suggestions on strategies that would make them more likely to do the readings. Three of these suggestions were subsequently tried in courses to measure compliance and students who had done the readings were interviewed to determine whether they had a basic level of reading comprehension. The results are shown in the table below.

#	Suggestion	Compliance	Reading comprehension
1.	Give quizzes on the readings	74%	53%
2.	Give supplementary assignments (a journal submitted at end of course for marks)	95%	42%
3.	Give frequent reminders (at least 3) that made readings sound interesting.	46%	31%

This should give us pause to reflect on the challenge we face.

Possible Strategies:

Make students your "partners in education." Tell them why you chose the readings, and their purpose, value, and relevance and how they will benefit from reading them.

Explain how the readings connect with course outcomes, in-class learning activities, assignments, and exams. They could show up as source material for in-class student presentations and course projects, or be the subject of examination questions. This "leverages" student efforts in mastering readings content by paying off in efficiencies gained as students work on other course assignments.

Promote the next reading assignment in class, giving a high-level overview that helps them discern what to look for and focus on. Provide study questions, or problems to solve. They could submit their answers or solutions which could be quickly marked for "good faith" effort if the class is large and you need to focus your marking effort on more important assignments and assessments. If submitted online,

the marking would be automated, which would be a time-saver. Alternatively, ask students to write and outline or draw a concept map summary of the readings.

If we don't grade students on an assignment, they think we regard it as unimportant. So to communicate to students the value of the readings, we have to assign reading-related activities that are worth points—enough throughout the semester to total at least 20 percent of the final grade.

Provide motivating annotations for the reading, such as, “This is one of my favourite readings—I’m interested in what you think of it,” or “This is the seminal article on this topic,” or “This is the article that started the whole controversy.”

Have students talk about the readings during class. To encourage critical thinking have an in-class mini-essay question that requires some application or analysis. To save time, you can dictate it or display it on a slide. Have students submit their papers, which you could evaluate for good faith effort in relatively little time.

In lectures, add to or update material in the readings, don't present it all. If you do, people will see little point in doing the readings. Apply the readings to real-world problems, have students work in pairs or groups to do something useful with the readings content.

In order for most students to consider something important, it must be worth a significant number of marks. Twenty percent is recommended (Nilson), but that seems high unless readings are a substantial part of the course requirements. Ten percent seems more realistic.

Another option is a quiz on the readings' key points. You could have students complete it online in Desire2Learn before class, and have one of the questions ask what they struggled with the most, or would most like clarification on. You can review these answers before class and be sure to deal with them during the lecture. The key to maximizing the usefulness of such an activity is to have questions to focus on key points and have question distractors be common misconceptions. If you administer a paper quiz, you can first have students take it individually and submit it, then have small groups retake it as a unit.

Cater to students interests in assigning readings (ex. how chemistry contributes to improving the environment, how social media is used to find new audiences for history, how forensic accounting methods were critical in bringing down mafia crime bosses).

Provide guidance on how to read assignments. What are appropriate reading strategies for your field, distinguishing major points from minor details, etc. Point them to Student Affairs workshops on critical reading. See a list of workshops at <http://www.unb.ca/fredericton/studentservices/studentssuccessseries.html>

Turn the table and ask students to prepare questions based on the reading. Each student could submit two index cards, each with a question and their name. Distribute the cards randomly throughout the class and call on students to read a question from the card, read the question creator's name, and attempt to answer it. Then open the floor to comments from others.

Time the assignment of readings to correspond with the date on which their topics will be meaningful parts of the class.

Provide reading guides along with the readings that summarize important concepts and identify potentially problematic areas. Reading guides typically contain such things as help with technical vocabulary, explanation of background concepts, and suggestions for getting the most out of tables, illustrations, graphs, and charts contained in the readings.

References

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