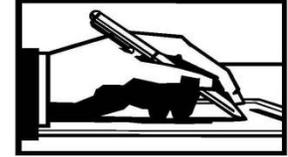


## Teaching with Writing (TWW) Tip Improving Reading with Writing



Reading and writing are inseparable in many ways, but while instructors are often innovative in ways to include discipline-specific writing opportunities and instruction, reading is a much less common topic. Often instructors lament that students don't read with sufficient comprehension, or in some cases, don't read at all. This month's tip will focus on teaching strategies and short writing activities that can help students to improve their reading habits and retention of information.

### What makes college reading different from other reading experiences?

Students typically arrive with strong abilities to decode written texts, meaning they are able to recognize written words within texts and understand them as meaningful units of information. At the same time, their ability to understand these texts and make connections between them may be much less sophisticated. Since the 1980s, researchers in language acquisition like Jim Cummins have distinguished [basic interpersonal communication skills \(BICS\)](#) from [cognitive academic language proficiency \(CALP\)](#). While basic interpersonal communication skills are valuable across contexts and acquired quickly, cognitive academic skills are both more context-specific and acquired much more slowly. Even within the realm of CALP, the highly specific conventions of disciplines and professions many be unfamiliar to students.

In addition to being context-specific, these language practices are also context-reduced, meaning that they depend on a reader's background knowledge and familiarity in order to convey meaning. While textbooks may work explicitly to provide context and explanation for students and other novices, professional and disciplinary discourses aimed at experts often do not. The gap between students' reading proficiency and the demands of complex texts [produces frustration for readers and decreases comprehension](#).

### Practices for Improving Reading Comprehension

*Including writing activities around threshold concepts:* [Meyer and Land](#) (2003) describe threshold concepts as those integrative and transformative concepts whose understanding are portals (or barriers) to disciplinary knowledge. Many disciplines, from accountancy to philosophy to sociology to electrical engineering, have robust pedagogical literature identifying these threshold concepts. If you are already using threshold concepts to organize and evaluate student learning, incorporating writing activities around these concepts gives students both concrete practice and motivation to integrate their new knowledge.

*Teaching the structures of writing in your field:* In addition to discussing the purpose, content, and findings of writing in your field, call students' attention to the typical structures of writing in your field. While students may be familiar with some academic conventions like the [IMRaD structure](#), helping students to recognize the function of and relationships between sections, paragraphs and sentences can make it easier for students to understand what they read.

*Assigning summaries early in the process:* Asking students to answer simple content questions or summarize their reading can help students to prioritize information and can provide a simple check on comprehension. By identifying key points and explaining their significance, students have the opportunity to integrate their reading with their prior knowledge. These summaries can be ungraded and used as the basis for class discussion or graded based on completion.

*Assigning higher-order writing activities later in the process:* Once students are familiar with conventions of writing in the field, ask students to differentiate between related concepts, apply concepts in new contexts, or evaluate the usefulness and implications of conclusions drawn in their readings. Completing cognitively complex writing tasks improves attention to cognitive complexity within source materials.

#### **Learn more**

- ATD Special Issue on [Reading and Writing Across the Disciplines](#)
- Horning and Kraemer, [Reconnecting Reading and Writing](#)
- Kamil, Pearson, Birr Moje, and Afflerbach, [Handbook for Reading Research](#)

**Further support:** Visit us online at <http://writing.umn.edu/tww>. To schedule a phone, email, or face-to-face teaching consultation, [click here](#).

*Our purpose is to provide practical strategies for teaching with writing. Our goal is to offer timely and pragmatic support to faculty members and instructors who teach with writing in undergraduate and graduate courses in all disciplinary areas.*