

## Article

# What Every Writing Teacher Should Know and Be Able to Do: Reading Outcomes for Faculty Members

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## Abstract

The need for much better preparation of faculty on reading arises from evidence in three areas: students' problems with critical reading and thinking, lack of extant faculty preparation in reading pedagogy, and an absence of focused faculty development to improve student reading. Many recent studies show clearly that students do not read as well as they might, online and off. Both quantitative studies like the ACT's data on over a million students in the U.S. and Canada and qualitative studies like the Citation Project show that half or more of current college students lack the skills to analyze, synthesize, evaluate and use material they have read for their own purposes, in school and beyond. Critical and analytical skills are particularly lacking as shown in untimed tests by Stanford University researchers of students' ability to evaluate online material. To address students' needs, clear goals for faculty development can help. Pre-service faculty should be trained in the psycholinguistics of reading as well as in teaching techniques. In-service faculty should have access to professional development to understand students' reading needs and address them more effectively. Collaborations across campus with library faculty can also provide useful approaches to building students' online critical reading skills.

## Introduction

Once not long ago in a department meeting, I raised my hand to say something about the issue under discussion, and before I said anything, one of my colleagues said, "hold on, Alice has something to add about reading." I'd been in the department long enough that everyone knew that

my contributions to discussion often made some point about reading in our courses and program, so it wasn't an entirely facetious remark. It would be a fair remark for anyone to make, since I have been raising my voice about reading issues for the last few years and, really, for much of my career. And so it is here: evidence suggests three specific reasons why much more attention to reading is warranted for writing faculty, despite the difficult conditions for teaching writing these days. The need for much better preparation of faculty on reading arises from evidence in three specific areas: students' problems with critical reading and thinking, lack of extant faculty preparation in reading pedagogy such that most are unable to work on reading as they teach writing, and an absence of focused faculty development that would help writing teachers work on reading effectively. Clear goals for faculty development in light of all this evidence can prepare even overworked teachers to help students read efficiently and effectively.

## **Students' problems with reading**

There is a steadily growing pile of reports and studies providing evidence of students' difficulties with critical reading and thinking. For international comparison purposes, one of the best sources is the Programme for International Student Assessment, or PISA. The most recent results are from the 2015 administration of this instrument in more than 70 mostly Northern Hemisphere countries, including Canada and the United States. The testing is done every three years with a sample of 15-year-olds across the participating countries. Canada does fairly well in the reading section of PISA, scoring on average in the top ten in reading among countries that use the test (Programme, 2015). However, as University of Calgary education professor Man-wai Chu points out (2017), Canadian student scores have not changed significantly since 2006, and this finding is not a good sign. It is also important to think about the fact that PISA is a timed test using multiple choice and paper-based formats. Thus, it does not measure students' abilities online or in untimed exercises. However, very large numbers of students take the exam, and their lack of improvement signals some concern with reading ability. There are similar concerns with reading performance in both Canada and the U.S., arising from studies that examine students' abilities in both timed, paper/pencil tests and in untimed exercises on critical reading in digital environments (ACT, 2006; ACT, 2017).

Tests of information literacy and online skills in both Canada and the U.S. suggest that students really need help with critical reading on paper and on screens. A recent Canadian report on

students' information literacy, using a version of an instrument developed in the U.S. by faculty and librarians at Kent State University in Ohio, shows that Canadian university students do not score at a mastery level for information literacy (Graham, Eva & Cowan, 2018). The instrument used, the Standardized Assessment of Information Literacy Skills (SAILS), is an untimed test of students' ability to find, read, evaluate, and use information, especially online. It draws on the work of the Association of College and Research Librarians (ACRL), a sub-group of the American Library Association. On a different measure that tests many of the same skills as SAILS, another recent study shows that a majority of Canadian university students in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver are at a beginner level of information literacy (Henkel, Grafmüller & Gros, 2018). American students score no better than 50% on the SAILS instrument.

Of these various findings, two recent ones seem most pertinent in suggesting that writing teachers can improve their own reading while learning about the nature of reading in order to integrate reading pedagogy in their own classrooms. One of these is from the U.S., in the Stanford History Education Group report, issued in late 2016. This study gathered 7,804 student responses to a range of tasks involving online information sources. A sample of students in middle school, high school, and college were tested, drawn from an array of institutions around the U.S. College students had five specific tasks:

- 1) Article Evaluation: In an open web search, students decide if a website can be trusted;
- 2) Research a Claim: Students search online to verify a claim about a controversial topic;
- 3) Website Reliability: Students determine whether a partisan site is trustworthy;
- 4) Social Media Video: Students watch an online video and identify its strengths and weaknesses;
- 5) Claims on Social Media: Students read a tweet and explain why it might or might not be a useful source of information. (Stanford, 2016)

Results show that between 50% and 80% of college students were unable to perform these tasks. These are fundamentally reading problems. They are reflected, in the U.S., in the performance of high school seniors from a true national sample of students collected by the U.S. Department of Education and reported in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP); in 2015 (the most recent available results), 37% of high school seniors were proficient in reading. NAEP is sometimes referred to as "The Nation's Report Card" because it is a carefully designed national sample of the American student population. By any of these measures, half or more of the students in college classrooms can't read well enough to do the work teachers assign as routine classwork,

nor can they effectively evaluate materials they find online. Increased attention to reading by all faculty is urgently needed.

Large-scale tests may or may not be the best sources of evidence to demonstrate why reading is important, especially in preparing faculty to teach writing. A different kind of evidence comes from careful analysis of what students actually DO when they write from sources, the kind of task routinely expected in college writing courses, across disciplines. This evidence has been accumulating in the work of Sandra Jamieson and Rebecca Moore Howard, who together oversee The Citation Project (2016). The Citation Project is an ongoing study of about 2,000 citations in student papers drawn from sixteen colleges and universities around the country. Jamieson (2013) has reported on the reading problems observed in the students' use of source materials (full disclosure: I was the guest editor for this issue of *Across The Disciplines*). Overall, the Citation Project findings show that in source use by students, only 6% of citations involve use of real summary, 46% cite from the first page of a source, 70% of citations come from the first two pages of a source, and a majority of sources are cited only once (Jamieson, 2013). Jamieson points out, correctly in my view, that the underlying problem reflected in these statistics is a reading problem.

A closer look at exactly what difficulties students experience appears in John Bean's *Engaging Ideas* (2011). Bean discusses a number of aspects of students' reading problems, including an inability to understand the nature of the reading process or adjust reading strategies for different purposes. Students have a hard time perceiving the structure of an argument or its rhetorical context. In addition, there's a lot of vocabulary and unfamiliar information in the readings assigned in all kinds of college courses, not just English or writing. Since many writing courses have transfer as one of their goals, developing these skills should be a key component of what happens in class. Bean also points to students' difficulties engaging in conversation with an author, following the complex syntax of college-level texts, and understanding the different genres of academic discourse. All these challenges suggest that faculty need to work explicitly on reading to achieve their own instructional goals in their classes.

What does this evidence and Bean's analysis of students' weaknesses mean for faculty? It means that all faculty who teach writing face fundamental reading challenges in their classrooms. I sometimes refer to the overall situation as the "don't, won't, can't" problem: students don't read critically and won't unless they are taught. Because the evidence shows that students really can't read in the way we expect and intend, the need for faculty to understand reading themselves and to be able to work on students' reading is clear. However, many faculty members lack the background

to do this kind of work. In fact, according to the results of a study by University of Connecticut rhetorician and reading scholar Ellen Carillo (2015), more than half of current writing faculty said they were “not secure” (p. 32) in their knowledge of reading theory and practice, or their ability to teach students to read more effectively. My own smattering of evidence, drawn from more than a dozen consulting appointments on reading across the U.S., supports this view. In my experience, front-line writing faculty generally do not know much about reading or how to teach it, and few, if any, graduate programs address this need, based on my own small survey of programs listed in the most recent directory of graduate programs in Writing Studies (*Doctoral*, 2009). Taken together, these points show that there are serious problems with students’ abilities to read critically on paper or online, and that faculty currently do not feel particularly prepared to address these problems. The need for critical reading and thinking continues to grow in an era of online communication, 24-hour news, and evidence of students’ reading difficulties; faculty preparation to improve these skills has never been more important.

### **The steps to be taken**

The discussion to this point offers a rationale for improving faculty training in the area of reading. Current college students need help to become more efficient and effective readers, and current faculty are, by their own admission, unable to provide that help effectively. Programs are not currently preparing faculty to address the issue, at least not if my small survey of programs is any indication. Generally, programs in Rhetoric and Composition do not seem to offer or require even one course in reading theory and pedagogy. Change through faculty development is urgently needed to address this situation. What should faculty know and be able to do to help students become effective and efficient critical readers? The following principles, loosely modeled on the WPA Outcomes for First-Year Composition, offers a guide for individuals and programs.

## Reading knowledge and skill

Outcome 1: Faculty should be expert readers themselves, and should have a basic understanding of the psycholinguistics of reading that they can share with students. Faculty should know and be able to demonstrate:

- explicit understanding of the processes involved in getting meaning from print and visual displays of various kinds, alongside knowledge of text structure, rhetorical context, and word meaning/usage.
- knowledge of current strategies for analysis, synthesis, and evaluation already in use in focused classroom instruction as well as learning new ones.
- skills in critical evaluation of alphabetic and visual texts of all kinds, including assessing for authority, accuracy, currency, relevancy, bias, and appropriateness.

To achieve this outcome, everyone teaching or preparing to teach today can and should be a better reader. There is more material to read; our general reading environment intensifies by the minute, online and off. Faculty should have repeated opportunities to develop skills in critical reading and thinking. Resources might include faculty from a School of Education, Department of Psychology, or centre for teaching excellence, or centre workshops, or online webinars (such as those offered by the Global Society of Online Literacy Educators (GSOLE)) to help.

Following the guidance of Bean (2011), faculty should understand the assorted difficulties undergraduates have in reading, along with the facts of their status as readers discussed earlier. Bean offers excellent guidance in the one chapter he devotes explicitly to reading. Keeping in mind that half or more of the students faculty face do not have the skills to complete the assignments they are given, faculty need to start with their own knowledge of reading, which they can use, as Bean suggests, to demonstrate their own skills and their expectations for students. Faculty can enhance their own skills, both in terms of text structure, rhetorical analysis, and sensitivity to language, and having done so, can share their expertise with their students. These are areas in which the expert readers I studied some years ago show first-rate abilities (reported in my 2012 study of novice and expert readers). Evaluative abilities are especially important; critical thinking about texts is clearly lacking among undergraduates, as illustrated by the findings of the Citation Project.

Bean offers a series of excellent suggestions on specific classroom approaches. He notes that teachers can show students how they read, revealing e.g. varying purposes, responses, and

annotation strategies. They can also encourage or require students to use a printed dictionary and/or a glossary to work on vocabulary development. Students can learn the says/does strategy for working with texts so that they develop both analytical and rhetorical awareness. Working on developing students' interest in texts and requiring them to be responsible for material not discussed directly in class are also useful approaches. In a really superb book on teaching (now in its fourth edition, 2016), Linda Nilson makes this point very directly. In *Teaching at Its Best*, Nilson says specifically, "don't lecture the readings" as well as other strategies so that students have to do the reading and understand it (2016, pp. 211-22). Providing the context for a text or working with students to develop the context will help with understanding. Teachers can lead students in this direction with reading guides and/or group projects to learn about the overall context, including historical, cultural, social, or other elements. Bean suggests using Elbow's "Believing/Doubting Game," one strategy among others also advocated by Ellen Carillo (2015, 2017). Likewise, Bean suggests a variety of note-taking approaches along the lines advocated by Carillo in her advice about annotation. A further strategy along the same lines is writing summaries; a challenge that works especially well is to have students write a 25-word summary of key points of sections of text (cf. Bazerman, 1995), which they see as a kind of game. Any of these strategies will get students reading more thoroughly and thus address the "don't, won't, can't" problem. For help with critical analysis, librarians are great allies with exercises in comparing and contrasting different types of serial publications as well as in examining hoax websites to improve students' critical thinking with both print and online materials.

## Program development

Outcome 2: Programs that prepare writing teachers need to be re-thought to include more emphasis on reading instruction. This includes:

- Requiring a course in reading theory and practice, possibly through an institution's Education department or school .
- Bringing in experts from outside the institution to provide in-service training for faculty.
- Making use of online resources to improve knowledge of reading theory and pedagogy, such as MOOCs or the Global Society for Online Literacy Educators (full disclosure: I have created a webinar with Ellen Carillo on reading, "Reading NOW: Adapting Offline

Strategies to Improve Students' Reading Online," on the GSOLE website, available to members).

Every program, perhaps in conjunction with a School of Education, teaching centre or other resource available on campus, should require a course in reading. Graduate students should be trained to teach reading along with writing, and should practice this teaching under close supervision by senior faculty. There are "ample resources," according to Jolliffe and Harl (2008), for this training, as well as assorted experts, online resources (the previously noted GSOLE webinars, for example), and support from librarians (see below) to achieve this outcome. Among the other priorities in teaching writing, training to incorporate reading should be at the top of the list. Doing so can raise the stock of a writing program insofar as first-year writing is preparation for the rest of undergraduate work; helping students read effectively can have a major impact on student success.

Effective reading and critical thinking are especially important in the online realm, where it is crucial that all faculty be aware of new research showing that some widely held ideas about student abilities are not accurate. A recent report (Kirschner & DeBruyckere, 2017) shows that the claims about the skills of "digital natives" and the wishful thinking about multitasking abilities are not supported by careful research. There is specific evidence pertinent to students' skills in working with sources in the online environment to support these claims. Student performance on the SAILS instrument, created by faculty and librarians at Kent State University in Ohio, shows that half of the current college student population cannot pass these tests (Project SAILS, 2019). Results on these measures show that students have difficulty finding, understanding, evaluating, and using materials they find online. Online reading skills are needed in every discipline and every program, so writing teachers, especially in first-year courses, can improve student success in not only their own classrooms but everywhere else too.

### Across the campus: Working with librarians

Outcome 3: Writing teachers should work in close collaboration with library faculty. This includes:

- Moving beyond one-shot instruction in online research and library resources.
- Building from the *Framework for Information Literacy in Higher Education* (American Library Association, 2015) to develop comprehensive programs in critical reading and information literacy with library colleagues.

- Exploring hands-on exercises and activities that can help faculty develop students' critical abilities (Burkhardt, 2016).

Library faculty constitute a key, and vastly underused, resource. Librarians on many campuses are already offering instruction in the first-year writing program, so they will already be working with faculty and students. But librarians can also provide in-service training to both faculty and graduate students in critical reading skills. Librarians, where available, also love being asked to provide library orientations in other courses that will reinforce the instruction students receive in first-year writing. They can provide many exercises and assignments that can be used in the library or in class to help faculty help students become better readers, researchers, scholars, and thinkers. It is important to remember that the technology of the library continues to change and improve and librarians are generally well-informed about new programs, databases and other aspects of information technology, so all teaching faculty can benefit from librarians' help.

The newly updated *Framework* document provides clear evidence that librarians have been thinking about critical literacy for a long time. They know the current technology probably better than even the most competent library users among the faculty. In my own experience, every presentation by a library colleague to one of my classes, whether first-year writing, a disciplinary course in Linguistics, or an upper-division writing course, taught me new strategies, better ways of analyzing sources, improved techniques for evaluation, or some other aspect of critical literacy. Everyone can learn from the library wizards, and all faculty can and should make better use of them in every course.

## **Conclusion**

From a writing teacher's perspective, perhaps the evidence from the Citation Project is the most persuasive about the importance of reading to the teaching and learning of writing. It's not just that students are pressed for time and so don't read and engage with source materials more thoroughly. It's not just the ease of cutting and pasting from a Google search that makes students' use of sources so superficial and uncritical. It is fundamentally that most students just don't have the skills to read sources well and use them appropriately. Faculty must be trained to work on reading. They need to develop their own reading abilities so that they themselves are top notch readers (and writers, of course). By tapping resources in the library, the writing centre, or a teaching centre, programs can help faculty become fully prepared to enter the classroom to work carefully on student reading

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abilities. Offering faculty development along these lines, perhaps with compensation for the time involved if possible (perhaps through stipends for those who elect additional training on campus or funding for studies elsewhere), can offer support to faculty and help for students. The reading problem has been with us a long time and is not resolving by itself or going away. Improving faculty members' understanding of the nature of the reading process, along with techniques and strategies for improving students' abilities in this area, can make an important difference to improving reading and writing everywhere.

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