CHAPTER 4: DEVELOPING CRITICAL READING STRATEGIES

From your first class, you are aware of the pressure on you to read faster and better. You hear your professor’s instructions, “Read the first two chapters of the textbook and the first two articles in the Course Kit, and be prepared to discuss them at the next class.” No other instructions. In what way are you supposed to read them? Discuss them? Will there be a surprise quiz? How do you begin?

To benefit most from university courses, you must cultivate ways of becoming an active and efficient reader. From the start, teachers expect their students not only to keep up with course readings but also to be engaged and thoughtful in their comprehension of them.

Learning Objectives

This chapter introduces effective strategies for reading in different kinds of courses and for assignments and answers questions about how to develop more advanced reading skills:

• How can you increase your reading comprehension?
• How does the way you were taught to read still influence how you read now?
• How do you skim texts for an overview? When is this skill acceptable?
• How can you prepare outlines and summaries of your readings?
• How do you draw links with other readings in this particular course or with other courses?
• How can you annotate your readings?
• How can you learn to increase your reading speed?
• What do you do if you suspect you have a reading disability?
• How can you combine analysis with reading for content and information?
• How do you annotate e-texts on your computer?
• What different reading skills should you develop to read in different disciplines?
• How can you read film, TV, and other media critically?

A detailed outline of the topics covered in Chapter 4 follows:

Learning Objectives
What is Critical Reading?
How Did You Learn to Read? The Controversy about Teaching Reading Skills
[See the discussion on Teaching Reading Skills on this Web site]
Practical Reading Strategies
Strategies to Increase Comprehension and Retention
  Distinguishing Primary from Secondary Readings
  Skimming for an Overview or Preview
  Reading Actively
  Reading for the Literal

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SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL FOR CHAPTER 4: HOW DID YOU LEARN TO READ? THE CONTROVERSY ABOUT TEACHING READING SKILLS.

As a skill, reading is acquired in elementary school, though many children learn to read before entering school. To become a proficient reader, information has to be processed using the conventions of the text (letters, words, sentences, musical sounds, colour and shape, space and texture, moving images and dialogue, and so on). Such conventions surround, and even bombard us everyday, and in large measure we remain distanced from
most of them, observing them at a distance or insulated against them by long exposure. But when we come to engage actively with any particular text, and seek to understand its meaning, that is, when we begin to read it, we rely upon our knowledge of the conventions of that text and the methods we have acquired and modified of reading it. These methods go back to our childhood where they were planted in our metal processes in the way that we first learned to process information from the language of the text into mental meaning of our own. Even though such early methods have been modified by each of us, many studies have shown that the first method of learning to read, and the continued early practice of it, is highly formative in the ways that we continue to read. Hence, the teaching of reading skills to young children has become an important field where educationists, psychologists, teachers, and politicians have been in disagreement.

From the age of two, most children can combine words into meaningful sentences. Readers are able to use those skills almost from the first stages of learning to read, which means for some children well before kindergarten, for others kindergarten or grade one. Unfortunately, many parents (and children) complain that by grade four they are still reading at a grade one level and have not made the transition to pleasurable reading and to the ability to cope with the syntax of a sentence and its meaning. Students already know the rules for oral English and have internalized some of them through their knowledge of the spoken language, but the written language presents additional problems.

Current research in word recognition (cited above) suggests that effective early readers have learned to move from letters to sounds (phonics) and then to meaning (morphology) through observation, being read to, learning to read, and reading to others. Young readers learn that words have separate and identifiable shapes that can be recognized, sometimes with and sometimes without phonemic processing. Whole language is particularly useful for readers who have some skills with phoneme processing. At the same time, the majority of university students with reading problems or disabilities have difficulty with these first steps in early reading: proceeding from phonics to meaning levels.

The Phonics Versus Whole Language Debates

Two rival methods have been used to teach reading in North America, the phonetic method and the whole language method. In recent years, the merits of each have been heatedly debated in academic circles, as well as in boards of education and government ministries. As a result, students have been subjected now to one method, now to another, and, less frequently, to a blend of both. We describe the two methods briefly so you can see quickly by which method you learned, and will recognize its strengths and weaknesses and what you need to do to improve.

The Phonic Method

Teaching how the ABC letters are pronounced in combinations has changed in its details, but overall it has been remarkably consistent from about 1910 on and has roots that stretch back to John Newberry’s Spelling Dictionary (1745), Solomon Lowe’s Critical Spelling-book (1755), and Noah Webster’s American Spelling Book (1783).

*Phonetics, phonics, or phonology* is the study of speech sounds, including their production by the speech and hearing organs. Phonics is one method used in elementary schools to teach beginning readers. It teaches how letters correspond to sounds, and it results in progressive skills in word recognition, spelling accuracy, and the comprehension of meaning.
In English, there are roughly 36 basic sounds (or *phonemes*, the smallest units of language that distinguish one sound class from another). For example, the *p* sounds in *pit*, *spin*, and *hip* are all slightly different, but the *p* sounds all belong to the same phoneme. The *p* and *b* sounds in *pit* and *bit*, however, have two different phonemes. It is in this distinguishing feature of phonemes that differences in meaning are allowed. Furthermore, the sounds of letters differ from the names of the letters in the ABC. The letter *c*, for instance, has the ABC name that sounds like *see*, but in a combination of letters it is pronounced as *k* (as in *car*). Hence, the words *cat* and *dog* have very different sounds phonically from the names of the letters in the ABC. The sounds of phonemes are described and identified in dictionaries in the pronunciation guide for each word.

When phonemes are combined, they make up a string of sounds that give meaning. The smallest combinations of sounds that are recurrent and that give meaning are called *morphemes*. Such short morphemes as *un-*,-*non-*,-*ly* indicate meaning differences, but so do particular case endings, verbal forms, and so on. Hence, morphology combines phonemes into words of clear and distinct meanings.

In learning to read by the phonic method, a student learns to sound out the words according to already learned patterns of sound recognition based on the combinations of letters and their pronunciation. The meaning of the words is arrived at by recognizing the morphemes that are then combined to make meaningful words, and those words are then combined into sentences. So the word *teacher* is made up of two morphemes, *teach* and *er*. The phonic reader can sound out the morpheme *teach* and can combine it with *er* to arrive at the meaning of the completed word.

The phonic method dominated the teaching of reading until the 1960s in North America when it came under widespread attack for too great a reliance upon teaching by rules and a neglect of the social implications of language in the face of new media developments in TV. At the same time, all kinds of rules in the classroom were challenged, and grammar and spelling rules fell by the wayside. The open classroom emphasized learning through interaction among children, free/unstructured school time, and holistic education: into this scenario came the whole language method of teaching reading.

**The Whole Language Method**

The whole language method teaches reading by having children recognize whole words, not their parts, within a broad language environment. This method stresses the fact that language is learned in a variety of social situations (through interaction with parents, friends, students, and teachers) and oral and visual contexts (through TV, video, computers, the radio, and books). Whole language teaching, then, in the words of a pamphlet produced by the (US) National Council of Teachers of English (a strong proponent of whole language teaching of reading and writing), is “a lot like learning to talk,” sharing “language naturally as a part of everyday experiences.” As in the home, where oral language acquisition is “celebrated and accepted without criticism,” so in school, “through using reading and writing and observing others reading and writing in everyday situations ... children can learn to read and write.” Hence, the classrooms where this learning takes place are those that foster a holistic approach to language, encouraging conversation and projects, considerable reading (especially of “whole,” “real,” or complete books, rather than extracts or kits), listening to others read, and writing. Little attention is paid to correction, standardized testing, spelling, and many of the conventions of standard English grammar or punctuation, as noted at the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) home page (‘Elementary School
Practices”). Similarly, the Board of Education for London (Ontario) issued in 1990 “A Parent’s Guide to Whole Language” in accordance with the policy of the Ontario Ministry of Education: “Children learn in a holistic manner, integrating what they are learning into that which they already know. Learning is difficult when it is focused on isolated parts.”

Whole language teaching was adopted officially in the United States in 1987, after it had been used in New Zealand. But it had already been widely deployed in schools before 1987, partly in reaction to the rigid teaching of phonics in the 1960s. By the mid-1980s it was widely used throughout the United States, becoming the accepted policy of the National Council for the Teachers of English from about 1990 almost to the present. Opposition to the exclusive use of the whole language method to teach beginning reading has been loud and prolonged, but until recently it has made little headway with the ministries and boards of education in Canada and the United States. Of the substantial studies conducted in the United States, sponsored by major national educational policy organizations and foundations and prestigious scientific organizations, none supported whole language or its precursors as the sole preferred method (see, for instance, Adams; Anderson et al.; Chall; and Snow et al.).

Combined Methods

In 1995 California required the teaching of fundamental spelling and phonics skills in grades one to eight, and shortly was followed by Michigan (see “Improving the Reading”). More recently, the NCTE has officially modified their endorsement of the whole-language method, accepting some phonic methods provided they are put into a wider context (“NCTE Position Statement”). At the federal level in the United States, a new reading initiative under the “No Child Left Behind” Act of 2001 has provided $5 billion in reading grants to states that meet the emphasis on phonics that a National Reading Panel report named as essential a year earlier. In Canada whole-language methods dominated the curricula during the same period, so that in Ontario, Circular 14 (the list of government-approved school texts) approved only whole-language materials for teaching reading, and whole language was the program taught by the faculties of education throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In 1997–1998, however, Ontario introduced new curricular guidelines to teach basic skills, once more emphasizing the phonic method, though placed in a larger social language context. In short, throughout North America teaching reading exclusively by the whole-language method is under serious questioning. Parent groups and governments, in response to ever-decreasing scores on standardized reading skills and complaints from post-secondary educators that their students cannot read, are demanding that phonics be emphasized once again in teaching basic reading skills.

The Impact of the Reading Controversies on University Students

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s when most students now in university were taught to read, the debate between the phonics and whole-language advocates rose in intensity, focusing on attacks on the whole method’s claim that learning to read is as natural as learning to talk and on the phonic method’s rules, drills, and rigour. Whole language advocates responded that some phonics could be taught as needed, while phonics advocates, still maintaining that a non-reader has to be taught to read by a reader, broadened their approach to include some whole language criteria for socialized language acquisition. These academic debates, and the consequent changes in requiring the teaching of one particular reading method in schools, were deeply caught up in political battles at federal, state or provincial, and local levels, as

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well as disputes in faculties of education and teachers’ unions. The results of these debates often placed students at a disadvantage, often leaving them behind because of sudden changes in the ways they were being taught to read.

In our view, based on teaching university students throughout the period of these debates, the collapse of phonics capabilities among post-secondary students in Canada has been one of the hidden causes of what many have called the current crisis of literacy in universities. Many students lack the ability to read unfamiliar words, to pronounce words correctly according to conventional practice, to link unfamiliar words to others that are familiar in word families, to recognize prefixes and suffixes as carriers of meaning, to move to the semantic level (the level of meaning) for unfamiliar words in sentences, before moving to rapidly and efficiently comprehending what they are reading. While many students have learned to adapt their skills for advanced reading for university courses, many others are left struggling. When faced with complex terms in technical subjects (for instance, in psychology, classics, biology, and literature), students without any phonics training cannot easily pronounce technical vocabulary essential to each discipline. Most teachers of English and foreign languages are acutely aware of this problem when students have difficulty in pronouncing (or deriving meaning from) unfamiliar words or characters in Shakespearean plays or proper names in the novels of Dostoevsky. But the same problems occur with various descriptions of clinical conditions in psychology, names in Greek, Roman, or contemporary history, the names of chemical compounds or parts of an organism, and so on.

It is partly to help address some of these difficulties that this chapter has been introduced into *Foundations*. But in addition, the materials that it covers, and in particular the reading strategies and more advanced reading levels, should help any reader at university.

**Selected Readings on the Phonetics–Whole Language Debate**


SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL FOR CHAPTER 4: POWER READING

Many students read much too slowly. If you are a word-by-word reader, chances are that you are not taking in nearly as much as you could if you increased your rate and learned to read by phrases or even lines. Most speed-reading books have exercises to test yourself. For instance, David Yarington includes one in his book Surviving in College, and comments that by exercising conscious will, you can improve the rate of your reading; he shows how using the simple device of saying “Read faster!” to yourself can help you double your reading speed and comprehension.

One of the first steps in learning to read faster is to follow quickly over the line with your finger (the finger method) or with a pointer (such as a pen or pencil) without relaxing the pace. The act of following with the finger provides some motor concentration and increases your speed and comprehension. Others find it useful to use the whole hand for this method. The point is to keep going in order to reduce the temptation to skip back to the previous sentence or to an earlier phrase to reread it. Most teachers of power reading agree that the speed of your reading depends to a large degree on the speed at which you move your finger or hand down the page.

People who study the psychology of reading have been greatly interested in how the eye works in relation to the printed page and in terms of comprehension. Beginning readers tend to focus on a word at a time: their fixation zone is the single word, or, to make things even slower, vocalization. Vocalization means that words are actually sounded out or pronounced mentally, on the assumption that if the word is pronounced it will be understood. More experienced readers avoid vocalization because they have increased vocabularies and recognize most words they come across, and they also extend their fixation zone to take in a block of words by a single fixation of the eyes. Many university students fear missing something in the textbooks or assignments that they are reading, and they often revert to their much earlier method, fixation on a word-by-word zone. That process is invoked especially when the reading is difficult or contains many unfamiliar words or concepts. Reading is thereby greatly slowed down.

Reading analysts are also interested in the duration of each fixation of the eyes.
Beginning readers look longer at each word, and even experienced readers, as we all know, slow down in reading when they are tired or when their mind wanders. The fixation time greatly increases, and the fixation zone is reduced. When you are slowed down in your reading by poor attention or lack of sleep you also tend to skip back to recover some of the words or phrases that you missed in the first pass of the eyes over that zone.

Power reading attempts to address the issue of reducing the fixation time by spending less and less time to “read” a passage, and by increasing the fixation zone from a word-by-word process to four or five words or a whole line with experienced readers. When these processes are implemented, usually by a self-paced computer program that highlights and blocks out text, or by some pointer or finger method, you will be well on the way to becoming a power reader.

Power reading puts the materials you read into your short-term memory, so that you can better comprehend the general structure and the details of what you are reading. However, you still have to consolidate that information into your long-term memory (review the discussion of this process in Chapter 2). Of course, the conditions for concentrated reading have to be in your favour. Reading in the college pub to the accompaniment of Friends, Vince Carter, or Eminem is not the best way to get the most out of your reading.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL FOR CHAPTER 4: A Short Glossary of Technical Terms Used in Film Analysis

The following technical terms are often used in film production, criticism, and analysis to describe the formal structure of scenes, camera work, and editing. For fuller glossaries, see the suggested Web sites in the Weblinks.

Cuts

- **Straight cut**: A transition from one scene to another with no intermediary footage.
- **Inter-cut**: An interjection of one cut into a sequence, often for irony.
- **Crosscuts**: Cutting back and forth from one scene to another, often to communicate a sense of urgency or parallel action.
- **Jump cut**: Showing the beginning and end of an action and leaving the viewer to supply the interim action, as when a character enters a room and is immediately at the destination.
- **Dissolve**: Merging one scene into another—related to form cuts, where the shape of one image on the screen suggests the shape of the next image; superimposing a fade-out with a fade-in. Both are used now to shift from black and white to colour, from one colour hue to another, or from one intensity to another.
- **Fade-out**: The screen gets darker as the image disappears.
- **Fade-in**: The screen changes from black as the image gradually emerges into full brightness.
- **Iris**: A new scene appears in the centre of the old scene and expands to take over the screen; uncommon today, but still used in some films to give the feel of the early days of the movies.

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• **Wipe**: The scene is wiped off from one side to another; or one shot shoves another off the screen.

**Shots**

• **Long shot**: A general setting, with full figures of the subjects.
• **Medium shot**: The object is shown in its immediate context.
• **Close-up**: The camera is stable, the lens moves (cf. **zoom**, **zoom freeze**) to show the subject’s face or any object close at hand.
• **Pan shot**: The camera swings from left to right or right to left, and the base is stable.
• **Tilt shot**: The camera aims up or down while fixed on its axis.
• **High- or low-angle shot**: As described.
• **Overlap shots**: Several shots of the same scene from different angles.
• **Two-shot**: A shot of two people (also a three-shot).
• **Tracking**: A single, continuous shot made with a moving camera, where the relationship and distance between the subject and the camera are constant.
• **Zoom**: The focal length of the camera lens is changed as the camera zooms in on the scene or on a detail, greatly shifting the relationship between the camera (the viewer) and the subject.

**Montage**

This technique includes the impressionistic juxtaposition of brief shots, but it refers especially to the process of controlling the manipulation of time in film by cutting and editing to combine shots of apparently unrelated material, generating new, meaningful relationships. Famous instances of the use of montage include Eisenstein’s treatment of the Odessa Steps in *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) or of the battle on the lake in *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), or the shower murder in Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1959) and the park and disappearing body scene in Antonioni’s *Blow-Up* (1966).

**Mise en scène**

*Mise en scène* refers to what takes place on the set and so is the opposite of montage. Literally, it is “the putting into the scene”—the use of the set or location, the direction of the actors, placement of cameras, choice of lenses, and so on—to determine the use of space in shots and scenes.

**Frame**

*Frame* refers to the single image on the film but also to the compositional unit of design in each image. Frames may be open, bounded, closed, or marked out with lines in the composition parallel to or echoing the shapes in the image.

**FAQs**

*My reading load is overwhelming. How can I keep up and still comprehend what it is that I am supposed to be getting out of it?* Course loads are heavy and make great demands on your reading abilities, pushing you well beyond the methods you have probably used up until now. Courses often
demand reading a book a week, difficult scholarly articles, and complex sections of textbooks. In order to adjust to these new demands, you must rethink the ways that you have been taught to read. First, decide what level of reading is required for each week’s assignments. Some will require general knowledge, others, an awareness of detail, still others, analysis and reflection. For two weeks, test your methods by keeping a record of your reading time for different purposes; if you cannot keep up, discuss your problems with your instructor, and modify your methods.

How do I know whether to skim or read for detail? Skimming has a bad reputation, but it is an essential art for successful university work. Before reading any assignment, you should skim it for an overview. For an article, read the opening and concluding paragraphs, glance through it to note the major divisions and topics, and consult the notes and list of works cited for the range of topics covered. For a scholarly book, look for a summary of the argument in its preface or introduction. Consult the table of contents for a list of chapter divisions, and follow the steps outlined above to read a scholarly article. Once you have completed such an overview, you should have a clear idea of what to focus on in relation to the guidelines and emphasis given by your professor. Remember that you are reading for specific purposes in a course.

How do I learn to read faster? Some materials, such as philosophical arguments, cannot be read quickly. Most students, however, can learn to read much faster than they do, and by developing their speed-reading skills, their comprehension will also increase because you are concentrating more effectively. The essential skills are to focus your attention on the line and paragraph rather than the word, to avoid (for now) getting bogged down in words you do not understand, to read for large concepts, and to self-consciously push yourself to increase your reading speed. You can monitor improvement in your reading speed using Box 4.1 in Chapter 4 of Foundations, or by testing yourself on some of the Web sites we recommend.

How can I learn to read with the depth that many of my courses seem to require? Some disciplines, particularly those that stress detailed readings and analysis, require methods of reading that push you beyond the literal level of the words on the page. Different materials require different approaches. For instance, the opening chapter of a novel demands that you pay attention to the cast of characters, setting in time and place, and the significant actions that will complicate the plot—that is, essential information available at the literal level. The opening of a novel, however, sets up dominant themes or ideas that will be explored later, and to comprehend these patterns, you need to draw on the expository method of reading that enables you to see the ways that meaning and concepts are communicated. The same methods can be applied to other forms of writing and argument. Analytical methods extend your comprehension by allowing you to see patterns of a text, drawing relationships between its parts and applying to your reading historical, social, or other contexts. You can consolidate your reading by making a brief summary by posing a relevant question to push your analysis further, or by annotating your text if it is your own copy.
WEBLINKS TO CHAPTER 4

Critical Reading Practice

- “How to read an article more effectively” from Augusta State University
  www.aug.edu/langlitcom/freshman_english/learning_materials/how_to_read.htm

- John Lye’s Guide to Critical Reading from Brock University
  www.brocku.ca/english/jlye/criticalreading.html

- Longview Community College's bibliography on recent scholarship on reading
  www.kcmetro.cc.mo.us/longview/ctac/reading.htm

- University of Toronto’s Critical Reading page
  www.utoronto.ca/writing/critrdg.html

- “What is Critical Reading?” from the Writing Center at Cleveland State University
  www.csuohio.edu/writingcenter/critread.html

Developing and applying critical reading skills and annotation strategies

- Columbia University
  www.columbia.edu/cu/augustine/study/focus.html

- Dartmouth College
  www.dartmouth.edu/~acskills/success/reading.html

- Fairy Tales and Red Riding Hood site
  www.surlalunefairytales.com/ridinghood/index.html

- Georgia State University’s reading test
  www.gsu.edu/~wwrtp

- “Reading Skills for University” at York University
  www.yorku.ca/cdc/lsp/readingonline/reads1

- University of St. Thomas
  www.iss.stthomas.edu/studyguides/

Film, Television, and Media Studies

- Cinema and TV Weblinks from the University of Alabama
  www.tcf.ua.edu/ss/link-16.html
Learning Disabilities

- The Davis Dyslexia Association has much material on learning and comprehension disabilities
  www.dyslexia.com/quest.htm

- The British Dyslexia Association
  www.bda-dyslexia.org.uk/main/home/index.asp

Phonetics/Whole Language Debates

- Anderson, Kenneth. “The Reading Wars: Understanding the Debate over how to Teach Children to Read” Los Angeles Times (June 18, 2000)
  www.nrrf.org/article_anderson6-18-00.htm

  www.edweek.org/ew/vol-15/26read.h15

  www.pdkintl.org/kappan/k0201yat.htm

Speed Reading

- Improving your speed reading from California Polytechnic University
  http://sas.calpoly.edu/asc/ssl/personal.reading.imprvmnt.html

- Tips on increasing your reading speed from the University of Victoria
  www.coun.uvic.ca/learn/program/hndouts/rdgspeed.html

Speed-reading software that costs between $20 and $500
• Acereader
  www.stepware.com/acereader.html

• Self-Growth
  www.selfgrowth.com/reading.html

• RocketReader
  www.rocketreader.com