

Teaching an Assigned Reading

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Whenever you are preparing to teach an assigned reading, whether for kindergarten or AP high school, you must always be clear in your own mind about two points:

1. what is important in the reading; what every student should understand about it
2. how you will help your students connect the new material in the reading to what they already know, so that it makes sense to them and they can remember it.

Teaching vs. introducing or exposing

Be aware of the difference between *teaching* new material and *introducing* or *exposing* students to it. Real teaching results in learning, understanding, and remembering, whereas merely introducing material may result only in students recognizing that they have heard of it or read it before.

Learning comes from using

Real learning comes from using new information in a way that connects with and extends or transforms what students have previously learned about the world. Make sure students have opportunities to do more than just read and listen: they need to be active and, on occasion, creative. Your goal is to make the material memorable and comprehensible by helping students make strong and diverse connections between the assigned reading and what they already know well. These strong and diverse connections result in what we call “understanding.” Activities that help students develop an understanding of an assigned reading take place before, during, and after the process of reading itself.

Before reading

What happens before reading is at least as important as what happens during and after reading. Pre-reading activities should help students understand:

Purpose

- the importance of the reading; its place in their culture, in their education, and in their future; why adults think its worth their time to read it
- the purpose of their reading it for this class; how it fits into the overall goals of the class;
- specific learning goals for the reading assignment

Context

- the historical, cultural, or other context of the reading--what larger story is it part of?
- specific references in the reading that students may not know or understand
- assumptions the author makes about his or her audience
- the genre of the reading and what it expects of the reader, if the genre is unfamiliar to students

Pre-reading activities should also bring to the forefront of students’ minds the ideas and information that they already know that will help them understand the reading.

During reading

Skillful readers always read for a purpose, and actively think about what they are reading. If your students have not yet learned to read skillfully on their own, you can help them learn how through gradually more complex practice, and refrain from assigning readings that are too difficult before they are skilled enough to read them successfully. You can also create reading aids or activities that help students do the following when they read:

- Identify what the author expects the reader to know or understand already, and find out about it if necessary. This may be as simple as looking up the meaning of unfamiliar terms or as complex as reading other material to learn something about the context of what is being read.
- Identify the work the author expects the reader to do, such as filling in gaps, making inferences, noting contradictions, visualizing, imagining, suspending disbelief, and putting facts together.
- Summarize what has been read so far.
- Identify important details or points.
- Identify how the details go together to make a big picture, an overall story, or a few big ideas.
- Compare and connect what is learned from the reading with other things already known.
- Pose questions or make predictions about what the author has in store.

After reading

Design an activity for the class to do that will allow them to work with the important ideas in the readings. Here are some suggestions:

- Have students put the information in another form, such as a picture, song, poster, timeline, or chart.
- Simulate an historical situation so that students can experience what it was like by putting them in the roles of teachers, students, politicians, immigrants, etc.
- Give students roles or situations and ask them to come up with their own skits.
- Give students questions to discuss or problems to solve.
- Set up a debate.
- Ask students to find comparisons between an historical or fictional event and current events.
- Ask students to go through the reading to look for particular information, and then ask them to do something with that information.
- Design a game or competition focusing on what students should learn and remember (rather than on unimportant ideas or details). Students can contribute questions or problems for the game.

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