

# Helping Students Read Difficult Texts

Whenever faculty get together to talk about student writing or critical thinking, they inevitably turn also to problems of student reading. Just as speaking and listening skills are intertwined, so too are writing and reading skills. Many of today's students are poor readers, overwhelmed by the density of their college textbooks and baffled by the strangeness and complexity of primary sources and by their unfamiliarity with academic discourse. Armed with a yellow highlighter but with no apparent strategy for using it and hampered by lack of knowledge of how skilled readers actually go about reading, our students are trying to catch marlin with the tools of a worm fisherman. We have to do more than take our students out to sea. We have to teach them to fish in the deep.

## Fear of Deep Waters: Causes of Students' Reading Difficulties \_\_\_\_\_

Before we can help students improve their reading skills, we need to look more closely at the causes of their reading difficulties. Our students, of course, have learned to read in the sense of achieving basic literacy. Except for an occasional student with a reading disability, college students do not need to be taught reading in this ordinary sense. Rather, they need to learn how to fish academic texts, which constitute waters deeper than anything they have plumbed before. What factors send them home from the sea of academic reading frustrated by the expense of time and the emptiness of the catch? I can identify ten contributing causes.

## 1. Misunderstanding of the Reading Process

When experts read difficult texts, they read slowly and reread often. They struggle with the text to make it comprehensible. They hold confusing passages in mental suspension, having faith that later parts of the essay will clarify earlier parts. They “nut-shell” passages as they proceed, often writing gist statements in the margins. They read a difficult text a second and a third time, considering first readings as approximations or rough drafts. They interact with the text by asking questions, expressing disagreements, linking the text with other readings or with personal experience. The bigger the fish they go after, the greater the struggle in reeling it in.

In contrast, our students imagine that expert readers are “speed readers.” Deceived by Evelyn Wood advertisements, students push themselves to read faster instead of slower. Consequently, they do not allot enough study time for reading and rereading. If they do not understand the text on first reading, they assume that it is the teacher’s job to explain the text to them. Since teachers regularly do so, the students’ reading difficulty initiates a vicious circle: the teacher’s willingness to explain the text (“I have to lecture on this material because students are such poor readers”) deprives students of the very practice and challenge they need to grow as readers (“I don’t have to struggle with this text because the teacher will explain it in class”). Noting the fishermen’s frustration, we teachers buy fish for them.

## 2. Failure to Adjust Reading Strategies for Different Purposes

Besides understanding how skilled readers read difficult texts, students need to know that a good reader’s reading process will vary extensively, depending on the reader’s purpose. Sternberg (1987) argues that college students—facing enormous amounts of reading—must learn to distinguish among different reading purposes and adjust their reading speed accordingly. Some reading tasks require only skimming for gist, while others require the closest scrutiny of detail. Sternberg gave people a reading comprehension test comprising four passages, each of which were to be read for a different purpose—one for gist, one for main ideas, one for detail, and one for inference and application. He discovered that good readers varied their reading speed appropriately, spending the most time with passages they were to read for detail, inference, and application. Poor readers, in contrast, read all four passages at the same speed. As Sternberg puts it, poor readers “do not discriminate

in their reading time as a function of reading purpose" (p. 186). The lesson here is that we need to help students learn when to read fast and when to read slowly.

### 3. Difficulty in Perceiving the Structure of an Argument as They Read

Unlike experts, inexperienced readers are less apt to chunk complex material into discrete parts with describable functions. They do not say to themselves, for example, "This part is giving evidence for a new reason," "This part maps out an upcoming section," or "This part summarizes an opposing view." Their often indiscriminate, almost random use of the yellow highlighter suggests that they are not representing the text in their minds as a hierarchical structure.

### 4. Difficulty in Assimilating the Unfamiliar

Developmental psychologists have long noted the "cognitive egocentrism" of new college students who have trouble walking in the shoes of persons with unfamiliar views and values (Flavell, 1963; Kroll, 1978; Norman, 1985; Bean, 1986; Kurfiss, 1988). No matter what the author really means, students translate those meanings into ideas that they are comfortable with. Thus, to many of our students, a philosophic Idealist is someone with impractical ideas, whereas a Realist is praiseworthy for being levelheaded. The more unfamiliar or more threatening a new idea is, the more students transform it into something from their own psychological neighborhoods. The deep harbors the strange and the terrifying. Better not to catch those ideas but rather to tame them into something familiar, to turn sea monsters into canned tuna. The insight of cognitive psychology here is that these problems are related neither to stupidity nor to intellectual laziness. They are as natural as crawling before walking, and we as teachers need to adopt appropriate strategies for dealing with them.

### 5. Difficulty in Appreciating a Text's Rhetorical Context

Students do not see what conversation a text belongs to. They do not understand what question is being addressed or why the writer was troubled by it. They have difficulty perceiving a real author writing for some important reason out of a real historical context. Particularly, they do not appreciate the political biases of different magazines and newspapers, the varying degrees of scholarly prestige of different journals and presses, and the significance

that skilled readers often give to the reputation of the author. These problems are closely related to the following one.

#### 6. Difficulty Seeing Themselves in Conversation with the Author

Possibly because they regard texts as sources of inert information rather than as arguments intended to change their view of something, inexperienced readers do not interact with the texts they read. Readers must will themselves to play two opposing roles: an open-minded believer who can succumb to the text's power and a skeptical doubter who can find weaknesses in the text. In playing these roles, an experienced reader carries on a silent conversation with the text's author.

#### 7. Lack of the "Cultural Literacy" Assumed by the Text's Author

In the jargon of reading theorists, students do not have access to the cultural codes of the text—background information, allusions, common knowledge that the author assumed that the reading audience would know. Knowledge of cultural codes is often essential to making meaning of the text. So significant is this cause that Hirsch, Kett, and Trefil (1987) have made a national movement out of "cultural literacy," lack of which they claim is a prime source of students' reading difficulties in college.

#### 8. Inadequate Vocabulary

Inadequate vocabulary hampers the reading comprehension of many students. Using a dictionary helps considerably, but often students do not appreciate how context affects word meanings, nor do they have a good ear for irony or humor. Moreover, the texts they read often contain technical terms, terms used in unusual ways, or terms that have undergone meaning changes over time.

#### 9. Difficulty in Tracking Complex Syntax

Although students may be skilled enough reading today's college textbooks, which may be "dumbed down" through simplification of syntax, they often have trouble with the sentence structure of primary sources or scholarly articles. When they are asked to read a complex sentence aloud, their errors in inflection reveal their difficulty in chunking grammatical units; they have trouble isolating main clauses; distinguishing them from attached and embedded subordinate clauses and phrases.

## 10. Difficulty in Adjusting Reading Strategies to the Varieties of Academic Discourse

Students do not understand that prose styles, discourse structures, and argumentative strategies differ from discipline to discipline or from historical period to historical period. Just as they do not adjust their reading speed to differences in purpose, they do not adjust their reading strategies to differences in genre. They do not understand, for example, that scientists often read the introduction and discussion section of scientific reports quite carefully but skip the methodology section and only skim the findings. To take another example, they do not understand that historians read primary sources quite differently from the way they read journal articles. They also do not understand why some writers labor to make themselves clear through highly mapped, thesis-up-front structures while others seem to seek obscurity through a difficult style and complex, organic organization. They have particular trouble with exploratory, digressive, process-oriented styles or with highly metaphorical or allusive styles. As anglers, they do not adjust their strategy to the kind of fish they seek.

### Suggested Strategies for Helping Students Become Better Readers

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Having examined these various causes, we recognize that reading skills, like writing skills, develop slowly over time as students move upward intellectually on Perry's developmental scale, as their vocabularies expand, as they grow in cultural literacy, as they increase their repertoire of reading strategies, and as they develop better study habits. Although we cannot teach reading directly, we can create learning environments that nurture reading growth. What follow are a number of suggestions for creating such an environment.

#### Explain to Students How Your Own Reading Process Varies with Your Purpose

Students appreciate learning how their professors read and study. You might take some class time to discuss with students your own reading processes. One approach is to create little research scenarios to help students see how and why your reading strategies vary. When you do your own research, for example, when do you skim texts? When do you read for gist but not for detail? When do you read carefully? Under what circumstances do you take notes on a

text or write in the margins? When you read a scientific or technical article, when do you read the methodology and findings sections carefully and when do you skip directly to the discussion section? How much are you influenced by the credentials of an author? How much does the prestige level of a scholarly journal or the political bias of a magazine or newspaper affect the way you read a text?

The fifteen or twenty minutes it takes for such a discussion can sometimes have a powerful influence on students, especially if your course involves reading of primary and secondary sources.

### **Show Students Your Own Note-Taking and Responding Process When You Read**

Just as it helps students to see a skilled writer's rough drafts, it helps them to see a skilled reader's marked-up text, marginal notations, and note card entries. Bring in a book or article full of your own marginal notes and underlinings, along with entries you make on note cards or responses you make in reading logs. Show them what sorts of things you write in the margins. Explain what you underline and why. If your reading is part of a scholarly project, show them how you take notes and how you distinguish between what the author is saying and your own reflections on the material.

### **Help Students Get the Dictionary Habit**

Students should keep a dictionary in the room where they study and should perhaps carry a small pocket dictionary. They need to learn strategies that work for them when they encounter unfamiliar words. One strategy is to make small ticks in the margins next to words they are unsure of and to look them up later when they come to an appropriate resting place in the text. After they have looked up a word, they can review briefly the parts of the text in which it occurred before tackling the next portion.

### **Teach Students How to Write "What It Says" and "What It Does" Statements**

A helpful way to teach students to understand structural function in a text is to show them how to write "what it says" and "what it does" statements for each paragraph (Ramage and Bean, 1995, pp. 32-34). A "what it says" statement is a summary of the paragraph's content—the paragraph's stated or implied topic sentence. A "what it does" statement describes the paragraph's purpose or function within the essay: for example, "Provides evidence for the author's first main reason," "Summarizes an opposing view," "Provides sta-

tistical data to support a point," or "Uses an analogy to clarify the idea in the previous paragraph." The "what it says" sentence for the paragraph you are now reading is "Teach students about structure by having them write 'what it says' and 'what it does' statements." The "what it does" statement is "This paragraph gives another strategy for improving reading." Asking students to write out "what it says" and "what it does" statements for each paragraph in a scholarly article in your field will ensure not only careful reading of the article but also increased awareness of structure.

### Make Students Responsible for Texts Not Covered in Class

A good way to increase the amount of material covered in a course or to create space for active learning is to make students responsible for course readings not discussed in class. (For a justification of this approach from an economist, see Machlup, 1979.) This strategy signals to students that all learning in a course does not have to be mediated through the instructor. Not only does this strategy allow instructors to cover content material without feeling rushed to lecture over it, but it also breaks the vicious reading cycle discussed earlier (teachers explain readings in class because students are poor readers; students read poorly because teachers explain the readings in class). When students know they will be tested on material not covered in class, they are forced to a deeper level of struggle.

### Develop Ways to Awaken Student Interest in Upcoming Readings

Students' reading comprehension increases when they are already engaged with the problem or issue that a reading addresses or are otherwise interested in the subject matter. The trick is to arouse students' interest in a text before they read it so that they are already participating in the conversation that the text belongs to. Perhaps they will thus be stimulated to read the text for their own reasons rather than for ours. Here are two strategies that might work.

**Devise Interest-Arousing Pretests.** One technique is to create an interesting nongraded pretest over the upcoming reading. Students will get a preview of the content of the reading, as well as an awareness of their own gaps in knowledge. If the test can make the content seem interesting or important, it may help awaken curiosity.

**Assign an Exploratory Writing Task or a Collaborative-Group Task on a Problem to Be Addressed in the Reading.** Prior to assigning a reading, ask students to do their own thinking about a problem or

question that the reading will address. For example, prior to assigning Plato's *Crito*, the teacher could present the following problem:

In the *Crito*, Socrates has been sentenced to death and waits for his execution. The state, perhaps embarrassed by its decision to kill Socrates, has made it easy for him to escape from prison. In this dialogue, Socrates's friend Crito urges Socrates to escape and go into exile. Socrates argues that his right action is to stay in prison and accept execution. Try to predict the arguments that both Crito and Socrates will make. Give at least three good reasons for escaping and three good reasons for staying and dying.

Having role-played the dialogue in advance (as either an at-home journal assignment or an in-class group task), students will be interested in comparing Plato's actual arguments to the ones they predicted.

### Show That All Texts Reflect the Author's Frame of Reference and Thus Are Subject to Interrogation and Analysis

Students often become more interested in scholarly works, even textbooks, when they realize that every author necessarily distorts his or her subject. No textbook or scholarly work can give them the "whole truth" about subject X, only the author's version of the truth—a version necessarily distorted by the author's own selectivity, emphasis, and writing style. Teachers can awaken interest in these issues by photocopying the coverage of subject X from competing textbooks or other scholarly works and by having students explore the differences between them. An excellent example of this strategy is provided by Swartz (1987), who contrasts two anthropological analyses of the role of women in the !Kung society in the African Kalahari. One anthropologist implies that !Kung women live a life of second-class drudgery, while the second anthropologist, observing the same data, cast !Kung women as "a self-contained people with a high sense of self-esteem" (p. 114). Class discussion of the differences in two accounts of the same subject helps students better understand the concepts of point of view, frame of reference, and authorial bias. Once students realize that all texts filter reality by privileging some aspects of X while censoring others, they tend to read more actively, more alert to point of view and to the persuasive power (and distortion) of metaphor, style, and narrative arrangement.

### Show Students the Importance of Knowing Cultural Codes for Comprehending a Text

Many students do not realize that a passage from a text can be baffling if the reader does not know its cultural codes. An author



assumes that readers have a certain background knowledge. If that knowledge is absent, the reader can quickly get lost.

To illustrate the importance of cultural codes to students, I have developed the following strategy. I place on an overhead projector several cartoons and ask why persons new to U.S. culture might not see what's funny. One of my favorite is a "Far Side" cartoon showing a group of partying dogs hoisting drinks inside a doghouse. One dog is speaking to another; the caption says, "Oh, hey! Fantastic party, Tricksy! Fantastic! . . . Say, do you mind telling me which way to the yard?" Understanding this cartoon requires a surprising amount of cultural knowledge:

That dogs in middle-class America frequently live in doghouses  
That at middle-class parties, people stand around holding drinks

That bathrooms are often hard to find in middle-class homes, so guests have to ask the host discretely where they are located

That middle-class homes have backyards

That dogs relieve themselves in the yard

Written texts require similar kinds of background knowledge. After discussing a few cartoons, I distribute a brief news article from the Cold War era, requiring reconstruction of cultural context. The article refers to NATO, to Reagan and Gorbachev, to ballistic and anti-ballistic missiles, to neo-isolationism, and to the way that America's nuclear arms threw the Marxist-Leninist engine of history off its tracks. Few of my students know what NATO is, understand the difference between ballistic and guided missiles, or appreciate the historical events and American attitudes that are packed into the term *neo-isolationism*. Fewer still can explain the "engine of history" metaphor. A discussion of this article quickly clarifies for students how knowledge of cultural codes facilitates comprehension of a reading.

One way to help students reconstruct a text's cultural codes is to create reading guides, the subject of the next strategy.

### Create "Reading Guides" for Particularly Difficult Texts or for Texts with Unfamiliar Cultural Codes

Teachers can assist students greatly by preparing "reading guides" that steer them through difficult parts of assigned readings. Typically, these guides define key terms, fill in needed cultural knowledge, explain the rhetorical context of the reading, and ask critical

questions for students to consider as they progress through the text. By requiring students to freewrite their responses to several of the guide questions, teachers can use exploratory writing to encourage reflection.

### Help Students See That All Texts Are Trying to Change Their View of Something

This strategy relates closely to the preceding one. Students tend to see texts as conveyers of inert information rather than as rhetorically purposeful messages aimed at effecting some change in the reader's view of the subject at hand. If students become more aware that texts are trying to change their views in some way, they can become more active in their desire to interrogate the text by deciding what to accept and what to doubt. A useful exercise to help students appreciate the rhetorical nature of a text is to ask them to freewrite responses to the following trigger questions:



1. Before I read this text, the author assumed that I believed . . . [fill in].
2. After I finished reading this text, the author wanted me to believe . . . [fill in].
3. The author was/was not successful in changing my view. How so? Why or why not?

### Teach Students to Play the "Believing and Doubting Game"

The "believing and doubting game" (Elbow, 1973, 1986) teaches students the reader's double role of being simultaneously open to texts and skeptical of them. When playing the believing game, students try to listen empathically by walking in the author's shoes, mentally joining the author's culture, seeing the world through the author's eyes. By stretching students toward new ways of seeing, the believing game helps students overcome their natural resistance to ideas and views different from their own. In contrast, the doubting game asks readers to play devil's advocate, raising objections to the writer's argument, looking for its weaknesses, refusing to be taken in by the text's rhetorical force. To help students practice believing and doubting, the instructor can design exploratory writing tasks, in-class debates, or small group tasks that can encourage students to see both strengths and weaknesses in any author's stance.

Elbow's believing and doubting game is similar to what Paul (1987) calls "dialogical thinking" or "strong sense critical thinking." For Paul, the crucial habit that strong sense critical thinkers must develop is the active disposition to seek out views different

from their own: "If we do not have informed proponents of opposing points of view available, we have to reconstruct the arguments ourselves. We must enter into the opposing points of view on our own and frame the dialogical exchange ourselves" (p. 129). Thus, according to Paul, students must be taught "to argue for and against each and every important point of view and each basic belief or conclusion that they are to take seriously" (p. 140). (For an application of methodological belief and doubt to a political science course, see Freie, 1987; see also "Pro and Con Grid" in Angelo and Cross, 1993, pp. 168–171.)

To apply this strategy to the teaching of reading, instructors need to emphasize that scholarly articles and other assigned readings are voices in a conversation that students need to join. For students, writing in the margins or otherwise responding to texts will begin to make sense when they see their responsibility to imagine and consider alternative points of view and thus to evaluate an author's thesis, reasons, and evidence.

## Developing Assignments That Require Students to Interact with Texts

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To conclude this chapter, let's consider ways that teachers can use exploratory or formal writing assignments to help students become more active and thoughtful readers. When assigned as homework, brief write-to-learn tasks can have a powerful effect on the quality of students' reading. Some of the following strategies are cross-referenced in Chapter Six as widely used methods of assigning exploratory writing.

### Marginal Notes Approach

Many teachers report success simply from forbidding students the use of underlining or yellow highlighters. Instead, they insist on copious marginal notations on the borders of the text itself. (If students plan to resell their texts or are reading library books, they can take marginal notes on separate pages keyed to the book page.) "Every time you feel the urge to highlight or underline something," the teacher can advise, "write out why you wanted to underline it in the margins. Why is that passage important? Is it a major new point in the argument? A significant piece of support? A summary of the opposition? A particularly strong or particularly weak point?" The teacher can then exhort the students: "Use the margins to summarize the text, ask questions, give assent, protest vehemently—don't just color the pages." The goal here is to get students to carry on lively dialogue with the author in the margins. The instructor

can occasionally start class discussions by asking a student to read his or her marginal notations next to a certain passage.

### Focused Reading Notes

Another strategy is to have students take reading notes on sheets of paper divided into four or five columns. For a heading at the top of each column, give students a key word or phrase identifying a theme or concept that you want them to be aware of as they read. For example, in assigning *Crito*, the instructor might give students headings such as "Crito's Values," "Socrates's Values," "Use of Analogies," "City or Family Versus the Individual," and "Your Own Questions or Responses." Students then enter reading notes in the appropriate columns. Students find that even minimal guidance such as this gives them a focusing strategy for their reading. Once students learn this system, teachers can provide new "note headings" for each course reading. As students become skilled at discovering key issues and values in a reading, they can begin developing their own headings.

### Reading Logs

Like an open-ended journal, a reading log requires that students write regularly about what they are reading but gives them freedom in choosing what to say. Students can summarize the text, connect it to personal experience, argue with it, imitate it, analyze it, or evaluate it. Often teachers are interested in how a reading affects students on the personal level. They therefore encourage personal response in the reading log. Readers can describe their emotional, intellectual, or philosophical responses to the text and call into consciousness the hidden memories and associations the text triggers. The reader answers questions such as "What does this text mean to me?" and "What effect does this text have on my values, my beliefs, my way of looking at the world?" You can ask students to make these responses regularly in their reading log or occasionally in a more formal reflection paper.

### Summary/Response Notebooks

A summary/response notebook is a slightly more structured version of a reading log. It requires students to make two opposing responses to a text: first to represent the text to themselves in their own words and then to respond to it. The following instructions are typical:



For each of the readings marked with an asterisk on the syllabus, you will write at least two pages in your notebooks. The first page will be a restatement of the text's argument in your own words. You can write a summary, make an outline, draw a flowchart or a diagram of the reading, or simply take careful notes. The purpose of this page is to help you understand as fully as possible the structure and details of the author's argument. This page should help you recall the article in some detail several weeks later. Your next page is to be your own personal reflections on or reactions to the article. Analyze it, illustrate it through your own experience, refute it, get mad at it, question it, believe it, doubt it, go beyond it. I will skim your notebooks looking for evidence of serious effort and engaged thought.

### Responses to Reading Guides or Guided-Journal Questions Keyed to Readings

Another effective technique is to devise critical thinking questions that require students to respond thoughtfully to a text and then to build these into the course as part of a reading guide or a guided journal. (The guided journal is explained in Chapter Six, pages 107–108.) By providing questions for students to respond to, you can get students to focus on points in the readings you find particularly important. You can often begin class discussions by having one or two students read their responses to one of your questions.

### Imagined Interviews with the Author

A change-of-pace strategy is to ask students to write dialogues in which they interview the author or otherwise engage the author in arguments with several antagonists (Francoz, 1979). Often the instructor asks the student, as interviewer, to play devil's advocate, arguing against the author's views and then inventing the author's response. Students generally enjoy the creativity afforded by this assignment, as well as the mind-stretching task of role-playing different views. Some teachers ask groups to conduct mock panel discussions in which one group member plays the author of the article and others play people with different views.

### Summary Writing

If one prefers to assign formal writing, an excellent way to promote reading skills is to ask students to write summaries or abstracts of articles (Bean, Drenk, and Lee, 1986; Bean, 1986). Summary writing requires that the reader separate main ideas from supporting details, thereby providing practice at finding the hierarchical structure of an article. Moreover, it requires that readers suspend their

own egocentrism, leaving out their own ideas in order to listen carefully to the author. An added bonus for the teacher is that summaries—submitted as microthemes—are easy to grade quickly. (For an example of how an economics professor uses a series of summary assignments to teach argumentation in economics, see Cohen and Spencer, 1993. See also the discussion of summary writing in Chapter Seven, pages 128–129.)

### Multiple-Choice Quiz Questions Developed by Students

A useful technique for some courses is to have students write their own multiple-choice quiz questions for each textbook chapter they read in a course. Students might be required to turn in their questions each week. Teachers can provide guidelines for the kinds of questions they want students to write and incorporate student questions into objective quizzes. According to my colleagues who use this strategy, students read texts more perceptively when they write their own test questions. They begin distinguishing between main and subordinate material, between points and data, and between concepts and illustrations.

### Writing “Translations”

A final strategy is to ask students to “translate” a difficult passage into their own words (Gottschalk, 1984). According to Gottschalk, “Creating the translation can help the reader see why a passage is important, or troublesome, and come to terms with its difficulties or significance” (p. 401). This is a particularly useful way for students to practice deciphering syntactically complex prose. The act of close paraphrasing also focuses students’ attention on precise meanings of words.

## Conclusion: Strategies Teachers Can Use to Help Students Become Better Readers

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The following list summarizes teaching strategies that address the reading problems discussed in this chapter.

Students' Problem	Helping Strategy
Poor reading process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Give tests or writing assignments on readings that you don't cover in class.</li> <li>• Require students to write expressively in response to texts (reading logs, summary/response notebooks).</li> <li>• Require marginal notes.</li> <li>• Show students your own reading process.</li> </ul>
Failure to reconstruct arguments as they read	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assign summary writing.</li> <li>• Have students make outlines, flowcharts, or diagrams of articles.</li> <li>• Help students write "gist statements" in margins summarizing main points as reading progresses.</li> <li>• Go through a sample text with students, writing "what it says" and "what it does" statements for each paragraph.</li> </ul>
Failure to assimilate the unfamiliar; resistance to uncomfortable or disorienting views	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Explain this phenomenon to students so that they can watch out for it; point out instances in class when students resist an unfamiliar or uncomfortable idea; draw analogies to other times when students have had to assimilate unfamiliar views.</li> <li>• In lectures or discussions, draw contrasts between ordinary ways of looking at the subject and the author's surprising way.</li> <li>• Emphasize the "believing" side of Elbow's "believing and doubting game."</li> </ul>
Limited understanding of rhetorical context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create reading guides that include information about the author and the rhetorical context of the reading.</li> <li>• Through lectures or reading guides, set the stage for readings, especially primary materials.</li> <li>• Train students to ask these questions: Who is this author? Whom is he or she writing to? What occasion prompted this writing? What is the author's purpose?</li> </ul>
Failure to interact with the text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use any of the response strategies recommended in this chapter—reading logs, summary/response notebooks, guided journals, marginal notations, reading guides.</li> </ul>
Unfamiliarity with cultural codes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Create reading guides explaining cultural codes, allusions, historical events, and so forth.</li> </ul>

Unfamiliar  
vocabulary

- Show students the function of cultural codes by discussing the background knowledge needed to understand cartoons or jokes.
- Urge students to acquire the habit of using the dictionary.
- Create reading guides defining technical terms or words used in unusual ways.

Difficulty with  
complex syntax

- Have faith that practice helps.
- Refer severe problems to a learning assistance center.
- Have students "translate" complex passages into their own words; also have students practice rewriting particularly long sentences into several shorter ones.

Failure to adapt to  
different kinds of  
discourse

- Explain your own reading process: when you skim, when you read carefully, when you study a text in detail, and so forth.
- Explain how your own reading process varies when you encounter different genres of text: how to read a textbook versus a primary source; how to read a scientific paper; how to read a poem; and so forth.