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I ended the previous Bulletin with the question: “If neither reading nor writing is a ‘skill,’ what does this mean for our curricula and our teaching?” For just a moment, think back to your own graduate school experience. Surely there was some material that you struggled to understand. Does this mean you were a bad reader? As your knowledge base grew, as you became more familiar with the conventions of your discipline, and as you began to understand how your discipline makes knowledge, your reading competency increased profoundly, as did your “ability” to write. Our students, too, know how to de-code texts, yet they often still have difficulty in our courses as they encounter increasingly challenging readings. It’s important, therefore, as we design and refine our courses and majors, to think of reading (and writing) not as a “yes/no skill” but as a “developing competency” (David Schwalm, Dean, East College at Arizona State University, on the WPA listserv).

By being more conscious of this process, we can more explicitly support our students in their intellectual maturation. Here at TCNJ, I think it’s particularly important to see reading and writing as developing competencies that are deeply interconnected, and to infuse our courses as comprehensively as possible with reading and writing in tandem.

Here’s an activity that requires students to practice, over and over again, the kind of reading and writing that will give them a strong foundation in course concepts, thereby preparing them for the more complex demands of formal papers. Best of all, it allows you to incorporate additional writing in your course without requiring any grading on your part. The activity consists of three rounds.

Round One: For a difficult reading assignment, ask students to write a 250-word summary (or whatever you think would be an appropriate length), and bring 3-4 copies to class. In small groups (or pairs, depending on the size of your class), have students exchange and read each other’s summaries, marking up any points they think need to be changed or revised. I ask students to underline inaccuracies, mark passages that are the student’s views or evaluations rather than author’s, and indicate with an asterisk any portion of the summary that provides disproportionate coverage of a minor point. Then the group should discuss the differences they see, with the goal of choosing the most accurate of the summaries to share with a larger group in round two. Groups can also choose to combine and/or revise the summaries based on their discussion. When two summaries diverge in their interpretation of some aspect of the assigned reading, students must examine the differences, consult the text for clarification, and debate why one student’s understanding is more accurate than another’s. This discussion requires close, attentive reading, and in the process students will deepen or complicate other group members’ assumptions about particular points in the text. Inevitably, students will also begin to share their reactions to and views on the material, and this provides an excellent starting point for further classroom debate and application.

Round Two: This round serves as a “check point” to ensure that each group has accurately understood the material. Have two or more groups combine into a larger group. Each smaller group then reads its selected summary out loud, and then the larger group examines their differences and similarities in order to choose the best one. These can then be shared aloud with the entire class as the basis for a deeper discussion and clarification of key concepts. It may also be an opportunity to examine the structure of the assigned reading, and to evaluate its logic, evidence, and/or methodology.

Round Three: (This would need to be done in a smart classroom or with a COW.) Ask each group to take their summary and further condense it into a much smaller number of sentences (I recently had my class go from 250 words, or one single spaced page, to 4 sentences). As the groups finish, have a representative type the short summary on the computer so that the class can compare and discuss them together. (This might also be done outside of class in the Discussion or C-Docs tools in SOCS, and then reviewed in class after everyone has had a chance to read them.) These shorter summaries require students to identify the center of the reading and distinguish it from important (but peripheral or supporting) arguments. Perhaps most importantly, it provides an opportunity to then discuss where this reading fits into a larger field of research or controversy in your discipline.

At any stage in this activity, you can focus the discussion on matters such as: difficult passages or terms around which there still may be confusion; how students discerned major points from examples, supporting evidence, or sub-arguments; and what students learned about summary writing by engaging in the class activity. You may even want to survey students about the extent of revision their own summaries needed once they had discussed the reading with classmates, or, depending on the course level, you might spend some time on basic summary conventions such as using attributive tags.

For an extensive list of other reading/writing activities, I highly recommend the following page from Shelley Reid, Director of the Composition Program at George Mason University:

[**http://mason.gmu.edu/~ereid1/teachers/tchguidereading.htm**](http://mason.gmu.edu/~ereid1/teachers/tchguidereading.htm)**.** Note that the activities go from basic to more advanced as you scroll down her page.

If you’d like to learn another interactive in-class reading/writing activity, you might want to join colleagues attending “Marginalia: A Meta-Reading Workshop” on either 9/23 or 10/21. <http://www.tcnj.edu/~writing/faculty/index.html>