Activities for pre-class readings

Teaching & Learning
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Assigning students pre-class readings is common in many courses. Students are expected to read and be prepared for lectures or exercise classes. However, reading can be a passive activity if it does not involve questioning, reflecting, elaboration and making connections with prior knowledge.

Linking the readings to a short activity can help students stay focused, engage more actively with the materials and come to class better prepared. It also helps the teacher clarify expectations and hold students accountable for pre-class preparation.

When choosing an activity for pre-class readings, consider:

1. What do you expect students to **be able to do after completing the reading**? Try to be more specific than "I want them to understand/be familiar with …". For example, do you expect them to be able to use key terminology, know the details of a case, explain a theory or also apply it?

2. How will **the reading preparation be used in class**? For example, will students use the preparation to participate in a case discussion? Let students know how they will be expected to use the readings. The clearer the expectations are, the easier will be for students to plan their reading and engage with the texts.

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The context
Questions to help students reflect on the context of the text and make predictions about the content. For example, *Looking at the title, what is the topic and what do you already know about it?*; *What issue is the writer focusing on?*; *What is the purpose of this text?*; *What is the relevance of this text for this course?*. These questions can be used as an introduction to another activity where students engage with the text further. If you would like to embed the questions in the text online and students to answer individually but see the contributions of others, you can use FeedbackFruits. The same applies to many of the activities below.

The central argument
Questions for students to focus on the thesis and the line of argumentation. For example, *What is the writer's thesis; What evidence does the writer use to support the central argument?*; *What evidence does the writer include?*; *Is it enough evidence?*; *Does the writer address opposing arguments?*. These questions can be particularly useful if at some point in the course students are themselves expected to write a similar type of text.

Follow the outline
Following the outline of the text, students find and comment upon 2 or 3 key points in each section. For example, Introduction, Literature Review, Methodology, Findings, Discussion. This activity is particularly suitable when it is important not only that students focus on the content but also on the format of the text, e.g. research paper.

Terminology
Students focus on the terminology used in the text. For example, they can select key terms and explain them in their own words; provide examples for the terms; make connections between them; divide them in different categories or create a glossary collaboratively.

Key extract or quote
Students select a key extract/quote from the reading, comment on it and explain why they think it is relevant.

Summaries
Summarise or write an abstract if the text does not have one. Summaries can be written or presented visually using flow charts, diagrams or concept maps.

"I know, I need to know"
This activity helps students reflect on what they have learned from the readings but also what they are still unsure about and should revise. It also helps the teacher see what topics students are finding most difficult. Variations of this activity are "Two takeaways and the muddiest point" and "3-2-1" (students point out 3 things they have learned, 2 points they still have doubts about and 1 opinion/reflection).

Cornell notetaking (download template)
The Cornell notetaking method involves taking notes while reading, and preparing cues and summarizing after reading.

Writing prompts
Use prompts like open questions or sentence stems to encourage reflection and/or elaboration. For example, *To what extent do you agree with ……, The author claims that …. and he/she demonstrates this by …, The argument in this article is similar to …, The significance of this theory/idea/model/framework is that …* If possible, give students more than one option to write about or use a general statement such as *Write a reflection of X words about the idea/concept/argument that you have found most interesting/relevant in the text*.

Annotate (do not just highlight!)
Students can use a system for annotation such as underline key ideas, circle key words/terms, place a question mark next to unclear concepts/sentences, use different colours for different topics. However, it is important to remind students that they need to do more than just marking and highlighting the text. They can write comments, questions, think of further examples, paraphrase key sentences or think of counterarguments. If you would like students to annotate in the text online, individually or collaboratively, and about predetermined topics, you can use FeedbackFruits.

(Adapted) Jigsaw reading
This is a collaborative activity that can work well when there is a considerable amount of readings to be done. Please note that this activity requires class-time (either synchronously online or face-to-face) to be completed. The class is divided in as many groups as readings. Each student reads and takes notes about their assigned text. In class, students meet first in groups with people who read the same text. They discuss and complete their notes in as much detail as possible. Next, students mix in groups with people who have read different texts. Students "teach" others in the group the main ideas of the reading they were assigned.

Six thinking hats (download template)
The six thinking hats activity is particularly suitable for the reading of cases or texts that present a scenario to be analysed or a situation where a decision has to be made. Each student analyses the situation from six different perspectives, represented by different coloured hats. You can reduce the number of hats if not all of them are relevant.

Graphic organizers (see examples)
Graphic organizers take little time to create for the teacher and can elicit a lot of information from the students. They are suitable to guide the scanning of texts for specific information and organize information (e.g. causes/effects of X, pros/cons of X, similarities/differences between X and Y). Students can complete them by using notes or bullet points. This type of activity combines well with a follow-up task in class where students work together comparing and adding more information to their organizers.

References

Annotating texts
Edward de Bono (2000) *Six Thinking Hats*, Penguin [Revised and updated edition]
Jennifer Gonzalez (2017) The great and powerful graphic organizer
Cornell Notetaking