REFOCUSING ON READING:
STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE READING AND ANALYTICAL SKILLS IN HISTORY COURSES

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The digital age has changed American society, which means history instructors face a different reality in their classrooms. With their cell phones, blackberries, iPods, digital games, computers, and the Internet, Americans have an unprecedented number of digital distractions. Few people have time to read anymore. Meanwhile, the new diversions have not displaced the popularity of television. According to a study conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), Americans age 15 and older spend about half of their total daily leisure time watching TV, while "15- to 24-year-olds spend less than three percent of their daily leisure time reading, and 25 to 34-year-olds spend roughly four percent." College students are no less affected, and arguably more so. They read less in their leisure time than did earlier generations, and consequently they read less proficiently. The National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) gave a reading comprehension test to 19,200 Americans, ages sixteen and above, and found that declines in "proficient" readers are steepest among the best-educated groups. Between 1992 and 2003, the study reported "a 20 percent rate of decline for adults with a graduate school experience and a 22 percent rate of decline for other college graduates."[1]

So how should history instructors respond? The answers must be measured because modern means of instruction can enhance education. The narratives and visuals of documentaries can stimulate learning, and the Internet vastly increases access to information. However, these digital advances have a downside. The new media cannot replace the thoughtful reading of scholarly texts and their use unavoidably decreases the customary focus on reading assignments in history courses. To compensate for this shift, educators should make corrective adjustments. Such adjustments do not imply eschewing the Internet as a resource and educational tool, nor do they suggest avoiding the occasional use of documentaries. They simply require instructors to renew their efforts to teach traditional reading and analytical skills in our age of ever-changing technologies. This article presents strategies to foster such skills through "main-point" and "reflective-reading" assignments. It also assesses the value of active-reading instruction. I have designed and used these strategies and assignments in college-level history courses of roughly twenty to thirty students.

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[1] National Endowment for the Arts, *To Read or Not to Read: A Question of National Consequence* (Research Report #47, November 2007), 38, 63-65.

The Challenge

Reading a primary historical text or the dense information in a textbook or other academic book has considerable instructional value, but many students have little idea of how to approach such work. Often they believe that finishing an assigned reading completes their task and thereafter judge that any lack of comprehension reflects the failings of the text, the instructor, or both. A few specific questions from the instructor frequently reveal that students cannot remember much of what they read. The problem lies with the students' passive mode of reading, which commonly results from expectations that the text should be engaging without much effort from the reader. Such expectations are misplaced. As those who have struggled with scholarly readings know, comprehending the content requires effort.

To prepare students to tackle difficult readings, instructors should state and restate the challenging nature of the texts, while at the same time explaining the significance of the texts' content. The importance of content is apparent to the instructor but is usually less evident to students. Finding a balance between explaining the importance of the readings and warning of their complexity is not easy; some students might become intimidated if the instructor overstates the challenge. On the other hand, allowing students to discover the difficulty of the texts for themselves typically leads to greater discouragement, while an early acceptance of the arduous but worthwhile task helps students embrace the challenge.

Explaining "Active Reading"

The term "active reading" has varying definitions. Although some faculty might prefer equally functional terms such as "engaged reading," the term active reading contrasts clearly with the notion of passive reading. Since different reading techniques might prove more or less effective, depending on the individual, a prescribed regiment for active reading is less beneficial than a general idea. Nevertheless, most students need direction,[2] and thus instructors should strongly encourage students to practice one or more of the following active-reading techniques:

1) summarizing or noting the main points of the text's paragraphs, sections, or chapters;
2) writing out any questions, concerns, or comments about the content;
3) questioning the author's premises; or
4) outlining chapters or sections.

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[2]One noted five-step reading strategy worth mentioning to students is the Survey, Question, Read, Recite and Review method, commonly known by its acronym SQ3R. See Francis Pleasant Robinson, *Effective Study*, 4th ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 15-50.

In short, active reading means finding a way or a variety of ways to engage with the text, and some of the most useful active-reading techniques consist of the reading activities mentioned above. Although these techniques are not novel, their application frequently suffers due to a lack of explicit explanation, emphasis, and encouragement.

To help students hone reading skills, instructors should assign exercises that demand active reading at the beginning of the course. Assignments that encourage active reading vary widely, and instructors might want to experiment to find those that work best for them and their students. One effective assignment asks students to distill the main points of course readings. Two versions of this assignment—one designed for textbook readings and the other for analyzing primary documents—are illustrated below.

A "Main-Points" Assignment for a Textbook

Designed to use and reinforce a common active-reading technique, this assignment requires students to determine the main points of a section in a chapter of a textbook and then to present the main points to the class for discussion. Through discussion, the presenter, instructor, and class reach a consensus regarding the main points. They might also examine and debate other topics of interest in the section, at the discretion of the instructor.

To start, the instructor assigns each student a different section in the chapter. Sometimes this will require assigning two or more chapters, depending on the number of sections and the number of students. The instructions for this assignment are then explained in three steps, a sample of which is provided below:

Step One: Carefully read chapters 1-2 and be prepared to discuss the material in class. Then read with particular care the section the instructor assigned to you and determine the main points of that section. There should be three to eight main points, depending on the section, and the points should be written in complete sentences. Students must complete their list of main points by [*date one*] for sections in chapter one and by [*date two*] for sections in chapter two. Step Two (below) will be impossible to accomplish if the student is absent or if the assignment is not finished on time. In such cases, assignments can earn only half credit upon being e-mailed to the instructor.

Step Two: Students present their main points to the class and explain why the points are the most essential ones that the authors want to convey in the section. With the instructor's guidance, the class will then discuss the section and reach a consensus as to the main points. Students should not be offended if their main points differ from those of the class. Instead, the presenter needs to note carefully the class's concluding main points. The

presentation of the main points should last no longer than five minutes, although subsequent discussion may last longer, at the instructor's discretion.

Step Three: The purpose of Step Three is to generate a written, digital copy of the main points. Presenters shall compose the main points of their assigned section as determined through class discussion (the consensus). They are then required to e-mail as an attachment those main points to the instructor at [*instructor's e-mail address*] by [*date*]. The instructor records the final grade for the assignment only after receiving this e-mail from the student. To ensure their opportunity for a good grade, students should check their grammar and spelling for errors. Students are also encouraged to meet briefly with the instructor after class if they would like further guidance.

After students submit the main-point assignments, the instructor has the option of copying and pasting all of the main points into a master main-points study list. The instructor then can post the list on a course website and/or distribute it as a hard copy. The list, in turn, can serve as a helpful study guide.[3]

As useful as this main-points assignment is in introducing active-reading skills to students, this tool should not be overused, especially for textbook reading. After all, a likely reason many students practice poor active-reading techniques is because educators—under their own pressures—have spoon-fed instructional material to them. The main-points assignment demonstrates an active-reading technique, but it should not replace the requirement that students carefully read the entire assigned text. Students should understand that they are responsible for practicing active-reading techniques on their own. If needed, the instructor might find it useful to refer back to the main-points technique when reinforcing active reading. The question, "What are the main points?" demands an accountable active-reading process. It also provides a starting point for discussion, even if the students are having difficulty with comprehension.

A "Main-Points" Assignment for Primary Documents

Having students read primary documents regularly, or even basing an entire course on primary documents, has advantages. Reading primary documents enhances students' analytical skills by requiring them to interpret for themselves the raw materials of history, as opposed to relying on the filtered analysis of secondary works. Determining the main points of a primary document compels students to address the

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[3]For an example of such a study guide for my course on Colonial Latin America, see
http://www.tamut.edu/academics/mperri/ColAm/ColLAAm.htm.

author's reasons for writing the document, and this, in turn, leads students to examine the historical context. This additional work makes the main-points assignment for primary documents—unlike that for textbooks—beneficial to use regularly since it gives students a framework in which to analyze a document and place it in context. The purpose of the assignment is to expose students to documents and ideas, but for many students it does more than just expose and inform. The assignment helps students understand that the study of the past is as much a process of interpretation as a quest for facts.

The basic format of the main-points assignment for primary documents largely replicates the assignment for textbooks: Students determine the main points of their assigned reading, which is then discussed in class, followed by the presenter recording the main points as determined by class consensus. Additional tasks include placing the document into historical context and addressing the document's significance. For an American history course, the guidelines below provide students with direction on how to approach this assignment.

● **Historical Context:** Placing the document into historical context involves answering the following questions:

- What is the author's background? For example, what is the author's race, class, educational experience, religion? Where was he or she reared? What transforming events occurred in the author's life?
- What are his or her viewpoints concerning the major issues of the time?
- What can be said about the author's time? In other words, what are the major issues and events concerning the author and affecting society at the time the document is being conceived and written?
- Who is the intended audience?

● **Main Points:** Students should ask the following questions to understand the document's main points:

- Why was the document written? In other words, what points did the author most want to convey?
  - This requires students to distill the essential points of the document. The points should be written as complete sentences. In most cases, the main point should not be a quotation, but rather a concise statement in the student's own words. However, students are encouraged to support the main points with appropriate quotations, usually inserted directly underneath the relevant main point.

● **Historical Significance:** Students should address the following questions when determining and evaluating the document's historical significance:

- What impact did the document have on the author's society?
- What impact did it have on later generations?

- What groups in particular did the document impact?
- Was this impact important and, if so, why?

Researching a Document's Historical Context

Placing a primary work in context and determining its significance usually requires some research using secondary sources. However, the assignment is not a research paper. Its central goal is to develop analytical skills through careful examination of the assigned document. Therefore, the instructor should keep contextual research simple. One practical solution is to assign a textbook to help students place the document in context

Educators should not ignore the Internet. Although the Internet contains a good deal of misinformation, certain websites can be valuable and convenient sources of information to help place a document in context. If instructors want to direct students to information, they could provide a list of recommended websites. On the other hand, a less managed approach also has advantages. Providing students with general guidelines to search on their own for information on the Internet is a constructive method to teach the merit of scholarship and the critical assessment of sources. The instructor should explain why peer-reviewed sources are usually more credible, as well as to point out the pitfalls inherent in Wikipedia's open editing process. Below is a sample guide instructors can use to help students navigate Internet sources.

> Students should not entirely trust everything they find on the Internet, because many websites contain inaccurate information. Instead, students should practice their critical-thinking skills when reading materials found on the Internet—or anywhere for that matter. This entails noting, and perhaps investigating, the source of information found on a website, as well as corroborating the information with information found in your textbook, in other books or articles, or on other websites. In short, be cautious and skeptical in your search for information. The instructor and your fellow students have the right to question the validity of information discussed in class and to request the source of the information.

Choosing a Reader of Primary Texts

Many publishers of history textbooks offer accompanying source readers, and the Internet teems with websites that provide access to many important documents in history, especially American history. For example, the Library of Congress maintains a superb website at http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/PrimDocsHome.html. Prentice Hall publishes a popular primary-source reader entitled *American Issues*,

edited by Irwin Unger and Robert R. Tomes.[4] Other major publishers of college texts also have excellent primary-source readers.[5] The best option is for instructors to create their own customized reader. Although this can be time-consuming, several publishers offer convenient on-line databases where instructors can create a customized reader on the Internet and then have a bookstore order hard copies of it for students to purchase.

Publisher	Database Title	Database Web Site
Cengage Learning	*Documenting America's Past*	http://www.textchoice.com/cgi-bin/Web Objects/TC.woa/wo/1.0.49.1.3..9.1.0.1.1.1
Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Co.[6]	*Custom Courseware*, formerly known as *Bibliobase*	http://websrv04.comcom.com:8102/HMCO/LoginPage.jsp
Pearson Custom Publishing	*Retrieving the American Past*	http://www.pearsoncustom.com/database/rtap.html
McGraw-Hill Companies	*Primis Online*	http://www.primisonline.com

Most of the databases charge a certain amount per page, and usually customized readers are less expensive than edited ones with a similar number of pages. The editors of the four databases listed above have sought to preserve the essence of the longer documents while reducing them to a more manageable size for students. For many of the lengthier documents, instructors have the option to select either a longer or briefer version for customized readers. The database editors customarily introduce each document with a background paragraph, and *Custom Courseware* includes pedagogically useful "Questions to Consider" before each document.

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[4]Irwin Unger and Robert R. Tomes, eds. *American Issues*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2004).

[5]Citing all of the good readers in American history is difficult since there are so many. A short list of readers include Raymond M. Hyser and J. Christopher Arndt, eds., *Voices of the American Past*, 3rd ed. (Boston, MA: Wadsworth Publishing, 2008); Paul F. Boller, Jr., ed., *A More Perfect Union*, 6th ed. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2005); Eric Foner, ed., *Voices of Freedom*, 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2008); Elliott Gorn, Randy Roberts, and Terry Bilhartz, eds., *Constructing the American Past*, 6th ed. (New York: Pearson Longman, 2008); Michael P. Johnson, *Reading the American Past*, 4th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2009).

[6]In June 2008, Cengage Learning purchased the College Division of Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company. This purchase included *Custom Courseware*.

Selecting documents that highlight certain themes is instructively constructive, and so too is selecting documents appropriate for comparison and contrast. In my primary document-based course entitled *American Social and Intellectual History*, for example, I have students compare and contrast George Bancroft's "The Office of the People" (1835) with Henry David Thoreau's "Civil Disobedience" (1849); William Graham Sumner's "What the Social Classes Owe to Each Other" (1883) with Thorstein Veblen's "Theory of the Leisure Class" (1899); and Booker T. Washington's "Atlanta Exposition Address" (1895) with W.E.B. Du Bois' "The Niagara Movement" (1905), among others.[7]

Active Reading and Reflective-Questions Assignments

The main-points assignment usually persuades student-presenters to read carefully the documents they are presenting. Motivating other class members to read the documents with similar care, and thus laying the foundations for constructive discussions after a student's presentation, often requires an additional assignment. One simple yet effective assignment is to require students to answer questions about the document. If instructors use *Custom Courseware*, they can convert the "questions to consider" accompanying each document into an assignment to induce students to read the documents actively. Having students answer these questions in a short paragraph or two enhances class discussion, and such an assignment also improves skills in active-reading and critical thinking by compelling students to contemplate the question while they read.

Many of my students initially resented question-assignments but soon came to value how answering the "questions to consider" improved their comprehension. When asked in an evaluation of my *American Social and Intellectual History* course if the "questions to consider" assignments had increased their comprehension of the documents, 22 out of the 24 anonymous student respondents agreed they had. One student replied: "I hate to admit this but yes, [the assigned questions were useful]. If you read the questions before reading the document it helped you follow along and underline important ideas or terms. It also gave you insight about what you were about to read and what to look for." Another student wrote that "answering those questions helped me comprehend the topics of study better than just reading the material." Other responses were more abstract but nevertheless positive. One student commented that answering the "questions to consider" "made the reading more meaningful and forced me to think much deeper than surface reading of the texts." Another student simply wrote that the question-assignments "helped me by making me think."

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[7] The course website has lists of the documents and presentation schedule. I also post the main-points assignemnts online at http://www.tamut.edu/academics/mperri/AmSoInHis/F07/AmSoInHist%20(f-07).htm.

A Study: Evaluating Students' Self-Reports of Reading Comprehension

In a recent semester, I required students to complete a rating scale for all 52 of the assigned documents in one of my two sections of *American Social and Intellectual History*. I asked students in the first section to read the document three times, first reading the document cursorily, then reading the document using the active-reading techniques outlined above, and finally reading the document to answer assigned questions. The rating scale asked students to record the percentage of the document they thought they understood after each reading, using the following scale: 0-25%, 25-50%, 50-70% or 75-100%. The rating-scale data collected from all assigned documents show the students' aggregate self-evaluations of their reading comprehension but did not accurately measure actual comprehension. Nevertheless, self-evaluations do measure students' perceptions of their comprehension and such perceptions largely reflect students' confidence to examine both cognitively and verbally the documents discussed in class. This confidence, in turn, tends to enhance learning, make the class discussions more engaging, and increase students' motivation to read carefully other documents assigned in the course.

The aggregate rating-scale data indicate students perceived their comprehension increased with each additional reading. Upon a cursory reading, only 50 percent of the students reported comprehending 50 percent of the documents and only 14 percent claimed to understand 75 percent or more (see graph). After reading the document actively, students reported a dramatic rise in comprehension, with 79 percent reporting that they understood more than half the readings, while 31 percent reported they understood 75 percent or more. Answering the "questions to consider" further increased comprehension. After completing the assignment, 92 percent of the students claimed to comprehend over 50 percent of the documents, with 58 percent reporting to understand 75 percent or more.

Having only 58 percent of the students believe they understood 75 percent or more of the document after three readings—plus an assignment—might seem low, but students reported considerable variation in comprehension among the documents. Eighty-nine percent of the students reported that they understood between 75 and 100 percent of the most current document the class examined —George Bush's March 2003 speech, "President Says Saddam Hussein Must Leave Iraq within 48 Hours: Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation"—and 100 percent claim to have understood at least 50 percent of the speech. In comparison, only 31 percent reported they understood George Bancroft's *The Progress of Mankind*, written in 1854. Considering the differences in time and language between these two documents, the students' different level of perceived comprehension is understandable.

Percentage of Comprehension by Reading Steps as Evaluated by Students
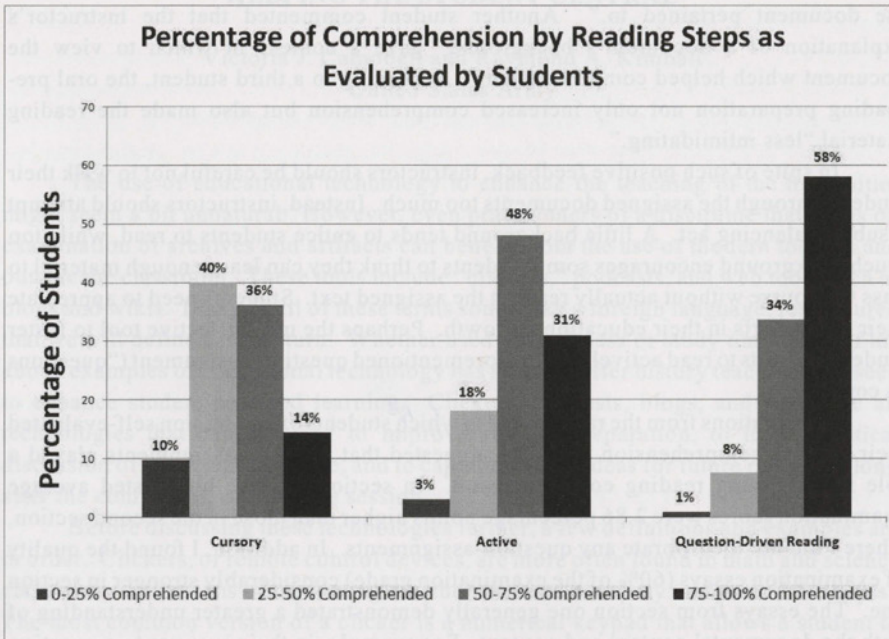
Less understandable were other results of the rating scale. Fifty percent of the students claimed that they understood 75 percent or more of John Winthrop's "Model of Christian Charity" (1630), and 58 percent reported the same for Winthrop's "Little Speech on Liberty" (1645), even though these documents usually receive the most complaints about difficult language. Perhaps my alerting the students to the difficulty of these documents and requiring them to answer the accompanying "questions to consider" primed them to read actively and ultimately increased their comprehension—or, at least, perception of comprehension. On the other hand, I was disappointed to learn that only 40 percent reported understanding in the top quarter percentile Alexander Stephen's "Slavery and the Confederacy" (1861). Because I usually have many students who voice a passionate interest in the Civil War, I had assumed that most in this class would think they understood Stephens's speech—which is not particularly abstruse—with little pre-reading preparation. I was wrong. In this case, pre-reading preparation proved more effective for improving comprehension than mere student interest in the topic.

In their anonymous evaluations, students expressed a special appreciation for the instructor orally providing a general background to certain documents before their reading. When asked about the utility of such a background, 23 out of 24 respondents thought that this form of pre-reading preparation helped comprehension. One student wrote that "the professor could set the stage mentally for whatever event or situation

the document pertained to." Another student commented that the instructor's explanation of a document's background "gave a context in which to view the document which helped comprehension." According to a third student, the oral pre-reading preparation not only increased comprehension but also made the reading material "less intimidating."

In spite of such positive feedback, instructors should be careful not to walk their students through the assigned documents too much. Instead, instructors should attempt a subtle balancing act. A little background tends to entice students to read, while too much background encourages some students to think they can learn enough material to pass the course without actually reading the assigned text. Students need to appreciate their own efforts in their educational growth. Perhaps the most effective tool to foster students' efforts to read actively is the aforementioned question-assignment ("questions to consider").

Observations from the rating scale in which students of one section self-evaluated their reading-comprehension progress suggested that question-assignments played a role in increasing reading comprehension. In section one the unadjusted average examination scores were 2.86 percentage points higher than those in the second section, where I did not incorporate any question-assignments. In addition, I found the quality of examination essays (60% of the examination grade) considerably stronger in section one. The essays from section one generally demonstrated a greater understanding of both the documents' content and context. For example, in their answers to a question that asked students to compare and contrast Booker T. Washington's "Atlanta Exposition Address" with W.E.B. Du Bois' "The Niagara Movement," more students in section one addressed the different backgrounds of the two authors, as well as the common difficulties with discrimination that African Americans experienced at the turn of the nineteenth century.

I also found the quality of discussion in section one substantially higher than in section two, even though section two was a smaller class with some excellent students. Students in section one more frequently and reflectively challenged or defended the authors' premises by pointing out pertinent exceptions or qualifications. They also were quicker to express supportive or detractive analogies regarding the authors' arguments. On the whole, they displayed more critical thinking about the assigned readings.

Conclusion

Students and instructors should not shun valuable texts or documents in history because they might be difficult to read. Instead, they should view such material as a challenge that necessitates active reading. Assignments that foster active-reading techniques usually increase reading comprehension and critical thinking. Having students who have thought about the material will lead to more sophisticated and lively class discussions, and instructors too will profit.