

# Thoughts on Teaching Reading Skills

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I've been teaching developmental reading classes and authoring reading skills books for almost thirty years—enough time to have formed some opinions about what and how to teach. Following are a few suggestions, especially for the beginning reading teacher.

### **1. In the first class, establish a personal connection between you and the students.**

Be friendly; introduce yourself and tell students enough about yourself so they get a sense of you as a person. Students are curious about you, just as you are curious about them.

Your comments can range, for example, from what happened in your life that made you decide to become a teacher to what you like to eat for breakfast in the morning or how you like to relax at night.

My experience is that the friendlier you are, the better: If you are comfortable doing so, you might even go around and shake everyone's hand and say "Welcome to the class." I didn't do this the first several years I taught; now I do it all the time.

Also, make it your intention to quickly learn everyone's first name. I do so by saying to students, "I'm going to leave the room for ten minutes. While I'm away, I want each of you to learn the names of ten other students in the class. I don't care how you do it. When I return, I may ask any of you to introduce ten others to me. Good luck."

When you return, you will find the class alive with nervous anticipation. They won't know if you are going to call on them, and they will not want to be embarrassed by not knowing the names. So they will have worked hard to learn them! What they don't know is that you are not going to call on anyone directly. Settle the class down and ask for a volunteer.

Someone will volunteer and begin to introduce the others to you. As they are introduced to you, say "Glad to meet you, Julia" or "Nice to have you in the class, Rod" and shake their hands. By so doing, you are establishing a warm personal connection, you are learning names, and you are beginning the class with a successful learning experience.

In your first class, then, try to break down some the wall between teacher and students. Doing so can make the class more energized and enjoyable for everyone involved. You are also likely to get more respect, trust, and attention in class.

**2. Be yourself in class, as much as possible.** I remember one colleague in particular who was on our reading faculty. He was a very likable, down-to-earth guy. One day we were talking in the corridor before his class. And then he went in, started class, and happened to leave the classroom door open. I was just amazed at how he changed. He was very stiff and formal; he wasn't himself at all; he had turned into this stranger from another planet. I remember thinking, "What a shame that he's cheating his students and himself by acting like someone other than the everyday person he is." What I'm recommending is that you aim for a balance: your role is not to be a buddy-buddy, but it is not to be a stranger either.

**3. Never forget your common ground with students.** Here's the bottom line: We're all here on this mysterious planet with one-way tickets. You have knowledge about reading skills and are in a position to help students who don't have that knowledge. Some of them probably have knowledge you don't have—maybe knowledge about cars or computers or plumbing or decorating or whatever. Under other circumstances, they might be in a position to help you. There is a profound human equality in every classroom that it's important not to forget.

It's especially important to allow for human moments in developmental classes because skills problems are often symptoms of human problems. If a student is in a developmental class, chances are he or she has taken some hits in life, maybe some heavy hits. You have to focus on their skills needs, of course—the nuts-and-bolts practice in reading and thinking skills is the heart of the matter—but don't be unmindful of the human dimension. As the instructor of a developmental class, you have the power to care and to *show* that you care. Use that power.

**4. Do not abuse your power.** One of the timeless lessons of history is that all power is a dangerous thing; therefore, be humble with your authority. Work to use it always in service to your students. We do have considerable power as teachers—we have the ultimate power of course, which is a student's grade. But we also have the power to embarrass students—by singling them out. And in a hundred different subtle ways in our everyday attitude in class, we have the power to affirm students or to negate them. Many of our students have already been too often negated. Take great care not to add to that negation.

**5. Provide a comfortable learning environment.** At the start of a semester, it's a good idea to reassure students that they won't have to worry about being called on in class until you know they're OK with it. Instead, you will ask for volunteers. After you get to know students and their comfort zones, you can feel free to call on them; it's a good way to keep people on their toes, in fact.

There is an important psychological principle here: A little anxiety can help learning; too much anxiety hurts learning. It's a matter of balance. Aim for a class in which there can be a little anxiety, for that creates energy—but not so much anxiety that people can't be open to learn.

**6. Set high expectations.** Students will want to know what they need to do to pass the course. Make it clear to them that you will be expecting a lot of them. If you demand a lot, you will get a lot in return. Tell students that they must attend the classes and do all the assigned work.

At the same time you set high expectations, I think in general your bark should be worse than your bite. Many students, especially older ones, have to deal with a lot of challenges to come to class on a regular basis and keep up with assignments. Be prepared to cut them a break when the circumstances seem to warrant it.

**7. Don't talk too much—instead, provide lots of reading and thinking practice.**

Remember that we learn skills through hands-on experience. You can listen to a lecture on how to drive a car, you can read a manual on how to drive a car, you can have discussions on how to drive a car, you can practice metacognitive strategies on how to drive a car, but you don't really learn how to drive the car until you drive the car. Students learn important reading skills not by hearing you talk about them, but by getting a lot of practice in those skills—and by doing a lot of reading.

Since students learn, as we all learn, by doing, they should be given a wide range of practices, including tests, readings, outlines, maps, discussion questions, and even writing assignments. These practices will help you give students the hands-on work they need to succeed.

Reading classes should be workshops, not lectures. If you lecture too much, you will be the one getting the language practice instead of your students—the ones who really need the thinking and the reading and the language practice. Your periods of instruction, then, should be brief; and you should move into activities as soon as practical.

**8. Teach by working through the reading skills textbook in class.** I think the most effective kind of skills teaching happens when the teacher and students work together on skills. Let us say, for example, that you want to teach “Main Ideas” in *Ten Steps to Improving College Reading Skills*. Here is a lesson plan you could follow:

- You might begin by writing on the board, “What’s the point?” and say to students, “You’ve probably heard these words before. It’s a question people ask when they want to know, in a nutshell, what someone is trying to express. The same question can guide you as you read. Recognizing the main idea, or point, is the most important key to good comprehension.  
“Let’s look at the reading selection on page 53. I’ll ask someone to volunteer to read it out loud. As you’re listening, I want you to be thinking to yourself, “What’s the point, or main idea, the author is trying to express?”
- After the passage on school bullies is read, ask students to turn the page and to choose, from the top of page 54, the general statement that is supported by all the material in the selection.
- Give students a couple of minutes at their seats to write in their answers. Then say, “Let’s have a show of hands. How many people think the main idea is statement A? How many think it’s statement B? How many chose statement C? How many like statement D?” Then go on to review the explanations of each statement on page 54.
- Then explain, “You can think of the main idea as an *umbrella* idea. The main idea is the author’s general point; under it fits all the other material in a selection—the supporting details for the main idea.” You might want to draw the umbrella on the blackboard or simply point it out to students at the bottom of page 54.
- You are now ready to move on to page 55. You can yourself explain the importance of thinking while reading and the three strategies for finding the main idea. *Or* you can read the ten lines under “Recognizing a Main Idea” while students follow you. *Or* you can ask someone to read aloud the material, and you can then reinforce it.
- You’re now ready to have students practice the first strategy: “Looking for General versus Specific Ideas.” Do the first group of words together as a class and explain why “pets” is the general idea. Then you can proceed in one of several ways:
  - (1) Allow a few minutes for students to do individually the ten items on page 56. Wait until about half the class has finished and then say, “OK, even though not everyone is done, let’s go through the ten clusters. What is the point in the first one?” After a volunteer answers, say “Good. (*Continue to provide positive comments such as “Good job” or “Right on” or “Well done” or “You’re on target” as you move through material.*) If an answer is wrong, don’t say it’s wrong. Instead, ask, “Does anything have a different answer?” This can lead to discussion that will give you a chance to help students determine the right direction. And so on.
  - (2) Ask students to pair up and to work together on the ten items. By interacting, they can help each other learn; also, working in pairs varies the routine and energizes the learning experience.
  - (3) Do the above, but put students in small groups or three or four.
  - (4) Instead of having students do the items individually or in pairs or groups, work through them with the class by saying, “Who wants to read the first one aloud and then tell us the point?”
  - (5) Alternatively, read the first item out loud and then say, “Let’s have a show of hands. Raise your hand if you think the point is home cooking. Is it take-out? Is it ways to eat dinner?” Note that there will be a bit of anxiety in this approach—students do not want to be the only ones raising their hands when most of the class does not. So they’ll pay attention and try to give their best effort.
- After Practice 1 is done, go on and do Practice 2, 3, 4, and 5. All this hands-on experience and practice and constant feedback will help students really learn the first strategy for finding a main idea.

**What I describe above is the very essence of teaching a reading skills course.** It is hard work, for you and for your students, but it is good work that will help them learn the skill in question. It is made up of brief instruction followed by reading and thinking practice followed by feedback on that practice. Such a pedagogical sequence is the heart of effective teaching.

**9. Assign homework and follow up on that homework in the next class.** Let's say you get through the main idea chapter in a two-or three-hour class. You might then ask students to do Review Tests 1 to 4 for homework. Reviewing all that material should be your first order of business in the next class. Just as continuing skills practice is essential, follow-up and feedback are essential.

**10. Use tests to help teach.** I can remember the first time I taught a reading class. At the end of the semester, I had to give students a standardized reading test. What impressed me as I watched them take this two-hour test was their tremendous sustained concentration—more than I had ever seen in the course of the whole semester!

We have in fact conditioned students to be motivated and energized by test situations. With that in mind, I suggest that you assign students mastery tests from the book—without letting them know in advance whether the test will “count” or not. The test situation itself will motivate them to give their best effort; they know a grade may be involved.

After they finish the test, you can do one of two things:

(1) Have students exchange their papers with each other, go over the answers in class, and then have students pass the papers in. Students will have gotten immediate feedback on how they did; also, you will not have to lose some of your valuable time in grading papers individually.

(2) Reserve the right to say, “This time the test will not count. Let's just go over it here in class.” Students keep their papers, but they still get feedback on how they did—and because they knew the test might count, they put their best effort into doing well on it.

**11. Assign reading for homework.** The more reading students do, the better off they will be. To supplement the reading students do in class while working on individual comprehension skills, I ask them to do two kinds of reading outside of class.

(1) Read some, or all, of the selections in Part II of the *Ten Steps* books. For example, as one of the first homework assignments, I ask students to read “The Yellow Ribbon” on page 417 of *Improving* and to do the activities that follow the reading. (To prepare them for the reading, I read aloud in class the preview on page 417.) I may require them to turn in the answers to the activities or simply to be ready to go over them in the next class. In similar fashion, and if time permits, the other readings in Part II can be covered during the semester.

(2) Read a book. If your students are like mine, very few of them have read any books on their own in their entire lives. I think we should require students to read at least one book from cover to cover outside of class. What better time to get the experience of reading a complete book than during a reading course?

Students are getting constant reading practice in class, but it is more stop-and-go reading, rather than sustained reading. A book gives them the opportunity for sustained silent reading. And it gives them the chance to discover that book reading can be a rewarding experience. I recommend that as a first book students read *Reading Changed My Life!* or *Letters My Mother Never Read* or *Great Stories of Suspense and Adventure*. Any one of these is available free from the Townsend Library if a student has purchased a *Ten Steps* book, or it can be purchased at the nonprofit price of one dollar.

I think it's important that students not be required to do a book report or answer a multiple-choice test after reading a book. (It is quite possible that one reason they may think they don't like book reading is that it was often associated in school with having to do a book report or take a test.)

Instead, check that students have read a book by asking them something about it. Ask them, for example, what they thought about the book or to tell about an episode in the book that sticks in their mind. Let me assure you: if a student has really read a book, you will know almost instantly based on the way he or she talks about it. You can do a book check in less than a minute or two; your only problem may be getting the student to *stop* talking about the book.

**12. Be sure to cover the combined-skills tests.** The combined-skills tests in Part III of each of the *Ten Steps* books allow you to review almost all of the ten skills presented in Part I and also help students prepare for the standardized reading test that is often a requirement at the end of a semester.

**13. Have students write a brief response to the day’s class.** Writing is active thinking, and writing reinforces reading. To reinforce what has been presented in class on a given day, I sometimes have students do a writing assignment in the last ten or fifteen minutes of the class.

One activity is to have students write a summarizing “Dear \_\_\_\_” letter to a missing classmate, telling him or her what was covered in class that day. Another activity is to have students write a reactive letter to you, explaining what they found helpful or not helpful in the class. In either case, I tell students not to worry about spelling and grammar and punctuation since I am only giving them time to write a first draft. I want them to concentrate on their thoughts and to not worry about correctness—which is part of rewriting.

At the very least, the above writing assignments can provide you with helpful feedback on what students are or not understanding.

**14. Teach, don’t monitor.** As I have visited schools in different parts of the country, I occasionally see programs that I think underserve students. I am concerned whenever classroom teachers are replaced almost entirely by reading lab monitors. With so many budget constraints today, school are sorely tempted to try to replace teachers with equipment. As a result, students are shortchanged with something less than true reading instruction.

At times I see a program where almost all of the teaching purports to take place through the use of reading machines, computerized programs, or reading lab materials. But in my opinion no reading machine by itself can teach students to become better readers. A reading machine might motivate a student to do more reading, but I think that motivation is better achieved in the long run by giving students appealing books to read. When I read something, I don’t sit down at a reading machine; I don’t think students should be made to, either.

Computerized programs have the same drawback: they are not real-world reading. And the pedagogical content of these programs, in my experience, is very low in quality. It’s not surprising—that content is often created by freelancers who are not themselves college teachers. To subject students to such mediocre materials (either high-priced or provided as a “bonus” with the purchase of a designated textbook) is to do them a great disservice. Reading software and online tests should be created by teachers, and it should always include not just answers for students but also immediate feedback on those answers. If a student is simply told that an answer is correct or incorrect and no explanation is given, little if any learning is going to take place.

Finally, some reading programs consist mostly of students working individually on reading lab materials. Students practice certain skills in certain books and present their work to a lab assistant for grading. As a supplement to class instruction, such materials, if carefully chosen, can have some value; as a substitute for class instruction, a lab approach falls woefully short of the reading instruction that students deserve and need.

The heart of an effective reading skills class, then, is what you as the teacher can provide: a teacher rolling up his or her sleeves and working with a class, giving students instruction, practice, and feedback on reading and on essential comprehension skills.