

## The Importance of Teaching Academic Reading Skills in First-Year University Courses

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### What does the article investigate?

The author's contention is that reading skills for first year university students is assumed rather than nurtured or explicitly taught. This means that students' reading capabilities are overestimated, which leaves first year students struggling and relying on a surface approach to reading. The author advocates an explicit approach to teaching reading strategies, which when aligned to the students' own subject discipline, can result in a deeper approach to reading. The article reviews some studies investigating a deep learning approach to reading before going on to describe some specific activities designed to develop students' reading strategies for a more critical and actively engaged approach to reading academic texts.

### What exactly is a deep approach to reading?

Compared to a surface approach to reading, where readers tacitly accept what they read and see what they read as mainly separate and isolated pieces of information, a deep approach to reading digs deeper by approaching texts in a more analytical manner aiming to synthesise information and construct new meaning. This is done, not just by interrogating the information presented, but also by making connections to the reader's own context and knowledge, and in so doing creating new, relevant meaning.

### Action Research – clear results.

The author conducted some action research in their Legal Studies class, having a normal class with no reading strategies taught, and contrasting this with another class where the author explicitly taught reading strategies. The results were dramatic, showing the taught class to have higher abilities by the end of term in such areas as; contextualizing better the arguments used in the texts, better able to locate & assess the evidence used in texts, more able to evaluate the policy implications and real world consequences implied in the texts, able to put forward alternative solutions to those suggested in the texts.

### Key Reading Strategies – what students need to do.

Strategies that students need to develop for a deep approach to reading are as follows:

1. **Analysing context**

This means situating the text in its correct background, so research the author of the text, what was the place & time of the text? Work out who the intended readership of the text is, place the text in its real-world context.

2. **Identifying Arguments**

This means understanding the author's intention in writing the text. What position does the author take? And are there any counter arguments raised? What is the author's thesis statement?

3. **Investigating Key concepts**

This means identifying key concepts within a text. Most academic texts presume that such key concepts are already known and understood by their peers. A student's job is to make these underlying concepts more explicit by doing some background reading into them and locating any ongoing debates which gave rise to a text's initial position and formation.

#### 4. **Evaluating author's claims**

This involves an evaluation of the claims made, looking at the evidence provided, weighing up how effective the arguments are, looking for counter evidence or comparing what is given to what is claimed in other texts.

##### **Making connections via other texts**

This may involve reading texts outlined in the original text but may also include evaluating the text to one's own personal experience and context. The key thing here to begin to make wider connections to the original text.

#### Taught Reading Strategies – what works?

The author has clearly developed some tried and tested practical activities aimed at sensitizing their students to reading using a deep approach. Some of the activities used are:

##### 1. **Amazing race:**

A competitive activity where students in groups have to analyse academic texts to answer some questions. Each group has a different role with different questions and students need to then locate appropriate texts in order to answer the questions. The first group to do so first become the winners.

##### 2. **The Apprentice:**

Like the T.V. show, *The Apprentice*, the team that finishes last, will be 'fired'. Each team is given some texts to read on a given theme with a reading guide to help them evaluate, compare, analyse, etc. the texts. The groups then present their findings to the rest of the class who vote on the best one.

##### 3. **Double-entry journals:**

These journals have columns down the page which allows student to record their responses to the texts they read by entering their personal experiences linked to the texts, questions they have, connections to other ideas or texts, etc.

##### 4. **Concept mapping:**

Concept mapping involves graphs which show the concepts and ideas in a text and link these to other relevant concepts or previous experiences. In this way, students can apply meanings to the real world.

##### 5. **Reading journals:**

Students use these reading journals to record their responses to what they read. They can question, relate personal experiences, respond to and comment on what they read.

So, reading academic texts in a deep and meaningful way is something that can be developed and done in a student-centered and engaging way. Assuming, however, that students will automatically read in this way, would be a false premise.