



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Writing "Reading Applications"

It has been a long-standing dilemma. How can I convince technical college students to read their psychology text? How can I help them understand that the textbook is a valuable resource which can help them gain a foundation in basic psychological principles? What activity would show them that what they learn from their text can be applied to their lives?

For the past several years I have been using an activity which seems to be effective in helping students see the usefulness of their texts. It also requires that they actually read assignments—at least parts of them. They must write a "Reading Application" for each reading assignment. This is a sentence completion activity which includes the following sentence stems:

- The one most helpful specific idea I can personally use from this chapter is...
- The way I plan to use this idea or put it into effect is...
- When I use this idea, I will benefit by...
- In order to use this idea effectively, I will need to share my plans with...
- One "muddy point" I found in the chapter is...

[This assignment is required, but it is not graded.

There are no right or wrong answers. Providing students with handouts containing the sentence stems results in more uniformity in the appearance of the papers and makes the task of reading the papers easier.]



Students often struggle to make personal applications to the first one or two reading assignments because the initial material is primarily introductory in nature—presenting psychology as a science, describing some of the historically significant events in its development, and spelling out the various methods of objectively observing behavior. Among the common themes to emerge from applications of the introductory readings are the need to be more objective about the behavior of others and to recognize and appreciate individual differences. The benefits cited include being less opinionated and better informed, and getting to know people better.

As the course content becomes focused on topics such as learning, emotion, motivation, and perception,

students are more involved in making the reading material work for them. Typical applications include the following sentence completions:

- The one most helpful specific idea I can personally use from this chapter is the use of a token economy to bring about changes in behavior.
- The way I plan to use this idea or put it into effect is to develop a behavior modification plan to get my three-year-old daughter to go to bed without a fuss.
- When I use this idea, I will benefit by having quiet time in the evening so I can get my studying done.
- In order to use this idea effectively, I will need to share my plan with my husband so that we can be consistent in how we deal with our daughter.

Child-rearing is a frequent topic among older, nontraditional students. Parents in the class are often excited to share the value of behavior modification in getting their children to engage in various expected behaviors. Bedmaking, completion of homework assignments, and tantrum reduction are all positive behaviors which my students' children are engaging in as a result of their parents employing goal-setting and reinforcement techniques.

Once the reading application is written, students are often eager to share the results of carrying it out. It is rewarding for a student to tell of extinguishing an undesirable behavior in his or her child by putting a learning technique to use and a thrill to observe the student's obvious self-satisfaction. And, the other students are much more convinced of the value of the readings because testimony to that value is being provided by "one of them."

Perhaps most gratifying are the applications written on the readings related to emotional stress and abnormal behavior. Often, a student comes to recognize an unhealthy or inappropriate personal behavior and identifies steps to remedy it. Many students, after reading the material on abnormal behavior, gain a greater tolerance of people. They seem to understand that there is more to "fixing" emotional disturbance and behavior disorders than an individual's desire to change. Students, after writing a reading application,



can see the importance of changing their own behavior or helping someone else seek out counseling or other assistance.



Paying attention to the frequency of themes and topics used by students in this sentence completion activity has increased my understanding of what textual material is most useful, and consequently, most interesting to them. It has provided me with some guidance as I revise the course syllabus and determine what to emphasize in the course.

In addition to being an effective teaching tool, I have found that these reading applications provide me with another means of getting to know my students. As they write, I come to understand some things about them that I might not learn otherwise. The assignment allows me to write a brief comment or suggestion to reinforce the student's understanding or further clarify a concept. It serves as a quick way to increase my interaction with the student and fosters some in-depth, face-to-face discussions. Sometimes a student will become so involved in a particular circumstance or situation that she will use it for several of the reading applications. In so doing, a deep understanding of how psychological principles can be applied to one's life is often achieved.

This activity is only one way to help students see the value of reading the text; it is simple to implement and does not require a large amount of student or instructor time. It also is useful in informing the instructor of student needs and interests, and it can be employed effectively in course revision and updating.

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