



The Place of Reading in the Freshman Composition Class

Immediately before the beginning of student debates in my second semester freshman composition class, a student announced, "This is a writing class. I see no point in doing oral things like debates." Admittedly, she was a high school student and felt empowered to announce her uninformed opinion. However, I was still concerned about her loud and unsolicited comment. She had ignored my previous explanation for the debates:

- The important connection between verbal and written argument;
- A handout on how to organize a classical argument; and
- The assignment of an argumentative research paper, which told students that the paper could come from the debate topics.

Like many of our students—and even some of our faculty—this student seemed unaware of the connections among "the arts of language," as Andrea Lunsford called them.

Not only do verbal activities help build written activities, but so does reading (Huot). Because of those interconnections, I use a variety of all of the language arts for each assignment in my freshman composition classes to build students' writing skills. This means that for every essay students write, they also read and talk about the assignment. In this way, I am asking them to build the cognitive structures that allow them to accomplish the final written product. David Foster suggests that teachers must connect reading and writing so that activity develops the other (p. 518). Foster also examines the connection between reading and writing and reports that, as the result of his study, students came to understand that reading and writing are "part of the same complex, unpredictable process" (p. 538).

In terms of specific assignments, this means that in every composition class, an assignment begins with reading the assignment sheet aloud. Sometimes, I also have students read aloud the essays that they reference for their assignment or examples of assigned essays written by previous students and posted online as a supplement for the class. In fact, we read something aloud almost every class. Usually, I simply ask one student to begin and then others follow, reading paragraphs or numbered instructions. Sometimes, I ask for volunteers to read aloud.

There are several reasons for having students read aloud:

1. Some students have learning styles that depend on oral or verbal input, not only written input.
2. If the entire class has heard the assignment, as well as read it, it is difficult—but not impossible—for a student to say he or she has not seen the assignment.
3. It allows me to supplement the assignment sheet with specific examples or information that, while it might not be crucial for student success, is still helpful.

Additionally, I recently started something new: I read an essay from our textbook aloud to the class. This came about as somewhat of an accident. At the time, I needed students to examine the essay as an example of how to organize an essay using various rhetorical strategies, but I had not previously assigned a chapter. Given the various reading speeds among the students, I knew we could not discuss an essay unless somehow everyone was familiar with it. Therefore, I resorted to reading it aloud in class. This particular essay was about suicide and was mesmerizing to my students. Several of them wrote about it later in their reading journals. I realized that most of my students have not been read to in a long time, if ever. It was an enriching experience for me and for them, primarily because of the essay I read. Now, with our common experience, I was able to refer to that essay as we moved on to other assignments where the author's strategies were also relevant. Michael Bunn mentions a similar use of texts: "These two uses of model texts call on students to study the text with an eye toward their own eventual writing" (p. 7).

Another way I have used reading in my classroom is through group work. When I assign groups specific sections of essays to explain to the class, I tell each group that someone from the group also must read their assigned passage aloud to the class, so everyone is familiar with the passage they are analyzing. While I assign the readings ahead of time, I know that not everyone will do the required work. By having each group read the passage aloud, I know that we all have a shared knowledge base for a discussion. Of course, many group activities also involve a presentation to the class as a whole so students' verbal skills are enhanced then, as well.

One of my reading activities also combines writing. For example, when our class reviews for the midterm essay—a timed writing assignment about a quotation students have not previously seen—I give them a similar quotation and they must draft an introduction and a thesis for that quote in five minutes. Then, I ask for volunteers to read what they wrote and I comment on their work in front of the class.

Students can opt out of reading their writing; however, usually there are several students who volunteer to read. In this case, reading, writing, and speaking come together to reinforce the writing skills students will be required to use on the timed essay assignment.

For many composition teachers, the idea of reading, especially aloud, is a secondary or elementary school activity. We see our job as helping students develop their writing—perhaps based on reading—but not a job where we teach students how to read. I am not suggesting that we teach freshman composition students to read by teaching strategies such as context clues, decoding, or phonics. Instead, I find that explaining active reading strategies and then having students use those strategies in the class, or simply having them practice reading aloud, can improve the writing on which our classes concentrate. Almost every assignment in my freshman composition sequence begins with reading and using that reading to progress to the writing strategies used in a specific assignment.

What reading strategies do you use in the classroom? Tell us in the comment section or on [Facebook!](#)

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