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## **Utilizing Textual Passages in Split-level Courses**

Having undergraduate and graduate students enrolled in "mixed" or "split-level" courses (for us, at the University of Georgia, courses numbered 4000–6000) poses particular problems for professors. The undergraduates in such courses are engaged in a two-fold process of general education and specialization in a major. Since many religion programs, ours included, do not have prerequisites for courses, the undergraduate religion majors and graduate students find themselves in courses with students who do not know anything about the study of religion. This is a frustrating situation for those who are ready for exercises in higher-level thought. The graduate school at my institution does not see such courses as providing core requirements for graduate study, though they may be used as electives, and the graduate school demands that the graduate students have additional requirements that set their education apart from that of the undergraduates.

For the professor, this situation offers many challenges, including how, in essence, to teach on three different levels at once: that is, how to scaffold the course in terms of learning goals and assignments so that those with no background are not overwhelmed while the majors and graduate students are still challenged. In addition, the graduate students are involved in a process of specialization and professionalization, and thus the course should address those issues as well. To accomplish these varied objectives, I have come, over my twenty years of teaching, to concentrate on a common issue for all of my students: that of learning how to read complex texts.

This problem, which is one for both graduate and undergraduate students, is caused by an educational deficit. [The National Reading Panel Report](#) suggests that there are five critical areas for effective reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and

comprehension. In colleges and universities, we have come to expect that our students have high-level cognition functions like fluency, the ability to read a text accurately and to gain meaning from it, and comprehension, the reason for reading in the first place (

[Pinnell, 2008](#)

). Many of our students, however, do not have the basis for these skills. An article in the *Washington Post*

suggests that only 31 percent of undergraduates and only 41 percent of graduate students were "proficient" in prose — reading and understanding information in short texts" (

[Romano, 2005](#)

). This is one necessary practice, therefore, in which undergraduates and graduates start essentially at the same level of proficiency.

I use many strategies for reading over the course of a semester, including, for example, double-entry journals, which have students copy certain phrases or sentences from a text and then write down their responses to them (see <http://www.adlit.org/strategies/22091/>). The strategy I will discuss here, however, emerged from the fact that my students were having problems reading assigned texts, as well as from my need to generate a common but high-level discussion in classes that included both graduates and undergraduates.

For key short passages in a text the class is reading (2–4 paragraphs), I photocopy the passage, setting it — isolating it — in the center of a blank page. I ask students to annotate the text, underlining key words and phrases, as well as ask them to make comments in the margins regarding why these things are important. In addition, I add one to two questions at the bottom of the sheet. These questions push the students to comment on the passage in relation to a theme or idea that it carries forward, to its connection to another part of the text, and/or to its connection to a larger theme and concern of the course.

I prepare the students for this kind of reading by practicing with one or two passages in class before they begin to count for a grade. In both the practice and the "for credit" sessions, I have them sit alone to read and annotate, then I break them into groups of two or three to discuss what they have found. I particularly want graduate students to be in groups with the undergraduates, so I often assign groups comprising both. During small group work, I encourage students to write their insights on the board. Whether they do or not, we return to a plenary discussion in which we work through the elements of the passage and the questions together.

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