

Chapter 3. Further Strategies That Make Reading Visible

This chapter details assignments that your instructor may ask you to complete throughout the course. Although writing assignments, these activities are focused on reading and, therefore, allow you to experience the connections between the two practices, while simultaneously developing your reading and writing abilities. Some of these activities are also assigned in Part Two of this textbook.

The Reading Journal: Developing and Recording Your Knowledge About Reading

A reading journal, which may be an electronic document on your computer or the more traditional bound notebook, gives you the opportunity to reflect on your reading and learn about yourself as a reader, which can be helpful as you read in this class, other classes, and beyond school. The journal is a space in which you record your experiences reading. You might return to your journal periodically to look at your notes to better understand how you can be a more productive reader. While you may use the journal to document your personal and emotional responses to each reading, please regularly also answer the following questions:

1. Which reading strategy did I employ first and why? (see Chapter 2 on reading strategies)
2. How far did this reading strategy take me?
3. What did this reading strategy allow me to notice in the text?
4. What must I ignore because of this strategy's limits?
5. At which point in the reading (and why) did I need to abandon my initial strategy?
6. What does this tell me about the strategy, as well as about me as a reader?
7. Which other strategy do I need to introduce in order to construct a meaning that achieves the goals associated with my reading/writing assignment?
8. How might this reading experience be useful as I read texts in my other courses?

Notice how this excerpt from a student's reading journal reflects her use of different reading strategies as she moves toward writing an essay for her geography class:

For my geography class today, I had to read Jamaica Kincaid's book called *A Small*

Place, which is about Antigua, a Caribbean island. She talks about the divide there between the fancy, wealthy white tourists on vacation and the poverty-stricken people who live there. I'm supposed to write a similar kind of essay to Kincaid's with the same sort of aggressive tone but about a different geographic place that has meaning to me and also has some sort of problem or tension I want to expose about that place.

I decided to reread *A Small Place* using the RLW strategy so I could really see what Kincaid is doing and why her writing comes off really aggressive. I noticed that she uses the word “you” a lot, which makes the reader feel attacked. I think this is something I can try in my own piece to get that same effect.

But, RLW didn't really help me think about the audience for Kincaid's book, which will be important for my essay, too. So I went back and reread using the rhetorical reading strategy and I realized that it seems as though she thinks her audience are those fancy, white tourists. This seems important because she is calling attention to a problem that the audience is causing and so that's why she is so aggressive. Her audience is to blame and so she writes in a really aggressive way because she is angry at them. I will need to keep this in mind as I write my essay and think about the audience's relationship to my subject.

Practice Writing a Reading Journal Entry

Now that you have read the excerpt from the reading journal, try your hand at your own reading journal entry. Pick something to read—either from this book or elsewhere—and write a few paragraphs answering some of the questions on the previous page.

Difficulty Inventory: Tracking and Overcoming Reading Difficulties

You may have had teachers develop reading guides for you to help support your reading, particularly of difficult texts. Perhaps these guides contained definitions of difficult vocabulary words, some historical context useful in understanding the reading, and some questions to direct your attention to the most important aspects of the reading. These can be enormously helpful resources, but when a teacher creates reading guides for students, it is the teacher who comes to recognize and work with the

difficulties that the readings pose. When students develop these, however, *they* learn to recognize the sources of their difficulties, which is a first step toward working through them. Developing a list of the difficulties you are facing as you read a text makes you aware of why you are having trouble and gives you the opportunity to address those difficulties. The following list contains elements that may cause you difficulty. As you read, create your own list, drawing from this list, and adding to it as necessary. Then, next to each “difficulty” indicate where you might go (e.g. a dictionary) to work through it. You may be asked to share your list with a peer from your class so that you can work through some of the difficulties together, or your instructor might wish to make a master list of these difficulties and support students while they work through these difficulties. No matter what you end up doing with your list, the very act of developing it and imagining which resources can support you will help you feel less overwhelmed when reading difficult texts and give you the confidence to address these difficulties.

Some Potential Difficulties You May Face When You Read

- You aren’t the intended audience for the piece
- You don’t understand certain words or concepts
- You don’t have necessary background knowledge
- You don’t understand the historical context
- You don’t recognize the genre
- The visuals or graphics are confusing
- You are distracted by advertisements on the screen
- The website on which the reading appears is not user-friendly
- The print or type-face of the piece is off-putting
- The piece’s organization is hard to follow

Here is a sample difficulty inventory in the form of a chart:

DIFFICULTY	RESOURCE
The unfamiliar word “consciousness”	A dictionary. If a word isn’t in a dictionary, I can look at all of the places in the text where the word is used. Looking at all of those moments together can help me figure out what the word means and how it is used.
References to the importance of the Korean War.	A reliable website that explains this War. A website that is a .org or .edu is probably best.
I can’t follow the text’s organization	The says/does strategy to help me figure out what each paragraph is doing.

Practice Developing a Difficulty Inventory

Choose one of the readings in this book and, as you read, keep a difficulty inventory—whether in the form of a chart or any other format you like—that lists both the source of the difficulty as well as potential resources that would help you overcome that difficulty.

The Passage-Based Paper

By asking you to choose a single passage from a longer reading, this assignment demands that you slow down and pay attention to how you make sense of the passage, how you read it. Passage-based papers offer you the opportunity to experience the connections between the interpretive practices of reading and writing as you make your reading visible through the act of writing. Here is how you would do this:

1. Choose a short passage (3-5 sentences) from the text you are reading and write a 1-2 page passage-based paper on this excerpt.
2. Transcribe the passage onto the top of the page (including the page number from which the passage is taken) and then “unpack” the passage, paying close attention to the textual elements including the passage’s language, tone, and construction.
3. Once you have examined the passage closely, conclude your paper by connecting this passage to the rest of the work. In other words, once you have completed a close, textual analysis of your passage, contemplate the meaning of the passage and its place in or contribution to the meaning(s) of the text as a whole.

The following sample from a passage-based is taken from a paper that discusses a passage from Sven Birkerts’ essay “MahVuhHuhPuh” from his book *The Gutenberg Elegies*. The passage-based paper has been annotated to highlight its elements.

The magnet that pulled them into shape was Woolf’s classic essay, *A Room of One’s Own*. Not the what of it, but the how. Reading the prose, I confronted a paradox that pulled me upright in my chair. Woolf’s ideas are, in fact, few and fairly obvious—at least from our historical vantage. Yet the thinking, the presence of animate thought on the page, is striking. How do we

sort that? How can a piece of writing have simple ideas and still infect the reader with the excitement of its thinking? (Birkerts 11)

In this passage, Birkerts is discussing how it is that he was able to think through and pull together some of the ideas he had been concerned with for a while. It proved to be Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* that helped him to do this.

Throughout this passage, Birkerts creates a distinction—one that Woolf helped him to discover—between “what” and “how.” This is a distinction he repeats throughout the passage. He even italicizes those words to show they are important. But, even if the words themselves weren't italicized it would still be clear because of the repetition of both words. For example, he writes that it was not the “what” of Woolf's essay but the “how” that helped him. Toward the end of the passage he asks about the relationship between “what” and “how” by posing the question: “How can a piece of writing have simple ideas and still infect the reader with the excitement of its thinking?” In all of these instances and in other moments in the passage, Birkerts is trying to figure out how a piece of writing—like Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*—can be lacking in sophistication when it comes to ideas but still make readers take notice. In other words, he wasn't blown away by the topic of her essay, but by how she wrote about the topic. He seems drawn to how she says what she says rather than what she says so much so that it “pulled [him] upright in his chair.” The question then becomes how did Woolf say what she said? In the passage above, Birkerts describes her style as “animate thought on the page” and it is this that he found “striking.” So, he was impressed by her style because it seemed as though she was actually thinking onto the page.

This passage seems important to the rest of Birkerts' essay because it sets up or introduces what he will go on to do in his essay. He spends not just this passage—but the first few pages—talking about Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* and how much he is impressed by the way she writes. Based on his description of her writing in this passage and in

This paragraph sets the context and provides some background for the discussion of the passage.

The reader chooses two textual elements to focus on. She notices a pattern in the passage and two key words. The reader begins to describe the many instances in which Birkerts seems interested in the differences between the concepts of “what” and “how.”

In the last section of this paragraph, the reader asks So What that Birkerts repeats these words? The reader comes to some tentative conclusions about the importance of the concept of “how” to Birkerts. The reader notes that Birkerts values how Woolf makes her points, how she shows her thinking in her writing. The reader says that this seems more important than Woolf's ideas.

This final paragraph connects the pattern and the key terms that the reader has noticed in this passage to the rest of the text. The reader points out that Birkerts mimics Woolf's style throughout his essay as he explores the subject of reading and meaning. Taking this point even further, the reader concludes by noting that just as Woolf's method of thinking inspired Birkerts he seems to want to inspire readers to think in complex ways, as well.

the next few pages it seems as though Birkerts tries to mirror her style by thinking onto the pages of his essay. In other words, he takes the same approach in his essay that she took in hers. This suggests that Birkerts believes that his ideas are not necessarily groundbreaking and that the way he will present them is just as—if not more important—than the ideas themselves. By introducing his essay in this way he lets his readers know that the topic he will be discussing—reading and meaning—is not new, but that the way he will discuss it is important, which is how Woolf presented her ideas—by thinking on the page. Therefore, thinking itself becomes very important. Just as Woolf inspired Birkerts' thinking it seems he's trying to inspire his readers' thinking by using the same style. This is a key element to what Birkerts seems to be doing overall in the essay, which is emphasizing the importance of continuing to think (by reading) rather than just giving into technology, computers, and movies and allowing them to think for you.

Practice Writing a Passage-Based Paper

Choose a passage from one of the readings from this book and write a passage-based paper on it.

Source Synthesis

As you read in previous chapters, it is important that you hone your reading and writing abilities so you can effectively participate in scholarly conversations in the academy. This assignment asks that you do just that as you **synthesize**, or bring together, sources that are on the same subject in order to orchestrate a scholarly conversation, of which you are also a part.

In order to enter this conversation, you will need to understand what each participant is saying individually. In other words, you should be able to **summarize**—restate and condense—it. You have likely written a summary in other academic contexts, and you should feel free to draw on those experiences as you complete the summary assignments throughout this textbook. A summary can

be a useful step in understanding what you read as summaries compel you to restate and condense the most important elements of a text. In certain instances you will be asked not to summarize a text in its entirety, but to focus your summary on specific elements. Summaries are particularly useful when texts are dense and include multiple perspectives on a subject. They are also a first step toward more complex academic moves such as those you are expected to make in source syntheses and other assignments.

Once you are sure you can summarize the ideas belonging to each participant in the “conversation,” you will need to synthesize their ideas to help you see how they relate to each other. Source syntheses are usually shorter versions of the typical source-driven, longer essays you will be assigned in many of your classes. Their compact nature helps you really focus on refining your abilities to mindfully read and respond to other scholars.

Although sometimes the term “response” is associated with emotions, you want to be sure that you are responding in what we might call an intellectual manner. An **intellectual response** is one that depends upon ideas rather than emotions (e.g. I feel X or Y or about the subject). You want to participate in a scholarly conversation by contributing your ideas. In other words, what would you say to those who have already written on the subject, participated in the conversation? Some intellectual ways to respond—that go beyond the more simplistic modes of agreeing and disagreeing—include the following:

1. Taking a point further
2. Redefining the context of the discussion
3. Exploring different implications for the findings
4. Complicating an argument
5. Locating a fault (an unfounded assumption, for example) and remedying it
6. Exploring why a particular approach is limiting and applying an alternative approach
7. Redefining some of the terms or ideas offered
8. Raising unexplored questions and their significance

As you develop your source synthesis, look back at your annotations for insights into how you are already interacting with the ideas presented in the texts, how you are already participating in the conversation. For example, perhaps one of the questions you pose in the margins can serve as your focus. Here are some additional guidelines:

- Be sure to **focus** the conversation on a specific issue or idea that you can explore in depth by offering the writers’ different perspectives rather than very quickly and superficially touching upon a bunch of different issues or ideas in your piece.

- You will need to **quote** your sources throughout since you cannot orchestrate and then participate in a conversation unless you give each source a voice. As you quote your sources, make sure that at the level of form the piece reads like a conversation. This means that, on the whole, each paragraph should contain more than one voice. One page devoted to one voice and a second page devoted to another voice does not represent the give-and-take of a conversation.

The following source synthesis is based on two readings, Sven Birkerts’ “MahVuhHuhPuh,” an essay from his collection entitled *The Gutenberg Elegies* and Dennis Baron’s blog entry entitled “Should We Read a World Without Books?” from his website *The Web of Language*. The student’s work has been annotated to show the elements of the assignment:

In this paragraph, the student lays out the two different perspectives she will put into conversation with each other.

In Birkerts’ essay “MahVuhHuhPuh,” he talks about technology and argues that it is to blame for what he believes will lead to the loss of the written word. Not just fearing the loss of the words themselves, he describes the potential loss of all of the associated activities that seem to be under threat, including the ability to verbally communicate and mental passion. Dennis Baron’s “Should We Fear A World Without Books?” on the other hand, tries to show how advances in technology are inevitable and not necessarily detrimental.

This paragraph explores where each writer stands on technology’s relationship to deep thinking and inquiry.

Birkerts believes that the encroaching reliance on technologies diminishes an interest in exploring language. Computers and other technologies encourage speed rather than the importance of focus or thinking in depth about something. Birkerts explains that a dependence on technology could lead to a “reduced attention span and general impatience with sustained inquiry” (27). Writing about the ebook, one of the most recent technological advances in book publishing, Baron argues that “There’s nothing about the printed book that shouts, ‘Attention must be paid.’ Even when we’re wide awake and concentrating, the mind does wander, and whether it’s a best-selling page-turner or an assigned textbook, every reader knows the experience of getting five pages further along, with no recollection of reading the intervening words, or even turning the pages.” In other words, Baron complicates the rather common argument, which Birkerts makes, that technology is likely to blame for our reduced attention

spans. He points out that we have all been equally distracted while reading printed texts as when we have been reading ebooks. Simply put, Baron's point is that minds wander. He's not convinced that technology itself has caused this or has caused our reduced attention span.

Related to this loss of depth when it comes to language and thinking is Birkerts' concern over the potential loss of in-depth relationships between people. He blames our "interaction[s] with new modes" (31) for this. "We all feel a desire for connection" writes Birkerts "and we are utterly at sea about our place as individuals with the world at large" (20) because of all of these advances in technology with which we cannot keep up. Where is the place for individuals and individuality in this new world?, Birkerts wonders. Finally, according to Birkerts, technology leaves our lives devoid of any reason to reach outside our electronic scope to interact with others. We become "solipsistic," according to Birkerts, engaged in our own little worlds. With the loss of the written word, which Birkerts thinks is around the corner, we lose even the opportunity to live in the literary world of books or escape through them. Baron agrees with Birkerts that "writing earned an honored place in human communication," (9) however, he also points out that "the briefest network crash makes us feel cut off from the world" (12). Baron is suggesting, in other words, that our digital lives actually bring us closer, more connected, to the world around us. While he doesn't cite social media sites specifically, one could imagine that these would be on the list of ways our digital lives connect us. Ultimately, Baron would call Birkerts a "defender of the printed word" and while finding some truth in Birkerts' arguments—such as the impact of reading and writing on all human behavior—Baron ultimately finds the technological evolution to be unavoidable and thus something to which we must adapt.

This issue of adapting seems crucial and demands additional exploration. Writing several years after Birkerts, Baron raises the issue of needing to adapt, but he doesn't take it much further than that. Taking into consideration Birkerts' concerns about new technologies making

Further developing the discussion about technology's relationship to depth, this paragraph considers what both writers say about how technology affects how people connect with each other.

The sentence beginning with "While he doesn't cite social media . . ." is an idea that the student contributes to the conversation. She takes Baron's ideas further by including an example that supports his position.

This final paragraph draws on the two writers' perspectives in order to lay the foundation for the student's greatest contribution to the conversation. The student complicates Birkerts' argument that people are sheep and offers an alternative way of thinking about the issue.

everything so easy that there is no longer any investment in sustained inquiry, I would argue that integral to our adapting—which Baron points out as inevitable—is the need to reflect on how we adapt. We must be aware of the choices we have and the choices we make in the face of the new technologies. In other words, while Baron describes the importance of adapting, he does not address how particular ways of adapting might be better than others. Whereas Birkerts is concerned that we are all just passively accepting these new technologies, he does not address that there are, in fact, ways to adapt that are not passive. We can consider our choices and the consequences of those choices. We can make informed decisions about which technologies to embrace and which to reject. Birkerts seems all too quick to assume that the masses are just sheep who are willing to simply go along with every new advance in technology. Instead, we can reflect more deliberately on how and when we embrace technology in our lives. If we remain conscious throughout this process and consistently analyze and inquire into these technologies rather than simply accepting them we will be adapting in responsible ways rather than just following the crowd.

Practice Writing a Source Synthesis

Choose three readings either from this book or from one of your other courses. Develop a source synthesis by putting these into a scholarly conversation and entering that conversation.

For Further Reading

- Baron, Dennis. "Should We Fear a World Without Books?" *Web of Language*, 26 Jan. 2009, <https://illinois.edu/blog/view/25/5800>
- Birkerts, Sven. "MahVuhHuhPuh." *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2006, pp. 11-32.