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Reading “at the Speed of a Writer’s Pen”: A Strategy for Close Reading

Getting students to become self-conscious readers and writers is a perennial problem and is the key to undergraduate research (UR) in religion, literature, and theory. Most of my students are working in literature and theory for their undergraduate research and they need to master not just close reading, but how to engage the arguments of texts and to compare and contrast those with the arguments of other texts. I address this by first reading to students a passage from Michael Ondaatje’s *The English Patient* (Random House, 1996), in which the patient advises reading at the “speed of a [writer’s] pen” (94). To get the students to do this, I developed a strategy based on one I learned from Todd Penner of Austin College.

Though this strategy is one I employ in the undergraduate classroom, I also use it for helping students to prepare for more independent UR as well. Most students at the University of Georgia who are working on undergraduate research are writing a thesis or working on a paper in an independent study. This strategy helps them to learn to read texts closely but also to engage theoretical and critical work on the subject area that they have chosen. Learning not just to quote outside sources, but also to evaluate them, to compare and contrast them to the arguments of other sources, and to put those arguments in fruitful tension and conversation requires close reading.

While Todd Penner grades the annotations students write in whole books, I ask students, early in the research, to annotate key passages from three to four texts. I give the parameters of the passage (page number and beginning/ending phrases). The instructions are:

- Read the passage carefully. Underline the key words, lines, and phrases.
- Comment in the margins on why these are important words, lines, and phrases.
- Photocopy the page in question to turn in.

On the back of the page, students write a paragraph in response to an interpretative question. They explain the significance of particular wording, themes, characters, or moments in the passage, their relation to the work, and analyze those using theory we have covered.

I first used this technique in a “Religion and Literature” course. For the first exercise, I let the class break into groups and compare their insights and work together to refine the paragraph answer. After the group work concluded, we discussed the first of these exercises and talked about reading strategies that worked for them. The students suggested:

- Underlining and using margins to hold a conversation with the author. Some said that in books that are well spaced on the page, they may also write between the lines of the text.
- Reading aloud, to oneself or to another, to sense the beauty of a passage and to draw oneself, if reluctant, into the text.
- Marking passages with sticky-notes: This can be confusing with too many notes, so one might color-code the passages by theme or character, make key-word notes on the sticky, or mark only powerful passages, forcing one to discern.
- Finding the right atmosphere for reading: being in the same place, in a context that “fit” the work, helped one student to focus.
- Summarizing key points at the bottom of the page or on the blank pages of the book: Use the blank front pages for notes and, after finishing the text, summarize key information on the back blank pages, including page numbers.
- Underlining and illustrating the page, not with words but with drawings to symbolize key points.
- Keeping a reading journal that contains insights on readings for a course or academic year. Copying a passage into a journal word-for-word may help one to enter its rhythm and meaning.

These student-generated strategies expanded upon my original assignment in ways that address a variety of learning styles.

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