Reading Task Force: Issue One

Reading Task Force Committee Members:

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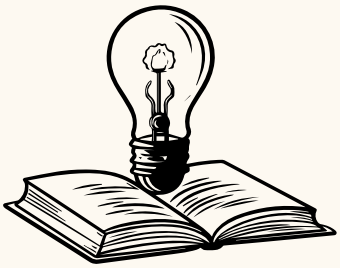
The reading task force appreciates your perspective as we plan our next newsletter. If there is a reading concern you've encountered in your classes, please let us know using the faculty survey linked below.

Faculty Survey



Recent Research in Reading: Below you'll find brief overviews of recent research in the field of reading. The link the full text is also provided.

Takeaways from the introduction of *10 to 25: The Science of Motivating Young People* by David Yeager, PhD.

This task force was created because English faculty have noticed that students aren't reading at the level they have in past. While we can't go back and change foundational issues in literacy instruction, we can meet students where they are and focus on motivating them to engage with challenging texts. In David Yeager's book, he aims to do what many think is impossible: understand the adolescent brain. Below are takeaways exploring what motivates students between the ages of 10-25 that we can consider during classroom instruction and feedback.

- Youth brains are still adapting
  - They are motivated by "status and respect."
  - Their brains are reward-seeking and shame-averse.
  - "Mentors" and youth may have the similar goal of growth, but come at that goal with different needs/expectations leading to frustration on both sides.
  - Critical feedback necessary to improve performance but may be discouraging to the student.
  - Encouragement necessary to keep morale, but being too nice may not facilitate growth.
    - If students are intimidated by authority figures or desperate to get the right answer or interpretation, they may freeze and choose to avoid the work rather than get it wrong. This stunts growth.
    - Alternatively, if they don't care about a particular subject matter and think faculty don't care about them, they may assume the effort they put into the class is inconsequential.
- "Wise Feedback" Study
  - The classic compliment sandwich (a piece of criticism sandwiched between two compliments) is good in theory but ineffective in practice- students see this as ingenuine feedback.
  - In this study, "instructors [were] critical with their feedback but [accompanied] that criticism with a clear and transparent statement about the reason they were giving that feedback– namely that they believed the student could meet a high standard if they got the right support" (5).
  - The 7th grade wise-feedback experiment doubled the number of students who submitted (required) revisions of an essay and succeeded in getting students to meet expected standards.
- While this 2014 experiment had to do with essays, the conclusions are worthwhile for assigning readings as well. We as faculty can take the

Mickey May	following actions: ○ Acknowledge the challenges students face and remind them that you believe they are capable of meeting your expectations. ○ Tell them the importance of the assignments. ○ Students can sniff out busy work– it's helpful to remind our students (and ourselves) why we are doing this specific work. Attach it to value in *and* outside of the class.
Review of "College Students Not Reading Is an Issue, So Teachers Are Adjusting How Classes Look" by Marie Rose Sheinerman, published in *Teen Vogue* (Sep. 18, 2024) Eric Wallenstein	Leave it to *Teen Vogue* to provide a helpful look at the way instructors are changing their methods to deal with students who are reading resistant. Sheinerman contextualizes this phenomenon in relation to the pandemic, the diminishment of attention spans, the ubiquity of smartphones, and as one professor puts it, "this mentality of 'Why should I think it through when I could get the answer on my phone?'" Sheinerman also looks at a large selection of syllabi from the last fifteen years and, surprisingly, finds little change in the amount of reading being assigned. Yet, this data runs counter to some of what's said here by interviewed instructors who mention trimming their syllabi and relying more on excerpts than full texts. The article also includes a (brief) discussion of how some instructors provide "structure" for longer reading assignments (through methods like online annotation tools and "reading teams") that could spark some ideas for how to deal with reading resistance in your own classrooms.
Review of "Is This the End of Reading?," by Beth McMurtrie, published in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (May 9, 2024). Cedric Synnestvedt	"Is This the End of Reading," by senior writer for The Chronicle of Higher Education Beth McMurtrie, offers multiple entry points into the conversation about why reading comprehension in college students has declined so significantly in the past fifteen-or-so years. McMurtrie sources anecdotes from both college professors and students at universities across the nation. She also includes links to numerous articles and studies which have useful perspectives on possible contributors to reading decline. Many experts blame lower academic standards in highs schools (especially during The Pandemic) and "test culture." Others suggest that social media and the more fragmented "communication cultures" students inhabit can make the type of reading and writing we expect of them seem unimportant. Others say the problem goes even further back: a dive in the amount of reading parents do with their children. I found one article McMurtrie links to, "Reading and Engaging Sources: What Students' Use of Sources Reveals About Advanced Reading Skills" by Professor of English at Drew University Sandra Jamieson, especially illuminating as a teacher of FYE. McMurtrie offers no hard and fast solutions, but her article has good suggestions. It's a starting point for faculty who struggle, like myself, to come up with ways to help students read better, in and out of the classroom.

Summary of "The Importance of College Reading" Research was conducted by a team of seven researchers across multiple disciplines at Worcester State University published in the *Journal of Effective Teaching in Higher Education* (Spring 2022).

Problems:

- Professors usually feel outside reading is essential, while students often find it unnecessary for their grade or overly time consuming.
- College-level reading and writing are not always taught before college.
- Reading-across-the-curriculum gets far fewer resources and much less attention than writing-across-the-curriculum.
- Professors often struggle to provide enough guidance or strategies to help motivate students to read.
- Reading instruction is frequently ignored after elementary school.
- Students often have little experience with discipline-specific reading.
- Ultimately, these problems and more contribute to students frequently skipping their assigned readings. Statistics from the study appear to illustrate this problem.

Procedure: The researchers surveyed 449 undergraduate students and 17 faculty members and covered multiple disciplines. The questions related to the following topics:

1. Problems professors face involving student reading
2. Content-specific issues with student reading
3. What gets in the way of students reading?
4. What could make students' reading experience better?

The process also includes these steps:

1. Researchers conducted workshops with faculty about the role of reading on campus
2. They interviewed professors about their experiences with student reading
3. They gathered quantitative and qualitative data about students' perceptions of college reading

Findings:

- Quizzes and reading-related questions can increase motivation, but they do not always increase comprehension, and there needs to be a significant amount of points attached to these reading "checks"
- Purposeful reading, direct instruction, authentic assignments, personal / "real world" connections, and intertextuality are all effective tools that help improve students' reading
- Having the students deal with their reactions to the reading rather than summarizing can be helpful
- Establishing trust that reading is worthwhile is important
- Students usually prefer visual texts to reading as it fits their experience better
- Students often skip reading they deem to be too difficult
- Students are often unaware or unconcerned about their lack of reading skills
- Students do better when they have familiarity with the assigned topic
- While students usually worry about time constraints and consequences, professors are thinking more about the intrinsic benefits of reading and what could be missed by not reading

- Students often read after the lecture, so they can get the information or meaning from it beforehand
- Students often find reading to be redundant with the lectures

Recommendations:

The researchers offer the following recommendations to address some of these college reading issues:

- More instruction in reading strategies and reading across disciplines
- Professional development workshops on reading strategies
- Manage the quantity of assigned reading
- Getting caught up with WAC by teaching "reading across the curriculum" (with writing being more tangible and measurable than reading, the latter gets neglected by comparison)

Blake VanderLind

Review of "There's a Very Good Reason College Students Don't Read Anymore" by Jonathan Malesic published in *The New York Times* (Nov. 10, 2024).

This article by Jonathan Malesic makes the argument that, to paraphrase, says media exposure / marketing gives students false impressions of what the professional world entails and requires. This disconnect or misunderstanding is one factor contributing to college students' declining will to read. Here are some of Malesic's points, plus my own suggestions based on my takeaways from his article and my personal experience.

- The professional world is presented as being less about merit and hard work and more about "vibe." This "vibe" comes at least partly from images of professionals experiencing success as a payoff for minimal effort. AI ads are a good example of this (which are a particular pet peeve of my own). They depict employees using AI programs to "overcome" professional challenges and getting figurative pats on the back for their "good work." Why, then, is it necessary to read or take the effort to think critically when professional life is so easy?
- "Intellectual labor seems optional." This direct quote relates to the previous point in that college students often do not value reading or consider its potential benefits. This is not where the money is found today. Money comes from "[l]uck, hype and access to the right companies." Basically, today's college students are inundated with marketing / branding, which is how the money is made. At least, that is the narrative that is constantly being pushed.
- Universities often reinforce a very corporate-sounding notion that degrees are about power more than knowledge. Again, reading is not deemed necessary if it cannot be directly monetized. Students also see some college athletes making big money off their marketability, another point addressed by Malesic.
- Although Malesic has, like many of us, reduced the amount he has students read, he maintains some hope because there will always be students who push themselves to learn and are willing to put in the brainwork to do it. Curiosity and work ethic are not necessarily dead, but fewer young people appear to value these characteristics.

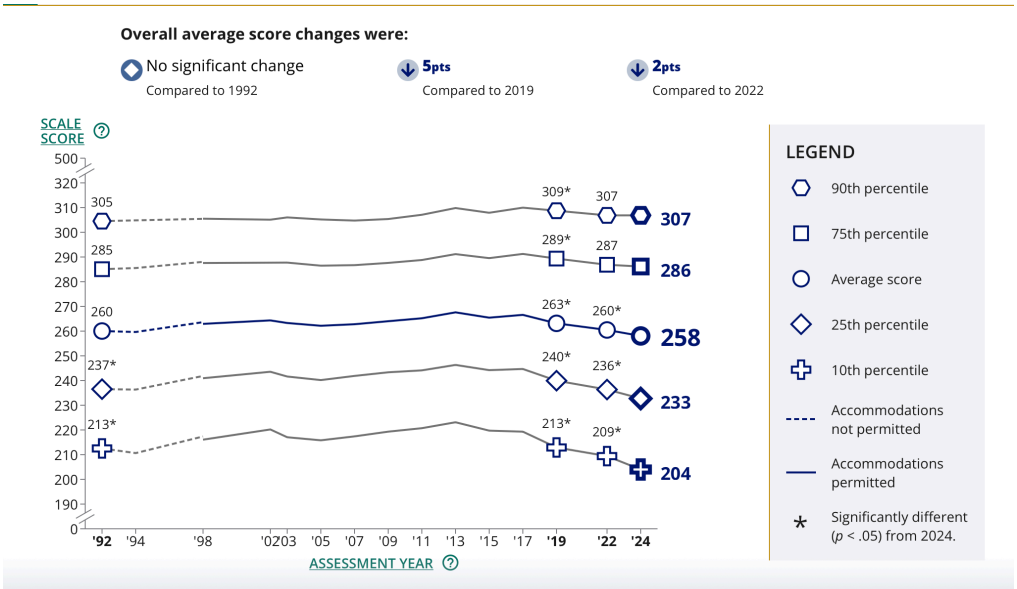
Blake VanderLind

My Ideas for Combatting the Issues Malesic Raises:

- Offer intriguing readings that require critical thinking to interpret them. For literature, choose authors and works that "show" human emotions and actions as part of larger meanings. This will get at least some of the students engaged if they can be persuaded to engage in the first place.
- Focus on specific passages that are rich with meaning and allow the students to glean their own meaning from them. Nothing builds critical thinking quite like analyzing a complex text that is more accessible than the students might initially believe.
- Select the texts carefully to help meet these desired goals. I like to select passages from William Faulkner because he "tells" almost nothing and says quite a lot through "showing."
- Sell the reading as both important and potentially fun. If the students are used to pitching and branding, then don't be afraid to use that tactic as an educator. Point out the satisfaction that may be gleaned from finding meaning in complex texts. There can be great satisfaction in solving a puzzle. Similarly, I have seen students become enthused when "the light turns on." The key, of course, is getting the light to turn on.

Highlights from The 2024 Nation's Report Card published by NAEP

According to its current homepage, the National Assessment of Educational Progress "(NAEP) is a congressionally mandated project administered by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), within the U.S. Department of Education and the Institute of Education Sciences (IES)." Following are a few highlights from the assessment. I focused on the reading data for current eighth-grade students. Since these students represent a broad snapshot of our freshman in four or five years, it seems helpful to consider where their reading comprehension data is trending.



- According to the chart above, from 2022 to 2024, there was a slight decrease in the number of students scoring lower than the 10th percentile and virtually no change in the number of students scoring at the 90th percentile; thus, the gap between the lowest and highest scoring students is holding steady.

- Student performance on specific questions that are most significant for our courses were as follows:
  - Provide an interpretation of the main message of a poem: 32% demonstrated partial comprehension and 12% demonstrated full comprehension.
  - Locate a paragraph in a story that supports an idea: 22% offered an acceptable response.
  - Provide an explanation of a character's feelings at a moment in a story: 12% demonstrated full comprehension.
  - Choose the best description of the main purpose of argument text: 70% choose the correct multiple choice response.
  - Identify two problems with an argument and explain how the author of the article responds to them: 17% of responses demonstrated extensive comprehension, 16 % demonstrated essential comprehension, 21% demonstrated partial comprehension, and 39% demonstrated satisfactory comprehension (responses that were omitted and/or off-task constituted the remaining 6% and 2%, respectively).
  - Evaluate effectiveness of text feature in an argument text: 23% demonstrated full comprehension, 41% demonstrated partial comprehension, and 33% little to no comprehension (3% were off-task).
- From 2022 to 2024 student responses at the NAEP advanced, proficient, and basic levels were virtually unchanged. Responses at the NAEP below basic level were also virtually unchanged with the exception of one type of question that asked students to determine the meaning of a particular word as it was used in context in a short story. Students dropped two percentage points on this question, moving from 84% in 2022 to 81% in 2024.
- Overall, the average score for eighth grade students in Texas was slightly lower (252) than the national average (257) although it was not significantly lower than the 2022 average for Texas (255).

Cassie Polasek

Classroom Application

Lesson Plan: Close Reading Activity *Compiled by Cedric Synnestvedt*

I. Rationale:

I've recently moved away from quizzes and have instead implemented in-class "reading journal" activities to get students engaging with readings more deeply. The idea here is they must first

II. Sequence:

I used the New Yorker essay "Why A.I. Isn't Going to Make Art," by Ted Chiang. You want a reading that isn't too long, but not too short, either. I also paired the activity with chapters 5 and 6 from the They Say/I Say reader. You could easily adapt this even if you aren't using They Say.

Reading Journal (15-20 minutes):

1. Get out a clean sheet of paper and write your name, the date, your section, and "Reading Journal #5" at the top of it.

identify certain rhetorical strategies (called "voice markers" and "naysayers" in *They Say*) in their assigned passage. Then note how the author's use of those strategies contribute to the essay's argument. It's my hope that this gets them reading beyond surface-level information to internalize certain craft strategies and to hopefully apply those to their own papers. I also think it motivates them to read the entire essay carefully, since they can't do as well if they haven't.

2. Looking at your assigned passage from "Why A.I. Isn't Going to Make Art" (I'll be assigning them), write an accurate, specific summary of what Chiang is saying (4-5 sentences). Then explain (2-3 sentences) how your specific passage contributes to his overall argument.
3. Make a list of as many "voice markers" that Chiang uses in your passage. Refer to Chapter 5 of They Say.
4. Refer to Chapter 6 from They Say, and brainstorm a "naysayer" voice that you could use to respond to your specific passage. Make this two to three sentences. Small Group Discussion (10 minutes):

- What are Ted Chiang's major claims?
- Do you agree, disagree, or both? Why/why not?
- What are the "naysayers" from your group?
- Name three specific examples of where he uses "voice markers."

III. Continuing the discussion:

- Ask students to look at their current paper draft and note spots in which you could use "voice markers."
- Brainstorm two potential "naysayers" for your own paper.

I always make reading journals integral to discussion. After they finish, they have some time to reflect and share their findings. During this time, I encourage them to share what may have been baffling or confusing about the reading. I do that hoping to break alleviate some anxiety about "slow reading."

Classroom Application

Lesson Plan using Jared Henderson's YouTube video "Why We Can't Focus." *Compiled by Eric Wallenstein*

I. Rationale:

Since the core of what we do in English classes—writing and, especially, reading—requires sustained focus, I like to get students to reflect on their own challenges with maintaining focus. It's a struggle we all feel, right? Intense

II. Sequence:

Step 1: Freewrite and Discussion

Have students freewrite about their thoughts about attention/focus and technology. (Example prompt questions: Many people think that technological devices—and particularly phones—are having a negative effect on our ability to focus. What do you think? Are we all addicted to our tech/phones? Are you? Why or why not?). As a starting point, you could also get each student to pull out their phone and check their usage stats and reflect on their app usage and screen time. Students have a LOT to say about this topic—and may even be willing to share their screen-time stats—so discussion should flow freely, but before that discussion begins, I like to tell them that I don't want to play generational blame games or engage in

focus can be hard for everyone these days, and the reasons why are obvious (Phones! The internet!). But it helps to see the problem in the context of larger shifts in our culture. Such a perspective can help reveal how we are all caught up in a system that's looking to steal our attention and how we can, at least in some small ways, steal that attention back and give ourselves more space to read and write and to simply be present and enjoy life.

any "kids these days" kinds of arguments. I share with them that my peers and I are very much implicated in this problem. For instance, I often hear people my age bemoan their dwindling attention spans. I also tell them that, over the years, I've heard SOO many students say things like "I think people our age are okay, but it's the kids who are younger (like my younger siblings) who are really going to have problems!" And this strikes me as an unhelpful variation on the "kids these days" argument . . . so I tell them that, instead, we are going to think about the bigger picture.

Step 2: Watch and discuss video:

Jared Henderson definitely focuses on that bigger picture in his "Why We Can't Focus" video (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6QltxZ-vPMc). He uses several media theorists (Neil Postman, Marshall McLuhan, and Nicholas Carr) to break down the shift from the "typographic mind" brought on by the printing press to the image and soundbite focus of the television age to the overstimulation we get from our current internet/app era. All the while, he stresses reading actual books as a way to rescue our ability to focus, and he gives several other helpful suggestions for re-training our brains to focus. This video really resonated with my students, and I imagine yours will also have a lot to say about it if cued by some general questions (What surprised you? What stood out to you? What got you thinking? Where do we go from here? Do you like Henderson's suggestions for improving focus? Do you do any of them already? Are they realistic? Do you have other suggestions?). If students don't pick up on it themselves (and they probably will), I would suggest underlining Henderson's points about the internet being a "hostile design environment" that "steals our attention" while we must "give our attention" to books.

III. Continuing the discussion:

There are lots of ways to keep students engaged with this topic after the lesson ends. Here's a few suggestions:

- Make a homework assignment involving a particular focus-training exercise (e.g., going for phone-less walk, or reading a book chapter or watching a movie phone- and internet-free, or keeping a log of your attention for one day) and have students write a short reflection on how it went.
- Use the video/discussion to generate a paper prompt. I did that this semester (Spring 2025), and it led to a lot of good papers!
- Simply call back to the discussion a few times over the course of the semester and remind students that it helps to be aware of what you are paying attention to and to what's stealing that attention. I also like to remind that I (along with all of us older folks) are in the struggle with them.