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# Why University Students Don't Read: What Professors Can Do To Increase Compliance

Mary E. Hoeft

*University of Wisconsin-Barron County, mary.hoeft@uwc.edu*

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**Mary E. Hoeft**

University of Wisconsin-Barron County  
Rice Lake, Wisconsin  
[mary.hoeft@uwc.edu](mailto:mary.hoeft@uwc.edu)

### **Abstract**

This article reports findings from two studies assessing reading compliance among first semester freshmen at a small Midwestern two-year liberal arts university. The first study assessed reading compliance of students enrolled in two sections of First Year Seminar, finding that 46% of students reported that they read assignments, yet only 55% of those students were able to demonstrate the most basic level of comprehension of the material they claimed to have read. Reasons most frequently cited by students to explain their failure to read and advice that noncompliant readers say will increase their compliance are identified. The second study assessed reading compliance in a 3-course learning community of first semester freshmen, incorporating one piece of noncompliant reader advice in each of the courses, finding that quizzes and graded journals greatly increased reading compliance.

**Keywords:** reading compliance, compliant readers, noncompliant readers, basic level of comprehension, First Year Seminar

### **First Study: "Why University Students Don't Read"**

#### **Introduction**

Many university professors, especially those in the humanities and social sciences, hold firmly to the belief that reading compliance is integral to learning. Intuition leads them to conclude that students who complete reading assignments will be more engaged in classroom discussion (Lei, 2010, Sappington, Kinsey & Munsayac, 2002), that the discussions will be more stimulating (Ruscio, 2001), and that the social dynamics of the classroom will be enhanced (Burchfield & Sappington, 2000). The research of Karp and Yoels (1976) appears to confirm that intuition.

It makes sense that professors who value the ideas and critical thought that surface during class discussions would want to do whatever possible to encourage students to read, but that is not always the case. Some professors maintain that responsibility for reading compliance rests firmly on the shoulders of students (Wambach, 1999). Others worry that compliance efforts will come back to haunt them on student evaluations (Sappington et al., 2002).

For professors who do choose to shoulder some degree of responsibility for motivating students to read, that motivation takes on a particular look in the classroom. Students are

seated in small groups. Clutched firmly in their hands are lists of questions that "lie at the heart" (Gottschalk, 1994) of assigned readings. Boyer (1991) refers to this classroom scene as a "common ground of intellectual commitment" (p. 11). As students discuss, professors circulate, eavesdropping on students actively engaged in a dissection of a reading, content in the knowledge that students read the assignment and understood it.

But are these professors deluding themselves? Are the provocative voices that surface within groups the voices of the lonely few who have completed the assignment? Findings from reading compliance studies conducted by professors in the discipline of psychology give us reason to believe that the answer is yes. Burchfield and Sappington (2000) found that fewer than 25% of 100- and 200-level psychology students completed assigned readings. Clump, Bauer and Bradley (2004) found that the reading compliance rate was slightly higher when considering psychology classes overall. They found that "Students read on average 27.46% of the assigned readings before class" (p.1). Connor-Greene (2000) found that 72% of her students reported that they "rarely or never read assignments on schedule" (p. 85).

Why do so few university students read assignments? Ryan (2006) argues that poor reading comprehension is the cause. After repeated disappointments when attempting to comprehend, students simply give up. Linderholm and Wilde (2010) assert that students willingly acknowledge a need for deeper processing when reading to learn, but that their efforts to apply processing strategies "may not yield better comprehension of the text materials" (p. 14). Culver (2011) identifies fifteen steps for students to follow to increase comprehension of assigned materials. Do students fail to comprehend assigned readings because there are simply too many time consuming steps to follow?

Cultural anthropologist Rebekah Nathan (2005) links low levels of reading comprehension to a student's desire for more personal time (p. 111). A National Endowment for the Arts report (2007) reinforces Nathan's hypothesis: students spend significantly more time on media and media devices than on reading (p. 8).

Paulson (2006) offers yet another perspective on why the basic comprehension level of students is so low. He suggests that a "get students through" approach (p. 51) in college developmental reading courses and a focus on study assistance may inadvertently signal to students that reading has no intrinsic value (p. 52).

Few studies have been conducted on the subject of reading compliance among university students. Most articles published on the subject reference the same small pool of research conducted almost entirely within the discipline of psychology. To establish that the findings cited in those studies are not aberrant cases of extreme noncompliance, or noncompliance unique to first- and second-year psychology students, two studies were conducted. In this first study, the rate of reading compliance and the comprehension level of first semester university students enrolled in a liberal arts and sciences learning seminar were assessed. Advice was solicited from noncompliant readers on what professors could do to get them to read.

When conducting the first study, there were four objectives: (1) Determine the rate of reading compliance in two sections of First Year Seminar—one section with 100 students and another with 24 students; (2) Ascertain whether students who claimed to have read the assignment were able to demonstrate a basic level of comprehension of the material they indicated they had read; (3) Compile a list of the major reasons why students said they did

and did not read assignments; and (4) Solicit advice from noncompliant readers concerning what professors could do to motivate them to read.

One hypothesis was tested in the first study: Because of the camaraderie that existed between the three instructors and twenty-four students enrolled in the small section of First Year Seminar and because those students appeared to be trying hard to please the instructors, the author hypothesized that students enrolled in the small section would have a higher rate of reading compliance than students enrolled in the large section.

### **Methodology**

Participants in the study were first semester freshmen at a small Midwestern two-year liberal arts university where 72% of the incoming freshmen are first-generation college students and 19% are over the age of 22. Forty-nine percent of the students are female and 51% are male. Students were enrolled in two sections of First Year Seminar, a course designed to help first semester university students make a successful transition to college. The course emphasizes active learning and emphasizes student responsibility in the learning process. The large section of First Year Seminar had an enrollment of 100 students and was taught by three instructors. The small section had an enrollment of 24 students and was also taught by three instructors.

Students were asked to complete a reading compliance survey on three separate occasions throughout the fall semester. The surveys were developed by the author, using reading compliance factors found in literature (Burchfield & Sappington, 2000, Connor-Greene, 2000). The author also incorporated reading compliance factors suggested by students and colleagues.

Surveys were unannounced and administered at the beginning of class. Students were given a piece of paper with the "YES" survey on one side and the "NO" survey on the opposite side. Students reporting that they had complied with the reading assignment were asked to complete the "YES" survey (Table 1) and students reporting that they had not complied with the reading assignment were asked to complete the "NO" survey (Table 2). Participation was optional and students were reminded that they were free to submit a blank survey, although none chose to do so. Students were instructed to respond to each question in Part A of the survey with a number between 1 and 10.

To determine whether a student who completed the "YES" survey had demonstrated a basic level of comprehension of the assigned reading, the author read each student's 3-sentence paraphrase searching for topics, ideas, anecdotes or phrases that came directly from the reading. If located, the student was awarded a check. Although students had been directed to be as specific as possible when paraphrasing the reading, the author understood that many of these first semester freshmen were just learning the art of paraphrase.

#### **Table 1: "YES" SURVEY**

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Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Code: \_\_\_\_\_

(Remove this portion when you hand form to professor.)

(Use the same code on each survey.)

**Part A:**

**1. What role, if any, did the following factors play in your decision to read the assignment?**

<b>Definitely</b>	<b>A Lot</b>	<b>Somewhat</b>	<b>A Little</b>	<b>Not at All</b>
9-10	7-8	5-6	3-4	1-2

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Interest in topic?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. Interest in course?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Love reading of any kind?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. Your interest in being exposed to ideas that may be more liberal or conservative than your own?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. The emphasis your family places on reading?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. Your respect for the professor who teaches this course?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. Your desire to not let your classmates down?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. A work schedule that allows you time for reading?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. Your concern over your grade in this course?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. Your concern that you will be called on during this class to discuss assignment?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 11. Your concern over what the professor thinks of you?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 12. Your concern that you will be tested on this assignment during this class?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 13. Your concern that you will be embarrassed by professor if you don't read?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 14. Your concern that you will be embarrassed by students if you don't read?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 15. You are ambitious?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 16. Reading comes before your social life?
- \_\_\_\_\_ 17. Factors not listed above? (List below)

**Part B:**

**1. How many times did you read this assignment? (circle answer) 1 2 3 or more**

**2. Paraphrase this assignment in *THREE* sentences. Be as explicit as possible.**

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**Table 2: "NO" SURVEY**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Code: \_\_\_\_\_

(Remove this portion when you hand form to professor.)

(Use the same code on each survey.)



### Leading Factors Identified By Students In Their Decision To Read

Early in the fall semester, students in both the large and the small section of First Year Seminar cited concern over grades as the top factor motivating them to read (Table 3). At mid-semester, concern over grades held on to first place (Table 3). At semester's end, although concern over grades continued to be cited as the #1 motivator for students in the large section (Table 3), concern over grades scored low in the small section. Significantly more important to students in the small group was concern about what their professor thought of them.

**Table 3: "YES" SURVEY – READING SURVEY RESULTS – LARGE AND SMALL GROUP**

<b>"YES" SURVEY QUESTION: What role, if any, did the following factors play in your decision to read the assignment?</b>						
	<b>Definitely</b>	<b>A Lot</b>	<b>Somewhat</b>	<b>A Little</b>	<b>Not at All</b>	
	9-10	7-8	5-6	3-4	1-2	
	<b>Round 1</b>		<b>Round 2</b>		<b>Round 3</b>	
Question Number	90 Total, 40 Yes (44%) <b>Large Group</b>	21 Total, 13 Yes (62%) <b>Small Group</b>	80 Total, 36 Yes (45%) <b>Large Group</b>	18 Total, 8 Yes (44%) <b>Small Group</b>	77 Total, 37 Yes (48%) <b>Large Group</b>	19 Total, 6 Yes (32%) <b>Small Group</b>
	Avg. Scores		Avg. Scores		Avg. Scores	
1. Interest in the topic?	5.53	6.62	5.25	<b>7.25</b>	5.81	6.50
2. Interest in the course?	4.58	6.54	5.25	<b>7.13</b>	<b>6.24</b>	<b>7.67</b>
3. Love reading of any kind?	5.78	5.38	4.97	6.88	4.92	5.33
4. Your interest in being exposed to ideas that may be more liberal or conservative than your own?	4.50	4.31	5.47	5.88	5.49	4.50
5. The emphasis your family places on reading?	3.50	3.00	4.86	3.75	4.35	2.67
6. Your respect for the professor who teaches this course?	6.80	<b>7.31</b>	<b>7.33</b>	6.63	<b>6.43</b>	<b>7.67</b>
7. Your desire not to let your classmates down?	5.05	5.08	5.22	5.75	5.19	6.50
8. A work schedule that allows you time for reading?	5.30	5.69	5.31	6.38	4.57	5.33
9. Your concern over your grade in this course?	<b>8.55</b>	<b>8.46</b>	<b>7.75</b>	<b>8.13</b>	<b>7.46</b>	7.33
10. Your concern that you will	<b>7.25</b>	<b>7.23</b>	5.83	6.63	5.65	6.67



be called on during this class to discuss assignment?						
11. Your concern over what the professor thinks of you?	6.05	6.38	5.42	6	5.97	<b>8.17</b>
12. Your concern that you will be tested on this assignment during this class?	<b>7.18</b>	6.31	<b>6.11</b>	6.88	6.08	6.83
13. Your concern that you will be embarrassed by professor if you don't read?	5.35	4.85	4.97	5.75	4.81	6.50
14. Your concern that you will be embarrassed by students if you don't read?	4.30	3.46	3.86	4.0	3.65	6.67
15. You are ambitious?	6.20	5.46	5.97	6.38	5.95	4.00
16. Reading comes before your social life?	3.65	3.54	4.19	4.5	4.32	5.33

### Leading Factors Identified By Students In Their Decision Not To Read

In the first survey, the top reason students in both the large and small group cited for not having read the assignment, was a work schedule that did not allow time for reading. By mid-semester, students in both sections continued to point a finger of blame at work schedules (Table 4). At the end of the semester, students in the large section found a social life to blame while students in the small section clung firmly to their belief that work schedules did not allow them time to read (Table 4).

**Table 4: "NO" SURVEY – READING SURVEY RESULTS –LARGE AND SMALL GROUP**

<b>"NO" SURVEY QUESTION: What role, if any, did the following factors play in your decision NOT to read the assignment?</b>						
<b>Definitely</b>	<b>A Lot</b>	<b>Somewhat</b>	<b>A Little</b>	<b>Not at All</b>		
9-10	7-8	5-6	3-4	1-2		
	<b>Round 1</b>		<b>Round 2</b>		<b>Round 3</b>	
Question Number	90	21	80	18	77	19
	Total,	Total,	Total,	Total,	Total,	Total,
	50 No	8 No	44 No	10 No	40 No	13 No
	(56%)	(38%)	(55%)	(56%)	(52%)	(68%)
	<b>Large Group</b>	<b>Small Group</b>	<b>Large Group</b>	<b>Small Group</b>	<b>Large Group</b>	<b>Small Group</b>
	Avg. Scores		Avg. Scores		Avg. Scores	
1. Lack of interest in topic?	3.94	3	<b>3.64</b>	<b>3.3</b>	<b>4.7</b>	2.31

2. Lack of interest in course?	3.18	2.25	3.23	2.3	3.6	2.15
3. Dislike reading of any kind?	<b>3.98</b>	<b>5.25</b>	2.93	3.2	3.58	2.38 2.15
4. Dislike exposure to ideas that may be more liberal or conservative than your own?	2.34	3.13	1.50	1.3	1.73	
5. Lack of emphasis your family places on reading?	2.66	2.75	1.95	2.4	2.28	1.92
6. Your lack of respect for the professor who teaches this course?	1.68	1.25	1.89	1.1	1.93	1.23
7. Lack of concern over letting your classmates down?	2.26	2.75	2.07	2	2.45	1.77
8. A work schedule that doesn't allow you time for reading?	<b>5.52</b>	<b>6.25</b>	<b>5.34</b>	<b>7.7</b>	<b>4.68</b>	<b>3.38</b>
9. Lack of concern over grade in course?	2.66	2.63	1.84	2.6	2.65	2.15
10. Lack of concern about being called on during class to discuss?	3.00	2.88	2.73	3.1	2.75	2.38
11. Lack of concern over what the professor thinks of you?	2.44	2.5	2.32	2.3	2.63	2.08
12. Lack of concern about being tested on the assignment during this class?	2.52	3.88	2.84	2.3	2.96	2.15
13. Lack of concern about being embarrassed by professor for not reading?	2.78	2.5	2.66	2	2.65	2.23
14. Lack of concern about being embarrassed by students for not reading?	2.52	2.38	2.39	1.8	2.5	1.85
15. You are lazy?	3.92	<b>5</b>	3.34	2.7	4.15	<b>2.46</b>
16. Your social life comes before reading?	<b>4.65</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4.07</b>	<b>3.7</b>	<b>4.85</b>	<b>2.77</b>

### Percent of Students Who Failed To Read

In the first survey, 56% of students in the large section reported not having read the assignment while 38% of the students in the small section indicated noncompliance. At mid-semester, 55% of students in the large group and 56% of the students in the small group reported their failure to have read. At the end of the semester, noncompliance in the large group dropped to 52% while noncompliance in the small group soared to 68%.

### Comprehension Rate

When students indicated that they had read the assignment, they were asked to paraphrase it in three sentences, being as explicit as possible. The author read each paraphrase searching for some indication that the student had read the assignment; perhaps an idea or an anecdote or a theme. If located, the student received a check.

In the first survey, 50% of the students who indicated that they had read the assignment were able to paraphrase it well enough to suggest a basic level of comprehension. At mid-semester, 52% of the YES respondents were able to demonstrate a basic level of comprehension. At the end of the semester, the basic level of comprehension rose to 67%.

### **What Non-Readers Say Professors Should Do To Stimulate Them To Read**

Early in the semester, student comments focused mainly on the amount of reading that was expected, an amount many determined to be too much: "Maybe a little less reading at a time," "Smaller amount to read," "Not make us read so much," and "There are a lot of pages due right away." At mid-semester and semester's end, non-readers continued to express frustration over what they perceived to be too much assigned reading: "Give more time or less to read," "Fewer pages at a time," and "Not so many assignments in one week."

The most common advice offered by students who had not read the assignment remained constant throughout the course of the semester: (1) Give quizzes, (2) Give supplementary assignments and (3) Give frequent reminders about the interesting assignment that is due.

Concerning reminders, students wrote: "Apparently it was stated that there was an assignment but I didn't hear about it." "REPEAT that there is an assignment at least 3 times so we know there's one for sure." "I honestly forgot to write the assignment in my planner, so I did not realize I had to do it until I got here." "Write it down on a piece of paper and explain the assignment on it and hand it out so I can understand it." "More emphasis on assignment." "Make it more clear on what we were supposed to do."

When choosing readings for the course, a conscious effort was made to choose readings that appealed to the interest of students. Students in both sections read essays from Gordon and Minnick's *Foundations*, a compilation of essays on how to be successful college students. Assignments included Finster's essay, "Freshmen Can Be Taught to Think Creatively, Not Just Amass Information," and an essay by Halverson and Carter, "On Academic Freedom." Many of the students who had not read the assignment complained that our assignments had failed to capture their attention: "Make it sound more interesting!" "Get us more interested in the topic, define the assignment more clearly." "Announce it more and make it more interesting."

Students felt strongly that quizzes provide a strong incentive for reading: "Give a test on the pages that have to be read," "Say there's going to be a test," "Have a quiz on the chapters/pages," and "Have a quiz today on topics discussed in the essay."

Students also requested that reading assignments be accompanied by supplementary materials that help them to focus: "Give us a short worksheet to guide us through the reading," and "Give a handout highlighting the reading."

### **Final Analysis**

The author had hypothesized that students enrolled in the small section of First Year Seminar would be more inclined to read than students enrolled in the large section. In the small section, there was a congenial, community atmosphere. In the large section, the atmosphere was more removed. The hypothesis that students enrolled in the small section would feel duty bound to complete the readings, not wanting to disappoint their professors proved to be false. Although students in both sections listed respect for the teacher as a

major factor causing them to read assignments, the percent of students completing reading assignments was identical in both sections: Forty-six percent of all First Year Seminar students on average, whether in the large section or the small section, were reading compliant.

Although approximately 2 out of every 4 students indicated that they had read the assignment, only 55% of the self-professed compliant readers were able to demonstrate the most basic level of comprehension, leaving the author to wonder whether students had lied when choosing to fill out the "YES" survey. A study by Sappington et al. (2002) demonstrated that self-report is not a viable method to rely upon when attempting to assess reading compliance (p. 273). Was the comprehension level of students enrolled in the two sections of First Year Seminar as low as it appeared to be or had some students attempted to do the impossible: demonstrate comprehension of material they had failed to read?

What would motivate students to lie on an anonymous survey? Had students given the answer they thought their professors wanted to hear? By the end of the fall semester, one of the top factors listed by students as motivation to read was "respect for the professor." Not wanting to disappoint professors whom they had come to respect, had students simply opted to fill out the "YES" survey even though they had failed to read the assignment?

When attempting to ascertain why 45% of reading compliant students failed to demonstrate a basic level of comprehension, another possibility comes to mind. Perhaps the reading comprehension level of first semester freshmen really is as poor as this study suggested. A study by Ryan (2006) demonstrated a link between poor reading comprehension and the decline in reading compliance of university students. Ryan wrote that students were lost and overwhelmed when given global reading assignments like "Read Chapter 8" (p. 135).

A study by Shenkman (2002) demonstrated that the more students read, the better they are able to understand research in the content area. As first semester freshmen, the students in this study had limited university-level reading experience. Consider also the fact that 79% of the students who said that they had read the assignment indicated that they had read it only once. These inexperienced readers may not have read carefully enough to comprehend the assignment. While 46% of the students may have ingested the reading material, only half were able to digest it.

The leading factors cited by students in support of their decision to read varied slightly in the large and small sections (Table 3). Students in the large section began the semester concerned about grades and being called on. By mid-semester, although concern over grades remained their top concern, it was now followed by respect for the professor. At semester's end, concern over grades held its spot at the top of the list with respect for professor a somewhat distant second.

In the small section, students began the semester concerned about grades, and indicated that their decision to read was influenced slightly more by their respect for the professor than their fear of being called on. By mid-semester, reading compliant students remained concerned over grades, but interest in both the topic and the course were cited as influencing their decision to read more than respect for the professor. At semester's end, students in the small section placed "concern over what the professor thinks of you" at the top of their list of factors motivating them to read. In a tie for second place were "respect for the professor" and "interest in the course."

The leading factors for not reading assignments, cited by students in both the large and small section (Table 4), remained fairly constant throughout the semester: schedules that didn't allow time for reading, social life that comes before reading, dislike of reading of any kind, lack of interest in topic, and laziness. These noncompliant readers indicated that any effort on the part of professors to get them to read would be futile: "No time," "I like my professor but am too busy for most readings," "Time is not on my side," "I really have never read any assignments," "Very busy with a situation with my daughter," "Nothing, it was the holidays and I had little time and relatives up," "I just didn't have time today," "I didn't know what the assignment was and if I had, I wouldn't have had the time to read it," and "Too many things happening in my life."

When noncompliant readers did offer a glimmer of hope that there was something a professor could do to motivate them to read, their suggestions fell into the following three categories: (1) Give quizzes, (2) Give supplementary assignments, and (3) Give frequent reminders about the interesting assignment that is due.

### **Give Quizzes**

Burchfield and Sappington (2000) urged professors to place greater emphasis on reading compliance by giving random quizzes. Connor-Greene (2000) found that students rarely read assignments by the due date but that daily essay quizzes caused a huge jump in reading compliance. Clump et al. (2004) found that reading compliance almost tripled when students knew they were about to be tested on a reading. When Ruscio (2001) gave frequent random quizzes, reading compliance soared to 79% compliance.

Students who failed to read assignments seemed convinced that quizzes were the best way to increase the likelihood that they would read: "Have a quiz on it," "Could have tested us on the chapters or quizzed us to make us a little more willing to read," "Make quiz for each reading," "If there was a test, I would consider reading the assignment," "If I need to read the text for a test, I would," "Make this quiz worth a lot of points," "Say that there is a quiz Monday, so we better read the text," and "A quiz would guarantee my reading the assignment."

### **Give Supplementary Assignments**

Ryan (2006) demonstrated that students who had completed focus worksheets that were graded and commented on extensively by the professor in an encouraging manner performed significantly better than students who had been quizzed or simply given graded worksheets. Weinstein and Wu (2009) referred to the worksheets as readiness assessment tests (RATs): open-ended questions asking students to describe major points in the article. Students found RATs helpful in guiding their reading for overall meaning and main points. Although the studies of Ryan, along with those of Weinstein and Wu, did not assess whether RATs increased reading compliance, their findings support that RATs increased the rate of reading comprehension. Light (2001), in interviews with graduating Harvard seniors, was told that reading assignments, when accompanied by writing assignments shared with students in class prior to the discussion of the assignment, resulted in reading being given a high priority by students (p. 64).

Students in the study asked for supplementary assignments, expressing their belief that such assignments would increase the likelihood that they would read. As certain as students were that their advice would generate a higher rate of reading compliance, they

prefaced their advice with tentative words like *maybe* and *probably*, words that suggested an awareness of the inherent danger that lay ahead should professors decide to heed their advice—more work for students: “Probably give us an assignment based on the reading that would be graded,” “Maybe a handout highlighting the reading,” “Probably some type of worksheet or homework to go with the chapter—answering questions while reading always helps and encourages me to read it.”

When reading the advice offered by students, it was difficult to imagine their sincerity. These were the same students who had written that they had no time to read, disliked reading, and had social lives that came before reading. Would supplementary assignments truly motivate these students to read or become one more assignment that students failed to complete? Gosling (1998) found that student self-reports were filled with positive distortion: students reported what they believed to be the socially desirable response, one that would enhance their own self-esteem (p. 1340). Were students recommending worksheets simply because the suggestion made them feel better about themselves?

### **Give Reminders and Make it Interesting**

The third piece of advice offered by students had dual components: Remind students that they have an assignment and make the assignment sound interesting. The advice seemed too simplistic. But what if it worked? What if all professors needed to do to get students to read was remind them?

Students wrote, “Emphasize more that there is a reading,” “Remind us about the reading before the end of class,” “Write it on the board,” “Make it sound more interesting. I would have been more motivated to do this homework before my other classes,” “Get us more interested in the topic,” and “Tell me just a little bit about the reading and make me want to know the rest so I have to finish reading the story.”

## **Discussion**

Approximately twice as many students in this study indicated that they were reading compliant (46%) compared to students in studies conducted by Burchfield and Sappington (2000) and Clump et al (2004). Although 2 out of 4 students in this study indicated that they had read the assignment, only 1 of every 2 self-identified compliant readers was able to demonstrate a basic level of comprehension of the assigned reading.

There are multiple explanations for the inability of students to demonstrate a basic level of comprehension. Perhaps they had skimmed the material so fast that they were unable to recall what they had read. Perhaps they did not know how to paraphrase. This explanation is a bit more difficult to accept since most of the students were simultaneously enrolled in English classes where they were learning how to summarize and paraphrase. Maybe students had lied. Although 46% of the students in the study reported that they were reading compliant, perhaps many were simply telling their professor what they thought the professor wanted to hear. Remember, in both the large and the small section, the factor most frequently reported by students for having read the assignment was respect for professor.

A fourth and even more disconcerting explanation for why compliant readers were unable to demonstrate a basic level of comprehension is that students really had not comprehended what they read. Perhaps the basic comprehension level of students is as bad as or worse than what cultural anthropologist Rebekah Nathan (2005) asserted, that less than one-third of university students are able to read at a basic level of comprehension.

Most students in this study cited “too busy” as their top reason for being a noncompliant reader. Professors can do little, if anything, to change that aspect of students’ lives. Noncompliant readers who were more open to offering advice suggested the following: (1) Give quizzes, (2) Give supplementary assignments, and (3) Give frequent reminders about the interesting assignment that is due.

Many students argued that quizzing was the route professors should take if they wanted their students to read. Many researchers agree. Burchfield and Sappington (2000) urge professors to place greater emphasis on reading compliance by giving random quizzes. Connor-Greene (2000) found that daily essay quizzes resulted in a huge jump in reading compliance. Clump et al. (2004) found that reading compliance tripled when random quizzes were given, and the reading compliance rate of Ruscio’s students rose to 79% when students anticipated frequent unannounced quizzes. But random quizzing carries with it a caveat: Connor-Greene (2000) warns that students resent quizzing, labeling it as punitive.

Other students hypothesized that graded supplementary assignments would increase reading compliance. Studies by Carkenord (1994) and Ryan (2006) support this hypothesis.

Some students argued that failure to read was the result of forgetfulness. All that professors needed to do was remind them—and accompany the reminder with a preview of the interesting assignment they were about to read. A follow-up study conducted two years later put these three pieces of advice to the test.

It is important to note that certain constraints of this study may affect the generalizability of findings. Participants attend a small two-year liberal arts university where 72% of incoming freshmen are first-generation college students. Enrollment in the surveyed course, First Year Seminar, was required and restricted to first semester freshmen.

## **Follow-Up Study: “How To Get University Students To Read”**

### **Introduction**

The goal of the second study was to determine the impact that the following factors, suggested by noncompliant readers, would have on university student reading compliance: (1) Give quizzes, (2) Give supplementary assignments, and (3) Give frequent reminders about the interesting assignment that is due.

The following hypothesis was tested: Because no evidence was found of studies done to assess the effect of frequent, provocative reminders on reading compliance, the hypothesis was that such reminders would have no impact on reading compliance.

## Methodology

The author and her colleague designed and taught a 3-course learning community. The same 24 first semester freshmen were enrolled in each of the three courses. Throughout the semester, students completed six reading surveys: two in each of the three courses in which they were enrolled. The surveys used in the first study were used in the follow-up study (Table A and Table B). The study was approved by the university's internal review board and, although participation was optional, all 24 students in the learning community elected to participate.

The first course in the learning community was Public Speaking, a study of the principles and techniques of effective speaking and listening. In this course, students were reminded on multiple occasions throughout the class hour that a reading assignment was due the following class session. The reading was made to sound as interesting as possible.

The second course in the learning community was Composition 1, a course focusing on academic writing, the writing process, critical thinking, and critical reading. In this course, quizzes (Appendix A) were administered at the beginning of each class in which a reading assignment was due.

The third course in the learning community was First Year Seminar, a course designed to help students make the transition to college by promoting active learning as well as student involvement and responsibility in the learning process. This course was taught jointly by the author and her colleague. A journal assignment (Appendix B) accompanied each reading. Students were allowed to use the journal during class as a discussion tool. At the end of class, the journal was collected, graded, and commented on by both professors. Late journals were not accepted.

## Findings

In Public Speaking, where the professor gave frequent reminders of the interesting assignment, 46% of the students indicated on the reading survey that they were reading compliant. Thirty-one percent of reading compliant students were able to paraphrase the assignment well enough to demonstrate a basic level of comprehension.

In Composition 1, where the professor administered quizzes (Appendix A) on the day that reading assignments were due, 74% of the students indicated that they were reading compliant. Fifty-four percent of the reading compliant students were able to paraphrase the assignment well enough to demonstrate a basic level of comprehension.

In First Year Seminar, where the professors assigned journals (Appendix B) that were read, commented on, and graded by both professors, 95% of the students indicated that they were reading compliant. Forty-two percent of the students were able to paraphrase the assignment well enough to demonstrate a basic level of comprehension.

## Discussion

The hypothesis that frequent reminders of interesting assignments would have no impact on reading compliance proved to be true. In Public Speaking, where students received



frequent reminders of interesting assignments, the compliance rate was identical to the rate in the first study: 46% of Public Speaking students indicated that they were reading compliant. However, in the second study, only 31% of reading compliant students demonstrated a basic level of comprehension whereas 55% of reading compliant students in the first study had been able to do so.

In Composition 1, where the professor accompanied each reading assignment with a quiz, the quiz had a significant impact on reading compliance. The same students who were 46% reading compliant in the Public Speaking course were now 74% compliant. Fifty-three percent of reading compliant students were able to demonstrate a basic level of comprehension. Although the increase in reading compliance was not as significant as that found by Clump et al. (2004), where reading compliance tripled with quizzes, the findings were similar to those of Ruscio (2001) who reported a 79% compliance rate when frequent, random quizzes were given. Students were right: when professors accompany readings with quizzes, reading compliance increases.

The third and final piece of advice that was assessed, to accompany reading assignments with a graded journal, had the greatest impact on reading compliance. On average, 95% of First Year Seminar students indicated that they were reading compliant, although only 42% were able to offer evidence of a basic level of comprehension.

At the end of the semester, after all of the survey results had been tabulated, the learning community students were curious about the results of the study and eager to explain their answers to the following questions: (1) "Why did the journals and quizzes increase the rate of reading compliance, but frequent reminders had no impact?" Students said that they were *just too busy* and had to *pick and choose* among assignments that were due. The grade attached to the journals and quizzes was the deciding factor. (2) "Why do you think that the reading comprehension level was lower in the course where students completed journals than in the course where students took quizzes?" Students explained that they got into a pattern of skimming reading material in search of responses to journal questions since journal questions remained constant (Appendix B). On quizzes, students said that they were unable to detect a pattern in the questions and needed to read more carefully in order to be prepared for the quiz (Appendix A).

Constraints of this study which may affect the generalizability of findings are similar to those in the first study. Participants attend a small two-year liberal arts university where 72% of incoming freshmen are first-generation college students. Students enrolled in the three surveyed courses were primarily first semester freshmen.

For professors who believe that reading compliance is integral to learning, it is important to know that there are things we can do to encourage such compliance among students. Findings from this study provide evidence to suggest that graded journals and quizzes greatly impact the rate of reading compliance.

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## **Appendix A: Sample Reading Quizzes**

### ***Into the Wild* Reading Quiz: Chapters 1-2**

1. Where does the title of the book come from?
2. Describe Chris's general height and build *before he went into the Alaskan wilderness*.
3. What are the BASIC events of chapter 1?
4. When do the events described in chapter 1 take place?
5. Who is Jim Gallien, and why is he important?
6. When does chapter 2 take place?
7. What is the gift of Chris's note taped to the door of the bus?
8. What are the BASIC events of chapter 2?
9. Why are Ken Thompson, Ferdie Swanson, and Gordon Samuel important?
10. How much did Chris's dead body weigh? (Get as close as you can—within 10 pounds will get credit.)

**Into the Wild Reading Quiz: Chapters 7-8**

1. How does Gail Borah (Wayne Westerberg's girlfriend) remember Chris as an eater and cook?
2. Describe Chris's relationship with his father, according to the details in Chapter 7.
3. Describe Chris's sexuality, according to Krakauer.
4. How does Krakauer respond to Chris's sexuality?
5. Wayne Westerberg's mother had a surprising response to Chris, given that she "didn't like a lot of (Wayne's) hired help" (Krakauer 67). Describe her perspective of/impression of/how she saw Chris. Be specific.
6. Describe the "bush-casualty stereotype" (85).
7. Name just one of the three men Krakauer devotes Chapter 8 to, men who seem to fulfill this stereotype.
8. According to Krakauer's research (interviewing people who knew Chris and reading Chris's writings), how does Chris *most* diverge from this stereotype?
9. What did you learn about commas for today?
10. How many absences do you have in this course so far?

**Appendix B: Reading Journal**

**To fill out the Reading Journal, type over the words in the boxes. Each box will expand to fit your text.**

Chapter ##

"Insert Chapter Title"

Pages ## - ##

Date(s) of chapter's events

Insert date(s) here.

Location(s) of chapter's events

Insert location(s) here.

Three-sentence summary of chapter

Insert summary here.

Thesis of chapter

Insert thesis here.

Analysis of thesis

Insert topic here.

Insert comment here.

One main idea of chapter

Insert one main idea here.

Two supporting quotes for your one main idea from this chapter, cited correctly using MLA Style (parenthetical citation and Works Cited entry)

Insert first quote here, and don't forget to cite it.

Insert second quote here, and don't forget to cite it.

#### Works Cited

Insert Works Cited entry here.

Theme of epigraph(s)

Insert theme here.

Chapter's characters: their perspectives about Chris (page numbers)

Insert first character's name here: insert his or her perspective about Chris here (insert page numbers here).

Insert second character's name here: insert his or her perspective about Chris here (insert page numbers here).

If there are more than two characters, simply copy and paste this box for each additional character, and type over these words.