Teaching Chapter 3: Previewing Texts and Working with Topics

Chapter Outline

Examining a Reading’s Context
Previewing a Reading to Identify Its Topic
  Consider the Reading’s Title
  Examine the Reading’s Headings
  Look at the Reading’s Illustrations
  Look for Repeated Words and Phrases
  Find Common Ideas
Working with Assigned Writing Topics
  Create an Assignment Page
  Read and Reread the Assignment
  State the Paper’s Topic in the Form of a Question
  Seek Help If You Need It
Developing and Narrowing a Topic for an Essay
  Brainstorming for Topics
  Narrowing Topics
Using Prewriting Strategies to Generate Ideas
  Prewriting Strategy: Discussion
  Prewriting Strategy: Simple Listing
  Prewriting Strategy: Clustering
  Prewriting Strategy: Journalistic Questions
  Prewriting Strategy: Freewriting
  Prewriting Strategy: Freetalking

Starting with the Chapter Quiz

  Consider assigning the chapter for outside-of-class reading and administering the Chapter 3 Content Quiz first thing in class on the day you have scheduled a discussion of Chapter 3. The content quiz simply checks to see that students have read and mastered literal comprehension of the chapter. These quizzes are helpful as quick checks to keep students doing the reading.

RESOURCE: This exercise, “Ch.0 3 Content Quiz,” is available for download as a Word file in the Chapter Quizzes area of the Online Learning Center.

Teaching Tips for Chapter 3

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Examining a Reading’s Context

Students are sometimes reticent to spend much time examining a text’s context because they often do not believe contextual information is all that important. Consider starting this chapter with a discussion of the context of utterances. Ask students to examine the following utterance:

“What an incredible loss.”

How does the meaning of the statement change depending on these contexts?

If you heard this utterance at a funeral, what might it mean?

If you heard it in a stadium, what might it mean?

If you heard it in a weight loss clinic, what might it mean?

We may not even consciously analyze the contexts of utterances, but we depend on those contexts to make sense of the words we hear. In the same way that we use contexts to decipher meanings from verbalized words, critical reading requires us to consider the context of the words we read to create and understand meanings.

To reinforce the importance of assessing contexts, consider using the PowerPoint Presentation “Analyzing Contexts.” Next, using the “Types of Texts” chart in Chapter 3, prompt students to think about the significance of contexts in understanding the meanings of texts. Consider having students complete Practice 1 in class and discuss the answers together.

RESOURCE: The PowerPoint presentation “Analyzing Contexts” is available for download in the Online Learning Center.

Previewing a Reading to Identify Its Topic

If you are new to teaching reading, the significance of identifying the topic of a text may come as a surprise. In reading instruction, we focus on identifying topics as the first step toward identifying a text’s main idea. In Chapter 4, students will be presented with this process for determining a text’s main idea:
The first step—identifying the topic—is fundamental and crucial to the pedagogy.

One reason students have trouble identifying topics is that they confuse topics with main ideas. I always emphasize that a topic is a word or a short phrase, not a sentence. If you can get this message across early, students will be in a better position to find main ideas in the next chapter and in the rest of the course.

While titles provide clues to topics, so do contexts, repeated words in the text (and their synonyms), headings, and visual aids. More sophisticated readers assess content to determine the topic, looking for common threads of thought that link together the paragraphs. To help students employ the steps for identifying topics, use the PowerPoint presentation “Identifying Topics.”

RESOURCE: The PowerPoint presentation “Identifying Topics” is available for download in the Online Learning Center.

Finally, consider using Power of Process in class and outside of class to determine the topic of readings. Use the reading process wheel to list the steps offered in this chapter for identifying topics:

1. Consider the Reading’s Title
2. Examine the Reading’s Headings
3. Look at the Reading’s Illustrations
4. Look for Repeated Words and Phrases
5. Find Common Ideas
Activating Prior Knowledge

As students preview readings to determine topics, they should also be making connections with content they already know. We do this unconsciously, for the most part, but making the process of activating their prior knowledge intentional seems to help struggling readers. One way to explain how to activate prior knowledge is to talk about situations in which we depend on our existing knowledge to make sense of a situation. For instance, the following scenario requires us to make connections to what we already know:

You have a big test coming up in your science class. As you sit down and get ready to take the test, you realize you had forgotten to study the content from a particular chapter—Chapter 9—that would be on the test! Chapter 9 covers solar energy. How can activating prior knowledge help you with the questions from Chapter 9?

Students sometimes see new topics and experience fear—rather than the calming reassurance that they already have some knowledge of the topic based on their life experiences. Consider opening a web browser in class and opening The New York Times. Click on articles and ask students to consider what they already know about the topics of those articles. Tell them how you would tie the topics to what you already know about the topics, especially for topics with which you are not familiar. Modeling this activity for students can help them see how to activate prior knowledge without feeling anxious about not knowing the new material.
Working with Assigned Writing Topics

Throughout this text, we remind students to take care with their assignments. Particularly, we encourage them to read, annotate, and reread assignments to make sure they understand them and respond to them completely. In this part of Chapter 3, we begin this focus on careful analysis of assignments.

One way to make students aware of the importance of reading, understanding, and following instructions for assignments is to have them create assignment pages. Inevitably, they will have a college professor in the future who will make oral assignments and will not hand out an assignment sheet. Students will need to be able to translate those oral instructions into quality work, and one way to do that is by teaching them strategies for writing out assignment pages. Consider asking students to take out some paper and to create an assignment sheet for the following assignment (which you speak out loud):

Write an essay in which you explain which parts of the Second Amendment are debated and why these parts are so controversial. You may use Chapter 12 of your textbook as a source.

Allow students to ask questions that you will answer. See if students ask the right questions to create an assignment page that will really reflect the requirements of the assignment you have in mind.

Once you are finished, consider assigning the worksheet “Interpreting Assignments” (reprinted below) and having students complete it collaboratively.


Interpreting Assignments

What follows is an assignment that was given to three students. Each of the students responded to the assignment, and their responses are printed below. Follow these steps:

1. Read the assignment, annotate it, and reread it.

2. Read each student’s response.

3. Underneath each student’s response, write a short paragraph explaining how well the student responded to the assignment. Did the student follow the instructions? Where did the student fall short?

4. Rank the students’ assignments in order of quality: best, second best, and third best.
Assignment from an English class:

Write a response to the article on page 454 of your textbook, “Nutrition in a Fast Food World.” What is the author’s thesis? Does the author attempt to persuade readers to avoid eating fast food? If so, what reasons does she offer? If not, what does the writer say about consuming fast food? Comment on the statistics the writer uses, and provide a brief summary of her article. Your response should be at least 100 words in length and should conform to standard spelling and grammar conventions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Kenny’s Response</th>
<th>Licia’s Response</th>
<th>Lee’s Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In “Nutrition in a Fast Food World,” the writer talks about how eating fast food can be hard on a person’s nutrition. She talks about statistics, and she says we should limit the amount of fast food we eat. (39 words)</td>
<td>Jonna Sharp, author of “Nutrition in a Fast Food World,” claims that a diet that consists of fifty percent or more fast food can have negative effects on a person’s nutrition. She uses statistics to prove that a diet of mainly fast food really does lower the vitamin levels in one’s body. While Sharp points out the dangers of eating fast foods, she does not attempt to persuade her readers to avoid eating it. Rather, she advises consumers to use care and to supplement their diets with fresh food and vitamins. (91 words)</td>
<td>Nutrition in a Fast food world is the article written by Jonna Sharp, the writer wants us to be careful about eating fast food. Everybody knows that eating at McDonalds is bad for you, so why are people surprised when they had bad nutrition and all they eat is fast food? Some fast food places do have salads and wraps and other healthy menu items. Wendy’s has a salad with fresh strawberries, and you can also get things like grilled chicken. Jonna Sharp says that if you eat more than fifty percent of fast food, you’ll have some problems with your nutrition. (102 words)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How well did the student respond to the assignment? Explain.

How well did the student respond to the assignment? Explain.

How well did the student respond to the assignment? Explain.

This response ranks

This response ranks

This response ranks
Another idea for teaching students to analyze assignments is to require each student to bring in a written assignment from one of their other classes. Spend some time putting these assignments on an overhead and discussing with your students how you would interpret the assignments. See if your students know the right questions to ask (when instructions are vague or need more elucidation), and see if your students could predict the kinds of responses to the assignment that the instructor might value and reward.

**Developing and Narrowing a Topic for an Essay**

**Developing curiosity**

It seems that regardless of how interesting you may believe a reading is, some students will simply not find it compelling. Nonetheless, these same students, when prompted, can tell you about subjects they do find compelling. So the problem is not so much that these students lack curiosity, but that they haven’t thought enough about topics to see how those topics can be personally relevant.

Consider challenging students to find a way to make ostensibly boring texts personally interesting to them. For instance, many students say they are not interested in international news. Find a news article that makes clear the connections between international events and the lives of your students. Ask students to flesh out the connections between them and the reading. As you go over readings, discuss how the readings can be personally relevant. Students should be encouraged to find a way to make what they read relevant to their lives and interests, for doing so can encourage greater participation and less alienation.

The worksheet “Are You Curious?” presents topics about which students may not, at first glance, find interesting. Ask students to think about how they can make each topic personally relevant by connecting it to their own lives. Students may benefit from doing this activity in groups, since the activity requires a certain amount of creative thinking. Dialogue may encourage this creativity.

**RESOURCE:** The worksheet “Are You Curious?” is available for download as a Word document in the Exercises, Handouts, and Graphics area of the Online Learning Center.

**Are You Curious?**

What follows is a list of real articles about various topics. In the space that follows each article, discuss how you could make the article personally relevant and, as a result, increase the likelihood that you’ll be interested in it.

   Introductory information: “You don’t believe in it -- you either understand it or you don’t.” This article appears in *The Week*, http://theweek.com/article/index/265653/why-you-should-stop-believing-in-evolution


To help students develop intellectual curiosity, consider using one of these suggestions:

- Require students to find and share with their classmates one interesting article each week. Students can use the Connect discussion board or a personal blog to share the articles they find.
- Assign “investigate” activities in which students go to websites you designate and find at least one article of interest.
- Have students browse actual (paper copy) magazines in your school library and find, read, and summarize one article that is personally relevant to them.
- Assign students the task of finding a website that offers interesting information regarding a career they might enjoy. Have them summarize their findings.

Narrowing Topics

The ability to judge the breadth of a potential topic does not come naturally to many students, who may confuse “narrow” with “broad.” Try an experiment. Ask which is narrower—science or biology? You may find that students respond incorrectly. Also, you will find, however, that they are able to make accurate distinctions after discussing the concepts in class in more depth. The point is—especially to those who have not taught reading before—that students need an explicit review of assessing the breadth of a topic, as well as the relationships between subjects.

One way to start this review is to use the PowerPoint presentation “Broader or Narrower?” It is important that students realize that we generally label something broader or narrower than something else. Thus, our labelling is usually a result of a comparison. In narrowing a topic, students are always making choices between two (or more) subjects. The student who wants to write a paper about sports needs to realize she has narrower options within the domain of sports, such as basketball, soccer, and swimming. And in those subjects, she also has the ability to find narrower topics: swimming can be narrowed to competitive swimming; competitive swimming can be narrowed to high school swim teams; and high school swim teams can be narrowed to a particular issue in high school competitive swim teams.

RESOURCE: The PowerPoint presentation “Broader or Narrower?” is available for download in the PowerPoint Presentations area of the Online Learning Center.
RESOURCE: In addition to using the PowerPoint presentation, consider having students respond to the PowerPoint by posting reflections on the discussion board in Connect BCE.

The graphic in the chapter that demonstrates how to narrow the topic of music industry jobs show how narrowing a topic may require multiple iterations.
Consider using the same kind of graphic on the board and having the class narrow additional topics as a class. Broad topics to start with are these:

- jobs
- restaurants
- politics
- children
- social events
- social problems
- relationships
- health care

Teaching students to narrow topics to make them suitable for an essay requires that students have a good understanding of the scope of an essay. One exercise you could do to help students understand what can be covered in a brief essay or an article is to thumb through with them the first group of essays under the Thematic Anthology Readings that is available online in Connect BCE. If you show students the first theme in the anthology, Overcoming Adversity, they will see this list of articles:

- “Bouncing Back” by Melissa Balmain. (Presents some methods for overcoming adversity by illustrating methods particular people have used)
- “Leaving the Battlefield: Soldier Shares Story of PTSD” by Chaplain (Maj.) Carlos C. Huerta. (Presents the writer’s story of overcoming PTSD)
- “Coping with Stress” by Benjamin B. Lahey. (Presents methods one can use to cope with stress)
- “‘To Do for Others’: The Dream of Justice Sonia Sotomayor” by Andria Ramon. (Presents an overview of Sotomayor’s dream and what she had to do to achieve it)

Guide students to skim over the articles to determine the breadth of each one. They will find that while each article deals with a major theme (overcoming adversity), the articles limit themselves to particular aspects of adversity: methods used by particular people, PTSD, dealing with stress, and the way Sotomayor dealt with adversity.

To help students achieve a more concrete understanding of how to narrow a topic, consider starting with assignment prompts and having students narrow them appropriately. Here follows some examples of prompts students can narrow.
Narrowing Topics for Essays

The follow essay prompts need to be narrowed appropriately for essay writing. For each prompt, narrow the topic until it is suitable for an essay. Write a sentence or two explaining how you would narrow the topic.

Prompt #1: Write an essay in which you discuss the importance of physical activity. Narrow the topic appropriately so that you focus on how physical activity positively affects one demographic group.

Prompt #2: People have said that one reason to study history is to avoid repeating the mistakes we have made in the past. Write an essay in which you discuss one of the mistakes we have learned about from studying history, and make the case that we should continue to study the historical event you have chosen.

Prompt #3: While technology has improved our lives in many ways, it has also introduced new problems. Write an essay in which you discuss one problem technology has brought into our lives.

Consider also using the reproducible graphic (modified) from page 59, shown here and available as a reproducible Word document:

RESOURCES: This graphic, “Narrowing Topics for Essays,” is available for download as a Word file in the Exercises, Handouts, and Graphics area of the Online Learning Center.

Using Prewriting Strategies to Generate Ideas

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If you are new to teaching writing, you may be surprised at the difficulty many students have when they are given a writing prompt. Even if they have used prewriting before, many students resist doing much more than making a few notes on a piece of paper before launching into writing a draft. A big part of teaching writing is requiring students to use a writing process that results in a better product. Students will sometimes roll their eyes at having to go through the steps: prewriting, vetting/organizing/redoing their prewriting, creating an outline, fleshing out their outline with more details, creating a draft, working with the draft, creating another draft, revising, editing, and formatting. And, of course, this process is not linear. Students may be at the stage of writing a first draft only to realize that their organization ideas were not very good, or they may be revising their papers and realize they need to go back to drafting.

As instructors, we’ve all had enough experience with writing to know how time-consuming and recursive the writing process is. Our students, however, want the writing process to be linear. They want it to be efficient: no repeating of steps and no “extra time” spent on excessive planning or thinking through what they’ll be saying. They want to roll up their sleeves and draft. Or, more precisely, they want to write something and turn it in and be done with it.

If a student is capable of writing a perfect essay without using all of the steps of the writing process, then shouldn’t you let the student do what she can do! After all, why be rigid about a process that she has already internalized? Even if a student can write a perfect paper without going through the steps of the writing process (and really, no student can!), she will not always be able to write a winning composition on the fly. What happens when she gets into a difficult assignment and the first-draft-is-my-final-draft strategy doesn’t work? She may be able to figure out a process that will enable her to write a better paper, but the training she will get from your insistence will serve her better than if you didn’t insist on the steps of the writing process.

The way to teach the writing process is to require students to use it—for every writing assignment. And the only way to make something a requirement, it seems, is to give it a grade. Thus, consider using a grading strategy to assess a student’s process as well as a student’s product. Students will eventually see that both grades are related, but until they do, giving students a grade on their writing process helps them take the process more seriously. You might, for example, require students to submit every bit of work they do prior to the final draft: their prewriting scribbles, outlining, organizing, drafting, revising, editing, formatting, note-taking, and so on. Or you might observe a student’s writing process if you are working on in-class writing. For the process, consider assigning a daily grade but perhaps making it 2-3 times the regular weight of a daily grade. In other words, if the process grade is an 85, you would enter 85 three times in the part of your gradebook where you keep daily grades. By grading the process separately, you can assess the product and put its grade in the category where it belongs (likely a more “major” grade category). NOTE: More information about grading strategies is available at the end of the Instructor’s Manual in the appendix, “Tips for Grading.”

All of this is to say that students must be required to take prewriting seriously. Not only will learning prewriting strategies help them come up with ideas for their texts, but requiring them to use prewriting regularly will help them begin the habit of using a writing process.

In the text, several prewriting strategies are presented. Consider having students practice using all of these strategies by completing the practice exercises. The PowerPoint presentation “Student Prewriting Responses” corresponds with each of the prewriting practices in the chapter. For each practice, a student’s prewriting is presented and suggestions are made.
You might make a discussion board prompt, so that students are guided to discuss the PowerPoint.

**RESOURCE:** The PowerPoint presentation “Student Prewriting Responses” is available for download in the Online Learning Center.

**RESOURCE:** In addition to using the PowerPoint presentation, consider having students respond to the PowerPoint by posting reflections on the discussion board in Connect BCE.

**Chapter Activities: Reading and Annotating**

Chapter 3 ends with a reading and writing assignment that has students read a textbook passage from an environmental science textbook. We have included textbook passages in almost every chapter of *Common Places*, because students have such difficulty reading them—maybe, due to their seeming boringness. The decision to include textbook passages was made precisely because (not although) these passages are difficult for students. We hope there are plenty of engaging readings that will keep students interested, but we also hope instructors will help their students learn to do the difficult work of reading texts that are challenging and not immediately interesting.

To help reinforce the reading process, consider having students use Power of Process when they read the textbook selection “Potential Consequences of Global Warming and Climate Change” of this chapter.

If you are interested in having your students read additional articles relating to global environmental issues, four additional articles are available under Project 2 of the Integrated Reading and Writing Projects available online in Connect BCE.

**Vocabulary**

Make sure students do the Vocabulary Collection Word exercises throughout the chapter. Upon the completion of the chapter, give students the chapter’s vocabulary test.

**RESOURCE:** The “Ch. 03 Vocabulary Quiz” is available for download as a Word file in the Chapter Quizzes area of the Online Learning Center and is also assignable for completion online through the Question Bank in Connect BCE.