

Why Reading Matters: A Lesson for College Readers

Overview

This lesson invites students to think critically about reading as an act — not just a skill they've already mastered, but a practice with real consequences for how they think, argue, and understand the world. It's designed for a single class session (50–75 minutes) with a short follow-up writing assignment.

Learning objectives: By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Articulate at least two evidence-based reasons reading shapes cognition and empathy
 - Distinguish between reading for information and reading for transformation
 - Analyze their own reading habits and identify one area for growth
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Part 1: Opening Discussion (10 minutes)

Start with a provocation, not a lecture. Ask students:

- “When was the last time a book, article, or essay changed how you thought about something?”
- “Do you read differently than you did five years ago? How?”

Let a few students share. Don't correct or steer yet — just collect responses on the board. You'll return to them.

Part 2: The Case for Reading (20 minutes)

Present three angles, briefly, and open each for pushback:

1. Reading builds cognitive stamina. Sustained reading trains the brain to hold complexity — to track an argument across pages, not just paragraphs. This is a different mental muscle than skimming a feed, and it's the same muscle needed for research, long-form writing, and any career requiring sustained analytical thought.

2. Reading builds empathy through perspective-taking. Narrative reading in particular

requires simulating other minds — imagining motivations, gaps in knowledge, and internal conflict that isn't your own. This is measurably different from watching the same story on screen, where the visual work is done for you.

3. Reading is an act of resistance against passive consumption. In an economy built to capture attention in short bursts, choosing to read something long and difficult is a deliberate act. It's one of the few remaining activities that rewards patience over speed.

Discussion prompt: Which of these three claims do you find least convincing? Ask students to argue against one of them. This models critical reading of the lesson itself.

Part 3: Close Reading Exercise (20 minutes)

Distribute a short excerpt (300–500 words) — instructor's choice, but something with genuine difficulty: a dense paragraph from an essay, a complicated stanza, or an argument with a hidden assumption.

Ask students to:

1. Read it once, silently, straight through
2. Read it again, annotating: circle anything confusing, underline anything surprising
3. In pairs, explain the passage to a partner without looking at it

This exercise makes visible the difference between reading *at* a text and reading *into* it.

Part 4: Reflection and Writing Assignment (10–15 minutes)

Return to the board notes from Part 1. Ask: "Has anything we discussed changed how you'd answer the opening questions?"

Assignment (due next class): A 400–600 word reflection responding to one of the following prompts:

- Describe a piece of writing that changed your mind about something. What made it work?
- Reading researchers distinguish "reading for information" from "reading for transformation." Which do you do more of, and what would it take to do more of the other?
- Argue against the claim that reading is in decline, or defend it — using evidence from

your own habits.

Instructor Notes

- This lesson works well as a semester opener or a mid-semester reset when engagement dips.
- Consider following up with a brief survey of students' current reading habits (format, frequency, genre) to personalize later units.
- The close-reading excerpt should be genuinely challenging — resist the urge to pick something “accessible.” The friction is the point.