

Engaging Students in Philosophy Texts

One of the most common and frustrating experiences for philosophy instructors, like all college instructors, is facing a roomful of students who have not adequately prepared for the upcoming class. Today's college students have a myriad of reasons and excuses for not reading assigned text prior to coming to class, but they have learned from experience that this seldom has any consequences.

Students expect instructors to cover the text in class, and see no purpose in reading the assigned text beforehand. Instructors, recognizing that some students have not read the assigned text, spend large amounts of class time reviewing it, and thus reinforce the belief that there is no purpose in reading the text beforehand. Meanwhile, those students who have done the reading prior to class find themselves disengaged as their instructor goes over what is to them basic ideas or concepts

Ten Reasons Students Don't Read Assigned Texts

1. What assignment????
2. I had to work late last night.
3. The reading was too hard.
4. I didn't really think I had to read it.
5. The professor didn't say it would be on the test.
6. Who cares what these dead old white guys thought anyway?
7. My dog ate my Kindle.
8. BORING!
9. The professor never refers to the reading assignment—so why read it?
10. The professor always reviews the reading assignment—so why read it?

covered in the reading. Reviewing text assignments takes time, discourages students from reading future assignments, and does not solve the problem of students not reading assigned texts. Reading quizzes might get more students to read, but quizzes use up valuable class time and may seem overly punitive. Moreover, such quizzes encourage memorization of basic facts that students expect on a quiz, and ultimately fails to engage students in the text. Breaking this cycle necessitates the use of strategies, grounded in best practice, that engage readers in texts.

This chapter will discuss this problem and briefly review the literature related to active learning and student engagement. Three strategies for engaging students in texts are described with steps for implementation.

The problem is students who do not read the assigned text or who do so only superficially. Solving this problem involves engaging instructors in best practice. Best practice is a concept grounded in research that embraces instruction that is "student-centered, active, experiential, authentic, democratic, collaborative, rigorous, and challenging."¹ Instructors may need to change their instructional approaches, specifically how they design reading assignments. Kuh finds that "Voluminous research on college student development shows that the time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities is the single best predictor of their learning and personal development."² The key here is educationally purposeful activities, specifically those activities that engage college students in texts.

The teaching strategies at the end of the chapter are examples of educationally purposeful activities grounded in best practice that are designed to engage students in texts by activating student prior knowledge, providing students a framework that facilitates the task of reading text, and using novelty to capture students' attention. Prior knowledge is everything a student knows about a topic, including attitudes and dispositions connected to a topic. James Zull developed three ideas regarding prior knowledge that effective instructors use:

First, prior knowledge is a fact. All learners, even newborn babies, have some prior knowledge. Learners do not begin with a blank slate. Second, prior knowledge is persistent. The connections in these physical networks of neurons are strong. They do not

¹ Steven Zemelman et al., *Bringing Standards to life in America's classrooms*, 4th edition (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2012).

² George D. Kuh et al., *Student success in college: Creating conditions that matter* (Washington D.C.: Josey-Bass, 2005), locations 346-348.

vanish with a dismissive comment by a teacher or a red mark on a paper. Third, prior knowledge is the beginning of new knowledge. It is always where all learners start.³

Designing activities that use prompts to activate students' prior knowledge facilitates learning new material and integrates that material with what the student already knows. Further, Barbara Davis shows that "Students who have inaccurate or incomplete assumptions and beliefs about a topic will have difficulty grasping new concepts and information."⁴ Activating students' prior knowledge brings these assumptions to the forefront and facilitates learning new material.

Scaffolding, or giving students a framework to follow as they read, often results in students finding texts more approachable, engaging, and understandable. According to Michael Graves and Bonnie Graves, scaffolding is "a temporary structure that enables a person to successfully complete a task he or she could not complete without the aid of the scaffold...scaffolding can aid students by helping them to better complete a task, to complete a task with less stress or in less time, or to learn more fully than they would have otherwise."⁵ Furthermore, "students can more easily recall what they already know and integrate new material when they are given a conceptual framework."⁶ All three strategies reviewed in this chapter use scaffolding to guide the reader through the text. Prompts may vary with the type of text and content area, but prompts are designed so that students must read and reflect on the entire text, rather than just hunt around for key words or phrases.

Novelty catches attention.⁷ In designing strategies to engage college students in text, novelty is used to grab attention of students. These strategies look different, use prompts and

³ James E. Zull, *The art of changing the brain: Enriching the practice of teaching by exploring the biology of learning* (Sterling: Stylus, 2002), 93.

⁴ Barbara Gross Davis, *Tools for teaching*, 2nd edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 259.

⁵ Michael Graves and Bonnie Graves, *Scaffolding reading experiences: Designs for student success*, 2nd edition (Norwood: Christopher-Gordon Publishers, 2003), 30.

⁶ Davis, *Tools for teaching*, 259.

⁷ See Patricia Wolfe, *Brain Matters: Translating research into classroom practice* (Alexandria: ASCD, 2001).

questions that rely on student input as well as what is in the text, and use a variety of approaches, such as drawing, poems, one-sentence summaries, and predictions. Davis finds that "Passivity dampens students' motivation and curiosity. Students learn by doing, making, writing, designing, creating, and solving."⁸ The strategies at the end of this chapter aim to engage students' attention through the use of novelty and requires them to take an active role in reading the text.

Many of these strategies can be extended into lively class discussions. Students should be encouraged to share their responses to prompts in pairs, small groups, and with the entire class. In this way, instructors can immediately assess students' understanding of the material and focus class time around student questions as well as student misconceptions. According to George Kuh and colleagues, "Students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education and have opportunities to think about and apply what they are learning in different settings."⁹ Strategies that extend into classroom discussions often result in students taking a more active role in their own learning.

When these strategies are implemented, students come to class with a foundation gained from an active reading of the text. Instructors spend less time reviewing class material that students have already read and understood, and more time helping students to deepen their own understanding, as well as develop students' critiques and their own philosophical positions. Class discussion can thus move quickly from "what is this philosopher's argument?" to "is this philosopher's argument and conclusion strong or weak?"

Instructors may wish to give students credit for completing these strategies prior to coming to class, but it is important to remember that the goal of the strategies is to engage students in the text, not to give students points for right or wrong answers. When the strategies

⁸ Davis, *Tools for teaching*, 279.

⁹ Kuh et al., *Student success in college*, 340.

are integrated into class activities and discussion, students will develop their understanding of the text beyond what they came to class with. Instructors can skim through collected strategies and assess for completeness. A rubric for assessing the strategies has been included below. Strategies may be returned to students with or without comments, or the instructor may simply keep them.

Experience shows that students do complete the strategies at a high rate. Over the fifteen week spring semester in 2014, eight different text strategies were assigned to the 22 students enrolled in Philosophy 212: Moral Problems and Theories, and nine different text strategies were assigned to the 98 students enrolled in Philosophy 484: Global Business Ethics. Both classes were taught by Dr. Paul Neiman at St. Cloud State University. Students received a small amount of credit for completing each strategy, and the strategies were returned to students only upon request. The text strategies were used as the basis of class activities and discussions. In Philosophy 212, 93% of these strategies were completed by students prior to coming to class, and in Philosophy 484, 88% of the strategies were completed by students prior to coming to class. This experience reaffirms that when these strategies are presented with novelty, they will catch students' attention, and when they form an important part of class discussion, students will complete them.

On end-of-semester course evaluations in the Philosophy 484 course, 87% of 61 students who took the survey strongly agreed or agreed with the statement: "The RAW assignments [text strategies] were useful in engaging me with the readings." When asked to comment on the text strategies, typical student comments included, "The raw assignments [text strategies] were very valuable and helped me really analyze the texts we had to read," and "They provided great guidance with the readings. I would have been less motivated if I was assigned to just read and write a generic paper every time."

The three strategies presented below each seek to use novelty to catch students' attention, to activate their background knowledge, and to enable students to take an active role while reading an assigned text. An example of how each strategy can be presented to students is presented, followed by instructions for constructing and implementing strategies for texts in any content area. The sample prompts can be tailored to focus students' attention on what instructors want them to think about while reading. When these types of strategies are used consistently, students are more likely to read assigned texts and come to class ready for deeper discussions, resulting in an increase in student learning. The three strategies below are *Reinterpreting Text*, *3-2-1 Contact*, and *Précis Pyramid*. An example of a rubric that has been used to assess student completion of text strategies is also presented.

Strategy #1 Example: Reinterpreting Text

Philosophy 212: Moral Problems and Theories, Fall 2014

Text: Dalai Lama, *Ethics for the New Millennium*, chapter 6

Description: For this text strategy, you will identify what you find to be the four most important or significant arguments or ideas from the text. You will *draw a picture, construct a diagram, or write a poem* that represents each argument or idea. Cite a quote from the text that can serve as a caption for your picture or diagram, or that could be an introduction/epigraph for your poem (you can, but don't have to fit them in the boxes below).

Due in class: Tuesday, October 6th.

A large empty grid for student work, consisting of a vertical line and a horizontal line intersecting at the center. The grid is divided into four quadrants, providing space for students to draw, construct diagrams, or write poems as described in the instructions.

Strategy #1 Instructions: Reinterpreting Text

Description of Strategy

Reinterpreting Text requires students to demonstrate their understanding of important ideas from an assigned text by transforming them into a different format. The novelty of transforming important ideas into a format that students may find more manageable allows students to express their own creativity and engages them with the text. Reinterpreting texts is especially useful for texts students may find intimidating.

Instructions for Creating Reinterpreting Text Strategy

1. Divide the text into several sections. For each section, students are asked to reinterpret the most important idea in a different format. Alternatively, ask students to identify and reinterpret a certain number of important ideas from a chapter or section of text.
2. Distribute Reinterpreting Text prior to discussing an assigned reading in class, with the expectation that students will complete Reinterpreting Text as the basis for future class discussion.
3. Invite students to share responses to each part of Reinterpreting Text, either with the whole class or with partners or small groups, as you work through the text. Small groups might vote on one reinterpretation from their group to share with the whole class. Students can share by reading a poem or short story, or by displaying a picture or diagram on a document camera. Students should be encouraged to explain how their reinterpretation captures an important idea from the text.

Reinterpretation Possibilities
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Draw a picture• Draw a diagram• Write a poem• Write a short story• Write a paragraph• Write a description from the point of view of...

Strategy #2 Example: 3-2-1 Contact!

Text: Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditation I

Due in class: Thursday, January 15th.

3	Write down <u>three</u> ways from the text that Descartes doubts the truth of his beliefs.
2	Write down <u>two</u> things from the text that challenged or supported what you know.
1	Write down <u>one</u> question or criticism you have about Descartes' argument.
Contact	Write a paragraph about how Descartes' arguments in this text might challenge the certainty of the beliefs that you have.

Strategy #2 Instructions: 3-2-1 Contact!

Description of Strategy

3-2-1 Contact is four prompts that require students to read assigned text in order to complete the activity. Since some of the prompts rely on student personal reaction, students must read the text in order to respond appropriately.

Instructions for Creating 3-2-1 Contact! Strategy

1. Choose a category for 3 that is *within the text*. For example, students are directed to find 3 terms, 3 facts, or 3 reasons from the assigned text.
2. Choose a category for 2 that is *within the reader*. For example, students are directed to record two things from the text that surprised them, puzzled them, or challenged them.
3. Choose a category for 1 that is *directed toward the author*. For example, students may generate a question, comment, or criticism directed at the author.
4. Choose a category for *Contact* that prompts a connection between the text and the student. For example, students list what is the most important concept of the text or how the text connects to another content area or life outside of college.
5. Distribute 3-2-1 Contact prior to discussing an assigned reading in class, with the expectation that students will complete 3-2-1 Contact as the basis for future class discussion.
6. Invite students to share specific responses, either with the whole class or with partners or small groups.

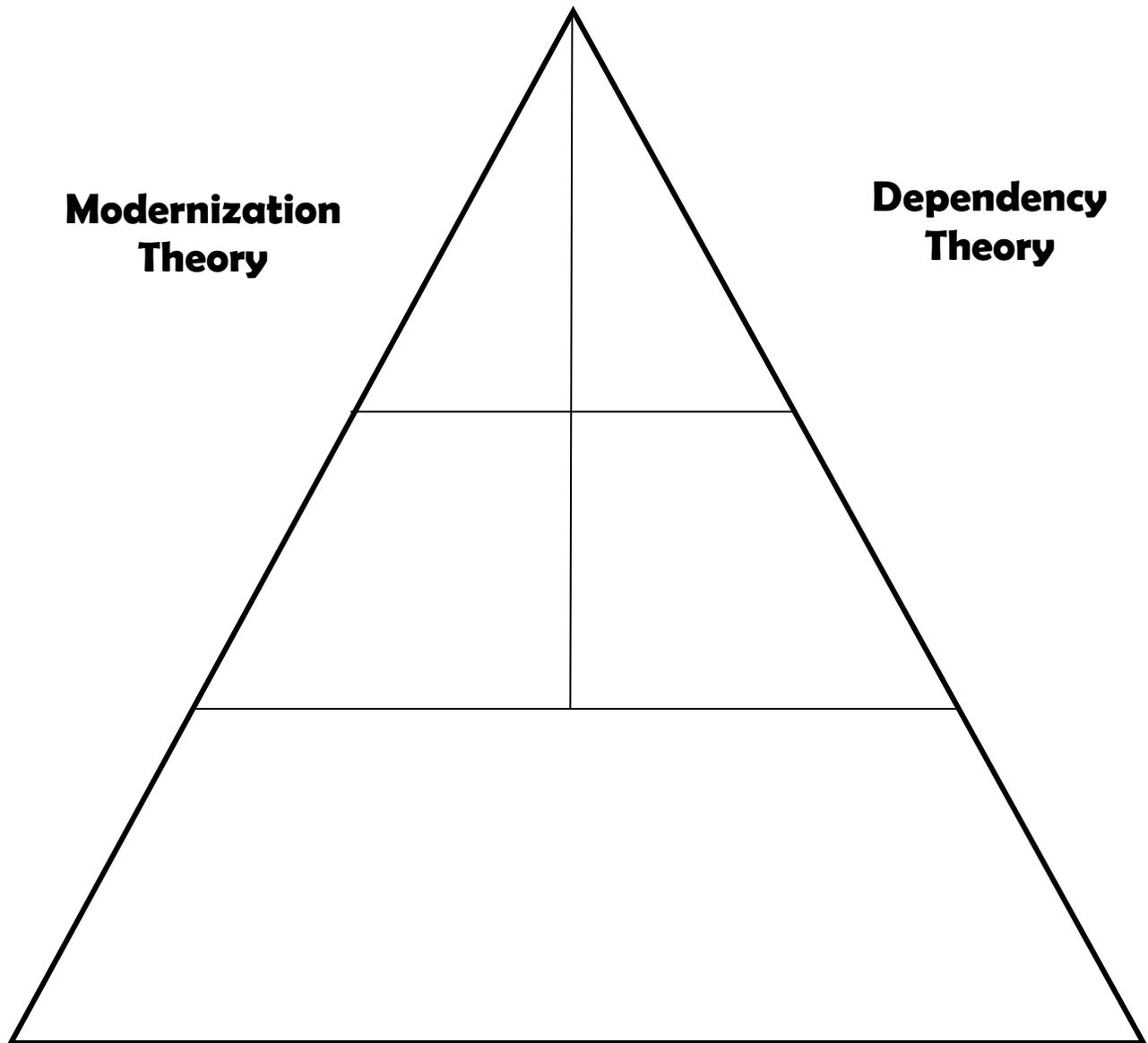
Possible Prompts for 3-2-1 Contact

Category	Prompt
<p style="text-align: center;">3 Within the text</p>	<p>Write down 3 words/terms you didn't know. Write down 3 facts. Write down 3 names of individual mentioned. Write down 3 of the most important sentences in the assigned text. Write down 3 of the most important words in the assigned text. Write down 3 characteristics of _____. Write down 3 properties of _____. Write down 3 arguments in favor of _____. Write down 3 arguments against _____.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">2 Within the reader</p>	<p>Write down 2 things that surprised you. Write down 2 things that you didn't know. Write down 2 things that you did know. Write down 2 things that puzzled you. Write down 2 things that challenge what you already know. Apply your knowledge by creating two questions. Apply your knowledge by creating two problems. Apply your knowledge by creating two examples.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">1 For the author</p>	<p>Write down 1 question for the author. Write down 1 question for a main character. Write down 1 question for someone mentioned in the assigned text. Write down 1 thing you would like to say to the author. Write down 1 thing you would like to say to a main character. Write down 1 thing you think everyone should know after reading the assigned text. Write down 1 thing that could have been eliminated from the assigned text.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;">Contact Personal connections</p>	<p>Write down how the assigned text connects to what you already knew about the topic. Write down how the assigned text connects to something in life outside of school. Write down how the assigned text connects to what you think is important. Write down how the assigned text connects to how you understand this process. Write down how the assigned text connects to what everyone should know about this topic. Write down an alternate ending for this novel, short story, or play.</p>

Strategy #3 Example: Précis Pyramid

Text: John Isbister, *Promises Not Kept: Poverty and the Betrayal of Third World Development*, chapter 3.

Due in class: Tuesday, January 12th.



- △ In the top section of the pyramid, write down words that describe the role that international businesses play in modernization theory and dependency theory.
- △ In the middle section of the pyramid, write down one question you have about each theory.
- △ In the bottom of the pyramid, write a short paragraph about how this text has challenged or shaped your view of why some nations are developed or underdeveloped.

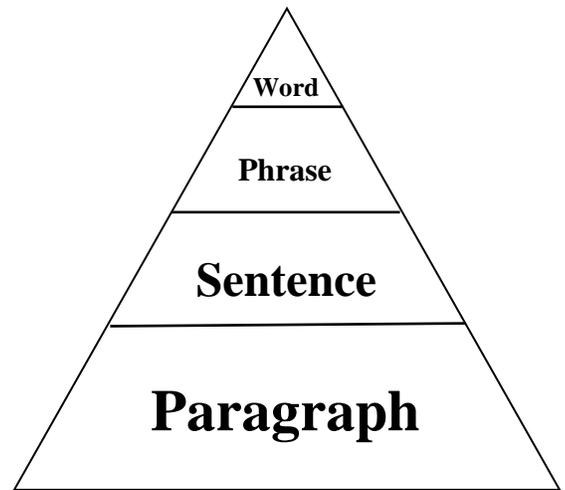
Strategy #3 Instructions: Précis Pyramid

Description of Strategy

Précis Pyramid is a graphic organizer that helps students determine the essential components of a complex concept or text. The pyramid may contain three to five parts, each pyramid part corresponds to a different aspect of the concept or text, generated by specific prompts from the instructor.

Instructions for Creating Précis Pyramid Strategy

1. Determine the number of pyramid parts (3-5 parts).
2. For each part of the Précis Pyramid, assign a different prompt, moving from one word response to phrase responses to sentence responses to paragraph responses.
3. Use the table below for possible prompts or ideas for prompts for each section of the pyramid that connect to the assigned reading or a complex concept.
4. Distribute Précis Pyramid prior to discussing an assigned reading in class, with the expectation that students will complete Précis Pyramid as the basis for future class discussion.
5. Invite students to share specific responses, either with the whole class or with partners or small groups.



Prompts for Précis Pyramid

One-Word Prompts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> △ Synonym for the concept or topic △ Adjective for the concept or topic △ Verb for the concept or topic △ One-word attribute of the concept or topic △ One-word reaction to the concept or topic △ Larger category to which the concept or topic belongs △ One tool for studying the concept or topic △ People who use the concept or topic △ People who study the concept or topic
Phrase Prompts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> △ Specific terminology that one needs to know to understand the concept or topic △ Skills that one needs to know how to do to study the concept or topic △ Analogy between concept or topic and sport, music, cat (or anything else) △ Three adjectives that describe the topic △ Three attributes of the concept or topic △ Three facts about the concept or topic △ Other concept(s) or topic(s) related to this concept or topic △ Headline or book title that would capture the essence of the concept or topic △ Formula or sequence associated with the concept or topic △ Three essential tools for studying the concept or topic △ One moment in history related to the concept or topic △ Samples or examples of the concept or topic
Sentence Prompts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> △ One question or more questions that the concept or topic sparks △ Causes or Effects of the concept or topic △ Reasons the concept or topic is studied and discussed △ Arguments related to the concept or topic △ Parts or elements that make up the concept or topic △ Description of the concept or topic in action △ Current relevancy of the concept or topic to society △ Insight gained from studying the concept or topic △ One thing that was thought about the concept or topic that has been discovered is incorrect △ The future of the concept or topic in 10, 15, 25 years
Paragraph Prompts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> △ Write a brief paragraph about how this concept or topic can be applied to... △ Write a brief paragraph supporting your own opinion about this topic △ Write a brief paragraph connecting this topic to an experience in your own life △ Write a brief paragraph connecting this concept or topic to another class topic or concept △ Write a brief paragraph that shows what you think another author thinks about this topic

Example: Rubric for Assessing Text Strategies

Rubric for Reading And Writing (R.A.W.) Assignments (10%)

Philosophy 484: Global Business Ethics, Spring 2014

Description: Students are required to complete written assignments on assigned texts. The guidelines for each RAW assignment are different, and will be posted on D2L. These RAW assignments are meant to be completed prior to discussing the text in class, and are meant to be shared with others in class.

RAW assignments can be printed out or hand-written. To receive full credit for the assignment, they must be complete, thoughtful, and turned in at the end of the class period in which it is due.

Purpose: The purpose of the RAW assignments is to engage students with the text, and to provide a framework and purpose for reading. In class, the purpose of the RAW assignment is to share student ideas and understanding with others.

Rubric:

2 Points	RAW assignment is complete, its guidelines are addressed thoughtfully, and it is turned in at the end of the class period in which it was due.
1 Point	RAW assignment is somewhat incomplete, not thoughtful, or not turned in at the end of the class period in which it was due.
Zero Points	RAW assignment is mostly incomplete, not turned in, or completely lacking in thoughtfulness.

Grading Scale

There will be 9 RAW assignments for this class. Collectively, the RAW assignments are worth 10% of the final grade for the course. Grades for this component of the course are determined by the table below.

Points	Grade
17-18	A
16	B
15	C
14	D
9-13	F
Less than 9	Zero

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