The Reading Context

Developing College Reading Skills

SECOND EDITION

THE READING CONTEXT

Developing College Reading Skills

Second Edition

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PREFACE

Reading can be fun! Reading should engage us: teach us something new, make us think, stir our feelings. *The Reading Context* seeks to engage you, the student, in the reading process. It is also designed to improve your reading skills, but that goal is sadly limited if you are not also turned on to reading. So, be forewarned; this book's goal is to change your attitude toward reading—as well as change your reading strategies.

The Reading Context is shaped by several concepts. First is the idea of reading in context, not just reading words on the page. To get meaning from those words, readers need to know about the author and type of work they are reading. They also need to know their purpose in reading. Second is the idea of active reading. Reading is not a passive activity of "receiving" information but an engagement with the text that generates meaning. Additionally, *The Reading Context* stresses the importance of being aware of the reading process *during* the process and consciously using strategies to aid comprehension and, hence, pleasure in reading.

The text's eleven chapters can be seen as forming three sections. Chapters 1 through 4 comprise the "nuts and bolts" strategies for reading. They introduce the idea of the reading context and active reading. Chapter 2 presents active reading as a three-step process: Prepare–Read–Respond. Students can work with this process and instructors will find it is quite similar to SQ3R and other reading strategies. Chapter 3 focuses on reading for main ideas, and Chapter 4 presents strategies for vocabulary building. Material in Chapter 4 on context clues, word parts, and the dictionary can be taught as a unit, or instructors can fit various sections into their own teaching plans.

Chapters 5 through 8 constitute the text's second section. In these chapters readers examine an author's use of writing strategies as aids to comprehension and develop their own writing-to-learn strategies. Additionally, Chapter 7 introduces skimming and scanning as alternative reading strategies and guides you through textbook reading, including the reading of graphics. Chapter 8 concludes this section by helping you prepare for class and for exams.

Chapters 9 through 11 provide opportunities to read more widely, to study expressive and persuasive writing, and to explore a variety of works in a casebook on living and working in the twenty-first century. Although the "Questions for Discussion and Reflection" that follow all the end-of-chapter reading selections are designed to develop critical thinking skills, Chapters 9 through 11 are especially concerned with the enhancing of critical thinking. Here you are

encouraged to evaluate what you read, to apply it to your own life and experiences, to ponder the issues raised, and to take a stand on the issues. In its focus on critical thinking, *The Reading Context* reinforces the concept of active reading in a specific context.

The second edition of *The Reading Context* is a stronger version of the original. The text is even easier to read because of a greater use of lists and bullets and boxes to provide guidelines and to highlight key points. In addition, exercises have been added in the chapters on finding main ideas; recognizing writing structures and strategies; using writing strategies to reinforce reading; and skimming, scanning, and reading graphics. Also, the questions used to guide reading of the selections at each chapter's end have been added to the selections in Chapter 11. Finally, in addition to new shorter readings in exercises, there are nine new end-of-chapter selections and six new readings in Chapter 11.

In *The Reading Context*, you will find clear explanations supported by many examples. You will have many chances to practice the skills explained in each chapter in exercises you can complete within the text. In addition, longer readings at the end of each chapter will hold your interest while representing the kinds of material you will meet in college assignments. This text provides you with a "tool kit" to develop your reading skills.

Fortunately for both authors and their readers, no book is prepared alone. Many colleagues and friends have helped me think more clearly about how we read and how we learn. To all of them I am grateful. In particular, I would like to thank Evonne Jones, Barbara Wilan, Pam Leggat, and Pat Hodgdon for lending me their books and sharing with me their ideas about the teaching of reading. And I can never complete a textbook without calling on the support of the library's reference staff, particularly Marian Delmore and Ruth Stanton. I also want to thank my most important first reader, my daughter Ruth. Additionally I want to acknowledge the support and guidance of my editor, Joe Opiela. The following reviewers have contributed many good suggestions to help me prepare this second edition: Natalie Miller, Joliet Junior College; Paul Parent, Montgomery College–Rockville; and Jack Scanlon, Triton College.

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CHAPTER 1

The Reading Context

In this chapter you will learn:

- What reading is
- Key characteristics of the reading context
- To evaluate your reading profile
- The roles of commitment, concentration, and cognition in reading success
- Specific strategies for improving concentration

Have you ever attended a party to watch the NCAA college basketball playoffs? If you have, you know that not all the partygoers have the same knowledge of the game. Some do not know much about basketball. Others enjoy watching the contest and cheering for their favorite team. There are also the viewers who watch intently and speak a strange language; they talk of "three-point baskets" and "presses," offering commentary on what is happening throughout the game.

Looking more closely at the partygoers, we can see other differences. Some at the party show little interest in the game. They enjoy the beer and chips. They may even retreat to the kitchen. If we took a survey in the kitchen, we would learn that most do not have much information about the game. Lacking knowledge, they quickly lose interest and turn their attention to something else. A second group at the party shows some interest in the game because their favorite team is playing. But if we were to take a picture of the partygoers sitting around the TV, we could identify these mildly interested folks in the photograph. One is busy eating a ham sandwich. Another is talking to the person sitting next to

him. Also in the snapshot are those showing great interest in the game. They are leaning forward in their chairs, eyes on the TV screen, talking and gesturing.

Now, why has this chapter begun with a discussion of people watching basketball? If you are asking yourself this question, you are on track to becoming a good reader. In the space below, answer the question we have raised and another one as well.

EXERCISE 1-1 Thinking about a Writer's Strategy

Answer each question in the space provided before continuing to read.

1. What, if any, connection do you see between the subject of this chapter and the opening discussion of a basketball party?

___

___

___

2. Why might a writer choose to write something that doesn't seem at first to be directly connected to the topic?

___

___

___

Let's look first at answers to the second question. Some students use the lines above as a place to express their frustration with writers. They complain that "there is no good reason to write on another topic" or "writers do this to confuse readers." Perhaps you wrote a similar answer. Sometimes we do get frustrated when we do not understand what a writer is doing.

One way to get rid of the frustration is to recognize the advantages that writers find in an indirect approach. Perhaps you responded to the question by listing some of the advantages: (1) an example or comparison can help explain a complicated idea; (2) the indirect approach can be an attention getter; (3) the indirect approach can be clever, amusing, fun. These are good reasons to take an indirect approach to developing a topic.

Now the first question. Did you see a connection? Is it possible to make a connection between watching a basketball game and reading? Let's think about the comparison.

First, we can conclude that the various groups of partygoers are not "seeing" the same game. Those who understand how the game is played are experiencing a different game than are those who do not know much about basketball. Similarly, what a reader brings to a reading situation does much to shape the reading context. Your knowledge and experience affect your ease in reading and what you understand from the reading. Second, the different degrees of interest shown in the game teach us something about reading. Those who show their interest by watching intently, engaged in what is happening, will be much more knowledgeable about the game. They are the ones you would want to ask for a summary of the game. Similarly, the more engaged you are in any reading task, the more you will remember from your reading. If you read a bit, then look out the window, you will not remember much. Those who *concentrate* get more out of any experience than those whose attention wanders.

Finally, what about the folks in the kitchen? They are not experiencing the game at all. Some people lose interest in subjects they do not know much about. Sometimes people even ridicule what they do not understand. ("Who cares how many times they execute a fast break!") This is a rather sad approach. Why not watch the game and ask questions to learn more? They might discover a new interest; they will at least know more about a topic that interests their friends. Of course, as a student you cannot afford to lack interest. If you think your history text is boring, you will find yourself failing history. Your role as a student is to *be interested*. You cannot—to use our analogy again—hang out in the kitchen! You can get in the game by thinking about the process of reading.

THE READING PROCESS

Do you remember learning your first language? Probably not, or at least not in much detail. And yet you had a fairly sophisticated command of your native language by the age of five.

Humans seem to come equipped to learn a language. Still, language has to be learned; it isn't already in the brain. What language would each brain be programmed for? A baby born to Mexican parents but then adopted by Irish Americans will learn English, not Spanish. A child born to an American father (who speaks only English to him) and a French mother (who speaks only French to her son) will become bilingual. Language learning requires a social context, but each brain comes with the equipment for developing this highly complex skill in a relatively short period of time.

We know that oral language came first, followed by various forms of writing. And of course writing had to be invented before there were works to read. Since some people have, with little or no help, taught themselves to read, we may conclude that reading skill is closely connected to general language skills. Just as preschoolers learn language by sorting and storing information gained through practice with language and some guidance from adults, we later learn

to read by sorting and storing information about the squiggly marks on the page. We learn that the various shapes stand for words, the meaningful sounds of our oral language. Reading, because it contains another layer of symbols, is a more complex activity than speaking.

We also know that the brain is a highly complex instrument with interconnecting parts that together are the source of our cognitive abilities. For example, to read you must first process the visual information on the page. Some people who have difficulty reading may be having difficulty with the visual processing of the symbols. They have trouble seeing the difference between, for example, *bad* and *bed*. Others may know all the letters in the word but do not know the meaning of the word; their problem is one of vocabulary. Language acquisition and the reading process are both complex activities.

What Is Reading?

Reading is the process of obtaining or constructing meaning from a word or clusters of words. This statement gives us three ideas about reading. First, meaning is found in clusters of words, not necessarily in complete sentences. In some contexts fragments, including just a word or two, express meaning. Look, for example, at the following three "sentences."

The thief stole Michael's book bag. And his keys. His wallet, too.

The first statement is a complete sentence, but "and his keys" is a fragment. By itself—without the context of the previous sentence, it would not offer a reader much meaning. "What about his keys?" we ask. And, "whose keys"? In this context, however, the cluster of words has meaning. So does "His wallet, too." We learn that Michael no longer has his book bag, his keys, or his wallet. We learn that all three items were taken from Michael by someone unknown to him, someone who intends to keep the items. We know all of this if we know the meanings of the words *thief* and *stolen*, and if we see how the second and third statements build on the first one.

The second idea about reading in the preceding definition is that reading involves getting meaning from the words. Reading does not refer to the ability to say the sounds that the words represent. It doesn't mean knowing the definitions of the words on the page. It means understanding what ideas or information or feelings the words convey when put together in the particular pattern chosen by the writer. This definition tells us that if we are not getting a message, then we are not reading. Think of it this way: You read with your brain.

Finally, we need to consider the two verbs *obtaining* and *constructing*. Both verbs have been used because reading experts do not agree on which verb should be used. Some would say that the meaning is in the words as they are put together in particular patterns. The task of the reader is to *obtain* the meaning that the writer seeks to convey. Others argue that meaning is really *constructed* by the reader and that skill in reading depends on the reader's ability

to connect the material to what the reader already knows in order to make meaning out of a passage. Both ideas are useful in helping you understand reading. On the one hand, readers do strive to understand or *obtain* the writer's meaning. On the other hand, readers must use their knowledge of vocabulary and grammatical structures to process the passage, to *construct* meaning from the words on the page.

The Role of Vocabulary

Because you need to use your knowledge of words it follows that the larger your vocabulary, the more easily you will read. To illustrate, how difficult is the following passage for you?

> The series of somites that came to lie on each side of the notochord shortly after gastrulation now differentiate into three kinds of cells: (1) sclerotome cells, which later form skeletal elements; (2) dermatome cells, which become part of the developing skin; and (3) myotome cells, which form most of the musculature.
>
> Helena Curtis, *Biology*, 4th ed.

For many readers this sentence is a challenge to understand. Why? To answer the question, go back and underline each word that you do not know. The reason for difficulty becomes clear: There are just too many unfamiliar words. How do you expand your vocabulary to make reading easier? By reading. Adults add to their vocabularies primarily from their reading. The more you read, the easier reading becomes.

Connecting and Predicting in Reading

Experienced readers do not need to look at every word in a passage to construct meaning. Your brain has a record of many sentence patterns as well as knowledge about various subjects. The information you already have allows you to comprehend a passage without reading every word. Because you seek meaning, you will make sense of incomplete statements, as you did with the three statements about the thief. You automatically attached the two fragments—about Michael's wallet and keys—to the previous sentence so that they would make sense.

Readers can also predict what will come next—in a sentence, a paragraph, or a longer work. In fact, active reading involves making predictions. Drawing on your knowledge of the patterns or structures of writing, you start to anticipate the rest of the sentence. For example, suppose you were to read the following:

> Instead of using a pen or a typewriter, today's students usually do their papers ______________________________

What would you predict the rest of the sentence to say? Answer this question by working the following brief exercise.

EXERCISE 1-2 Predicting in Reading

Circle any statement that could complete the sentence and then explain why the others would not work.

a. in the library.
b. on a computer.
c. while listening to music.
d. which is a good thing.

____

____

____

Only one of the four statements can fit into the sentence. "D" adds a new thought without completing the first idea in the sentence. Although the other three all "sound" as if they could fit, "a" and "c" do not fit logically. For the sentence to make a meaningful statement, it must tell us what *tool* students now use to do their written work. Where they work or what else they do while working are ideas that fail to complete the contrast pattern started in the sentence. Your knowledge of today's students would help you to predict the sentence's concluding point.

You can also predict what you will read in longer passages. If a paragraph begins with the sentence "There are three good reasons to participate in the political process," you should anticipate that the rest of the paragraph will state and develop those three reasons. You would be a frustrated reader if you found that only two reasons were discussed in the paragraph.

In the following exercise, see how well you can predict what will follow. Look for patterns established by the writer to guide you.

EXERCISE 1-3 Predicting in Longer Passages

Use a piece of paper to cover the lines of the following passage and then uncover one line at a time as you read. Each time you come to a question, answer it, keeping the rest of the passage still covered. If you look ahead, you will not benefit from this exercise.

Sociologists Paul Lazarsfeld and Jeffrey Reitz (1989) divide sociology into three phases.

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