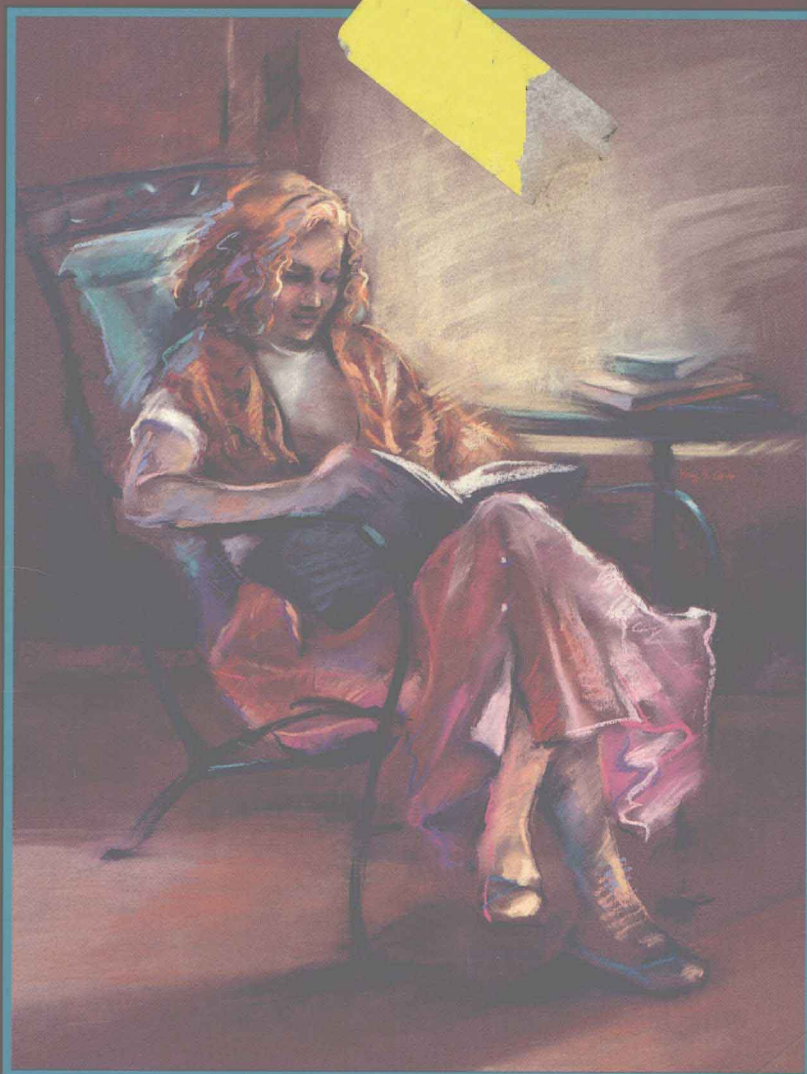


THE
READING
CONTEXT

DEVELOPING COLLEGE READING SKILLS



DOROTHY U. SEYLER

THE READING CONTEXT

Developing College Reading Skills

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Allyn and Bacon

Boston London Toronto Sydney Tokyo Singapore

Vice President, Publisher, Humanities: Joseph Opiela
Editorial Assistant: Kate Tolini
Marketing Manager: Lisa Kimball
Editorial Production Service: Elm Street Publishing Services, Inc.
Manufacturing Buyer: Megan Cochran
Cover Administrator: Linda Knowles



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A Viacom Company
Needham Heights, MA 02194

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Seyler, Dorothy U.

The reading context : developing college reading skills / Dorothy U. Seyler.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-205-18545-2

1. Reading (Higher education) 2. Reading (Higher education)—
Problems, exercises, etc. I. Title.

LB2365.R4S39 1996

428.4'071'1—dc20

96-7816
CIP

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 01 00 99 98 97 96

Credits

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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 you examine an author's use of writing strategies as aids to comprehension and develop your 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.

In *The Reading Context*, you will find clear explanations supported by many examples. You will have many opportunities to practice the skills explained in each chapter in exercises that you can complete within the text. In addition, there are longer reading selections at the end of each chapter that will hold your interest while representing the kinds of material you will meet in college assignments—material that ranges across the curriculum from geology to health, from history to sociology. Reading with understanding and retaining information and ideas from reading are essential skills for success in college courses, in the workplace, and in our personal lives. *The Reading Context* provides a “tool kit” for those students ready to develop their 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, specifically Marion Delmore and Ruth Stratton. I also want to thank my most important first reader, my daughter Ruth. Additionally I would like to acknowledge the support and guidance of my editor, Joe Opiela. The following reviewers have also contributed many good suggestions throughout the development of this text: Rosann Cook, Purdue University–Calumet; Janet Elder, Richland College; Elaine M. Fitzpatrick, Massasoit Community College; Eric Hibbison, John Sargeant Reynolds Community College; Pamela Leggat, Northern Virginia Community College; Richard F. Malena, Phoenix College; Jack Scanlon, Triton Community College; Ellen Gage Searles, Mohawk Valley Community College; and Nancy E. Smith, Florida Community College at Jacksonville.

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CHAPTER 1

The Reading Context

In this chapter you will learn:

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

Have you ever attended a party to watch the NCAA college basketball play-offs? 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. But if you ask them why their team lost, their answer may simply be the other team was better. Their answer doesn't offer much insight into the game. Finally, there are 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.

If we look at our basketball partygoers in another way, 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 for conversation that is not about basketball. 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 does show 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. One is eating a pretzel without taking her eyes off the TV screen. Another is talking and gesturing while watching, just like a TV commentator.

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 an answer similar to one of these. Sometimes we do get frustrated when we fail to see a connection, 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 that will

engage the reader; (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 an *analogy* (a comparison noting several similarities between two items, usually to explain one of the items) between watching a basketball game and reading? There are several points about reading that can be made, if we 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 make a difference not just in how easy or hard the reading task is, but also in 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 very much from the reading. 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, even though they are at the party. It seems that people often lose interest in those 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*—to learn as much as you can from your reading. You cannot—to use our analogy again—hang out in the kitchen!

■ YOUR READING PROFILE

A reader’s knowledge, interests, and attitudes greatly affect any reading experience. They are part of the reading context. Remember that the reader creates the reading context. You *choose* to pick up the work and turn the page, just as some of our partygoers choose to watch the game. Since the reader is so important a part of the reading context, we need to become acquainted with ourselves as readers. The following exercise will help you examine your reading habits and attitudes.

EXERCISE 1-2 Your Reading Profile

Mark T (true) or F (false) in the space provided after each statement. The goal is self-awareness, so answer truthfully.

	T	F
1. In my leisure time, I usually choose to watch TV rather than read.	<u>T</u>	___
2. I mostly read newspapers or magazines.	<u>F</u>	___
3. My favorite place to read is on my bed.	___	<u>F</u>
4. I enjoy reading novels but not textbooks.	<u>T</u>	___
5. I usually read late at night.	<u>T</u>	___
6. I rarely find time to read the newspaper.	___	<u>F</u>
7. I usually have music or the TV on when I read for my courses.	___	<u>F</u>
8. I would like to be a better reader.	<u>T</u>	___
9. Reading bores me.	___	<u>F</u>
10. I enjoy reading about new subjects.	<u>T</u>	___
11. Reading is difficult for me.	___	<u>F</u>
12. I would be a better reader if I had a larger vocabulary.	___	<u>F</u>
13. I am taking this course so that I can read faster.	___	<u>F</u>
14. Good reading skills are necessary for success in college and the workplace.	<u>T</u>	___

The first seven statements give you information about your reading habits. Study your answers to those seven first. What did you discover? How often do you read? Do you read when and where you can concentrate? The next seven statements ask you to think about your attitudes toward reading. Look over your responses to those statements. Do you like to read? Do you think reading skills are important? In answering these questions, rate yourself on each of the following scales. Circle the ratings that are right for you.

	Poor	Average	Good	Very Good
Reading Habits	1	2	3	4
Reading Attitudes	1	2	3	4

■ THE ENGAGED READER

What is your reading profile? Is there room for improvement? The ideal reading profile is the profile of the *engaged reader*. The *engaged reader* gets top marks for each of the “3Cs”: **commitment, concentration, and cognition**. The following chart sums up the idea of the 3Cs.

The 3Cs of the Engaged Reader

Commitment: An *active* desire to read well and benefit from reading. Attitude matters.

Concentration: *Active* attention to reading, using specific strategies for concentration.

Cognition: *Active* use of language and reasoning skills to follow the writer's ideas.

Commitment

The fact that you are taking a reading course and using this text is an indication of commitment on your part to improve your reading skills. Signing up for the class is a good first step, but it is only a first step. This course on your schedule will not make you a better reader. Only *you* can improve your reading skills. Reading is a skill, just like driving a car or playing a sport. You improve any skill with the same three ingredients: a desire to improve, some good instruction or advice, and practice, practice, practice! This text and your instructor will offer you good advice and many opportunities for practice. If you seize the opportunity, because your commitment to improve is strong, then you will succeed in your goal.

Unfortunately, commitment is not something that you either have or don't have. Instead, there are degrees of commitment. Students tell teachers that they are *really* committed to doing well in school; employees tell bosses that they are *really* committed to succeeding in their jobs. Still, some students and some employees do not do well. Commitment must show itself each day in the way that time and energy and thought are used to produce success. Your commitment to improve reading skills will be measured in how much more time you spend reading—and in how often you turn off the TV or turn down the stereo. Commitment needs to show itself in action.

The degree to which you are committed to improving reading skills may be tied to your immediate college goals and long-term career goals. Why are you in college? What are your plans and dreams for the future? Use the following exercise to reflect on your goals.

EXERCISE 1-3

1. List 5 to 8 reasons why you are attending college. Try to be honest and thorough, including reasons such as "making new friends."

II. Analyze your list and then comment on your reasons for attending college. For example, does your list emphasize career goals or short-term goals of having fun?

Can your college and career goals be used to strengthen your commitment to improved reading skills? If you have strong goals for intellectual and personal growth, try reflecting on them when you become anxious or frustrated by all of the required reading for your courses. Let your goals serve as “commitment boosters.” If your analysis has revealed a lack of serious goals, then perhaps you should begin by reflecting on the depth of your commitment to the rigors of college work. You may want to schedule an appointment with a counselor to discuss your reasons for attending college or to explore career possibilities.

Attitude does matter. It’s okay to say that reading is difficult for you at times. It’s not okay to begin each reading assignment by saying “This is boring” or “I hate reading biology.” Negative feelings, whether expressed to others or thought to yourself, get in the way of positive actions.

Students sometimes have negative attitudes toward particular reading assignments because they do not find the course or subject matter interesting. But if they—or you—need to be entertained to find motivation for a course, there is a commitment problem. Rethink your reasons for taking the course—and for attending college—and then decide that you will do well and get the course behind you. If you cannot always make a positive statement, at least try to break the habit of negative thoughts.

Concentration

Concentration is also an essential trait of the engaged reader. If you do not concentrate well when you read, then achieving greater concentration will be a necessary step to improving your reading skills. The desire to be more focused is, of course, part of the equation, but desire alone won’t do the job. Concentration, like commitment, requires action. Here are some specific steps that you can take to improve your concentration when you read.