

For Teachers: Using Textbooks

In General

Most of our students have never had to buy a textbook before entering college. Some high school teachers go through the assigned textbook reading with their students during class, so students have not been responsible for independent reading of the textbook outside of class time. As a result, some students at the College think teachers require them to buy textbooks that they "don't use." It may help to spend some time going over your expectations.

For example, I tell my Writing for and About Literature class that I will give a general introduction in class for each genre. The page assignments on the syllabus go into details that I don't cover in class. I expect students to check the syllabus and do the reading. While I'll be glad to answer questions, I'll assume that they've done that reading and will be able to use the material as a basis for class discussion on the assigned literature. I'll expect them to read, understand, and use the material from the textbook (or ask if they don't understand), and I won't be teaching it in class. In English 245 (Readings in World Scripture), I tell them that they don't have to read the texts closely. I want them to get through the text, get a general idea of what it's about, and then focus on one part—a line, a page, a verse, a chapter—they want to read carefully and talk about in detail in class. No, there will be no quizzes on "what is the name of the hero of the *Baghavad Gita*!"

Specifics

Give some background:

Many of us try to require the minimum expenditure on textbooks. Explaining why you chose the text you did and what advantages it has for the students may also help them understand how college work is different.

Textbook Economics 101 can be a useful lesson in many classes. In some courses, it may help to remind students that they may use this text again, especially if it is a foundation text for a concentration (writing manuals, math books, A&P textbooks and so on). Further, however, the cost and marketing of textbook may provide a useful basis of discussion. Who profits? What is the second-hand book market? Why are new editions issued every two years? How useful is the on-line support, and what does it cost? Economics, marketing, sociology, psychology, IT and many other disciplines may have useful insights to bear on the cost of college textbooks.

Get to the book:

On the first day you require students to bring the book to class, have them to open it and survey the sections. Be sure they know about major divisions (table of contents, glossary, index, appendices, charts, answers, etc.) and the general layout of each chapter (study questions, vocabulary, case studies, etc.), as well as how to use each section.

A fast way to do this: Either in general class discussion or in groups, make up a list of the book sections with use categories : “I’ll never use this” (acknowledgements, photo credits), “Reference” (appendices, table of contents, index (is there more than one?, answers, etc.), “Need to Skim,” “Need to Learn.” The last two categories are specific. You may want students to memorize terms; you may just want them to know a general outline.

What to Assign

Students can be asked to do the following:

Mark useful sections: Put sticky notes or other permanent markers on essential section so they can them (glossary, source documents, answers, etc.) You can mark your own book and show them what you’ve done.

Tell them what you expect from the reading. Let students know what you want them to gain from the reading: every detail? main idea? overall concepts? Is there any part they should always read thoroughly? any part they don’t need? sections they should skim?

Make connections to content and ideas from their other courses, and, where applicable, to their own experiences. People learn better when they can put concepts into a larger context, and this technique can encourage class participation.

At the end of class

Use the last 2 minutes of class to remind students to look over the reading for the next class before they come back, and let them know what you expect them to gain from the reading.

(Sometimes this technique helps to quell the rush to pack up and get out, even as the instructor is finishing the class. Students are annoyed at not being able to hear valuable information, and will hush the early packers.)

More help with the textbook:

Emphasize the long use of the textbook. Although this is not true for every discipline, some textbooks have a life use beyond the course. Students may want to keep grammar books, reference books for specific disciplines, math books, and similar texts for future reference. New ones will only get more expensive!

Use multi-sensory techniques: put charts, maps, pictures, up on classroom walls and use models (hint: go look at the science classrooms). Bring in examples of what students read about (art, materials, models, etc.). Play speeches, sounds, music that connect to the material (YouTube is great for this). These aids help students make connections and emphasize using all areas of brain processing used in learning: visual, oral, aural, kinesthetic.

Remind students that iPhones, Blackberries, and other gadgets do more than network, tweet, or play games! Students have a wide array of resources, including multi-sensory resources at their finger (or thumb) tips. One student in English 120 pointed out that professors often post their Power Point presentations on line and she has found useful supplementary material from courses posted by professors from colleges. Students can hear FDR telling the American people he is asking Congress to declare war on Japan; Auden reading his poetry; Steven Beckwith lecture on "The Dawn of Creation: The First Two Billion Years"; look up paintings; listen to music. They can also practice math, grammar, vocabulary, French, Spanish, geography and much else while helping to hold down world hunger on FreeRice.com.

Listen to the book. Free software is available through the school that will read on-line texts aloud. Texts not on-line can be scanned (to be read aloud). See "Using Read-Write-Gold."