Strategies: When Students Haven’t Done the Reading

I. Avoiding the Problem
The best way to combat student apathy is to design a course, which consistently and from the start encourages participation.

1. Develop a policy that encourages participation
   • Learn students’ names and use them
   • Making doing the reading a considerable part of the students’ participation grade.
   • Visibly reward students who consistently do the reading.

2. Prepare students in advance
   • Remind students of the reading assignments.
   • Give students ample time to complete the assignments.
   • Give students questions to consider as they read.
   • Discuss difficult terms and vocabulary in advance.
   • Highlight areas of particular consequence for exams and papers.

3. DO NOT summarize readings for students!

II. A Range of Assignments that Encourage Reading

1. Activities which need to be instituted from the beginning of the quarter:
   • Sign-up small groups to present and introduce the reading in each meeting.
   • Ask students to come to class with study questions about the reading.
   • Give regular quizzes to test for reading knowledge.
   • Ask students to bring in answers to pre-prepared questions or short paper topics.
   • Put a passage on an overhead projector transparency and work with it as a class.
   • Bring in a selection of passages and have students read and present them to the class in groups of four.

2. Activities for individual lesson plans:
   • Ask students to write for 5-10 minutes on the reading at the start of class.
   • Go around the room asking each student to name one important point, new discovery, or question s/he has about the reading.
   • Ask students to help you list the three most important points from the reading on the board.
III. Troubleshooting
If all else fails and the students still arrive at class unprepared, these are a range of strategies for salvaging the lesson for that day.

1. Begin the class with general questions students can answer even if they have not read. As the class continues, draw in the reading assignment. Students who have done the reading will see the connections, and students who have not done the assignment will hear a broad introduction to the material.
2. Read a passage or passages together as a class. Pose the questions that you would have asked in a normal lesson plan. Have the students divide into groups and answer them.
3. Put questions about the reading on the board. The students who have done the reading will be able to quickly write down their answer and work on fresh material. Non-readers will have to use their texts to find the answers.
4. Review concepts from lecture during discussion. You may want to assign a brief paper answering one or two questions to ensure that the students do the reading before the next class meeting.
5. Dismiss the students who have not finished their reading with a short paper assignment or an admonishment to study for a quiz at the next class meeting. Continue the class with those who have done the reading.

IV. Reading Actively
One way to encourage students to do the reading is to provide them with some guidance. Some students will read more efficiently with suggestions from their instructors. These are some suggestions that could be developed as a handout or a group discussion.

1. Always read with a pencil in your hand. Copy unfamiliar vocabulary and ideas in the margin.
2. Ask yourself questions as you read. To avoid “fading out” as you read difficult material, ask yourself to restate the main point of each paragraph.
3. Use a highlighter sparingly. Never highlight examples. Instead, read the paragraph first, then go back and highlight only the important main points, dates, definitions, and names.
4. In very difficult classes, try keeping reading notes. Write down the top 3-5 main points of the reading. Make up a mock exam. Keep a list of questions for the professor.
5. Try to make connections between the reading material and your other classes. It may be easier to remember and respond to a text if you can relate it to your own major or a favorite class.
6. Use visual aides to help yourself remember details. A timeline, a graph, a diagram, or a family tree drawn in the margin or in your reading notes will help you remember material at test time.
7. As you read, underline quotations that you may want to use later in a paper. This will save time when developing a topic or supporting your thesis with examples from the book.
8. Have a no television policy when you do your reading. Even if you are not watching the screen, the reading will take at least twice as long.
9. Take careful notes in lecture and/or discussion section. Each time the instructor refers to the reading material, you have a chance to review for the exam.
10. Ask questions about the reading. Be sure to clarify any information that is unclear to you. Also ask the instructor to review what he/she considers to be the most important elements in the reading.

In consultation with: “How to Encourage Your Students To Do the Reading” (a handout from the Office of TA Development at UCSB) and “The Teaching Professor” (December, 1989): 3-4.