

Step 1: Reading for Argument

Encourage your students to follow these four guidelines when reading a text for class.

- **Skim** the text for basic structure and main ideas. This first reading is brief and cursory, so no underlining or note taking should take place—the main goal is to get a feel for what the text is about.
- Take time to **look up** any background information or concepts that might help to understand all aspects of the text (its context, scope, and implications, for example).
- Then, **read the entire text carefully**. This step is crucial, so slow down and look at each individual idea, underlining and making marginal notes about what each paragraph is about. Your goal here should be to identify the main evidence the author provides for her argument.
- If you have to write a paper using this text, look back at your notes and **identify sections that will help support your own argument**. Read that section sentence by sentence to clarify exactly what the author is saying and use evidence charts to record quotes and paraphrases you will be using.

Tips:

- Read with a pen, pencil, highlighter, or all of the above at hand. When “to highlight or not to highlight?” becomes the question, remember that liberal highlighting produces nothing but an unnaturally yellow page. Instead, highlight main ideas and then write notes beside them as a reminder of their significance.
- Look up words that are specific or crucial to understanding the author’s argument, but don’t become flustered looking for every word that you don’t understand.
- Stop and summarize what you have read after reading a key section. Can you restate the meaning of each paragraph? Can you comment on how the text is unfolding or how one idea relates to another? Are questions emerging?

It might also be helpful to provide your students with guiding questions for the reading. For example:

- What is the author doing? Is he persuading, explaining, analysing...?
- What are the key issues of the text, and how does the author go about supporting them?
- What are the author’s conclusions, and what do they imply for the field/topic?
- What is the context for the author’s text?
- What counterarguments can you think of? Are there flaws in the author’s argument?

Step 2: Reading-to-Write Notes

The Basics

- Students use reading-to-write notes to record the information they gathered during their reading.
- Reading-to-write notes can help prepare students for class discussion by forcing them to think about key aspects of the text(s) and their connection to other readings or topics within the class.
- Usually, reading-to-write notes are structured as a chart. Charts can help students compare different texts, different aspects within a text, or different questions on a text or texts and find connections or disparities between them, thus encouraging analytical thought from the start.
- To further encourage analysis, have your students include a short freewrite at the end of each chart where they prepare questions or points of discussion for class.

For more on Reading-to-Write notes, consult the Writing Center module.

Reading-to-Write Notes: An Example

The following are notes on three texts that discuss the documentary *Waiting for Superman* (2010), which explores pressing issues in American public education through the lives of five children who enter a lottery to attend a charter school. The notes were used as preparation for class discussion and were part of the response paper assignment.

	“No More Waiting” (Editorial)	“What ‘Superman’ got wrong...” Ayers	“Review of WFS” Dutro
Argument	Hopes that the election of governor Walker, the increasing rate of high school dropouts, and the popularity of WFS will bring essential and drastic reforms to the public education system that mirror the innovation of charter schools.	Posits that some of the problems and proposed solutions presented in WFS are narrow and unfounded. Proposes that a “community empowerment and strong evidence” are the correct approach to problems in schools.	Dutro argues that, while WFS does present urgent issues in public education, its presentation and proposed solutions are often simplistic. Moreover, some of their arguments are contradictory and based on poor evidence.
Key issues	- The election of gov. Walker = a new chance for essential reform - Challenges facing public education (i.e. high dropout rates) - Charter school reforms and their role in educational innovation - WFS is the catalyst for reforms - More flexible policies from teachers’ unions	- The demonization of unions. Finland has highly successful unions. - Supports tenure. Says that WFS “decries tenure as a drag on teacher improvement.” - The problem of hiring and maintaining good teachers.. WFS could have showed us more examples of “good” teachers.	- Heroes vs. villains: we are more likely to think that it is just a few leaders and schools that need to change, rather than a community approach. - Lack of a systemic approach to issues of poverty. - We don’t see the successful neighbourhood schools - Supports banking model of education - Contradictions in WFS’s presentation of test scores.

Quotes	“[WFS] calls for rewarding the best teachers with more pay and getting rid of the worst teachers – something that rarely happens now”	“the amp up rhetoric of crisis and failure” “paying teachers for higher student scores” “narrow agenda that undermines strong education” “reform must be guided by community empowerment and strong evidence, not by ideological warriors or romanticised images of leaders”	“this appearance of simplicity is only achieved through omissions and misrepresentations surrounding some of the film’s key points of evidence for its claims” (1) “the blame is squarely placed on teachers unions, the bad teachers those unions protect, and the bureaucrats who maintain the status quo” (2)
Thoughts/Questions	How can we find a balance between union policy and hiring successful teachers? Are the unions getting in the way of producing successful teachers? How?	His argument seems to focus on the issues (within WFS and the educational system in general) surrounding teachers, teachers’ unions, and tenure. Perhaps his argument is slightly biased since he was a teacher. He does present a more complex argument with regards to good/bad teachers, especially in terms of keeping good teachers in school and the kind of environment necessary for their retention. WFS could have further expanded on what makes teachers good, other than passion for teaching. What can we learn from the focus on training for Finnish teachers? What was Rhee’s purpose in firing all those principals and offering teachers who gave up tenure a raise? What is some of the context behind the “teacher problem”?	Dutro points to the complexity behind some of the issues presented in WFS much more successfully than Ayers, probably because she covers fewer issues in more depth. WFS does try to place a great deal of the blame on teachers and teachers’ unions, rather than thinking of a more systemic approach on issues such as poverty. The question then is what the role of teachers in this systemic approach should be. How can they use a broader community approach in their teaching? Does the “good” teacher just teach students or does the role extend to the entire community? Perhaps part of teachers’ education (Finland-style) should include this? What makes a good public school teacher?

Step 3: Evidence charts & Topic Sentences

Once students select a topic or focus (guided by the “thoughts/questions” of their reading-to-write notes) for the assignment, they can organize their evidence by using evidence charts. You can model these in class by choosing a general theme or topic, and then asking students to find supporting quotes/paraphrases. Once they have constructed evidence charts, students will find it much easier to construct topic sentences (with the common ideas) and paragraphs supported by relevant evidence.

Common ideas: Tenure	Editorial	Dutro	Ayers
Teacher pay and teacher performance. Tenure as obstacle	- WFS supports increasing salaries for successful teachers and firing those who are not up to standard, which is currently a rare practice (para. 9) - [Governor-elect Walker] “wants to tie teacher pay to performance” (para. 13)	- Dutro features Finland as a successful educational system that emphasises the need for “teacher education and professional development” (p. 3).	- Ayers supports tenure because it prevents institutions from firing teachers for unwarranted reasons like gender, race, or political opinions (para. 16) - Unlike the examples shown in WFS, Ayers claims that principals would fire teachers if they deemed it necessary (para. 17)
Teachers unions and tenure	- The editorial calls for greater flexibility within the teachers’ unions (para. 16)	- In WFS, a unionized model that defends low-quality teachers is characterised as one of the “villains,” the main obstacles to successful educational reform (p. 2).	- While Ayers agrees that unions should be “more transparent, more accountable, more democratic and participatory,” he argues that unions have generally played a beneficial role in public education (para. 10-11). -Ayers uses the education system in Finland, where both teachers unions and tenure exist, as an example of how a unionized workforce can be successful.
Holding on to good teachers rather than focusing on the bad ones		- Dutro speaks of “missing voices” such as that of teachers who are genuinely dedicated and who work within the public school system (p. 4).	- Ayers is concerned that WFS might contribute to the “teacher-bashing culture” that dissuades capable graduates from becoming teachers. Rather than a focus on firing, he suggests that the main problem is figuring out how to keep qualified teachers from leaving the schools (para. 27)