The Task
A Guide for Tutors in the
Rutgers Writing Centers
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Reading Tasks
As many experienced tutors will tell you, reading the texts and understanding them are two very different things, and that difference is not always apparent to students at the writing center. A student who does not read each text carefully will not be able to write adequate papers; unfortunately, convincing students to do this is one of the most challenging parts of being a tutor. Of course, all students should come to their tutoring sessions with the texts carefully read, but even those who try to do this may not be as prepared as they need to be. These are some strategies for helping students understand the texts as well as read them.

Getting to Know the Text
For students with reading comprehension problems, have them begin by looking at the title and subheads, and skim the beginning and end of the essay. You should ask questions to encourage students to think about the text in new ways:

- Why did the author choose this title?
- Why does the author choose these examples?
- What ideas or words are repeated throughout the essay?
- Why would the author include so much description or imagery?
- What is the author's tone?

You should have enough knowledge of the essay to know whether their guesses are right or wrong; if they are wrong, guide them with questions towards the correct answer. When students refer back to the text for answers, have them highlight the text they choose for later use. This will only work if the tutor has enough knowledge of the text to guide his or her students' assertions about the overall ideas of the text. If you are not that familiar with the essay, do not use this task.

Keywords: reading the essay
Starting from Scratch—Still Not Having Read the Essay
When students come in with only an essay to read (which they should not do), give
them five to ten minutes to read and take notes. Then, go back and ask them to explain
what they just read and to find one sentence that sums it up. Students should then find
at least one connection between that sentence or their notes and another text they have
already read. Having students refer back to the text to explain what they have read
rather than simply summarize it in their own words is a good idea because:

- it reinforces the author’s ideas;
- it provides a clear opportunity for you to ask them to expand on those ideas with
  their own input; and
- it allows a tutor who is unfamiliar with the text to see exactly what is being
  analyzed and how, preventing students from accidentally misinterpreting the text.

See also: Connection Tasks.
Keywords: connections, reading the essay

Breaking Down the Text
Ask students to find a paragraph they “guess” is probably important but that they didn’t
understand. (Assure them that especially difficult paragraphs often yield the most to
write about once we untangle them.) Ask them to work sentence by sentence to try to
summarize the paragraph. Eventually, you will want them to write about connections
between the “new, hard” paragraphs and the ones they already understood.

See also: Connection Tasks.
Keywords: connections, reading the essay

Attributing Quotes
Students often have trouble distinguishing between an idea an author describes and
their position on that idea. You will usually want to ask:

- Who said it?
- To whom?
- Under what circumstances?
- Does the author challenge, agree with, or modify the idea?
- How does it relate to the author’s position?
- How does it relate to Author B’s position?
- How does it relate to your position?

Students should hold onto these answers as they write their papers so that they can
refer back to them when they get confused. The list should be referenced each time a
quote from that paper is used or analyzed to make sure they are interpreting the text
correctly.

Understanding Big Words
Often times, a student’s misinterpretation of the text can be boiled down to simply not
knowing the meanings of certain words in the text. Dictionary exercises and key term
exercises can be helpful if used judiciously, but they should not be an end to themselves. Students work to understand words and **terms in order to put them in the context of the author's thesis**. It isn't helpful to have students look up every word they don't know – anybody can do that at home – but rather to find meanings that work in context in order to better understand an author's claim. If your students are having trouble with big words, have them look those words up in a dictionary, but only if you then have them choose the correct definition based on the context, and then reanalyze the text with that definition in mind.

*Keywords: vocabulary*

**Relating Passages**
Sometimes students understand discrete parts of the essays but don't see how they work together. Pick a few pages of the essay (not the whole thing!) and have your students write a one-sentence summary of each paragraph on those pages. Then ask them to write a sentence to go between each of the summary sentences, explaining how they fit together. This task also works when connecting two different essays, which the student insists have "nothing to do with each other."

*See also: Connection Tasks.  
Keywords: connections, summary*

**Doing “Close Reading”**
“Close reading” may be entirely new to your students, but teachers may ask them to do it for a paper. Close reading focuses on short passages and explores the implications of the text -- asking why an author chose every word, every tense, every metaphor or image and trying to make coherent sense of those choices. Why does Nafisi say she had to “deprive” (417) her house of items rather than simply saying she “removed” them? How does that word choice fit into the overall theme being developed in the text? Practicing close reading with your students will help them to feel more comfortable doing it on their own.

*Keywords: close reading*

**Charting Main Ideas**
To help students understand the main ideas of each text in order to connect them, try beginning by selecting an excerpt of a few paragraphs from each text and discussing how they are connected to the titles. By doing this, students are often unknowingly talking about the argument, and you are able to reveal this to them once the hard part has been done. After they outline these connections and write them down, have your students identify several important ideas from the first text and write them down, one after the other. Then choose an idea to discuss and ask how it relates to the other author (“if author B were to comment on author A’s idea, what would he say? Why?”). When they finish the chart, they will have an organized and thorough list of connections between the authors.
If students are confused by one or both texts, it may also help to begin with excerpts that the students have identified as particularly difficult. That way, the students will gain a better understanding of the texts and can immediately begin making use of those ideas.

See also: Connection Tasks.
Keywords: connections, main idea

Finding the Author’s Main Idea
Get students to write out in their own words what they believe to be the overall thesis of the essay. Then when you have a difficult passage identified, work with the students to get at what the passage is doing in the essay – not just what it says but why – and try to connect that to the overall thesis of the assigned reading. This will not only help the students to get the know and understand the essay, but it may help them find quotes that may be useful in their own papers, as well as get them used to linking the thesis statement and supporting arguments of a paper together so that they may better do it on their own.

See also: Quotation Tasks.
Keywords: main idea, quotes, thesis

Connection Tasks (bridge between reading and writing)
Helping students find connections between the texts can be very much like trying to push down a brick wall: sometimes, they just don’t get it. Every tutor has heard students lament that “These essays are not related at all!” and on the surface, they are right. For college-level writing, however, we want students to dig for connections beneath the surface, and many of them have never been asked to do that before. The following tasks may help students uncover connections between the essays they could not see before.

Clarifying Connections
Some students choose good quotes and see the connections themselves, but do not articulate them in their papers. Have these students write those two quotes out on a separate piece of paper, then ask them why they put those quotes in the same paragraph. Have them write several sentences answering why, then use what was written to formulate connections between the quotes. Most importantly, explain that the connection they just established is what the paragraph should be written about, not the authors themselves or the quotes they selected. If the students have problems creating topic sentences, this is a good way to address that as well.

See also: Quotation Tasks
Free-writing with Structure
Putting limits on what your students should free-write about can help eliminate useless ideas and focus their results to only the most useful topics. It helps to have students pick out a quote or idea from text A and free-write about why they think it is important or what it means. Then, have them do the same thing with text B, and finally, have them free-write on the connection between the two. For students who are so far gone that they cannot express any opinion about either text on their own, chances are they will be broad enough ideas that they will connect in some way. If they do not, however, have them go back to the free writing they did for text A and pick out something new from text B that they thinks might relate, and try the exercise again.

See also: Start Up Tasks.
Keywords: free-writing

Drawing Concept Maps
An effective way to help students see connections between papers, especially for visual learners, is by creating a concept map. Have your students begin by picking a theme from one essay and branch off from that theme other related ideas either mentioned in the essay or that they came up with on their own. Have them do the same thing with another essay, and then ask them to connect the essays through the related ideas branching off of the main 23 themes. This way, they can see not only how small, minor ideas relate, but how overall themes within the texts relate as well.

This can also be used to make connections between texts while sticking closely to the assignment question. Rather than having students identify themes within the texts, use key words from the assignment question as the starting points and then branch off ideas that should relate to each text. This should help them come up with ideas that relate the texts not only to each other but to the assignment question as well, making it more difficult for them to get off track.

See also: Tasks Using Teacher Materials.
Keywords: concept map, assignment questions

Breaking Jargon Barriers
Sometimes, the vocabulary or jargon that authors use can confuse students enough to get in the way of connections between the two texts. Utilization of a certain vocabulary can make the text seem like it could not apply to anything that does not also use that vocabulary. It may help those students to try rewriting important passages from author A using jargon employed by author B. This should help students see how each author’s ideas can relate, despite the differences in vocabulary or discourse.

See also: Reading Tasks. Keywords: reading the essay, vocabulary

Constructing Connection Columns
“Connection columns” is a favorite tutoring exercise of which there are many versions.
Have students divide a blank sheet of paper into two or three columns, one column for each author. They should then write out all the quotes that even potentially pertain to the assignment question. Have them look for words in each quote that share certain connotations, meanings and context with words in another author’s quote. Develop a chain of quotes. Maybe quote 3 from Author A goes with quote 19 from Author B. But then what links to quote 19? If there are three authors, the next one should be from Author C. If there are only two authors, the third quote can be from either A or B. The point is that your students are not developing isolated pairs of quotes. They are developing a single, unified theme, which can become a thesis as they explore these ideas.

Students may need help with the next step. Have them write one sentence that “goes between” every quote and the one after it, describing what kind of relationship exists between them. As your students advance, reach beyond comparison and contrast to complication, extension, illustration, etc.

If your students have trouble doing this with quotes, try having them write down ideas. Once the connections have been made, you can help them go back to ideas they used and find quotes from those sections of the texts.