



ARE YOUR STUDENTS DOING THE READING?

Seven Strategies for Motivating
Students to Complete Course Reading

Presented by Hypothesis

Introduction

The start of a new term evokes a sense of renewal for students, and the back-to-school period represents an incredible opportunity for educators as well.

In higher education, and in most aspects of our culture, we tend to focus on what is changing. And for good reason: There's a lot of uncertainty, including an ongoing pandemic. As new terms begin, many students will be stepping foot on a physical campus, but more students than ever before will be embarking on a learning journey that includes remote, hybrid and hyflex class settings. On top of it all, students are now facing the prospect of an uncertain economy and a rising cost of living.

However, much remains the same. Student engagement continues to lag, and students — overcome with distractions and finding it difficult to relate to course content — aren't doing the reading.

Reading, of course, marks another constant: Despite the rise of new modes of learning, reading remains a foundational aspect of education for almost all students.

Back to school is a time not just for new beginnings but also optimism. At Hypothesis, we are firm believers that students not only want to learn, they want to engage in discussions around what they're learning. We just need to lower the barriers to reading and discussion.

We are equally optimistic that educators like you will seize the opportunity afforded by a new term to take new actions that will help engage students in what they're learning and motivate them to complete course reading.



The power of reading

If you ask an educator to name the most challenging aspect of teaching, more times than not, finding ways to keep students engaged is the answer.

This is especially true now, as students have had to cope with the unprecedented challenges brought about by the pandemic. Isolation and quarantine, disruptions caused by quick shifts to remote learning (and to hybrid or back to in-person instruction), the realities of distance learning, and increased workloads have all taken their toll on students.

As a result, student engagement has suffered. According to a recent Gallup study, 36% of bachelor's degree students and 39% of associate degree students report that it was difficult or very difficult to remain enrolled heading into the fall of 2021. Even more concerning, this impact has not been evenly distributed: Students from historically marginalized groups are most likely to report struggling to stay enrolled.



 ¹Gallup, 2022: "The State of Higher Education 2022 Report"

Reading is foundational to learning, but students aren't doing it

Reading is highly correlated with student engagement. Those who are engaged are more likely to complete required course reading, whereas students who aren't as engaged are less likely.

The activity of reading is also a critical component of how we learn. Students who do the reading are more likely to show up to class prepared and participate in class discussions.

Unfortunately, the statistics confirm what many educators have suspected: Students aren't doing the reading.

One frequently cited study assessing reading compliance among first-year students found that 46% reported that they read assigned content, yet only around half of those students were able to demonstrate the most basic level of comprehension of the content they claimed to have read.² A more recent study found that only 20 to 30% of students read the course content they have been assigned.³



 ² [Hoeft, 2012 – “Why University Students Don’t Read”](#)

³ [Deale, 2021 – “To Read or Not to Read?”](#)

The impact of students not doing the reading

Student engagement is one of the strongest leading indicators we have of positive learning outcomes. Consequently, when students are disengaged, they are less likely to achieve their learning goals.

While student success is one of the primary goals of higher education, faculty and administrators should be alarmed by the state of student engagement for another reason: It influences how students perceive the value of higher education. Students who are disengaged are not just less likely to complete their degree, they are more likely to question if college is even for them.

For administrators, students who are not engaged are less apt to complete courses or continue their education, making the institution itself less likely to achieve its own goals.

Student engagement also directly impacts educators. For faculty, it means facing the dreaded “wall of silence” when trying to teach concepts or facilitate class discussion — and it ultimately leads to a less rewarding teaching experience.





Reasons for optimism

Despite the negative headlines, there are reasons for educators to stay hopeful about reading and student engagement.

First and foremost, students still want to learn. While public opinion about higher education is mixed, college still represents the best available pathway to improving financial security and quality of life.

Secondly, college students engage with and consume more content than at any time in history. It just so happens that this content is delivered by a streaming service, video game or social media platform, not by a college instructor.

Looking at the content students are most likely to engage with, we can see at least three key commonalities:



Flexible

Content that can be consumed wherever students are, in small doses or larger chunks



Authentic

Content that students can engage with in a way that expresses who they really are



Fostering connection

Content that builds connections between students and their peers



The power of social learning and social annotation to engage students

Learning does not happen in a vacuum. It is influenced by social dynamics, most notably between students and their peers.

Educators are increasingly using social learning tools that aim to make the learning experience more engaging by imbuing it with social layers. With social learning tools, students can ask questions, develop knowledge and help each other learn. Even in the business world, organizations are implementing social learning practices as a way of maximizing talent by letting people share knowledge and expertise through a structured and collaborative learning experience.

While social learning tools can be used to enhance many different aspects of the learning experience, social annotation tools focus squarely on bringing the promise of social learning to the act of reading.

Social annotation with Hypothesis is a new take on the time-tested practice of annotation. It enables sentence-level note taking, critique or questions on top of classroom reading, news, blogs, and other types of digital content in the learning environment. It increases student participation, expands reading comprehension, and builds critical-thinking skills and community in class. Annotating together makes reading active, visible and social, enabling students to engage with their texts, instructors, ideas, and each other in deeper, more meaningful ways.

Our students are reading more carefully and more deeply. They are helping each other make sense of the readings, so they already have an idea of how others are thinking, and discussion in class ends up being an extension of those ongoing conversations.

Jasmine Ma,
Education Professor, New York University

My students often struggle with reading and studying. But now I'm seeing that students have done the reading, and are engaging with the text and one another.

Hollie Benson,
Muskegon Community College

My students contribute to the conversation whether they are frequent class participants or the type that like to sit back and think before responding. I can't call on every student, but by annotating together, we can all join in the conversation.

Sarah Gross,
High Technology High School



In the next section, you will find seven strategies faculty and administrators can use to motivate students to complete assigned reading and engage more deeply with their courses. Given the power of social annotation with Hypothesis to make reading more collaborative and fun, it should come as no surprise that many of these strategies represent clear use cases for its use. This is a great time to give the margins a try.

Learn more about the power of social annotation for your classes:



COMMENT, REPLY, REPEAT: ENGAGING STUDENTS USING SOCIAL ANNOTATION WITH HYPOTHESIS

Here are seven strategies to help educators encourage students to complete course reading and develop a sense of agency over their own learning.

ONE Focus on building community

Yes, we want our students to do the reading. We want them to understand it. We want them to think critically about it.

But students learn best together, not alone, and a key element of motivating them to read is fostering a sense of belonging. Educators should aim to cultivate reading skills and practices in a community of practice with their peers.



I'm finding that my students really seem to like online texts that lend themselves to social annotation, so they feel less alone when doing the readings and actually engage in dialogue (voluntarily!) before class discussion. Hypothesis is a hit. I wish I had it in law school.

Raina Haque,
Professor of Practice of Technology,
Wake Forest University



Tip: Encourage students to connect with each other in substantive ways when they are annotating a required text using Hypothesis. For example, have students use social annotation to ask each other questions, share ideas, and collaborate around their learning while both staying rooted in the essential readings.

TWO

Annotate the syllabus — together

Assigned readings are not the only educational artifacts that can be collaboratively annotated.



Tip: Consider asking students to annotate your syllabus or other course materials. This is a great way to build engagement ahead of more rigorous or high-stakes assignments, and open up a dialogue with students from the start. If students are given points for annotating the syllabus, it is one of the best ways to engage them in the course before the first big assignment is due. Especially if you are not meeting face-to-face, annotating the syllabus or assignments with students can help you continue to have those important, meta-conversations about the course itself.

[Read more about annotating the syllabus.](#)

THREE

Prompt students to ask questions

Using social annotation allows anyone to put a simple question mark in the margin of a text. That question mark can flag a word or passage for discussion. And such discussions can be generative of important explication and analysis.



Tip: If you're using a social annotation tool like Hypothesis, you can have students highlight, tag and annotate passages that are confusing to them in their readings. An annotation need not be, and often is not, an answer. While the instructor can respond to such student annotations, a possible follow-up exercise could have students respond to each other's questions instead of or in addition to an instructor response.



Bonus: Directing students to annotate in this way creates a sort of heat map for the educator that can be used to zero in on troubling sections and subjects or spark class discussion.



FOUR

Have students create a glossary for course readings

Having students share the burden of the research necessary for comprehension can help students better understand the reading, especially when it comes to difficult texts. And there is something incredibly powerful about students beginning to imagine themselves as scholars, responsible for guiding a real audience through a text — whether that audience is their own peers or a broader intellectual community. Students starting to create a glossary is a great annotation exercise for early in the term.



Tip: A glossary assignment using social annotation can be as simple as asking students to post an annotation whenever they stumble over a new word. This exercise can be completed on any text — from works of literature to scientific research papers. Think of this activity as creating a kind of inline Wikipedia on top of your course reading.



FIVE

Embrace multimodal annotation practices

One of the unique aspects of online writing is the ability to include multimedia into the composition process. At Hypothesis, we have found that many educators and students are excited to make use of animated GIFs and other media when annotating readings.



Tip: Have students annotate with images, videos, GIFs and memes, or encourage them to integrate such multimedia into their written annotations. Images can simply be representative; you can also teach students to think about how images can make arguments and serve other rhetorical purposes.

One idea is to spend a lesson introducing the notion of digital writing to students, with particular attention to the use of images, covering everything from usage policies to writing Alt Text. Assessing such multimedia compositions and annotations can be very different from typical grading. It is helpful for students to know ahead of time how multimedia annotations will be assessed. Instructional designer Amanda Licastro has great [strategies for using multimodal annotations](#).

SIX

Look closer, dig deeper

Using social annotation with Hypothesis, students can select small pieces of meaningful evidence from a document for specific analysis. Educators can direct students to:

- identify textual features (word choice, repetition, imagery, metaphor, etc.) or
- identify relevant broader contexts (historical, biographical, cultural, etc.) in the text

Collaborative close reading can be especially effective, in that multiple students can build off each other's interpretations to demonstrate just how deep textual analysis can go.



SEVEN

Encourage creativity

Students can contribute creatively to assigned texts by inserting into their annotation an imaginative response.

One creative writing exercise might be to have students annotate in the voices of characters from a novel being read. Another is having students reimagine passages written as newspaper stories. [Nathan Blom's Annotated Lear Project at LaGuardia Arts High School](#) is a fantastic example of students creatively responding to a text through annotation.



Tip: Have students annotate their reading with their own poetry, prose or visual art. Students can respond as themselves or through role play, which provides them with a safe way to give voice to their own perspectives or explore different points of view.

When students use their imaginations and annotate texts with their own poems, drawings, photographs or even videos, this can result in some wonderful illustrated editions of course texts.

This exercise can be done individually or in groups.

Conclusion

When students annotate assigned texts, they are more likely to complete the reading — because they feel agency over and engagement with the texts. And that increases class participation, expands reading comprehension, and builds critical-thinking skills and community in class.

Through social annotation with Hypothesis, educators can implement many of the strategies discussed here to inspire students to engage with texts, instructors, ideas and each other in deeper, more meaningful ways.

Hypothesis is a social annotation tool that renders reading collaborative and fun, and makes every student want to raise their hand.

Hypothesis social annotation is designed to enable students to engage with content wherever it lives, using the familiar tools they rely on to express themselves in their daily lives.



Benefits for faculty

Hypothesis fosters high-quality discussions that include all students — even those less likely to engage through more traditional modes.



Benefits for administrators

Hypothesis' ability to increase student engagement helps administrators improve outcomes like course completion, student retention and academic development.

Learn more about how you can implement social annotation strategies for encouraging students to complete course reading by visiting us at web.hypothes.is or emailing us at education@hypothes.is.

