

We've all read the startling stories about lax standards in higher education. As faculty members, we've struggled with the growing expectation among undergraduates that a minor amount of work should be the norm for college-level courses. In their 2011 book, *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses*, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa found that half of the students in the study's sample "had not taken a single course during the prior semester that required more than 20 pages of writing, and one-third hadn't taken one that required even 40 pages of reading per week."

Despite such findings, I take issue with the idea that once you've assigned a certain number of pages of weekly reading, you've accomplished something resembling "academic rigor." Faced with the question — How much reading should we assign? — I think most instructors would agree that the best answer is: "It depends."

The decision requires a delicate balance between the various ability levels of students in the class, the goals and outcomes of the course, the kinds of texts being analyzed, and the methods brought to that analysis. Instead of debating whether to assign more (or less), perhaps we need to focus on how to make reading matter — that is, how to make it a more meaningful exercise in our classrooms.

I'm fairly new to the tenure track, after a stint as a visiting professor. So my advice here — offered mostly to new and would-be faculty members — is framed by my own experience in the classroom, both as a teacher and as a student (not so long ago).

What that experience taught me: If you are new to the classroom, it is possible that you are giving too much reading. New instructors tend to be very optimistic about the speed at which undergraduates read and their comprehension of the material. The worst-case scenario is when the amount of reading you've assigned mirrors that of a graduate-level course.

The first thing to do is take a deep breath and temper your expectations for how much a student can or is willing to absorb. That is not to say that students shouldn't be challenged, but assigning a lot of pages is only one of the ways to be more rigorous in terms of what and how they are reading.

During the first few weeks of class, I make sure that all of my readings have been scanned and are available online so that students can access the texts and avoid the "I don't have the book" problem. Similarly, to ensure that each student gets a copy of the book, I try to make my syllabus available online at least two weeks beforehand, with all relevant book information, especially the ISBNs, clearly displayed. I also try to ensure that at least one copy of each book is available in the library.

The number of times your class meets in a week — and the length of those sessions — should shape your assignments and determine how you approach the reading. When I'm teaching a 200-level literature course, I will usually ask students to read 80 to 120 pages between Thursday's class meeting and the following session, on Tuesday. However, I assign only a third as much reading — 30 to 40 pages — from Tuesday to Thursday. That shorter assignment not only acknowledges the 48 hours that students have to complete the task but also gives me a little extra time in class to cover any material from the previous session that I'd glossed over.

Acknowledging students' schedules is an important way of asking them to complete a task in a reasonable amount of time. During breaks in the semester, I might assign slightly more reading, as well as an online assignment that asks them to respond to specific prompts and demonstrate an understanding of the material. I use their responses to anticipate problems in their comprehension. During certain times of the semester when I know students might be less able to complete a lengthy reading assignment — such as the weekend before midterms — I might ask them to focus on a short article, a poem, or a set of excerpts.

A short text in no way implies less-rigorous attention to detail. If anything, the close reading that text demands may require students to be more exacting.

I've also found that it's effective to structure the amount of reading around the fluctuations in students' energy. In my experience, students are generally most engaged and enthusiastic readers during the first four or five weeks of class, and that energy progressively wanes starting around midterms.

Like most faculty members in English, I have a certain amount of freedom when it comes to assigning texts for, say, a British-literature survey course. Many other academics are in fields that use a specific textbook or a predetermined set of texts. In either case, faculty members can divide the reading into a kind of two-tiered system — primary and supplementary. Some of the best classes I took as an undergraduate and as a graduate student offered a rich array of secondary literature (available online, in the library, or in a bibliography) to pursue beyond the primary texts.

That way, you accommodate enthusiastic readers and balance their needs with those of slower readers. When motivated students complain that you are covering the material too slowly, offer them supplementary reading or extra-credit assignments that emphasize close reading and careful explication of a text. That will help the faster readers to understand that they can build new relationships with a text by rereading it.

Much like a writing prompt, a reading prompt is another way to make the reading matter. For advice on how to do that, take some time to watch *Justice*, a [video series](#) by the Harvard professor Michael J. Sandel, based on his book, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* Sandel begins each video by summarizing the material covered in the previous session, and he ends by asking questions or providing a brief summary of issues in the next video. You can do the same thing with reading prompts at the end of class. Give students a sense of what the next assigned reading is going to be about, what challenges they may face in reading it, and what ideas are crucial to better understanding it.

Beware, however, of distributing material that is so thorough in its coverage of a forthcoming reading that it encourages students to skim the text or skip reading it entirely.

Sometimes it might be more productive to ask students a question that primes them for an issue they will encounter in the text. It might be as simple as this: "The type of narrator in this novel is very different from the previous one. Be prepared to discuss two or three key differences you see in narration between the two works in question." In short, note a difference between two readings, but don't say what it is. In doing so, you encourage students to make inferences and, in some cases, mistakes, so that they may learn from them. Key here are the ideas of surprise and an "invitation to the academic conversation," a concept emphasized by Ken Bain in his brilliant book [What the Best College Teachers Do](#).

Anyone who loves teaching knows that it is a craft that demands the most of us, and that we are always striving to improve if we take what we do seriously. For that reason, the sheer quantity of the reading that students do is not always the central issue. A close reading of a short poem can unfurl remarkable insights and depths that hundreds of pages assigned from the most difficult tome cannot.

For me it comes down to striking a balance. Challenge students with good questions. Give them enough time to digest the assigned material. And account for the shifting demands of each individual classroom.

What strategies do you use in trying to make the reading matter? Share your thoughts in the comments below.

Charlie Wesley is an assistant professor of English at Daemen College, in Amherst, N.Y.