Teaching Tip 2: How Much Assigned Reading is Too Much or Too Little?
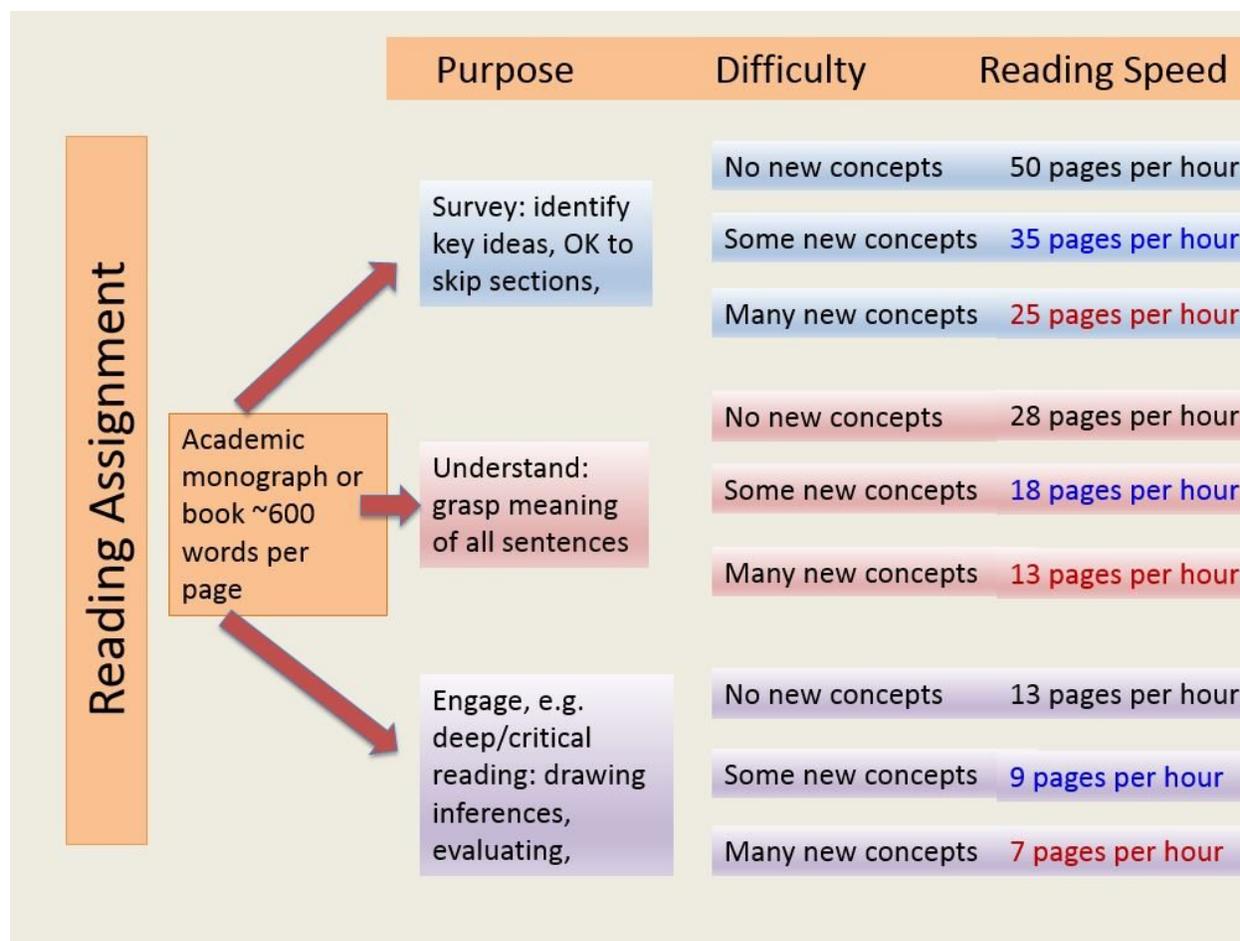
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This tip focuses on the question of how much reading to assign. It is generally assumed that on average students should spend two hours of out-of-class time engaging the course materials for every hour of in-class time. For a student taking five classes that each meet three hours a week, this means that students would spend 30 hours each week outside of class engaged in course work, reading, reviewing, solving problems, homework, etc. It is worth noting that this totals to 45 hours (in-class plus out-of-class) per weeks for university academic work, which is more a fulltime job. However, the reality is that university students spend on average 14 or 15 hours a week outside of class on academic work and often, less especially if they are working part-time. For effective teaching and learning, student and teacher expectations need to be in reasonable alignment. Since one of the most common academic activities students do is assigned readings, so it is worthwhile to consider how much reading to assign.

The Center for Teaching Excellence at Rice University developed an interactive website *"How Much Should We Assign? Estimating Out of Class Workload[1]"* to assist faculty in estimating class reading workload. reading workload estimator takes into account the words per page (wpp), the difficulty of the material, and the academic purpose. Reading speed is a function wpp, the difficulty of the content, the academic purpose and the background knowledge of the reader. Assigned readings can have different academic purposes from raising awareness (scanning), to increasing understanding, to critical engagement e.g. deep/critical reading. The purpose effects the number of pages per hour (pph) students can read. The site does not take into consideration language ability, something that is critical for readings that are not in a student's native language. The site provides reading hour calculation guidelines based on published reading rates. For example, the average adult reading rate is 30 pph and student reading rate is 20 pph for general reading materials such as a book or magazine article. Of course, individual reading rates vary and academics vary their reading rates both within a reading and across reading types. As seasoned readers we know what parts to skip, what can be skimmed, where to slow down and what to focus on. Many undergraduate and beginning graduate student read assigned readings at the same pace irrespective of purpose or difficulty.

	Purpose	Difficulty	Reading Speed
	Survey: identify key ideas, OK to skip sections,	No new concepts	50 pages per hour
		Some new concepts	35 pages per hour
		Many new concepts	25 pages per hour
Academic monograph or book ~600 words per page	Understand: grasp meaning of all sentences	No new concepts	28 pages per hour
		Some new concepts	18 pages per hour
		Many new concepts	13 pages per hour
	Engage, e.g. deep/critical reading: drawing inferences, evaluating,	No new concepts	13 pages per hour
		Some new concepts	9 pages per hour
		Many new concepts	7 pages per hour

(Reading Assignment — vertical label)

The graphic shows the estimated pph reading times for a typical monograph or book with 600 wpp. As one can see if the reading purpose it to simply survey for key ideas then on average, students can survey/skim a 50-page article in an hour if there are no new words or concepts. This drops to 25 pages per hour if there are many new words or concepts. However, if the purpose is to critically read, question, reflect and analyze the pph rates drop to 13 pph if there are no new words of concepts and 7 pph or less if there are many new words or concepts. If the reading has low word density text, such as a paperback novel, then the pph rate increases by a factor of 1.3. For example, if the assignment was a 100-page paperback with no new concepts or words with an estimated reading speed of 37 pph the workload would be approximately 3 hrs. If the assignment was to read 40 pages of academic reading (600wwp) for understanding and the material contained some new concepts or words estimated reading speed is 18 pph and this would require approximately 2.2 hrs. of student reading time. If the assigned material is an academic journal article (750 wpp) and the purpose is to the engage material that includes some new concepts or words, then the estimated reading time would be 1.4 hrs. for a 10-page article. The Rice CTE site provides a convenient table and interactive tool for estimating reading workload time. Adapted from *"How Much Should We Assign? Estimating Out of Class Workload"*

The rates are based on students reading material in their native language. If they are reading material in a second language the rates will drop depending on their second language skill level. For students who are at an intermediate level the rates will likely drop by 50 percent and for beginner level students even more and the workload times would increase accordingly.

Of course, these are at best soft estimates and different materials have different wpp and different levels of difficulty and individual students have different levels of reading and language ability. None-the-less, it is worthwhile to occasionally step back and estimate the assigned reading workload. Is it too little? or so much that only the most dedicated students will do it? For courses that use discussion pedagogy if students have not done the reading it makes for a frustrating and difficult class. The adage *"Less is More"* may be useful in ensuring that students actually do the readings.

[1]Rice Center for Teaching Excellence https://cte.rice.edu/blogarchive/2016/07/11/workload

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