According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, in 2003, only 31% of college graduates demonstrated a proficient level of literacy. That's not entering students; that's graduates. That's not mastery; that's proficiency, the minimal acceptable level.

There are a lot of reasons for that, and a lot of them boil down to various groups blaming each other, which is rather pointless. Rather than worry about who's to blame, let's deal with the problem: most college students don't read well. Yes, the focus of this course is obviously on writing, but if you can't read, you'll have nothing to write about, so there's not much point having a course in one without the other.

Many college activities are focused on trying to move you beyond a particular reading, but while that certainly is a large part of what you need to learn in college, it's impossible to move beyond a text you've never gotten into and you've never been through. By "into," don't misunderstand me; I don't mean you're going to think everything you read is just breath-takingly fascinating. (I think these techniques will help many of you, but they aren't magic.) By into a text, I mean that you've introduced yourself to it in such a way that you're ready to begin thinking about the reading and its topic.

**Into the Text**

Most of you know that, if you just wake up in the morning and immediately jog ten miles, you'll have wasted your exercise time; not only will you not derive much benefit from it, but odds are you'll be injured and unable to exercise at all for quite awhile. Before you begin any extensive exercise session, you warm up. (I hope you do, anyway. If you don't yet, you'll learn to eventually, the hard way.)

Just as you warm up before you exercise, you don't just dive into an article or textbook selection; you should prepare yourself before you start. One way to do use a little chart like this:

| Topic __________________________ | Name ______________ | Date ______________ |
| Article/Chapter/Presentation ____________________________ | Pages ______________ |

**KWQ**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>K</th>
<th>W</th>
<th>Q</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do you know about the topic?</td>
<td>What do you want or need to know about the topic?</td>
<td>Create quiz questions based on the reading.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Take about five minutes before you read and just write down anything you already know about the topic. Don't edit or correct yourself; just write and write and write (or type, if you're on the computer). (We'll do this a fair amount this semester; you'll hear it called freewriting or fastwriting.) There are no right or wrong answers; just put what you know.

One thing this "K" part can be very useful for is seeing what assumptions you have before you read an essay. Once, before a class read Maya Angelou's story "Graduation," one student said, "Well, she's African-American, so she probably hates white people." I then had to try find a polite way to say, "Thank you; I appreciate that you had the courage to speak up and participate in class. However, you're an idiot." (No, I have never, ever said that to a student. I will not lie to you and say I've never thought it.) Anyone who has ever read Angelou knows that she is very inclusive; often, her writing isn't about race at all but about more common human experiences. This particular story has a part where the citizens of a town are brought down very low, but then someone leads them in an inspirational song, and Angelou makes the comment that "They were back on top again." This student assumed this meant "on top of the white people" in a Black Supremecist sort of way. However, that's not what the line means at all; she means that they were back on top of their own games. They weren't on top of anyone else; they were merely back to their normal equilibrium. This student's assumptions had caused her to misread the essay.

After you've thought about your previous knowledge for a few minutes, think about what you want to get out of this reading. One good way to do this is to figure out what questions—who, what, where, when, why, how—you'd like to have answered from this reading.

(I left a little blank column in the table; that's the part where you read.)

When you're done reading, then write questions you think might be on the quiz. (True/false or multiple choice or good; you can knock those out pretty quickly.) What do you think is important enough to know?

One variant of KWQ is known as KWL+. Here's how this chart looks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Article/Chapter/Presentation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pages</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>K</th>
<th>W</th>
<th>L</th>
<th>+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What do you know about the topic?</td>
<td>What do you want or need to know about the topic?</td>
<td>What did you learn from the reading?</td>
<td>What do you still want to know?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first three columns (I'm counting the blank one where you actually read) are the same. In the L column, write a brief summary of what you just read, attempting to answer as many of the questions from the W column as you can. In the + column, write what you still need or want to know about this topic. If a question you asked originally from your W column didn't get answered, you can just move it over here. If, after reading the assignment, you have additional questions that weren't answered, those go here as well.

Through the Text

I said I wasn't going to play the blame game here, but schools do play a weird little trick on you; most schools give pretty good reading instruction up until about the sixth grade—and then it stops. Think about that; just as the things you're reading are beginning to get complicated, we stop teaching you reading! How cruel is that? Reading instruction becomes instruction in reading Literature. Now I'm an English teacher, so make no mistake; I'm very much in favor of your learning to read Literature. However, in your life, you're going to have to read much more nonfiction than literature, and we're not particularly good helping you learn to read that. Here are a few techniques that may help.

Skimming

Okay, now you've taken a few minutes and done the KW part of the KWQ chart about the first few chapters of NFG (that's the abbreviation I use for The Norton Field Guide to Writing). You've probably thought about what you already know about words like "Purpose" and "Audience." Now just skim the chapters. Quickly. Don't read a word. Give yourself five minutes to just look at the assignment. How long is it? What divisions is each chapter divided into? Are there any charts? How is this book organized? What's with all those funny colored words and stuff in the margins? How long are the sections relative to each other? (Often, longer sections are more important. Not always, but often.) Just take about five minutes and get the lay of the land.

Chunking

Here's a big one. Often, students sit down and read the whole assignment, start to finish, all in one sitting. Or at least, they look at all the words. Usually, nothing actually sinks in after the page or two. Trying to read the whole thing in fell swoop is not only ineffective, it's cruel. For each type of reading you do, you need to figure out your chunk—the amount of text you can fit in your head at once.

When you eat, you don't just cram all the food in at once. (Well, sometimes you might try, but this is generally only good for the Mylanta people.) You take a bite, you chew, you swallow. Maybe you take a drink or wipe your mouth with a napkin. Maybe you stop eating all together for a few minutes and tell a joke or listen to your uncle talk about something that happened to him in 1972. Same concept: read a little bit, think about it, ponder. Then read another little bit. Divide your reading into "chunks."
I can't tell you how big your chunks are going to be, because it's different for everyone. It's also usually different depending on the type of reading. If I'm reading a novel, I might read 10 or 20 pages in a chunk. If I'm reading a very dense or very difficult article, I might only read a few paragraphs at a time before I get up and think about something else for a few minutes. (The other reading file will have information about techniques you can use to help you keep track of your chunks)

**Highlighting**

This is a skill that really should be taught, but seldom is. Very often, when I glance at the textbooks of students, every word is yellow. Every paragraph is just a steady river of yellow. This is pointless. The purpose of highlighting is for you to be able to review the material later by reading just the highlighted portions, which should give a summary of the reading. People don't know how to do this, so they just highlight everything. All this does is reduce the resale value of your book.

As you're first reading, do not, I say, do not have a highlighter in your hand. If you're highlighting, there's one very important thing you're not doing: you're not reading. Trying to highlight while you read does nothing but interrupt the flow of your reading.

**First point:** if you will never need to review the material for whatever reason, don't bother highlighting it.

**Second point:** after you've finished reading each chunk, however long your chunks are, then go back and decide what's important. Don't highlight the whole sentence; there are dumb little words in that sentence, like "the" and "an" and "and" and "be" and junk. You don't care about those words. They aren't important. If you mark every "the" you ever read as important enough to review, you'll never get anything else done. Highlight only the important information in that chunk. The idea is, when you come back to this chunk in two weeks to review for the midterm, what concepts are you going to need to do well on your test?

Here's an example. (This example and many of the ideas in this file are from Craig Goodwin, who teaches Reading at Truckee Meadows Community College.) The bold words are the ones he highlit.

**Classification** consists of **placing together** in categories those **things that resemble each other**. While this sounds simple, in actual practice it may be quite difficult. First of all, we have to decide what kind of similarities are the most important for our purpose. One **example** of the earliest classification schemes placed in one category all those **organisms** which **lived in the same habitat**. Thus, **fish**, **whales**, and **penguins** were classified as **swimming creatures**. This type of classification was often based on the principle that creatures possessing **analogous organs** should be classified together. Analogous organs are **organs that have the same function**. The **fins** of fishes and the **flippers** of whales and penguins are analogous organs because they are all **used for swimming**.
If you string those words together, you've more or less recaptured the meaning of the passage. Your eye can quickly skim the key words and be refreshed on the concepts.

**Beyond the Text**

As you progress through your college coursework, you will come across readings sooner or later that will be challenging; they may not make any sense to you at all. It's okay if you don't understand all of the details, but you may not walk into a college classroom without having a clue what was in the reading (or, worse yet, without having done the reading at all). I also hope you have the common sense to realize that not understanding a reading doesn't mean you don't go to class; it's especially important to attend on days when the professor will be discussing material you had problems with. If you read something and are left with that stunned, deer-in-headlights, "I wonder what just happened" feeling, you need to do some additional work to prepare for that class. (A friend of mine who is a reading specialist says, "If you've read it, but you know you don't understand it, you need to move some data around in your head to help you learn it."

Most of the following techniques are ways to move data around in your head.)

None of these techniques work for everybody; that isn't how the human brain works. I would be surprised if nothing on this list helps you, but on the other hand, I can't predict which will be useful for you in particular. It's my job to make sure you get enough practice with these to know which ones work for you.

The other complaint that I usually hear is, "But that takes so much longer!" Yeah, it may. For some of you, it will take less time as you practice, but for some of you, it may just always take longer. You know what? Of course reading with comprehension in such a way that may actually help you learn the information will take longer than staring at the words. My nieces could have stared at the words when they were toddlers, too, and that wouldn't have taken very long, either—and I would argue that, for many of you, looking at the words quickly gives you so little understanding that you may as well be toddlers. Giving yourself the tools to succeed in college, and in life, takes longer than blind oblivion. Make your choice.

- The best place to start is often with the aspects of writing composition classes often focus on. What seem to be the purpose, audience, genre, stance, and media of this reading?

- The first problem people often come across when they read is there are vocabulary items and cultural references they don't understand. Sometimes the editors will include footnotes that explain these items, but not always. Make a list of the words you don't know or the people, places, events, or other items you that seem to be references you don't understand. By the end of the essay, you'll know which ones you need to look up. Some items, you can understand just by the context clues (that means "what's going on around them in the sentence"). I'd start a list and use the same list for every reading; if the same word or reference comes
up in more than one reading, you really need to know what that means or refers to. Look it up, or if dictionary.com or wikipedia.com don't help you, ask your professor what the word or item means.

What tends to happen is that, when we come across a word or reference we don't understand, we just ignore it; sometimes, we don't even let it register in our mind that we just read something we didn't understand. It's difficult to do, but part of college needs to be learning to see those things you've been skipping. You can't ever learn them or figure out what the reference is if your brain simply won't tell you it saw unfamiliar material.

- Summarize the reading. The first time I tried to read Shakespeare, I was having a miserable time; I could sort of understand the individual parts, but if a character didn't appear for a few scenes, forget it; I'd forget who that person was or how the person was related to everyone else in the play. The only way I could finish the plays successfully was to write myself a scene-by-scene summary: here's who appeared in this scene, here's what everybody wanted, here's what everybody got. That helped me remember them long enough to finish the play and get an overview. Did I understand everything? Of course not. But at least I had a starting point.

- Sometimes, summarizing won't work; if you don't understand enough to know what the individual parts are saying, summarizing them won't help you at all. My sophomore year in college, I was assigned the first book of the Faerie Queen. This was a very long epic poem written a hundred years or so before Shakespeare, so it was even more old-fashioned in its language; I really couldn't remember from line to line who the characters were and what they were doing. The only way I could make sense of it was to paraphrase—I literally rewrote every line in my own words. Again, it took a long time, and it wasn't very much fun, but the next day in class, I was the only person who had a clue what had happened, which made me look smarter to the professor than I probably actually was. (That's not a bad thing.)

- When I was in high school, those of us who were going to college all took Physics our senior year. However, we were a small country school district, and there really weren't any teachers qualified to teach Physics to seniors, so the school board sent the math teacher, whose schedule wasn't quite full, for some extra classes so he would legally qualify to teach the class. That would all be well and good if it had worked, but he never really quite understood Physics himself. Instead of explaining the material in our book, he would tell us lame stories about wiring the batteries at Antioch College, the same stories over and over again. Instead of writing tests that reflected what he had taught us (which was nothing), he would just give the pre-packaged tests that came with the Physics book—tests that were hard if you'd had a good teacher and impossible if you'd had no teacher. We were in the latter situation.
I knew when I went to college the next year I was going to have to be familiar with at least one science; since we also hadn't had very good Biology or Chemistry teachers either, I was going to need to know Physics. How could I learn it, though, when the teacher didn't seem to understand it himself well enough to explain it?

All I had was the textbook, so that's what I used—I outlined it. Paragraph by paragraph, I summarized each section and then tried to figure out how the sections were related. Somewhere in my office at home, I have an outline of my complete high school Physics textbook. It was boring, and it made me mad that I had to do it—but by the end of the year, I could pass those stupid, ridiculously hard tests the publishers included with the book. I got the science award for my high school class not because I had any particular skill or knowledge, but because I was the only student in the class who had actually read the book.

- If there are reading comprehension questions at the end of the reading assignment, copy them onto index cards. Sometimes, it helps if you have a specific thing you’re looking for while you read; if it’s the sort of class that gives quizzes or tests, you’re also making yourself flashcards as you go along. (I was that little geek in college who sat in the hall practicing with my flashcards between classes. I did really well in classes that asked those sorts of questions.)

- Read it out loud. Sometimes hearing a piece will be helpful, even if it’s in your own voice. (For some learning styles, even if your brain doesn't process the words as your mouth says them, it will understand them when your ear hears them.)

- Try a double-sided journal entry of key passages from the beginning, middle, or end. If this helps you, there’s no reason you can’t do every paragraph. I think this technique is useful, so I’ll talk you through it now.

This can be done either by hand or on a word processor. Take a piece of paper and divide into two columns, either by hand or by using the word processor's "columns" button. In the left column, you're going to include quotes, paraphrases, summaries, or key ideas from the article. Whatever you think is important or you might want to remember later, put it in the left column. If there's a paragraph you just don't understand, put it in the left column. After each quote, put the page number in parentheses so you can remember where it's from; if you decide you want to use that quote in a paper, you don't have to go back into the article and try to find your quote. If the article includes a story you think is interesting or statistics you think would be helpful, jot them all down in the left column, including the page number after each reference. I usually try to get material from the beginning, the middle, and the end of the article so I know I'm not leaving any part of the article out, which might make my interpretations look unfair. Double-check and make sure your quotations are accurate, including spelling and punctuation.
In the right column, click beside the first quote and fastwrite. You may have heard this called freewriting before, and I tend to use the terms interchangeably. What it means is just to write. Don't stop and edit yourself, don't worry about whether or not you're doing it wrong—just write (or type). Don't let the pen lift from the page or your fingers lift from the keyboard. Write. If you haven't done this before, your first few attempts are sometimes not so great, but eventually, this helps you get quick snapshots of what you're thinking at the time. Just click by the first quote and freewrite—what strikes you about this particular quote? What are your first impressions? Your second impressions? Your third impressions? What does this quote make you remember or think about? How does this connect with other things you've read? How do you feel about it?

After you've worked through the quotes, then leave some space in the left column and think about what you "believe" about this essay. What do you agree with? What is useful to you? What seems reasonable; what can you go along with? What merits do you see in this article as a whole?

After you've played the "believing" game, play the "doubting" game. What questions does this study raise for you? What do you doubt? What evident seems thin? What assumptions does the author make with which you can't agree? What counterclaims would you raise?

After you've played the believing and doubting games, finding both the strengths and weaknesses of the article, freewrite on it one last time as a whole. Having thought through what you like and what you don't, how are you feeling about the essay as a whole right now?

You will be writing quite a few double-sided journals over the semester, so let me tell you what I'll be looking for. I usually assign 20 points to each double-sided journal. The first five points concern your quotes: Have you quoted them accurately? Is there at least one from each section of the article? If there's a part of the essay you don't seem to understand, have you included at least one quote from that section? The next five points are on your Believing writing, and the five after that are on your Doubting work. The last five points are about your overall summary of the article.

Related to the double-sided journal is the Visual Journal. Draw two columns again, but this time, make the left column much, much bigger than the right. As you read each chunk, use the left column to sketch the key information for that section. (You can't draw a usable picture for the entire essay; this usually works in one to three paragraph sections, tops.) In the right column, just caption your drawing with the key points. (When my colleague Craig Goodwin first mentioned this idea, I thought it might help some students, but how could you possibly draw most articles or assignments? He had us try to draw that paragraph above about classification. It can be done—and some of the pictures were so funny I’ll never forget them.)
In the *Norton Field Guide*, chapters 30-34, 36, and 37 focus on the modes of writing, which we'll be discussing throughout the semester. Sometimes, searching for these modes can help a piece of writing make sense. Are two things being compared and contrast? Is the writer trying to prove that one causes another? Is the point of the essay to define a word or describe something? Something the modes give us clues what's happening in an essay.

Look in the essay for quotations, paraphrases, and summaries. Sometimes seeing whether a piece of writing uses other sources can help a reader understand some things about that essay or book chapter.

Look for similes, metaphors, or images. An "image" is just a picture or some sensory sensation we're given, maybe a description of what something looked like. In similes or metaphors, two things are compared; similes are compared with the words "like" or "as"; in metaphors, two things are compared without these words (usually just with a form of the verb "be"). A simile would be, "My love is like a heat wave, burnin' in my heart." A metaphor would be, "Love is a river that drowns the tender reed." Generally, the more different the things are, the more revealing and interesting the simile or metaphor will be. "A pen is like a pencil" is a pretty lame, boring simile because we can all see a pen is like a pencil. However, "A pen is like a sword" is more interesting; most of us are going to have to have that one explained to us a little before we'll buy the comparison. In all three of these literary devices, we're given pictures; in the first two, we have a comparison. Trying to figure out what two things are being compared is often very helpful to working out what is happening in the essay.

Many readings contain an argument. Some students are confused about what this means. It only means that the essay has one or more logical points it is trying to prove. If the essay has an argument (and it usually will unless it is fiction or purely narrative), it can help to be able to evaluate that argument.

The place to start is often to look for the claim. This is usually the one point the writer is trying to prove. This will often be the same as the thesis sentence, the one sentence around which the essay seems to revolve. Sometimes authors will directly state their thesis sentences, while other times you will have formulate your own. If you decide that the thesis sentence is a sentence in the essay, you have to beware of the most common trap people beginning to read on the adult level fall into: they choose a sentence that seems to summarize all the parts they understand but that is a poor summary of the essay as a whole because the reader didn't understand very much of the essay.

After you have decided what the essay's claim is, look at how the claim is supported. What evidence does the author present? How does the author present this evidence? (To use language from earlier this week, what is the author's
stance? Is the writer trying to be objective, or does the writer obviously stand on one side or the other of the debate?)

What assumptions is the writer making? If you were reading an essay with the thesis sentence, "Nobody should shoot toddlers," you should be aware of the assumptions behind that statement. There are many assumptions behind that simple statement: no one deserves to die who is innocent, and no toddler can be anything but innocent, really (yeah, some of them have some frustrating days, granted, but toddlers are still essentially innocent). Even though no sane people are going to dispute the statement "Nobody should shoot toddlers," some of the assumptions behind the statement may be questionable; if, for example, one of the writer's assumptions is "No one deserves to die for any reason," many people would dispute that—for some, criminals deserve die, or those who have been cruel themselves.

An important step of tracing the validity of an argument is to figure out what statements the author makes are facts and which are opinions. Facts are verifiable; you can look them up in a dictionary or almanac or at Wikipedia.com. "The capital of Nevada is Carson City" is a fact. Opinions, on the other hand, aren't necessarily factually true; look for words like "should." "Should" can't be verifiably confirmed because it is an opinion. "Las Vegas or Reno should be the capital of Nevada" would be an opinion. Be careful that writers don't present opinions as facts.

- It can also be useful to check readings for logical fallacies, which is just a fancy term for a mistake in the reasoning. We'll spend some time on logical fallacies in a few weeks.

- It can also be useful to think for a minute about agendas. Who cares about this topic? Who has a stake? Who is going to disagree with this writer? Who is going to agree?

I need to mention a word to you that many of you have been taught to use incorrectly: relevance. Many of you have been taught, or have led yourselves to believe, that if a reading is about somebody who looks or thinks differently than you do, then you're somehow "excused," or the reading somehow isn't about you. Unless you are 12, that won't fly. Now hear this: Everything ever written is relevant to you; if you are unable to see the link, the fault is solely yours. This is part of what you're supposed to learn in college. "I just couldn't get into this because it wasn't relevant to me"—then leave college until you grow up, because you're too immature to be wasting your time and money here; you're also wasting the space in the class, which some adult might have needed. Make the effort.