Know Your Text Before You Teach It

On your own or with colleagues, use this protocol to examine the demands and opportunities of a text you plan to teach.

First Read

Read the Piece to Understand and Appreciate It

- Annotate key points in the argument or narrative and "cool spots" in its expression.
  - What are the text's main points and appeals? Where does the speaker's craft impress you (e.g., with musical parallelism, the perfect metaphor, a striking juxtaposition, a poignant detail, etc.)?

Mark Key Vocabulary and Language Demands

- Note words that are key to understanding the argument.
  - Which words about or in the text will students themselves need to use in order to discuss this topic or write about it? Will you need to introduce any of these words or concepts before students read?
- Note words that could hinder comprehension
  - Are there words with multiple possible meanings? Are there idioms or other figurative language? How much academic language or discipline-specific jargon is there? Do a few of those words merit direct instruction because they transfer to many other situations?
- Note dense, complex sentences
  - Are there key sentences to unpack? Are there sentence features to note that can help with meaning

Note Prior Knowledge Demands

- Mark spots where your own prior knowledge contributes to your understanding of the argument or narrative.
  - Will your students have the background knowledge necessary to build schema for this text and contribute to comprehension of the argument or narrative?
- Consider students' experience with the genre.
  - Are students familiar with the purpose and expectations of the genre? Is this an ordinary or unusual use of the genre?

Consider Your Context

- Prioritize student engagement.
  - What arguable point is central to the piece? What conversation are you asking your students to join? Is there something about this text (e.g., the subject, perspective, voices, genre, medium) that will matter to your students or engage them?
- Brainstorm the assets your students can bring to the text.
  - How can you use students' background knowledge, personal experience, and/or cultural funds to create a bridge between home and school learning?

"Second" Read

Consider the Text's Structure

- Mark shifts in the text.
  - What were the cues (linguistic, structural, rhetorical, etc.) which prompted you to mark these shifts? Are they obvious or subtle?
- Complete a quick descriptive outline or argument map.
  - What's notable about how the ideas in the piece are organized? What's the progression or structure of the argument or narrative?
- Assess the text's straightforwardness.
  - Given the text's features and organization, how predictable is it as students move through its sections? Does the text provide clear links between claims, warrants, and evidence? How easily will students be able to see the part-to-whole relationships and explain the speaker's logic?
- Count the perspectives.
  - Are there multiple voices to follow in an argument, or dialogue that may be confusing in a narrative?
- Assess the purpose of graphics in the text.
  - Do they merely add visual interest? Do they reduce the complexity of the text (e.g., illustrating what the text says, adding pathos, etc.), or do they increase the complexity of the text (e.g., by extending the text's ideas, adding distractions, etc.)?

Analyze the Influence of Rhetorical Situation

- **Thoroughly develop your analysis of the text's rhetorical situation.**
  - What can readers know or infer about the audience, purpose, occasion, and genre of the text? Will the age of the text and/or the historical frame need discussion? Which notable interactions between elements of the rhetorical situation that help to explain the speaker's rhetorical choices and what he/she is *doing?*
- **Consider the speaker's perspective, ethos, and tone.**
  - How does the speaker's persona contribute to the argument? How might elements like a one-sided argument, an authoritative tone, formal vs. informal language, etc., influence students' interpretation of the text?
- **Consider the critical thinking questions in the template.**
  - What do you notice about the argument when you read with and then against the grain? How do appeals aim at audience? How does ethos affect the argument? How is the genre related to the purpose and audience?

Analyze Levels of Meaning

- **Consider nuanced language.**
  - How much does comprehension depend on navigating word connotations, irony, allusions, subtext, and/or figurative language?
- **Assess the author's approach.**
  - Is it direct or indirect? Is the subject matter concrete or abstract; is the purpose obvious or subtle? Are there multiple levels of meaning or possible interpretations? How much reading between the lines are students expected to do?
- **Identify stated or unstated assumptions that the argument rests upon.**
  - Do the speaker's values help shape the basic assumptions of the argument? If so, would a T-chart of what the speaker "does value" and "does not value"[1] help surface that for students? Does the argument's logic assume shared definitions of key words? Are there reasonable people who would challenge the speaker's assumptions or values?
- **Consider relationships between texts.**
  - If the text is part of a text set, do the accompanying pieces reduce its complexity (e.g., by demystifying the hard parts) or increase its complexity (e.g., by adding new perspectives on the issue)? Might the texts or discussions from previous modules influence how students respond to this text?

Revisit Your Context

- **Anticipate mental roadblocks.**
  - Will students have pre-existing biases or misconceptions on this topic that might make them likely to accept or reject the argument without deliberation? If so, how will you dislodge them from these entrenchments to help them truly entertain various viewpoints?
- **Activate your empathy**.
  - Might this be a sensitive text, topic, or line of inquiry for some students in the room? Are there terms that carry social repercussions? How will you honor these concerns and create a safe environment for conversation?
- **Make connections to past and future coursework.**
  - What opportunities does this text provide to build your students' transferable knowledge or skills?

Revised 2021. This protocol was originally developed by Meline Akashian. Revisions to the protocol are indebted to Robby Ching's work for ERWC on text complexity analysis and to feedback from Marcy Merrill.

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[1] For more information on the T-chart that helps students assess a text's ideology, see "Binary Patterns Table 4.1" from Bean et al's *Reading Rhetorically*, 4th ed., 79- 80.