An Introduction to
Critical Reading: Deep Reading Strategies for Expository Texts Teacher Guide 7-12

The purpose of this document is to show how AVID’s Critical Reading: Deep Reading Strategies for Expository Texts and the training that accompanies the guide is addressing the need for a practical, academic literacy resource for college readiness. The document begins by briefly describing the need for a rigorous, systematic approach to reading and writing in secondary education. Then, it relates this discussion to the research-driven approaches found in the AVID Critical Reading teacher guide.

Research tells us that the lack of explicit instruction in reading strategies has resulted in students moving through secondary education deficient in reading. The gap that exists between what students are learning in high school and what they are expected to know in college has raised serious concerns among secondary and post-secondary faculty. According to the Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senate (ICAS)—a committee made up of California’s higher education institutions—there has been a gradual decline for the past two decades in the ability of students to read and write effectively. In 2007, ACT released a report that claims literacy instruction is still not systematically taught in many secondary classrooms, despite considerable research about the importance of selective and purpose-driven reading of expository texts.

David T. Conley, a noted expert on the secondary-college academic divide, argues that “cognitive and metacognitive abilities” are more valuable to learners and the types of work they do in college than content knowledge itself. To prepare for college, students must learn various cognitive strategies like analysis, interpretation, problem solving, and reasoning. Conley is quick to point out, however, that understanding the “big ideas” of each content is also very important to students’ success in college.

However, earning good grades in school and getting involved on campus may not be enough. ACT research indicates that it is not the number of rigorous courses that students take (or the grades they earn in those courses) that makes a difference, but what they are asked to do in the courses.

Academic rigor is at the core of AVID’s mission. Earning good grades and participating in extracurricular activities is only one aspect of college readiness. To truly “ready” students for college, teachers must challenge their students with reading and writing tasks that emulate college level work. Table 1 defines what it means to be both college “prepared” and college “ready.” Academic success in college will require students to develop a deep knowledge of various academic skills.

Table 1: College Prepared vs. College Ready

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students who are college prepared…</th>
<th>Students who are college ready…</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Maintain a high GPA (3.5 or above)</td>
<td>• Possess a deep knowledge of reading strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Complete college preparatory classes</td>
<td>• Construct original papers with evidence and sound reasoning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Take the ACT and/ or SAT</td>
<td>• Analyze and interpret ideas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Participate in athletics</td>
<td>• Retain critical concepts in content areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Participate in student leadership</td>
<td>• Select skills and approaches that best fit the reading and or writing situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Volunteer time to community service</td>
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</table>

This table is a synthesis of ideas from the following sources: ACT research and David T. Conley’s work on college readiness.
Not surprisingly, then, ACT advocates for the study of complex (expository) texts in all of the content areas, “texts that require students to work at unlocking meaning by calling upon sophisticated reading comprehension skills and strategies” (7). In academically rigorous classrooms, “students actively explore, research, and solve complex problems...they have time and opportunities to develop and apply habits of mind: weigh evidence, consider varying viewpoints, see connections, and identify patterns.” In a rigorous classroom, “students not only gain knowledge and skills, they also gain ways of thinking and doing that prepare them for college, work, and citizenship” (Oregon Small Schools Initiative/OSSI).

How does the Critical Reading guide address academic rigor and college readiness? Critical Reading provides instruction and practice for carefully selected deep reading strategies that can be applied across the curriculum. The researched-based strategies and methods listed in Table 2 became the framework for AVID’s Critical Reading: Deep Reading Strategies for Expository Texts and the accompanying professional development offered by AVID Center.

Table 2: Strategies and Methods for Effective Literacy Instruction

- Place heavy emphasis on expository reading and writing.
- Implement strategies that build students’ ability to analyze text structure.
- Utilize engagement strategies to increase students' motivation to read.
- Explicitly model and teach cognitive and metacognitive strategies.
- Provide frequent opportunities for students to practice using reading strategies.
- Set high expectations for reading, writing, and speaking.
- Facilitate conversations about reading strategies and how they help with the comprehension.
- Facilitate discussions of reading material.
- Teach students how to monitor and improve their comprehension of texts.
- Establish a student-centered approach to teaching critical course concepts.

The Critical Reading guide identifies a limited number of essential strategies and skills for student success. Practice of these strategies, with a variety of assignments and texts, must begin early in the students’ secondary experience (or earlier) and continue throughout their academic experience, not only in English/language arts classes, but in all content areas. Daniel T. Willingham, a cognitive psychologist who studies applications of brain research to the classroom, argues that continuous, distributed practice is required for students to be able to acquire and store vital strategies for academic performance in their long-term memories.

Teachers who are trained in AVID critical reading strategies can explicitly teach deep reading strategies and effectively facilitate literacy instruction that is both rigorous and engaging.

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1 Three independent research projects were used to create this list: Aligning Postsecondary Expectations and High School Practice: The Gap Defined Policy Implications of the ACT National Curriculum Survey® Results; Academic Literacy Instruction for Adolescents: A Guidance Document from the Center on Instruction; and “A Cognitive Strategies Approach to Reading and Writing Instruction for English Language Learners in Secondary School.” Complete publication information available under references.


