Sage D’Vice is back with answers, or at least responses, to readers’ questions. If you have something you want to know about working in the field or you’re just looking for a little perspective, send your question to our editorial team. We’ll make sure to make it anonymous.

In this installment of The Question, a seasoned teacher is weary of students coming to class having not read. Sage D’Vice can relate and has some thoughts on how to handle this evergreen predicament.

Dear Sage D’Vice,

I think I’m out. I’ve been in the teaching game for upwards of 20 years and I haven’t seen anything like this before. My students simply will not read. Some won’t even order the books I have assigned. How am I supposed to teach if my students won’t do the reading?

Last week I lost my cool. Before class started, I was expressing my frustration with my students’ general lack of preparation. One of my students responded awkwardly saying, “I won’t say who, but my English teacher had us meet outside and rip up the essay drafts that we’ve been working on. He said I want you to go make a vlog on something you’ve learned instead.” I swear, another student whispered, “Who did you take for English?” That was the last straw!

I just don’t get it. Not doing the reading is like refusing to dissect the frog. You can’t just stare and expect to understand things. You’ve got to get in there. Well, my students won’t even crack open the book so what am I supposed to do?

Seriously,

Fed Up Beyond All Recognition

Dear Fed Up Beyond All Recognition,

I’m not going to sugar coat it. You’re clearly a veteran in the game. You don’t need a pep talk or yet another professional development workshop—unless it has a good spread and allows to-go boxes. You deserve the long and short of it. Here it is!

You cannot make students read.

You know this, but it bears repeating. You can’t make students read. If a student gets to college and thinks school is possible without reading, then you’re looking at a problem that is larger than any single would-be pupil. That’s a societal failing beyond your control. Nevertheless, if you’re asking for help, then you’re clearly not ready to throw in the towel just yet. Let’s rap about this reading thing.

Students are a little different than when you first started teaching. Reading comprehension is largely measured in standardized tests. The genres of media that students engage in and out of the classroom favor shorter, bite sized selections. Books became excerpts. Essays became Twitter threads. Instructional videos became TikToks. And why do students refer to everyone they read or read about by first name. Is it just me, but I want to break something when I hear things like “William is famous for writing ‘To Be or Not To Be.’” Arrrggghhh!

But Bob said it best: “The Times They Are-A Changin’!” Old hands like us have to change with them if we are going to remain relevant. This doesn’t mean we stop assigning readings. It does mean we should take a beat to reflect on why we assign readings.

Are you the kind of teacher that [A] assigns readings that introduce concepts to students or [B] assigns readings that build upon concepts you have introduced? There is no intrinsically right or wrong answer. Either can work. You should know why you’ve chosen the path you’ve chosen. What about your context makes one more appropriate than the other? What is going on with the rest of your pedagogy that supports your choice?

Sometimes a poignant reading can spur a level of reflection and preparation requisite for active class engagement. Once students get into your classroom, they can do hands-on activities or ask questions in a rigorous discussion. Sometimes the material you teach is so novel that you need to break it down nice and slow so that students can get acquainted prior to the extended

The Question: What Do You Do When Students Don’t Do the Reading?

Sage D’Vice

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discussion that a reading provides. What the students do changes your role.

Your question is about why they won’t read. I haven’t forgotten, but ask yourself about the stakes. Can a student take whatever they are getting from you to do well in the class? If so, then maybe the reading isn’t actually necessary. And that’s okay, don’t assign it! But if you think the reading is necessary, then the applications need to be made plain and the evaluations substantial. The cost of not reading needs to make clear the benefit of doing so. If this isn’t the case, can you really blame the students for not doing what amounts to extra-curricular work?

For many faculty there seems to be a tension between vivid application and serious evaluation. More often than not, the question is whether you want students to have a good time using what they are learning (i.e., playing hard in the positive sense of the word) or spending a lot of time ensuring they truly know what they are learning (i.e., studying hard).

Now given that you’re no spring chicken, I can’t imagine that you are a stranger to this tension. You might find some refreshment in thinking about this tension as a product of wider institutional considerations. Think about it. We’ve seen both approaches work. The issue is about efficiency. What kind of learning can you and your students pull off in a semester? What becomes the optimal way of getting results? And if you’re like me, you feel like your classroom is increasingly subject to student Yelp reviews. So what methods are not only going to get student buy-in, but what methods will ensure you’ll get to teach again the following semester and the next semester if you get my meaning? Don’t you want to keep your job?

I feel dirty just writing that stuff. But it’s all true. And you know what? Little of it actually has to do with your best teaching. So, my advice to you is to keep the above in mind and rethink your reading and instructions as what you can get away with. What kind of reading needs to get done so you can do the job you want to do? Now you may have to adjust your expectations about what’s possible and plausible. But given the reality of your setting—and what you can’t control—use your reading assignments to reinforce the kind of teaching you want to do and the kind of learning of which your students are capable. That is in your control.

If you put this advice into practice, you’re probably going to feel like you’ve lowered the bar too much. In my experience though, you’ll free your students up to surprise you and themselves about how much learning can actually take place in the classroom when you do at least some reading.

And if this doesn’t work, get a calendar and start counting down the days till summer!

Catch you on the flip side!

Sage D’Vice