

# 7

## STRATEGIES

for motivating students to complete  
course reading

Presented by Hypothesis





## Introduction

If you ask an educator to name the most challenging aspect of teaching, more times than not, finding ways to keep students engaged is the answer.

This is especially true now, as students have had to cope with the unprecedented challenges brought about by the pandemic. Isolation and quarantine, disruptions caused by quick shifts to remote learning (and to hybrid or back to in-person instruction), navigating remote learning, and increased workloads have taken their toll on students.

As a result, student engagement has suffered. According to a recent Gallup study, 36% of bachelor's degree students and 39% of associate degree students report it was difficult or very difficult to remain enrolled heading into the fall of 2021.<sup>1</sup> Even more concerning, this impact has not been evenly distributed: Students from historically marginalized groups are most likely to report struggling to stay enrolled.

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↩ <sup>1</sup>Gallup, 2022: "The State of Higher Education 2022 Report"

## Reading is Foundational to Learning, But Students Aren't Doing it

Reading is highly correlated with student engagement. Students who are engaged are more likely to complete required course reading, whereas students who aren't as engaged are less likely to be up-to-date on their syllabus.

The activity of reading is also a critical component of how we learn. Students who do the reading are more likely to show up to class prepared and ready to learn. They're also more likely to engage in class discussion.

Unfortunately, the statistics confirm what many educators have suspected: Students aren't doing the reading.

One frequently cited study assessing reading compliance among first-year students found that 46% of students reported that they read assignments, yet only around half of those students were able to demonstrate the most basic level of comprehension of the material they claimed to have read<sup>2</sup>. A more recent study found that only 20-30% of students read the course content they've been assigned<sup>3</sup>.



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↔ <sup>2</sup> Hoeft, 2012 — “Why University Students Don’t Read”

<sup>3</sup> Deale, 2021 — “To Read or Not to Read?”



## The Impact of Students Not Doing the Reading

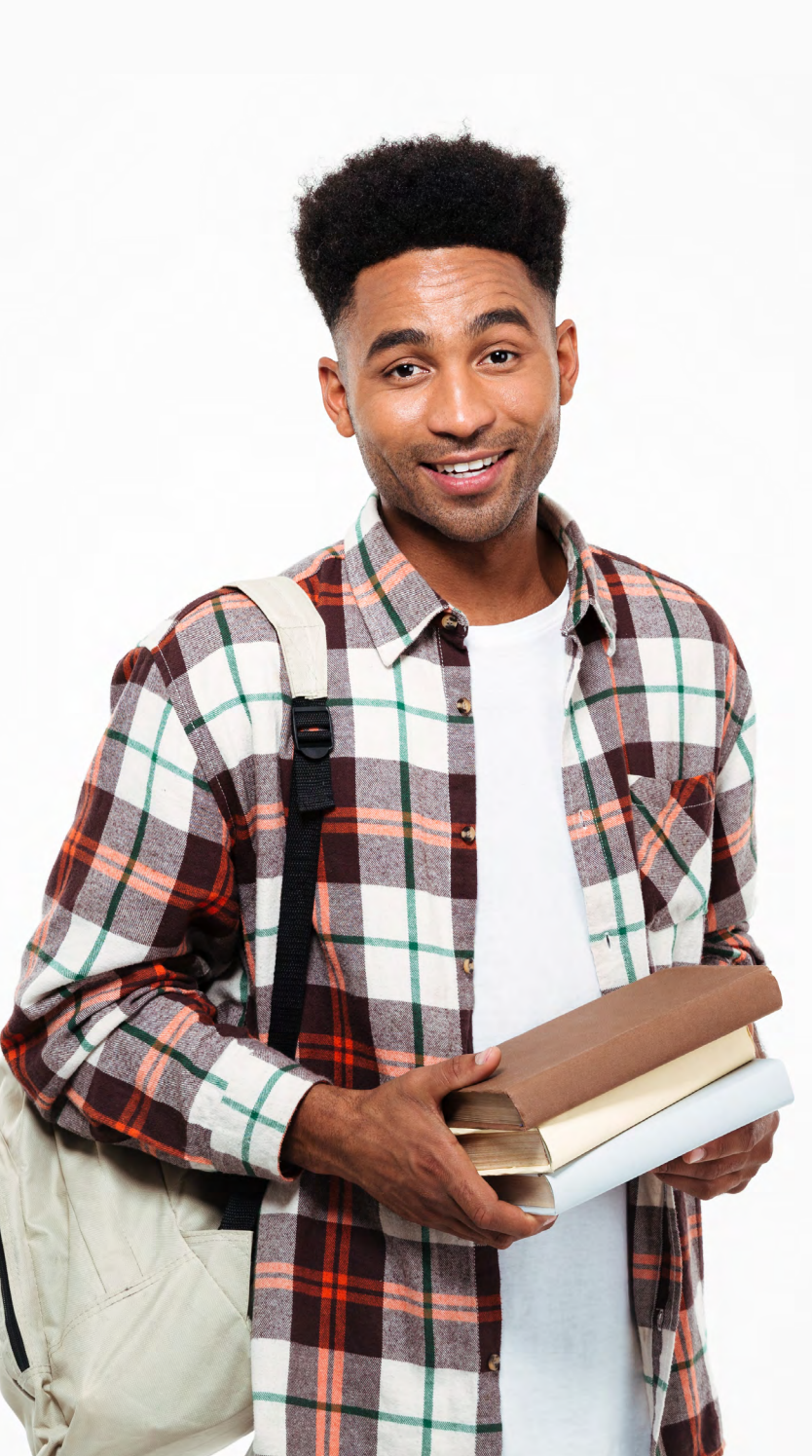
Student engagement is one of the strongest leading indicators we have of positive learning outcomes. Consequently, when students aren't engaged, they're less likely to achieve their goals.

While student success is one of the primary goals of higher education, faculty and administrators should be alarmed by the state of student engagement for another reason: It influences how students perceive the value of higher education. Students who are disengaged aren't just less likely to complete their degree, they're more likely to question if college is even for them.

Student engagement also directly impacts educators. For administrators, students who aren't engaged are less likely to complete courses or continue their education, making the institution itself less likely to achieve its own goals.

For faculty, it means facing the dreaded “wall of silence” when trying to teach concepts or facilitate class discussion — and it ultimately leads to a less rewarding teaching experience.





## Reasons for Optimism

Despite the negative headlines, there are reasons for educators to stay hopeful about reading and student engagement.

First and foremost, students still want to learn. While public opinion about higher education is mixed, college still represents the best pathway available to improving financial security and quality of life.

Secondly, college students engage with and consume more content than at any time in history. It just so happens that this content is delivered by a streaming service, video game, or social media platform, and not by a college instructor.

Looking at the content students are most likely to engage with, we can see at least three key commonalities:



### Flexibility

Content that can be consumed wherever students are, in small doses or larger chunks



### Authenticity

Content that students can engage with in a way that expresses who students really are



### Meaningful

Content that fosters connections between students and their peers





## The Power of Social Learning And Annotation to Engage Students

Learning doesn't happen in a vacuum. It is influenced by social dynamics, most notably between learners and their peers.

Educators are increasingly reliant on social learning tools that aim to make the learning experience more engaging by imbuing it with social layers. With social learning tools, students can ask questions, develop knowledge, and help each other learn. Even in the business world, organizations are implementing social learning practices as a way of maximizing talent by letting people share knowledge and expertise through a structured and collaborative learning experience.

While social learning tools can be used to enhance many different aspects of the learning experience, social annotation tools focus more squarely on bringing the promise of social learning to the act of reading.

Social annotation is a new take on the time-tested practice of annotation. It enables sentence-level note taking or critique on top of classroom reading, news, blogs, and other types of content that you might find in a learning environment. It increases student participation, expands reading comprehension, and builds critical-thinking skills and community in class. Annotating together makes reading active, visible, and social, enabling students to engage with their texts, teachers, ideas, and each other in deeper, more meaningful ways.

Educators around the world are using social annotation to make reading more engaging:

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Our students are reading more carefully and more deeply. They are helping each other make sense of the readings, so they already have an idea of how others are thinking, and discussion in class ends up being an extension of those ongoing conversations.

**Jasmine Ma,**  
Education Professor, New York University

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My students often struggle with reading and studying. But now I'm seeing that students have done the reading, and are engaging with the text and one another.

**Hollie Benson,**  
Muskegon Community College

“

My students contribute to the conversation whether they are frequent class participants or the type that like to sit back and think before responding. I can't call on every student, but by annotating together, we can all join in the conversation.

**Sarah Gross,**  
High Technology High School

In the next section, we present seven strategies that faculty and administrators can use to motivate students to complete course reading and engage more deeply with their courses. Given the power of social annotation to make reading more collaborative and fun, it should come as no surprise that many of these strategies represent clear use cases for its implementation.

## Comment, Reply, Repeat: Engaging Students With Social Annotation

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# 7 Strategies for Motivating Students to Complete Course Reading

Here are several strategies designed to help educators encourage students to complete course reading and engage with what they're learning.

## 1) Focus on Building Community

Yes, we want our students to do the reading. We want them to understand it. We want them to think critically about it.


But people learn together, not alone, and a key element of motivating students to read is fostering a sense of belonging. Educators should aim to cultivate reading skills and practices in a community of practice with their peers.

 **Tip:** Encourage students to connect with each other in substantive ways. For example, have students use a social annotation tool to ask each other questions, share ideas, and collaborate around their learning while staying rooted in and branching out from the readings teachers think are essential.




## 2) Annotate the Syllabus — Together

Reading assignments are not the only educational artifacts that we can read and annotate together.

 **Tip:** Consider asking students to annotate your syllabus or other ancillary course materials. This is a great way to get engaged ahead of more rigorous or high-stakes assignments, and a way to open up your course design to student input. Especially if you are not meeting face-to-face, annotating “handouts” with students can help you continue to have those important, usually in-class meta-conversations about the course itself.

## 3) Ask Students to Create a Glossary of Course Reading


This exercise can span from simply creating a list of vocabulary words from a text to presenting, as a class or individually, a text annotated like a scholarly volume. This exercise can be completed on great works of literature as well as scientific research papers. Think of the activity as creating a kind of inline Wikipedia on top of your course reading.

 **Tip:** For difficult texts, sharing the burden of the research necessary for comprehension can help students better understand their reading. And there is something incredibly powerful about students beginning to imagine themselves as scholars, responsible for guiding a real audience through a text — whether it's their own peers or a broader intellectual community.



## 4) Encourage Students to Ask Questions

A simple question mark in the margin of a text can flag a word or passage for discussion. And such discussions can be generative of important explication and analysis.


 **Tip:** If you're using a social annotation tool, you can have students highlight, tag, and annotate words or passages that are confusing to them in their readings. An annotation need not be, and often is not, an answer. While the teacher can respond to such student annotations, a possible follow up exercise could have students respond to each other's questions instead.

**Bonus:** Directing students to annotate in this way creates a sort of heat map for the instructor that can be used to zero-in on troubling sections and subjects or spark class discussion.




## 5) Ask Students to Pick a Side

Framing one's opinions as annotations of specific statements or facts is a reminder that our arguments should be grounded in actual evidence. Allowing students to express their opinions in the margins of the Web, and helping them become responsible and thoughtful in those expressions, is a huge part of what it means to be literate, both on the web and in democratic society more generally.

 **Tip:** Have students share their personal opinions on a controversial topic as discussed by an article. Students could be asked simply to respond to the reading with their thoughts, as in a dialectical reading journal, or employ specific cultural or persuasive strategies in their rhetorical intervention. Again, this advocacy exercise could be a summative assignment within a unit that uses social annotation.

## 6) Make Space for Creativity

Whether in writing or using other media, students can respond creatively to texts under study through annotation as well, inserting themselves within the intertextual web that is the history of literature and culture.

 **Tip:** Have students respond creatively to their reading with their own poetry, prose, or visual art. Students can respond as themselves or through role play, which provides students with a safe way to give voice to their own perspectives or explore different points of view.


One creative writing exercise might be to have students annotate in the voices of characters from a novel being read. Or have students reimagine passages written as newspaper stories. [Nathan Blom's Annotated Lear Project at LaGuardia Arts High School](#) is a great example of students creatively responding to a text through annotation.

Students can also use their imaginations and annotate texts with their own drawings, photographs, or videos inline with the relevant sources of textual inspiration. Whether completed individually or collaboratively, this exercise can result in some wonderful illustrated editions of course texts.



## 7) Embrace Multimedia

One of the unique aspects of online writing is the ability to include multimedia elements in the composition process. We've found that many teachers and students are excited to make use of animated GIFs when annotating readings.

 **Tip:** Have students annotate with images and video or integrate images and video into other types of annotations. The use of images can simply be representative, but students can also be taught to think about how images themselves make arguments and serve other rhetorical purposes.

We advise spending a lesson introducing the idea of digital writing to students, with particular attention to the use of images, covering everything from search to usage policies and attribution. More traditional teachers may be less accustomed to assessing such multimedia compositions and should spend some time thinking about and explaining to their students a grading rubric.



## Conclusion

Encouraging students to complete course reading increases student participation, expands reading comprehension, and builds critical-thinking skills and community in class.

Through social annotation, educators can implement many of the strategies discussed above to encourage students to engage with their texts, teachers, ideas, and each other in deeper, more meaningful ways.

## Social Annotation with Hypothesis

Hypothesis is a social annotation tool that gives every course the feel of a small seminar by making reading collaborative and fun.

With Hypothesis' approach to social annotation, students can engage with content wherever it lives, using the tools they rely on to express themselves in their daily lives.

## Benefits for faculty

Hypothesis fosters high-quality discussion that includes all students — even those less likely to engage through more traditional modes.

## Benefits for administrators

Hypothesis' ability to increase student engagement helps administrators improve outcomes like course completion, student retention, and academic growth.



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