

# Encouraging Students to be Readers: Survey Results of Successful Practices

by Mitzi Lewis and John Hanc

Motivating students to complete reading assignments is a problem documented across disciplines. Journalism and mass communication are no exception. This study used a Web-based survey to ask International Association for Literary Journalism Studies (IALJS) members and Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) Small Programs Interest Group (SPIG) listserv subscribers about (a) observations of student reading practices with longer forms of journalism and (b) successful practices for motivating students to read. Educators' learning goals for student reading and the strategies used to achieve these goals are discussed.

**“Man’s mind, once stretched by a new idea,  
never regains its original dimensions.”**

—*Oliver Wendell Holmes*

What mass communication and journalism educator has not been confronted with the challenge of motivating his or her students to read? Succeeding in this seemingly universal challenge is essential. Students need to read to learn. Educators know that reading will help students prosper academically and economically. In fact, reading has been positively correlated with “almost every measurement of positive personal and social behavior surveyed,” proving empirically that reading “change[s] lives for the better” (National Endowment for the Arts, 2007, p. 6). To assist mass communication and journalism educators with the important task of motivating their students to read, a brief summary of reading research from other fields is presented, followed by results from a survey of literary journalism and mass communication educators, over two-thirds of

## Three ideas for improving reading assignments

1. Allow each student to make notes on the reading on one 3”-by-5” card and allow those 3”-by-5” cards to be used on a quiz.
2. Use online quizzes before or after the class on the reading.
3. Select reading assignments that are “weighty, important, or even troubling.”

## Three top reading assignments by SPIG and IALJS members

1. Books by Barbara Enrenreich and Tracy Kidder
2. Ken Fuson’s “A Stage in Their Lives”
3. Stories by writers who can visit the class (locally or via Skype calls)

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whom have 10 or more years of teaching experience. The teachers' (a) observations of student reading practices with longer forms of journalism and (b) successful practices for motivating students to read are reported.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The teaching of journalism and mass communication can benefit from an exploration of existing scholarship from education literature outside of these fields (Seamon, 2009). Studies in this area have found that student compliance with required reading assignments has declined steadily during the past few decades (Burchfield and Sappington, 2000; Clump, Bauer, and Bradley, 2004). Clump, Bauer, and Bradley's research (2004) indicates that less than 30% of students complete assigned readings before coming to class. To identify reasons for reading noncompliance, Lei, Bartlett, Gorney, and Herschbach (2010) examined published literature and found a number of causes: poor reading comprehension, low self-confidence, procrastination, lack of interest in the subject matter, underestimation of reading importance, and absence of regular homework assignments and in-class exercises. While this list appears daunting, the researchers provide some insight into possible solutions for helping motivate students to read: quizzes (pop or announced), participation points, extra credit points, and index card or handout use on exams. Options identified by other scholars include responding to reading in journals, (Hilton, Wilcox, Morrison, and Wiley, 2010), doing other reading response assignments (Roberts and Roberts, 2008; Coffman, 2010), using class time as a reading period (Davis, 1993), and, more generally, building on the skills, attitudes, and knowledge that students bring with them (Considine, Horton, and Moorman, 2009).

These strategies expose students to increased learning opportunities by engaging them with readings and providing feedback on their efforts. However, which approaches should mass communication and journalism educators use to

encourage their students to read? Considerations include matching the strategy to the learning objective, strategy effectiveness, and student perceptions (Weinstein and Wu, 2009); however, the choice and effectiveness of these methods can vary from student to student and class to class.

Some action researchers have found success in encouraging reading by incorporating quizzes into their courses (Connor-Greene, 2000; Tomasek, 2009; Ruscio, 2001; Agnew, 2000; Fernald, 2004; Sappington, Kinsey, and Munsayac, 2002; Marchant, 2002; Leeming, 2002). Quizzes are defined broadly in this context, but they generally follow Miriam Webster's definition: "the act or action of [questioning] closely" ("Quiz," n.d.). Quizzes can be administered online before class begins, after class begins, but before class discussion, or after class discussion; and quizzes given in class can be planned or they can be a surprise. Connor-Green (2000) found that frequent planned quizzes were more successful than fewer long tests in encouraging students to complete reading assignments on time; in other words, quiz dates motivated students more than reading assignment dates. Connor-Green's different quiz and test schedule did not result in different final course grades, but other research (Leeming, 2002) has shown that planned frequent quizzes result in higher perceived and demonstrated learning. Unplanned (pop) quizzes have proven effective in motivating students to read, as well as resulted in more insightful class discussion, better questions, and greater enthusiasm (Ruscio, 2001).

Strategies other than quizzes are varied. Some instructors award participation points that count for up to 30% of the course grade (Green and Rose, 1996; Roberts and Roberts, 2008). Others provide students the opportunity to write a summary and critique readings on index cards for extra credit and for use during exams. One instructor found that, when this method was employed, students turned in cards for about three of every four reading assignments and responded favorably to the method on an end-of-term survey (Carkenord, 1994). Another reported that the

number of students who usually read the material before class jumped from about 10% to about 90% and that about 90% thought the cards were a good idea (Daniel, 1988).

Although educators can select a specific strategy, letting students choose from a group of strategies/tasks has also proven effective. Examples include allowing students to respond to readings through connecting to the text by visualizing, questioning, and responding (e.g., by annotating the text); summarizing the readings and visualizing key ideas (e.g., by creating a graphic organizer or chart); keeping a reading response journal; studying as a group and writing up key concepts that are discussed; or creating and recording a song or a rap (Roberts and Roberts, 2008).

Student motivation to read is also influenced by the reading material assigned. When Howard (2004) replaced the standard survey text with a reader (an anthology), the proportion of students completing reading assignments increased by 72%. Savery and Duffy (1996) suggest that readings “must have a purpose beyond, ‘It is assigned’” (p. 137). In an analysis of senior seminar student essays about their careers as readers and nonreaders, Ramsay (2002) found that a common “thirst for significant reading” theme emerged: “If you’re going to ask me to invest the time in reading in the first place, give me something weighty, important, or even troubling” (p. 55). D’Aloisio (2006) further argues that students can be motivated if they are made aware of the link between college learning and work settings.

The aforementioned research heightens general understanding of college students’ reading behaviors and possible teaching methods to encourage reading; however, a search of academic databases revealed no literature addressing reading behaviors or motivational techniques specifically within the fields of journalism and mass communication. The present study is an effort to help bridge that gap, specifically with respect to reading longer works of journalism (as

opposed to reading about journalism, media law, history, etc.).

### SURVEY AND PARTICIPANTS

A Web-based survey was used to ask International Association for Literary Journalism Studies (IALJS) members and Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) Small Programs Interest Group (SPIG) listserv subscribers about their (a) observations of student reading practices with longer works of journalism and (b) successful practices for getting students to read longer works of journalism. Exploratory questions were asked in an open-ended format to encourage rich, meaningful responses. E-mail requests were sent to 130 IALJS members directly and to 186 SPIG listserv subscribers through the listserv. One IALJS member’s e-mail was returned undeliverable, and three e-mail addresses were on both the IALJS and SPIG lists, so the total potential number of survey participants was 312. Forty-five IALJS members responded to the survey from the e-mail request, and 44 SPIG members responded to the survey from the listserv post, for a 29% overall response rate; 82 respondents indicated that they taught or had previously taught in the mass communication field; their responses were analyzed. Additionally, 74% of the educators teach journalism, 11% are mass communication generalists, and 15% teach law, ethics, research, English, creative nonfiction, or a combination of these areas. The educators as a group are experienced. Almost half have been teaching 15 or more years (see Table 1).

Table 1  
*Years of Experience Teaching*

| Number     | Percent |
|------------|---------|
| 0-4        | 12.2    |
| 5-9        | 19.5    |
| 10-14      | 20.7    |
| 15-19      | 12.2    |
| 20 or more | 35.4    |

## RESULTS

Results indicated 99% of the educators reported that it is either very important or somewhat important for students in the digital age to be able to read and think critically about longer works of journalism, and 70% reported that journalism and mass communication students today are either much less or somewhat less likely, willing, or able than students five or more years ago to read assigned longer works of journalism. Half of the educators assign longer (feature) stories five or more times in a term, and only 3% never assign longer stories (see Table 2). Assigned readings are most likely first to come from magazines, followed by newspapers, and then books (see Table 3).

Table 2  
*Number of Longer Feature Stories Assigned per Term*

| Number    | Percent |
|-----------|---------|
| Never     | 2.6     |
| 1         | 14.1    |
| 2         | 16.7    |
| 3         | 11.5    |
| 4         | 5.1     |
| 5 or more | 50      |

Table 3  
*Likelihood for Assigning Newspapers, Magazines, and Books*

|                 | Newspapers | Magazines | Books  |
|-----------------|------------|-----------|--------|
| Not likely      | 14.10%     | 6.40%     | 21.80% |
| Somewhat likely | 43.60%     | 32.10%    | 25.60% |
| Very likely     | 42.30%     | 61.50%    | 52.60% |

### Learning Goals for Student Reading

Several themes emerged from a content analysis of responses to the question, “What do you want students to learn through reading?” The answers included: Think deeply/critically; write, report, feel appreciation and joy for reading; gain knowledge (content); and, at a basic level, read. Educators repeatedly stated that they want students to think deeply and critically, as articulated in this answer: “How to think. How to get to depth. How to focus and concentrate. Then

how to present significant ideas themselves using thought, depth, focus and concentration.” Others expressed this idea as forming opinions or exploring new ideas, and several mentioned choosing compelling stories to help encourage these behaviors: “I also try to find provocative stories that force the students to think and form an opinion.”

The second major theme was the belief that students will become better writers if they read more; reading well-written literary journalism provides a learning and inspirational model. Related comments include the following:

[I]t is impossible for students to become good writers if they don't read. Good readers develop a fluency in their writing and an instinct for written storytelling that nonreaders just don't have.

I want the student to analyze what makes a story effective and how he/she can use those tools and techniques to improve his/her work.

Teachers mentioned wanting students to learn how to structure pieces more than any other writing element. Other elements mentioned include style, language, characterization, storytelling, voice, description, scene construction, narrative, metaphor, and writing mechanics (e.g., grammar, spelling, etc.).

Educators hope that reading will also help students both appreciate great reporting and learn skills, such as inserting depth, sourcing, backgrounding, complexity, and context in their stories—skills that will help them develop as reporters. Several comments illustrate belief in this potential:

[I want them to] understand in-depth investigation and reporting and how much of it goes into a substantial piece of journalistic work.

I want them to learn the ways of reporting (fact-finding); [I want them to understand that] observation and synthesis of background and context make for excellence in journalism that goes deeper than surface events.

Beyond learning how to think critically, write, and report, educators clearly want students to feel the appreciation, joy, and rewards that can come from reading well-written stories. Teachers want to inspire students and ignite curiosity. Responses reflect passion and a desire to share that passion.

I try to find compelling stories that make [students] realize that a good story can really make them forget about everything else for a while.

When they read good writing, interesting storytelling, they get that sense of “I can do that” or “I want to do that” – and we can build on that.

Educators reported that they assign stories to expose students to new ideas and a variety of perspectives so that students can “learn about the world they live in” and learn how the world “is supposed to work and how it actually does(n’t).” Instructors want students to “widen their outlooks” in general and in the following areas: new developments in mass communication (beyond what is in textbooks), politics, diversity, internationalism, economics, business, and public affairs, including social issues. Educators hope that “reading makes [students] want to find out more.”

Finally, instructors also hope that reading more will help students develop critical reading skills, “close” reading skills, and improved reading comprehension.

### **Strategies for Motivating Students to Read**

Although there appears to be no “magic bullet” for motivating students to read, the

question—“What strategies/best practices do you use to get students to read?”—drew a variety of responses.

Some educators begin with a discussion about the importance of reading and what they want students to learn from specific reading assignments. As one person stated, “I try to entice them with a strong logos-based ‘what’s in it for them.’” Discussions range from telling students about what they can discover from the readings to the enjoyment they will experience when reading to the consequences of not completing the reading. Then, in the end, “other than that, I simply hope that my genuine passion for the stories will win them over and convince them to [read].”

Other strategies allow students a level of choice in the readings and try to match subject matter to student interests; however, when given this flexibility, educators find that students will sometimes gravitate toward choosing shorter pieces. Whether students or educators choose the readings, piquing interest early in the semester can be important. One teacher finds that “once students engage and actually read examples of great works, they then trust me more when I ask them to read the next one, and the next one, and so on—the trick is to inspire them through reading very early in the semester.” Another teacher receives better responses to controversial subjects than to stories that “don’t push as many buttons.” Still another finds that assignments with a visual component, such as animations, Web pages, or other media, increase the likelihood that students will complete the reading. Students have responded well to works listed in Table 4.

Discussion also plays an important role in motivating students to read. Whether online or in class, instructors use a range of participation activities to try to engage students with readings and place them “in the shoes of the writer.” For some, this begins with reading aloud in class. The discussion that follows can be led by instructors or students. In other cases, instructors assign written reading responses, such as one- or two-page responses to readings, weekly journals, or

Table 4  
*Assigned Readings Selected by Educators*

| Reading  | Additional Comments   |
|--|---|
| Stories from Poynter's <i>Best Newspaper Writing</i> books | Explore how writers create mood, tension, character; also good for discussing sourcing                                    |
| Start with sports stories by Mark Bowden                   | Then move to long-form articles he has written on more complex topics, such as torture                                    |
| An article from either AJR or CJR                          | Write a report  |
| "A Stage in Their Lives" by Ken Fuson                      | "I usually assign a segment or two initially; almost always, the students tell me that they read all the way through it." |
| Books such as Barbara Enrenreich's and Tracy Kidder's work | In lieu of textbooks  |

question prompts, in advance of discussion of the readings. Some instructors grade these assignments and some do not. Group activities can further support class discussion. Dividing a class into teams that are assigned a reading followed by a group-led discussion or presentation more directly engages students. Discussions can also occur within groups as students read each other's work. Either class visits by local writers or Skype calls with remote writers can give students the chance to discuss "how the pieces they are about to read came about."

Last, instructors mentioned quizzing or testing students over reading material, although a few expressed displeasure with using punitive measures such as "stupid little quizzes [and] threat of test questions" to encourage student reading compliance: "I sort of hate the idea, but if it works ... ."

### CONCLUSION

Research findings indicate that journalism and mass communication educators believe it is important for students to be able to read and think critically about longer works of journalism. Combined with the majority perception that students are less likely, willing, or able than students five or more years ago to complete these readings, educators are faced with a daunting challenge. Reading is central to learning in any field, but for journalism, reading is fundamental. A journalism student who does not read is like a film student

who does not watch movies. The present research can help meet this challenge. Educators can learn from each other's reported successes. It is hoped that implementing strategies presented here can impact students' academic and personal lives.

Overall, journalism and mass communication educators responding to the survey employ techniques similar to those reported by other instructors in the explored reading motivation literature; however, two distinctions emerge. First, some journalism and mass communication teachers facilitate discussions between students and authors of class readings. It is not clear to what level teachers in other fields may use this technique. Teachers who are former journalists may have the advantage of access to professionals with whom they used to work. Perhaps journalism and mass communication instructors invite authors to class because it is part of their training: going to the source. In any case, exposing students to the insights of authors' research and writing processes can only enrich the students' learning experience.

Second, the other aspect of reading motivation that journalism and mass communication teachers may be focusing on differently than teachers in the hard sciences and other social sciences is imparting to students the pure enjoyment that can come from reading, a goal upon which literature and reading teachers also traditionally have focused. Fostering this internal reading motivation could result in students continuing

to read after the course is over to a greater extent than if they were motivated to read only for external reasons. Certainly, this is a central goal of all educators—wanting what students learn in the classroom to extend to their lives beyond the classroom.

More research is needed to expand the understanding of what works in the classroom and how this may change over time with different populations of students. Future studies could survey educators from a variety of fields besides journalism and mass communication. Sharing results with other teachers will allow them to learn, not only from others in their own field, but also from a broader base of educators. Different strategies could be tested with students in different sections of the same course, and students' reading behaviors—both in the class and after the class is over—as well as their class performance, could be compared. Finally, journalism and mass communication students could be surveyed about their reading behaviors and motivations both in the classroom and beyond the classroom.

As students grow up in an increasingly fast-paced and sound-bite-driven world, educators must adapt teaching strategies to encourage students to read longer works of journalism and help them discover the joys that can come from doing so. Students' increased reading, improved reading, and improved writing and reporting skills are all critical to the future of journalism and mass communication.

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## APPENDIX SURVEY ITEMS

Do you currently teach or have you previously taught in the mass communication field?

- Yes  
 No

What is your teaching area?

- Journalism  
 Public Relations/Advertising  
 Mass Communication Generalist  
 Telecommunications  
 Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

For how many years have you been teaching?

- 0-4  
 5-9  
 10-14  
 15-19  
 20 or more

Please choose the word that most accurately completes this sentence: "Journalism and mass communication students today are \_\_\_\_\_ likely (or willing or able) to read assigned longer works of journalism."

- not  
 somewhat  
 very

How many times in a term do you assign longer (feature) stories to read to your students? (these would be defined as stories of about 1,500 words or over)

- Never  
 1  
 2  
 3  
 4  
 5 or more

How important do you think it is for students in the digital age to be able to read and think critically about longer works of journalism?

- Very important  
 Somewhat important  
 Not important

Are you more or less likely to assign such longer readings from:

|   | more likely              | less likely              | n/a                      |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| newspaper/web   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| magazines   | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| books (excluding textbooks or books about journalism) | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

What do you want students to learn through reading?

What strategies/best practices do you use to get students to read?

Are you willing to share specific handouts, exercises, assessment tools, etc.?

- Yes  
 No

If yes, please provide your name and contact information: