Strategic Reading Activities to Power Up Your Online Classroom
by Nicole Brun-Mercer

Consider the number of hours your students spend every day on digital reading, from social media posts to online textbooks. Now consider the number of hours those students have spent in the classroom explicitly learning and practicing digital reading strategies. Is it any surprise that online reading is often less fluent, less accurate, or less rapid? Online reading comes with some inherent challenges (Coiro, 2015), but instructors can help learners engage more effectively with digital texts by teaching online reading tips and providing sufficient guided training with online texts (Geva & Ramirez, 2015).

The following activities target challenges specific to online reading, and while they are also suitable for face-to-face learning, the procedure and tips presented here have been designed for the online classroom. These activities will keep your students fully engaged, starting with an adrenaline-pumping reading race as the virtual bell rings.

Activity 1: Reading Fluency Log

Online reading is full of potential distractions, from advertisements to pop-up chats. Learners need ample practice reading texts online quickly and accurately to hone their ability to remain focused. Help students create an online reading log (see Table 1) to monitor their reading speed and comprehension. At least once a week, have students read an online text, time themselves, and log both their time and comprehension scores (e.g., eight out of ten multiple-choice questions answered correctly). The objective of the Reading Fluency Log is for students to improve speed without sacrificing comprehension. Giving them comprehension questions helps ensure they are reading not only quickly, but also accurately.

Table 1. Sample Fluency Log

Date	Reading Time	Text Word Count	Words per Minute	Comprehension Score
10/24/20	*3 min 15 sec*	*520*	*160*	*8/10*

Procedure

Begin your class by posting a link to an online text, in either the chat box or another clearly visible location. Set a maximum time for learners to access and read the text, log their reading time, then answer comprehension questions. Adapt this activity to your learners based on their level of comfort with the technology. The following tips can help you anticipate potential difficulties for learners and scaffold the activity accordingly.

Tips

1. Before asking students to do this activity, model the steps. Share your screen and show them how to copy and paste the link to the reading into their internet browser. Use think-aloud modeling (e.g., "Now I'm setting my timer. I'm trying to read quickly but also carefully enough that I'll be able to answer questions about the text. I'm trying to ignore the ad over here on my right and the other article over here on the left, even though the title looks interesting. Okay, I'm done. I stop my timer: 3 minutes and 15 seconds. I go to my reading log and write my time with today's date. The article was 627 words, so I put that here and calculate how many words I read per minute.")
2. When you ask learners to do this activity for the first time themselves, do not give comprehension questions, so they can focus on moving from the classroom platform (e.g., Zoom) to their internet browser, timing themselves, and reading.
3. Because students will be accessing the reading as they enter the "classroom," remind them to set their own timer before they begin reading. A chat message with "SET YOUR TIMER" before the link should suffice.
4. Once students are comfortable accessing texts and timing themselves, post comprehension questions (a) on a presentation program, like PowerPoint or Google Slides, and share your screen, (b) by chat, (c) via a poll (through Zoom or another online platform), or (d) on a collaborative document you share with the class.
5. Students can answer the comprehension questions (a) in a notebook which they do not share with you or the class, (b) in a document or personal chat which they send only to you, (c) in a chat visible to the entire class, (d) as a poll response, or (e) on a collaborative document. Note that most collaboration platforms (e.g., Google Docs, Padlet) have a setting to moderate answers. That allows you to wait until all students have logged their replies before you reveal answers to the entire class.

Activity 2: Research Road Map

Online readers contend with an overwhelming volume of information, often read in a nonlinear fashion. A simple search can quickly become a labyrinth of hyperlinks in which the online reader suddenly discovers they are reading a completely unrelated (though fascinating) article or they forgot to bookmark a page with important information. Thus, having a clear reading focus and keeping track of sources are particularly critical when reading for information online. This "research road map" activity provides a step-by-step process which guides learners through the internet superhighway maze.

Procedure

Give students a research topic or question (e.g., In what ways does composting benefit the environment?) and have them brainstorm related questions on a collaboration platform (e.g., Google Docs, Padlet). Create a table with their list of questions, including room for the answer and source (see Table 2). Share the Table on a collaboration platform for use in the next activity (i.e., Activity 3).

Table 2. Research Question Road Map

Question	Answer(s)	Source(s)
What happens when food scraps are discarded with other trash?		

Tips

1. When students have finished brainstorming, encourage them to read all questions posted by the class and offer comments. Is each question clear and relevant? If you want to limit the number of questions learners will be investigating, ask them to select the most compelling questions (top five, for instance) through a poll.
2. While the next logical step is to find answers to the questions (see Activity 3), encourage learners to view this as a distinct task, because this key step is often skipped. Model what happens when you search online without a road map of questions (e.g., "Oh, this is interesting! Maybe I can use this…okay, now where was that thing about urban composting?") and what happens with the road map (e.g., "Hmm…that looks interesting, but it won't answer any of my questions. It's actually a bit off-topic.")

Activity 3: Reliable Source Scavenger Hunt

Another challenge with online reading is judging the reliability of a source. Most students have heard the lecture on using Wikipedia but have not necessarily understood what criteria to look for in a reliable source. A worksheet such as the one in Table 3 can help learners evaluate a source based on publication date, domain, publisher, author, and factuality of information. This "scavenger hunt" activity guides learners as they research their topic, helping them select reliable sources.

Table 3. Reliable Source Worksheet

Source (in APA format) _____

Points	1	2	3	4	Total
Date	Not indicated	More than 20 years ago	10–20 years ago	Less than 10 years ago	
Domain	Other		Organization site (.org)	Government or educational site (.gov, .edu)	

Publisher	Not indicated, not reliable			Indicated and reliable	
Author	Not indicated, not reliable			Indicated and reliable	
Information	Not factual	Factual but not verifiable	Sometimes factual and verifiable	Always factual and verifiable	
Total Points					

Procedure

Have each student answer one of the questions from Table 2. As learners look for information, they should calculate the reliability of potential sources using Table 3. Once they have found a source that should reliably help answer the research question, have them complete Table 2. Post both worksheets (Tables 2 and 3) on a collaborative platform so learners can view each other's work.

Tips

1. First, model with a sample question. Share your screen as you examine results from your internet search. Talk through Table 3 and explain where you find each criterion (e.g., publisher) on the webpage.
2. Be sure to emphasize that this point system is only a guide, and the importance of each evaluation criterion will vary for any given question or topic. For example, some research questions aim to uncover opinions and biases, in which case sources using unverified information might, in fact, be desirable. Other research questions investigate changes over time, so both newer and older sources would be necessary. This worksheet can also be used to initiate discussion on the "reliability" of publishers and authors. Typically, publishers that have fact-checked and edited texts and authors who include a biography showing expertise in a field are considered more reliable.
3. This is a good opportunity to review reference formatting (e.g., MLA or APA).
4. With advanced students, you might suggest finding multiple sources.
5. To do this activity in groups, put learners in breakout rooms and check that all students know how to share their screen. Students choose a role: Student 1 accesses the internet, enters terms, and clicks on links. Student 2 completes Table 3 to verify source reliability and writes the source in APA format. Student 3 completes Table 2. Note that students have roles involving consecutive, not simultaneous, steps. The objective is for every student in the group to be active throughout the process, under the leadership of a different student for each step.
6. With younger students beginning the research process, scaffold by completing more work as a class. Rather than doing the worksheets themselves, learners take a screenshot that includes the answer to their question and the webpage, which they send to you. Share the screenshot with the class, and ask the student to discuss the source (*What question is it answering? What information does it give? What site is it on? Who is the author?*) Encourage other learners to give their input (*Do you agree this is a reliable site?*) and complete the worksheets as a class. To ensure active listening, give students a listening

guide (*Who chose to research recycling? What is eco-tourism? Who is sharing information from a government site?*)

7. For further explanation of and practice with reliability of online documents, see Dobler and Eagleton (2015).

These three activities are designed to improve learners' online reading and researching skills. They can be assigned separately or as part of a larger project. You might, for instance, highlight a broad theme, such as environmental responsibility. Select several related readings for fluency exercises (Activity 1) and have students choose relevant research topics for Activities 2 and 3. If your class targets writing as well, ask students to compose a text (e.g., essay, blog post, letter to the editor) based on their readings and research. Your students will be practicing key digital reading strategies while engaging in fun, motivating activities that are sure to power up your online class.

References

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