

Learning How to Read in High School

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Fear of failure is the educational equivalent of the FBI's "public enemy number 1). When a student becomes afraid that he or she will fail a course – not merely concerned enough to motivate diligent work, but absorbed with dread over the mark which will appear on a report-card – then the student stops paying attention to the content and purpose of the course and focuses attention on formalities like "how many points do I need to gain in order to pass this test?" At that point, getting a true, maturing, intellectually stimulating, and personally enriching *education* has been replaced with simply *getting by*.

How can parents and teachers help students to overcome fear of failure? There *are* things that can be done. There is no need to throw our hands up in despair, imagining that it is somehow a fortuitous matter of "chance" (fate, luck) that some students do well and others do poorly in schoolwork. *Every* student of normal ability (i.e., every student who is free of physical handicaps such as retardation, eye-motor disorders, etc.) can do well in schoolwork. As blunt or even as harsh as it may seem at first, we will eventually have to face up to the grim truth that there is no such thing as a (normal) student who *cannot* do passing work. There are simply some students who *will not* (choose not) to do passing work. Now they may very well desire to have at the outcome of the course a passing mark. They want that *end* – BUT without being willing to pursue *the means* to that end.

The age in which people commonly believed in magic has not passed. It has simply taken on a more sophisticated front. Parents and teachers who believe that (or operate as though) the difference between successful and unsuccessful students is a mystery beyond our control assign good schoolwork, in effect, to magic or chance – beyond any cause-effect explanation. Students who want a passing grade at the end of the course, but who ignore or refuse the means to that end, are hoping for a magical deliverance. We live in a universe where events (effects) have their corresponding causes. There are appropriate causes of good performance in school. This is bad news and good news. The bad news is that students who fail cannot "cop-out" and blame their failure on something beyond their control. The good news is that something can indeed be done to improve a student's work in school. There is *hope* because there exist proven methods of achieving success as a student.

One of those methods was touched upon in my last article. The first rule to be observed is that students must not fall behind in their work – tuning out during a lecture, during a reading assignment, failing to ask for help when something is unclear, failing to complete homework – and then expect to understand later portions of the course work. As I said, we cannot "leave things behind at the Ramada Inn." We will eventually have to go back and pick up what was omitted, and so the sooner we do so, the better. Students must keep abreast of the course in listening, understanding, reading, and completing homework.

A second rule to be observed for achieving success in school is that students *must learn how to read*. A shocking suggestion, perhaps, because the assumption commonly held is that high school students *already* know how to read. But that is held because we erroneously think that reading is merely a matter of knowing how to sound out words, recognize punctuation, and understand basic vocabulary. That is, we are often satisfied simply with the *mechanics* of reading – getting the encoded message on the page through the eyeballs, into the (reasonably alert) brain. I do not doubt that most (if not all) high school students at Newport Christian can do this. Reading mechanics – the basics – have been mastered. But reading has not.

Once the basics have been learned, students need to learn how to tackle a reading assignment in such a way that they understand its meaning, point, and structure. They need to master skills of comprehension and retention. In a word, they need to learn how to analyze and interpret – not simply translate – the message encoded on the page(s) of their assignment.

Let me suggest a proven method of reading. Never plan to read an assignment only once; good readers will read at least twice and usually three times. The *first* time through should be a quick and casual reading to familiarize yourself with the material and find out the main point(s) the author intended to communicate. The *second* time through you should take notes for yourself, attempting to outline (roughly) the material presented so that the way in which the author gets to his conclusion is made clear; also write out important lists which may appear in the reading, along with key sentences which express important insights or necessary declarations (as far as the author is concerned).

Only after these two steps have been accomplished should you go through the assignment again the *third* time and underline (or highlight) the words, phrases, or sentences which will help you to review and recall the material later. Keep these underlinings to a minimum, for too many such markings will simply force you later to reread most of the assignment again – which defeats the purpose of underlining. By the time these three steps have been completed, the reading assignment will be clearly recorded in the mind.

The reading notes along with underlinings will facilitate quick and effective review of the material, which should be accomplished once a week until the end of the term. This method of reading may appear to consume more time initially than the less rigorous style practiced by most students, but in the long run it saves not only time (for instance, rereading the entire assignment every time a quiz is possible) but also emotional energy which is lost over the fear of failure at exam time.