



 **Quindew's Skill-Based Pedagogy**  
**A Research Project on Academic Literacy**



## Abstract

This research project is designed to assist secondary teachers in the explicit teaching of deep reading comprehension skills. The research was inspired by the need for a more deliberate approach to the teaching of academic reading instruction in middle and high school. One of the methods of this project is to detail the expectations colleges and universities have for incoming freshman and offer a sampling of studies and projects that have contributed to the conversation on adolescent literacy.

Although there has been much discussion about adolescent literacy, **high school graduates continue to enter colleges and universities unprepared for post-secondary reading tasks.** The majority of scholarly work contributing to academic literacy remains in the form of a discussion, yielding valuable conversations on methodology and pedagogy but producing few online curricular resources that are built on research and rooted in explicit, skill-based literacy instruction. It is this lack of resources that creates a space for this project.

The gap that exists between the skills and abilities of high school graduates and what colleges and universities expect from their incoming freshman, combined with the general need for literacy instruction in secondary education, signals a need for more research that informs teachers and schools on how to best prepare secondary students for reading tasks in rigorous, academic environments.





**The purpose of this document is to identify academic competencies and expectations in order to better understand what secondary teachers can do to help prepare students for post-secondary reading demands.** It is also the purpose of this document to investigate what scholars and organizations in the field have said about adolescent literacy and to see what has been done to bridge the gap between what high school students are learning and what colleges and universities expect them to know and do.

This document includes a review of three comprehensive research studies that focus on adolescent, academic literacy: the first, a study conducted by the Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senate, outlines academic competencies and expectations for reading, writing, and thinking for incoming freshman entering California's colleges and universities; the second, a study sponsored by the California Writing Project, details how a group of teachers in the Santa Ana Unified School District implemented a cognitive strategies approach that improved the development of academic literacy for thousands of English Language Learners; and the third, a report by the Center on Instruction, identifies the need to address literacy earlier in a student's education and provides various recommendations to help prepare students for rigorous reading assignments.

As a result of these three studies, educators are becoming more aware of what needs to be done in order to improve adolescent literacy. This growing awareness has spurred a rich conversation in and around middle and high schools and has produced three central questions:

- 1) What does it mean to be a competent reader of texts?;
- 2) What is the most effective way to teach students how to read complex texts?; and
- 3) Who should be responsible for teaching academic deep reading comprehension?

## Study 1

In 2002, the Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senate (ICAS) published a study entitled *Academic Literacy: A Statement of Competencies Expected of Students Entering California's Public Colleges and Universities*. This comprehensive document designed to aid in the research and development of critical reading, writing, and thinking, seeks to identify "skills and attitudes" that competent, successful college students exhibit. Since the Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senate recognizes that all incoming freshman must be competent in reading, writing, and thinking in order to be successful in any academic field, the ICAS wanted to include in this research project as many voices in as many disciplines as possible. The two consultants for this project—Dr. Robert Doly, a professor at the University of California, Irvine and Dr. Jerry Rudmann, an instructor at Coastline Community College—coordinated a massive online survey where faculty from California's community colleges, state colleges, and universities were invited to participate in this study.

In the section titled "Habits of Mind," the ICAS suggests that critical reading, writing, listening and thinking "depend upon students' ability to postpone judgment and tolerate ambiguity..." and that getting in a habit of "rethinking, rereading and rewriting" will lead to high levels of academic success. Based on what colleges and universities value as "intellectual habits of mind," the study concludes that incoming freshman are not generally equipped with the attitudes and habits necessary to do well in their first two years of college. According to the study, "Only 1/3 of entering students are sufficiently prepared for the two most frequently assigned writing tasks: analyzing information or arguments and synthesizing information from several sources" (17). Even though this statistic focuses on students' writing ability, the type of writing that is being assessed here begins with a reading assignment. And, since students are being asked to analyze authors' arguments and synthesize information from a variety of texts, it is reasonable to conclude that the problem is not the individual student's ability to write; **on the contrary, the issue is more fundamental; and it begins with his/her ability to competently read challenging texts.** The study goes on to say that only 49% of students are able to give brief summaries of texts that they read and 83% of faculty involved in the study report that "students' lack of analytical reading skills contributes to students' lack of success in a [college] course" (17). These percentages are alarming and instructive. If we hope to have aspiring students graduate with a college degree, we must teach students how to read with deeper meaning and purpose.

In the first section, the committee members contend that "**we must teach our students to be active makers of meaning and teach them the strategies all good readers employ:** to think critically, to analyze arguments, to compare, to identify evidence and central ideas, and to make connections (12). They argue that "true academic competence depends upon a set of perceptions and behaviors acquired while preparing for more advanced academic work" (12). To better prepare students for college level reading tasks, they recommend that middle and high school teachers help students develop the following skills.

## Reading and Reading to Write Competencies

- Make predictions based on the title
- Predict the author's purpose using textual clues
- Approach texts with a variety of reading strategies
- Successfully read challenging texts without instruction or support
- Clarify challenging material through rereading strategies
- Differentiate between main and subordinate ideas in texts
- Comprehend and connect ideas presented in a variety of texts
- Make predictions while reading
- Withhold judgment while reading a text"
- Challenge what a text says
- Apply prior knowledge to new ideas and information
- Develop questions while reading and seek to find answers
- Identify central ideas and details as it relates to the topic
- Identify key claims and evidence as it relates to the argument
- Use context clues to understand unfamiliar words



Even though the Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senate published their report back in 2002, their recommendations in 2002, and now in 2015-2016, continue to inform teachers, schools, and districts about the need for a more deliberate approach to teaching adolescent literacy.

In 2007, ACT Inc. released their 2005-2006 National Curriculum Survey Results that focused on the gap between post-secondary expectations and high school practice. In a press release by an ACT spokesperson, we are reminded of the “gap between what U.S. high schools are teaching in their core college preparatory courses and what colleges want incoming students to know in order for them to succeed in first-year courses” (“New Study Points to Gap,” par. 1). The National Survey reports that “colleges generally want all incoming students to attain in-depth understanding of a selected number of fundamental skills and knowledge in their high school courses, while high schools tend to provide less in-depth instruction of a broader range of skills and topics” (“New Study Points to Gap,” par. 2). The survey conducted by the ACT not only reiterates what the ICAS reports, it extends the ICAS’s claim that high school academic standards are not aligned with post-secondary expectations for reading and writing, leaving incoming freshman ill-equipped to handle the rigors of post-secondary work.

Moreover, ELL students ought to be a major concern for any teacher who teaches in California. According to the ICAS, English Language Learners make up close to 40% of all K-12 students in California, and based on their report, this population is also not prepared for college-level reading tasks. Many students who are non-native speakers of English possess the determination and commitment that the ICAS suggests is the key to success in academic settings. However, despite their efforts, ELL students struggle through many reading and writing assignments; they have the heart and the motivation to make it to college, but many ELL or ESL students lack the English language development needed to succeed, especially if they have only been in America for a short period of time. This is perhaps where we see the clearest case of what has been called “misplaced confidence.” Students whether they are ELL or native speakers of English move through high school with excellent grades and soaring GPAs. The students see their grades as a reflection of their abilities and their preparedness for college; however, their grades are not necessarily a good determiner of how well they can read and write. Many ELL students wander onto college campuses unaware of the academic demands that await them. For this reason, individuals who are interested in helping students make the transition from high school to college must confront the reality that a fair number of students in our classrooms are ELL and that these students need to develop academic competencies if we hope to increase the number of under-represented students going to and succeeding in college. But, the questions still remains: How can we support the development of academic competencies for our English Language Learners? This is where studies like the Pathway Project can be most helpful.



## Study 2

In February 2007, the California Writing Project in conjunction with the Santa Ana Unified School District—a low socioeconomic district struggling to serve their 93% ESL population—published a study that focused on improving academic literacy for English Language Learners. In the opening pages of their report, *A Cognitive Strategies Approach to Reading and Writing Instruction for English Language Learners in Secondary School*, we learn that the Pathway Project spanned over an eight year period and included the participation of fifty-five secondary teachers (grades 6-12).

In the section entitled “Conceptual Framework: A Cognitive Strategies Approach,” the cognitive strategies approach to teaching academic literacy is defined as an intervention developed by the California Writing Project. This intervention was born from their extensive research on how experienced readers and writers interact with texts. From their research, they found that “experienced readers and writers purposefully select and orchestrate cognitive strategies that are appropriate for the literacy task at hand” (273). They also found that “teachers need to **provide systematic and explicit instruction in strategies used by mature readers** and writers and help students develop declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge of these cognitive strategies, thereby building students’ metacognitive control of specific strategies” (274). They contend that the responsibility rests with the teacher to “make visible” the thought process and decisions good readers and writers make and “to provide enough sustained, guided practice that students can internalize these strategies and perform complex tasks independently” (274). In other words, the cognitive strategies approach relies on teachers to teach students a variety of different strategies, how to use the strategies, when to use the strategies, and why one strategy may be more appropriate than another.

As students learn how to use reading strategies, they will develop the flexibility needed to approach a variety of challenging texts. This is not a simple task, however. In *Teaching and Researching Reading*, William Grabe and Fredricka L. Stoller comment on the challenges behind developing students into strategic readers of text. In their third chapter, “Dilemmas for L2 reading research and instruction,” Grabe and Stoller state that **a considerable amount of time must be spent on teaching students how to become strategic readers; time, they say, that most teachers do not have or are unwilling to invest** (82). They also caution that “using strategies effectively does not typically involve conscious decisions on the part of the fluent reader. Strategic readers are able to verbalize consciously the strategies that they use when asked to reflect, but they usually do not think consciously of these strategic choices because they have used them effectively so often” (82). **Teaching a strategy to students, having them practice the strategy and learning when to use the strategy is an important step in developing strategic readers, but great investment of time must be spent on repetition.** As Grabe and Stoller explain, mature readers do not consciously select strategies as they read; instead, they fluidly move from one strategy to another, making “strategic choices” based on the reading situation. Grabe and Stoller



contend, to truly develop into a strategic reader, students must move away from the deliberate selection of strategies and into a process that is more instinctive or automatic.

In the following table, there is a condensed list of the cognitive reading strategies that are outlined in the Pathway Project study. The list below identifies strategies that would best assist students in meeting the competencies outlined in the study conducted by the Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senate.

These reading strategies suggest that there is a high correlation between an individual's ability to think, question, and summarize text while reading and his/ her ability to competently read and understand ideas presented in text. Therefore, teachers should teach and rehearse with students how to ask questions of a text, make connections in and around a text, and how to infer meaning and make predictions from a text. The cognitive strategies approach makes clear that the teaching of strategies or skills is not enough to help students develop into competent readers and writers. Instead, students need to learn how to think about each strategy and have ample opportunities to practice the strategy. **Through repetition and exposure to a variety of challenging texts, the skills that are acquired will become transparent and transferable. Through this process, students eventually take ownership of the strategy, independently making decisions about how to approach and interact with difficult reading material.** From the Pathway Project we can infer three effective teaching practices that will improve literacy instruction: 1) teachers must participate in continuous professional development; 2) teachers must purposefully select texts for pedagogical purposes; and 3) teachers must dedicate class time to the modeling and scaffolding of cognitive strategies.

## Effective Reading Strategies

- Make predictions based on the title
- Predict the author's purpose using textual clues
- Approach texts with a variety of reading strategies
- Successfully read challenging texts without instruction or support
- Clarify challenging material through rereading strategies
- Differentiate between main and subordinate ideas in texts
- Comprehend ideas presented in a variety of texts and be able to see connections among them
- Make predictions while reading
- Withhold judgment while reading a text"
- Challenge what a text says
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Before moving to the third and final study, let's review some key points from the previous two studies. The first study by the Intersegmental Committee of the Academic Senate reports that high school graduates are not prepared for the academic rigor that is expected of them in the colleges and universities. **The study recommends that high school teachers need to spend more time explicitly teaching critical reading and writing strategies to their students.** It also states that students must develop the "attitudes and habits" that mature readers possess and learn how to approach texts openly, suspending judgment until the text is fully understood. They suggest that junior and senior classes should assign writing assignments where students are asked to summarize and synthesize information from a variety of texts and spend more time teaching students how to analyze arguments that are presented in texts. We are left to believe from their recommendations, even though they offer recommendations for reading, writing, thinking, and speaking alike, that the ability to competently read academic texts is the most essential skill that high school student should learn in order to increase their chances of success in an academic environment.

In the second study, by the California Writing Project, we learn that a cognitive strategies approach to teaching English Language Learners academic competencies proves to be quite successful. **This study concludes that "deep knowledge" of reading strategies, and the explicit teaching of declarative, procedural, and conditional knowledge of strategies is central to developing competent readers of academic texts.**

## Study 3

The third and final research study focuses on students who have fallen behind in grade-level reading standards. Primarily concerned with grades 3-12, this study adds to the conversation by reporting on the damaging affects falling behind in grade level reading has on a student's overall academic performance. The study suggests ways teachers can prepare students for challenging reading assignments earlier in their education and recommends ways for teachers to keep students reading at grade level.

The Center on Instruction, one of five content centers serving as resources for the 16 regional U.S. Departments of Education Comprehensive Centers, published a report in 2007 entitled *Academic Literacy Instruction For Adolescents: A Guidance Document from the Center on Instruction* which offers a synthesis and summary of twelve comprehensive documents produced by scholars and organizations who are actively involved in the researching of academic literacy. Placed within this document are descriptions of each research project the Center on Instruction consulted. The purpose of this document is to assist states, districts, and schools in their efforts to improve literacy instruction. Divided into three parts—Improving Academic Literacy, Advice from the Experts, and Examples of State Activities—this document offers ways to improve literacy, ways to



support students reading below grade level, ways to support literacy development in English Language Learners, and ways the state and local governments can support schools in their pursuit to improve adolescent literacy.

In the opening pages of the study, the Center on Instruction outlines three goals for improving academic literacy: the first, increase all students' overall grade-level reading ability in order to prepare them for post-secondary and workplace reading demands; the second, ensure students continue to gain one grade-level in reading competency with each year they move through elementary, middle, and high school so that they continue to grow with the increasing demands; and the third, support students who are reading below grade-level standards and help them improve their reading proficiency.

The document suggests that literacy instruction should focus on six elements:

- 1) reading fluency;
- 2) vocabulary knowledge;
- 3) domain-specific and domain-general content knowledge;
- 4) higher-level reasoning and thinking skills;
- 5) cognitive reading strategies; and
- 6) motivation and engagement.

It is important to remember that the three goals for improving academic literacy and the six elements of literacy instruction that are listed above come from the examination of nearly a dozen research projects on academic literacy instruction. The value in this report, then, rests in the wide body of research that went into the creation of this document. The recommendations and suggestions here are not one person's idea of how secondary educators should approach literacy; instead, this document provides a comprehensive look at what research has found to be most useful and productive in the teaching of adolescent literacy.

Even though their research document is divided into three sections, this document will focus on the first section, "Improving Academic Literacy Instruction for Students in Grades 4-12." Although Parts 2 and 3 prove to be valuable resources to those interested in academic literacy, Part 1 applies more directly to helping students become more proficient readers and writers.

In Part 1, the Center on Instruction provide 5 recommendations:

- 1) Discuss reading strategies with students.
- 2) Give adequate time to practice reading strategies.
- 3) Increase opportunities for students to discuss what they are reading.
- 4) Engage students with high interest texts, reading goals, and choice.
- 5) Implement predictable learning routines.



## Summary

This research project began with one simple question: What can teachers do to better prepare students for college level reading and writing assignments? After a bit of research, the one question became three:

- 1) What does it mean to be a competent reader of texts?;
- 2) What is the most effective way to teach students how to read, write, and think with sophistication and maturity; and
- 3) Who should be responsible for teaching academic literacy?

Even though the three studies provided here represent a modicum of the total scholarship on adolescent and academic literacy, they do offer a diverse sampling of the research and represent ideas from the larger conversation. The three questions above driving this research project establish a solid foundation to help teachers, schools, and education companies better understand how to improve the achievement gap as it relates to academic reading.

It's also important to note that the scholarship included here has contributed to the development of Quindew's skill-based pedagogy and the components of Quindew's rigorous and adaptive reading program. This research document identifies key elements of successful literacy instruction and offers guidelines to help programs like Quindew develop sound reading experiences for students at all levels of reading ability.

