

WRITTEN QUESTIONS

I ask them to prepare, as homework along with the 60-page weekly reading assignment, 10 questions to which they do not know the answer. As preparation for their first question-making assignment, after I had modeled such questions for their discussion the previous week, they read Carver's "Popular Mechanics" in class, writing question marks in the margin as they read; then they create one (grammatical!) question each to be written on the board. The class can easily produce 25 questions about this ambiguous story--and we don't know the answers to any of them! Later, when they bring their lists of 10 questions, I glance at each student's list of 10 and check off the student's homework completion on my grade sheet; anyone who hasn't completed her written homework is asked to do so in a corner of the classroom dubbed "The Library". All others are then grouped to discuss possible answers based on other passages of the novel, other readings, personal experiences and observation, etc. Discussions are lively as students try to tease out motivations, consequences, etc. Few students arrive the second time without written questions prepared at home; they don't want too be excluded from the discussion.

CONCEPT MAPS

For a non-fiction text that, in my experience, students tend to skim and forget, I ask students to read as homework the important first chapter that emphasizes the connections between important ideas. Many students--predictably--miss the big picture although they may remember some details. When they arrive in class, I ask them to write a one-page explanation of the connections between main ideas that the authors are putting forward. While a few can do so, most struggle to understand the question and write weak answers. At the next meeting, we go over (anonymous) adequate and inadequate example answers on the overhead and then I ask how students could read next time so that they would have more comprehensive understanding. After accepting any suggestions for better study skills, I show on the overhead a concept map or cluster diagram of the same chapter showing how the concepts in question could be connected graphically to show how they are connected conceptually. I then pair students (including one capable reader in each pair) and ask them to create in pairs a concept map of the next chapter which they have just read as homework. As they finish, we post or pass around the various treatments of the chapter. Both the mapping and the examination of classmates' maps are attended by a buzz of activity and enthusiasm: this is always a popular activity. For the next 4 or 5 weeks, each homework assignment in the non-fiction book includes the making of a concept map. At first I give feedback on each (some crowd too many details, others skimp on substance or fail to show connections); later I check them off quickly as done.

READING CHECKS

For both fiction and non-fiction texts, I regard homework reading as vital so that in-class group discussions of texts will be fruitful. Consequently I ask students to write a "Reading Check" as they arrive in class, which requires them to have read to the end of the assignment in order to answer the question posed. The writing exercise doubles as a practice in writing effective support paragraphs during the first weeks (topic sentence answering the question, adequate support facts from the reading, summary concluding sentence) and as a challenge to write a complex sentence to practice dependent clauses that we are studying in the paired grammar class in later weeks (for example, an "Although X, Y because Z" sentence serves as useful practice for writing thesis statements). The questions never require recall of inconsequential details but rather focus on larger ideas found near the end of the reading assignment; also, I invite students to build higher-order thinking skills by asking students to apply a key concept to their experiences, or to identify an idea they doubt is true and tell why, or to connect an idea to another course reading, etc. Several weeks into the course, when in the paired writing course we have reached the editing part of the writing process, we take out all earlier reading checks and use them again for editing practice. Instead of giving letter grades on each Reading Check, I use check plus, check, check minus or unsatisfactory responses, which makes scoring faster, but I always write a brief comment as well. I get a lot of mileage from these twice-weekly brief writings: proof of having done homework reading, critical thinking, paragraph or complex sentence structure, editing practice.