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Slow Reading: A Practical Solution for Reading and Writing

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Slow Reading:

A Practical Solution for Reading and
Writing by Matthew L. Miller, Ph. D.,
University of South Carolina Aiken



What is Slow Reading?

- At its simplest form, slow reading is deliberate, intentional reading, which tries to examine the complexity of writing and to offer personalized interpretations.
- Slow reading is a method to increase the analytical and critical reading skills of students.
- Slow reading encourages readers and writers to develop a relationship through the text. Thomas Newkirk, author of *The Art of Slow Reading*, states, “A transactional view of reading acknowledges [that] writing is an intentional act and as reader we must be alert to the cues the writer gives us in titles, in opening paragraphs, in pivotal scenes, in descriptions. If we are to respond, we must be responsible. We need to be awake, to pay attention” (117).



How Slow Reading works?

Slow Reading entails six practices (as I tell students):

- PERFORMING—you could dramatize the text by listening to the writer's voice and acting out that voice. You should be able to demonstrate “sound cues [that] enable readers to connect, to imagine, the presence of the writer, a quality writers often refer to as voice” (Newkirk 47).
- MEMORIZING—you could learn a passage “by heart,” “allow[ing] language to be written on the mind” (Newkirk 76). One could say, “Memorization is also a pledge of allegiance, an act of loyalty and deep respect, of affiliation” (Newkirk 76).



How Slow Reading works?

Slow Reading entails six practices (as I tell students) (cont.):

- CENTERING—you could mark the text with annotations, “being alert to the intentions of the writer” (Newkirk 95). You are trying to find a “center” that could be both an “emotional” and/or “conceptual” focus chosen by the writer (Newkirk 95): “the reader needs to focus both on the global intention of the piece and on the specific local facts, details, and examples” (Newkirk 104). There are not necessarily wrong answers: “readers will find their own entry points to a piece of writing; they will make their marks, depending on their purposes, on the associations they make, on their prior experiences, their age, gender” (Newkirk 117).
- PROBLEM FINDING—you could demonstrate a balanced understanding of the text—“*work through* [the] initial discomfort of situations that don’t make sense, when our habitual patterns of understanding don’t do the job” (Newkirk 119-20). The key to this option is to be “*microscopic*”: “[w]hen faced with a difficulty or a major challenge, an effective thinker can break apart (the root meaning of *analyze*) that problem into parts—the whole problem may be daunting, but it doesn’t have to be solved all at once; it can be broken into stages that feel more manageable” (Newkirk 120).



How Slow Reading works?

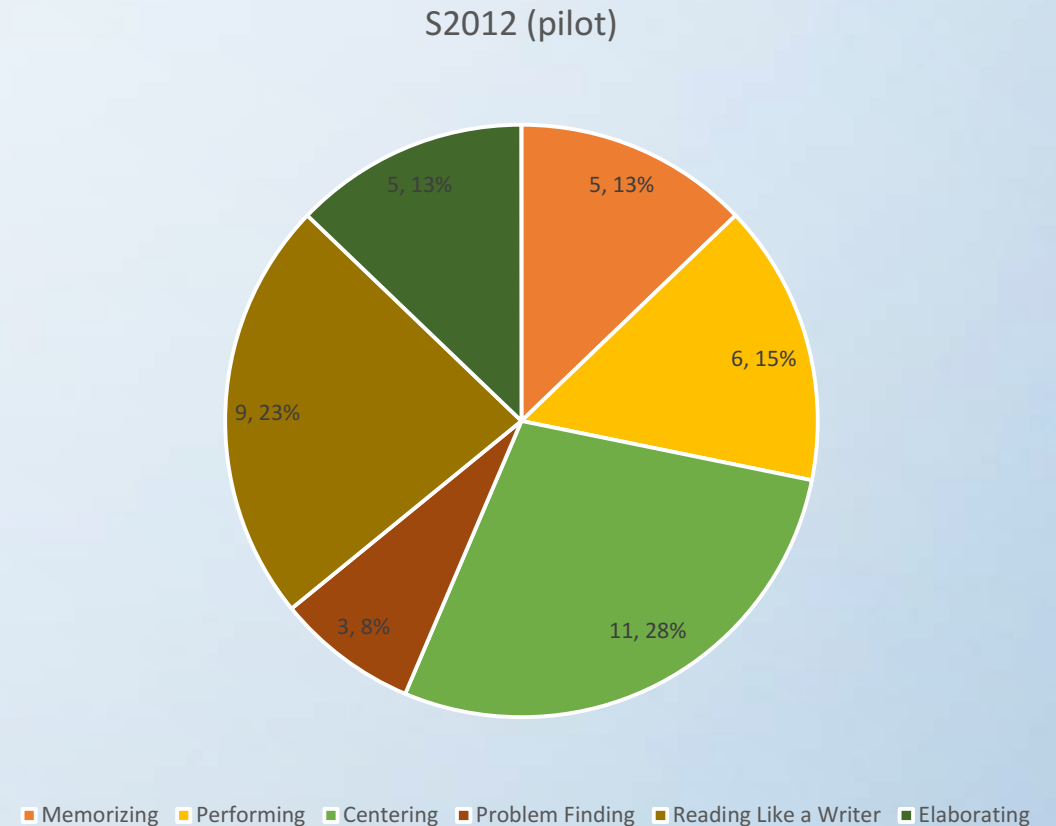
Slow Reading entails six practices (as I tell students) (cont.):

- READING LIKE A WRITER—you could demonstrate a “close, writerly reading” of the text through “annotation,” “selective destruction,” or “revision” (Newkirk 144). Annotation means “attending to surprising and effective authorial choices” (Newkirk 144). Selective destruction means “degrading an effective text to appreciate skillful choices” (Newkirk 144). Revision, in this practice, means “improving writing and studying the revisions of other authors” (Newkirk 144).
- ELABORATING—you could demonstrate a capacity to “listen to the text,” respond in a way to open the text: responding to the specific details and key words given by the writer to the reader. Indeed, “a key action in ‘opening a text’ is to *interrogate the key words*” (Newkirk 184).



Slow Reading as a Strategy

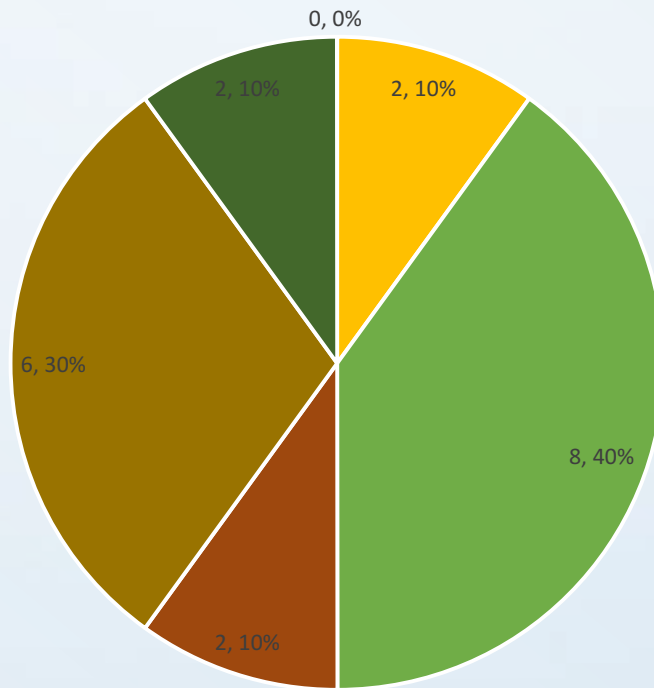
- In Spring 2012, I piloted this assignment in my 200-level American literature survey course and my 400-level African and African American literature course.
- 38 total students participated in the pilot.
- 19 students in the 200-level survey course and 19 students in the upper-level course





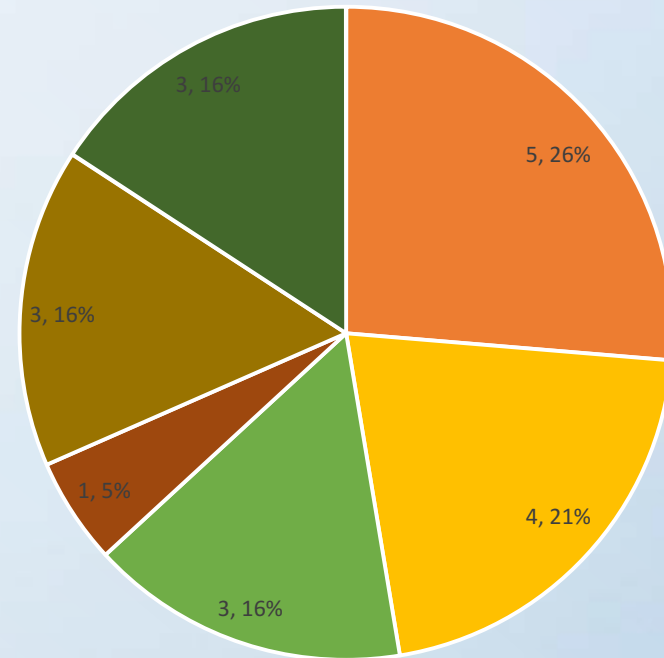
Spring 2012 (pilot)

S2012 (pilot) 200-level



Memorizing Performing Centering Problem Finding Reading Like a Writer Elaborating

S2012 (pilot) 400-level



Memorizing Performing Centering Problem Finding Reading Like a Writer Elaborating

Spring 2012 (pilot) Example

"All right, Billie," said the captain. "Back her in." The oiler swung the boat then and, seated in the stern, the cook and the correspondent were obliged to look over their shoulders to contemplate the lonely and indifferent shore.

The monstrous in-shore rollers heaved the boat high until the men were again enabled to see the white sheets of water scudding up the slanted beach. "We won't get in very close," said the captain. Each time a man could wrest his attention from the rollers, he turned his glance toward the shore, and in the expression of the eyes during this contemplation there was a singular quality. The correspondent, observing the others, knew that they were not afraid, but the full meaning of their glances was shrouded.

As for himself, he was too tired to grapple fundamentally with the fact. He tried to coerce his mind into thinking of it, but the mind was dominated at this time by the muscles, and the muscles said they did not care. It merely occurred to him that if he should drown it would be a shame.

There were no hurried words, no pallor, no plain agitation. The men simply looked at the shore. "Now, remember to get well clear of the boat when you jump," said the captain.

Seaward the crest of a roller suddenly fell with a thunderous crash, and the long white comber came roaring down upon the boat.

"Steady now," said the captain. The men were silent. They turned their eyes from the shore to the comber and waited. The boat slid up the incline, leaped at the furious top, bounced over it, and swung down the long back of the wave. Some water had been shipped and the cook bailed it out.

Wave 1

They were warned twice to jump clear but they tumbled instead.

Wave 2

But the next crest crashed also. The tumbling, boiling flood of white water caught the boat and whirled it almost perpendicular. Water swarmed in from all sides. The correspondent had his hands on the gunwale at this time, and when the water entered at that place he swiftly withdrew his fingers, as if he objected to wetting them. The little boat, drunken with this weight of water, reeled and snuggled deeper into the sea.

"Bail her out, cook! Bail her out," said the captain.

"All right, captain," said the cook.

"Now, boys, the next one will do for us, sure," said the oiler. "Mind to jump clear of the boat."

The third wave moved forward, huge, furious, implacable. It fairly swallowed the dingy, and almost simultaneously the men tumbled into the sea. A piece of lifebelt had lain in the bottom of the boat, and as the correspondent went overboard he held this to his chest with his left hand.

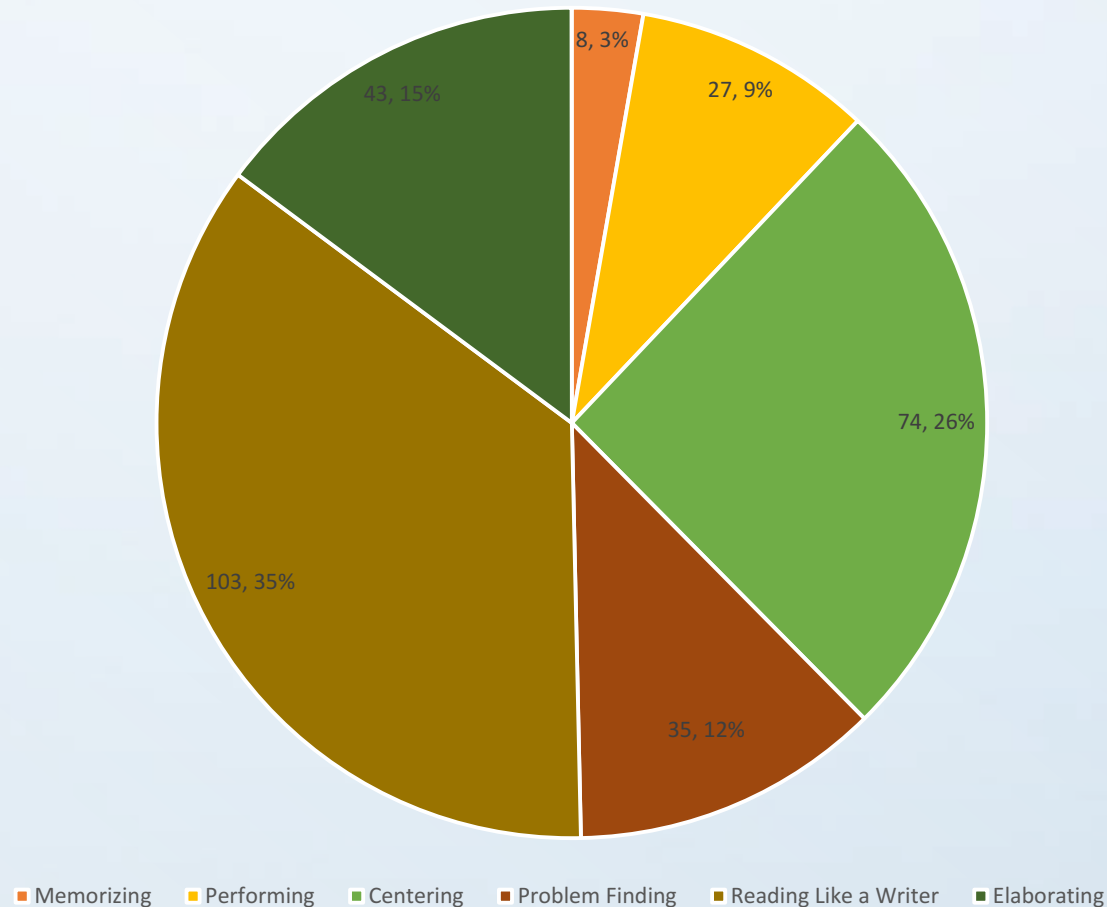
They tumbled just as the waves had previously.

Wave 3

The boat is called a dingy here to make it sound helpless and small.

Slow Reading Practices: Spring 2013- Spring 2018

Slow Reading Practices S2013-S2018



- Slow Reading has been assigned over ten semesters.
- 290 students have produced Slow Reading Exercises.
- The majority of students have chosen the Reading Like a Writer exercises followed by Centering.

Reading Like a Writer

Bread Swers, Yeyierska
ch 16, p 230-231

Smolinsky draft 1

A thousand years older I was by the time I dragged myself up the stairs to my room. I threw myself on the bed. My whole body ached with the bitterness of it all. Insane I've been — reaching for I know not what and only pushing it away in my clumsiness.

subject then adjective

I want knowledge. How, like a starved thing in the dark, I'm driven to reach for it. A flash, and all lights up! Almost I seem to touch the fiery centre of life! And there! It was only a man. And I'm left in the dark again.

have been / was

awk phrasing

keep tenses consistent

What was that flash of light that lured me into this blackness? Was it desire for the man, or desire for knowledge? Why does one kill the other and make everything that was so real nothing but an empty mockery?

use that past tense

don't begin with "and"

For hours I lay listening to the breathing of the elm leaves in the rain.

sound of wind and?

elm leaves don't breathe...
fragment. repetitive. passive

Slowly, the clouding numbness left me. Work to be done. Work to be done. That's why I came to college.

signmark non-few

try "I had work to do."

thoughts should be italicized (in US...)

Stupid yok! Always wasting yourself with wild loves. I'll put a stop to it. I'll freeze myself like ice. I'll be colder than the coldest. I'm alone. I'm alone.

you never explained what "yok" means.

decided to

decided to/would

awkward... same person.

I
I
I
I
repetitive watch it up

Little by little, I began to get hold of myself. If I lost out with those spick-and-span youngsters like Mr. Edman, I won with the older and wiser professors. After a while, I understood why the young men didn't like me. I knew more of life as a ten-year-old girl. Running the streets, than these psychology instructors did with all their heads swelled from too much knowing.

I was alone. (verb tense, repetitive)

With the older men, I could walk and talk as a person. To them, my Hester Street world was a new world. I gave them mine, and they gave me theirs. What could such raw youth as Mr. Edman know of that ripened understanding that older men could give!

word choice?

As time went on, I found myself smiling at the terrible pain and suffering that my crush for Mr. Edman had cost me. That affair, like the one with Morris Lipkin, all foolish madness which, though it nearly killed me, made me grow faster in reason than if I had no such madness in me.

unnecessary "was" works better.

Each time, after making a crazy fool of myself over a man, I was plunged into thick darkness that seemed the end of everything, but it really led me out into the beginnings of wider places, newer light.

I made

and

Gradually, I grew up even to be friends with the dean. His house was always open to me. Once, while we were chatting in his library, I asked him suddenly, "why is it that when a nobody wants to get to be somebody, she's got to make herself terribly hard, when people like you who are born high up can keep all their kind feelings and get along so naturally well with everybody?"



Reading Like a Writer (cont.)

Sara,

Your personal narrative essay is very good, however, there are some issues I would like to see addressed in your next draft. Some points to consider:

- Avoid beginning sentences with “and.”
- Avoid needless repetition.
- Avoid vagueness for the sake of sounding “poetic.” This is a narrative – be specific.
- Maintain verb tense.
- Maintain first-person narrative voice – no “you.”

Also, please note that you should try to avoid using non-standard or non-English words without explaining them; you don’t want to distance your audience.

Recall that in English grammar, when the subject is followed by a linking verb, the adjectival phrase will go after the linking verb. For example, “I was older” rather than “older I was.” I know it gets tricky sometimes, but that’s the general rule.

I understand that this is a very emotionally charged experience, but I feel perhaps your writing has come from a heightened emotional state which is effecting your clarity.

As I said, your work is very good! You should be proud of your use of descriptive language and organization of thought in your storytelling.

Prof. C.



Elaborating

It is as Mathilde is beginning to think critically about these myths of love that she uncovers an additional truth about herself and woman. Thinks Mathilde, “**The way the old story goes, woman needs an other to complete her circuits, to flick her to her fullest blazing**” (Groff 235). **Here** Mathilde observes that inherent to the same mythic love stories she has been told since she was young is the idea that a woman needs the love of another to be fulfilled. It is **in this moment** that she realizes that perhaps this part of the narrative may too be fabricated, though she cannot be certain at the present moment. **Here** Groff utilizes a bracketing mechanism to allow the reader insight into Mathilde’s future and to see what Mathilde will later come to call a “**refutation**” (Groff 235) of this narrative. The reader is allowed a glimpse of Mathilde in her eighties, as she is living alone and reflecting on the narrative arc of her life. In a moment of clarity, an aged Mathilde sees that, “**her life had not been, at its core, about love. There had been terrific love in it. Heat and magic. Lotto, her husband. Christ, there had been him. Yet—yes!—the sum of her life, she saw, was far greater than its sum of love**” (Groff 236). **Here** Mathilde is now finally certain of what she had suspected many years before—that to achieve completion and to be whole as an individual, she did not require another. Her love for and marriage to Lotto had brought her great joy—“**heat and magic**”—and while it had shaped and enhanced her life, it did not define her. By achieving completion without the necessity of “**foundering into another,**” (Groff 235) she had refuted the last element of the love myth she had known as a girl.



I tell students that “[w]riting is a demystified human act, a set of decisions and revisions. Thus, while reading can make us better writers—writing can make us better, more discerning, more human readers” (Newkirk 168).

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