



THE **ACTOR** METHOD

Enhancing close, critical, and efficient reading of informational texts

By **Victoria Rey**



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*a*ccording to the National Center for Education Statistics, millions of first-year students who attend postsecondary institutions are academically underprepared. As a result, they are required to take developmental education courses, which refer to courses and programs that address the needs of underprepared or nontraditional students who lack basic skills that are necessary for college-level work.

One of the developmental courses that students take is reading.

I teach developmental reading courses to postsecondary students. In the beginning of the term, some students do not have a positive attitude toward these courses because they perceive them as remedial. Others find lengthy nonfiction materials boring because of unknown words, unfamiliarity with certain topics, long sentences, inadequate reading skills, and ineffective strategies.

However, I have developed a strategy to help.

The ACTOR method

After studying the factors that contribute to college students' inability to fully understand what they read and using research-based strategies on how to deal with these situations, I developed ACTOR—a method that is designed to enable readers to become focused, engaged, and productive before, during, and after reading:

- *Activate* prior knowledge
- *Concentrate* and *connect* this knowledge to new information
- *Trigger* appropriate strategies to understand thoroughly what is being read
- *Organize* mentally the ideas that have been gathered from reading
- *Respond* to this information

During the *activate* stage, students recall prior knowledge by reading the title and headings and asking questions on what these suggest. Students also reasonably activate prior knowledge on given content and vocabulary to relate to what they read. They *concentrate* by eliminating distractors and *connect* prior knowledge (vocabulary or ideas) to the new information to make sense of what is being read in the second stage. Prior knowledge about a topic and vocabulary help students to understand what they read.

During the *trigger* stage, students derive meanings from or make sense of printed texts by choosing a combination of strategies to ensure engagement with the text, processing, and thorough comprehension. In the fourth stage, students think about what they have read and recall and *organize*

in their minds or on paper the ideas that they have generated from the text. Continuous use of effective reading strategies enables students to become better at using appropriate techniques with spontaneity and automaticity and improve their comprehension and/or perceptions toward reading.

Finally, students *respond* to what they have read to show proof of comprehension by reciting or writing substantial information or key ideas, responding to assigned tasks, achieving one's purpose in reading, or creating something. Answering and asking questions about the texts during class and group discussions or written assignments can measure students' comprehension. Responding helps students to determine if what is read is understood. In independent reading, students use their own words to recite, map, illustrate, or think about what they have read. An awareness of the importance of responding to texts is important because it helps students to remember information. Pertinent concepts become a part of schemas or prior knowledge that will be helpful in the future. Related literature supports the importance of responding to texts.

To further develop students' vocabulary and comprehension skills that are necessary to fully understand complex informational texts in college, I demonstrated the five stages of ACTOR with accompanying techniques. I considered the literacy expectations that must be met by students to be prepared to enter college and workforce training programs for K–12 students, ways to help students better understand what they read, the terrain of college developmental reading, reading demands in disciplinary courses, and other studies.

Close, critical, and efficient reading

In reading intensive college-level coursework, it is important for students to read closely, critically, and efficiently. Close reading is the act of considering word and sentence structures and meanings in order to correctly process given

information and make sense of what is being read. Critical reading is breaking apart written information, putting these pieces of information together in one's own words without altering the original meaning, and responding to given tasks based on the writer's intended meaning. Efficient reading is comprehending what is stated; inferring what the text suggests or implies; and forming valid conclusions, arguments, or new information based on stated ideas in the least possible time.

Because students habitually read informational texts closely and critically, they save time and effort in understanding what is being read, thus achieving speed and accuracy. I find ACTOR beneficial in helping my students to read closely, critically, and efficiently.

Benefits of using ACTOR

College students who found ACTOR to be helpful perceived an improvement in their reading comprehension skills, test scores in developmental reading and other courses, and their attitude toward reading. Students have spoken positively about the method:

- "ACTOR helped me focus and comprehend better. Now when I read, I can honestly say I understand what the author says."
- "The ACTOR method helps me break down the work I'm doing. It helps me concentrate more quickly and makes it easier to understand the text. It also improves my abilities to connect and to notice the tone of the text."
- "The ACTOR method is very helpful because it helps break down what I am reading. I was already good with activating prior knowledge and connecting it to the new information, but ACTOR helps me to use the different strategies we learned and to organize and respond to new information."

And for those students who intend to major in education, they clearly draw connections to their future careers and see how ACTOR will be beneficial in helping elementary students who struggle in reading. ■

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