# Mindful Reading Beyond First-Year Writing

**Ellen C. Carillo, University of Connecticut**[1]

**Abstract:** This article reports on a longitudinal, cross-institutional study exploring the extent to which undergraduate students transfer reading practices they learned in their first-year writing courses to future courses and contexts. Although small in scale, this study is a step toward helping writing program administrators, WAC/WID directors, writing center directors, and those in similar roles better understand the kinds of reading practices students engage in across their courses, which is a means toward creating more relevant and comprehensive first-year and cross-campus writing programs, as well as stronger support services on campus.

## Introduction

This article presents findings from a longitudinal, cross-institutional study I conducted to examine the extent to which undergraduate students transfer what they learn about reading in their first-year writing courses to subsequent courses and contexts. The students that participated in the study were in courses that used my own textbook, *A Writer's Guide to Mindful Reading*, which as of April 2025, had been "visited" 285,736 times and downloaded 222,139 times. The far reach of the textbook suggests the value in exploring the efficacy of this widely circulating approach to teaching reading and writing simultaneously. The findings I present here, however, have implications beyond these textbook users. While limited in scale, this study represents a step toward helping writing program administrators, WAC/WID directors, writing center directors, and others in similar roles better understand the reading practices students engage in across their courses—a critical step toward designing more relevant and comprehensive first-year and campus-wide writing programs, as well as stronger support services.

## Contextualizing the Study

The cross-institutional, IRB-approved (protocol number X18-170) study titled "Tracing the Impact of Mindful Reading Beyond First-Year Composition," which I conducted from 2019-2022, contributes to recent research on the transfer of learning, as well as research on reading in the field of writing studies. Both reading and transfer have become subjects of interest in writing studies over the last fifteen years or so. Reading has reemerged after a period of neglect by the field (Carillo, 2015; Huffman, 2012-2013; Salvatori & Donahue, 2012, 2016;) while the transfer of learning, which had been taken up by scholars in education for decades, made its way into writing studies through the important early work of scholars such as Anne Beaufort, Rhonda Leathers Dively, Linda S. Bergmann and Janet Zepernick, and Elizabeth Wardle. While other research I have conducted has foregrounded the complexity of transfer as a concept itself (Carillo, 2020), I am prioritizing the study's focus on reading and will be invoking the most common definition of transfer as a form of application. However, as the section on coding below suggests, the study recognizes more dynamic notions of

transfer, too, wherein students are repurposing rather than just applying reading strategies (e.g., reading aloud to paraphrase) as necessary.

The study also contributes to recent research on students' reading habits. In "Critical Reading: What Do Students Actually Do," for example, Kendall Hairston-Dotson and Sara Incera (2022) report on a study of undergraduates' reading habits that they conducted at Eastern Kentucky University. They studied students' perspectives on the usefulness of twenty critical reading behaviors that fall under the larger umbrellas of skimming, reviewing, synthesizing, questioning, and applying. Hairston-Dotson and Incera "found meaningful differences between the critical reading skills students report being most useful and the ones they report more often when working on their assignments" (p. 126). While students consider more complex skills, such as applying, more useful than simpler skills, such as skimming—and these more complex skills are taught more often in their classes—students still chose to skim more often when working on their assignments. This discrepancy leads Hairston-Dotson and Incera to call for research on "why students skim their course materials" and whether it's "possible that skim reading is good enough for students to reach their goals" (p. 125).

An earlier study conducted by Annie Del Principe and Rachel Ihara (2017) suggests that in some cases other course materials are making it unnecessary for students to complete a course's assigned readings. In a study of the experiences of ten community college students in their classes across the disciplines, Ihara and Del Principe found that "that the cross-curricular reading experiences of students in [their] CC [community college] are more or less in line with the NCEE's [National Center on Education and the Economy] broad 2013 study of literacy skills required in community colleges: lectures and notes often replace reading; students tend to do some reading when they are quizzed or asked to be accountable for what they read; very few classes ask students to read closely or assign texts that necessitate careful reading" (p. 241). My study answers Del Principe and Ihara's (2017) call to "examine and understand nonjudgmentally the ways students utilize texts in all of their classes" (p. 242), as well as Hairston-Dotson and Incera's call by engaging students in discussions about their reading practices.

## Study Background, Design, and Data Collection

The cross-institutional, qualitative study was approved by my institution's IRB and went through the same or similar processes at the other institutions represented in the study. The goal of the study was to determine the effectiveness of the mindful reading pedagogy by exploring the extent to which students were transferring what they learned from *A Writer's Guide to Mindful Reading* to future courses and contexts. To address this question, I used a mixed methods approach involving a survey and a series of semi-structured, follow-up interviews, both of which are included in the Appendix.

To recruit participants, I asked colleagues to share the survey with their students. These colleagues used the textbook in first-year writing courses at a regional campus of our public, R1 university in New England and at other local institutions where they also taught. Students could elect to continue to partake in the study by sharing their contact information on the survey and participating in an interview at the end of each semester until graduation. In these interviews, students reflected on their use of reading strategies during the previous semester in their classes and other contexts. As an incentive to participate in the series of follow-up interviews, students were given an Amazon gift card after each interview. This mixed methods approach allowed me to reach a broader number of students through the survey while also gathering the in-depth data provided by individual interviews.

Students across two public four-year universities, one private four-year university, and one community college in New England were invited to participate in the survey (see Appendix A). Unfortunately, just one community college student completed the survey and did not participate in

the follow-up interviews. Despite incentivizing participation in the survey through a raffle for an Amazon gift card, response rates to the survey were low with just forty-six students in total participating. Seven students agreed to the series of semi-structured interviews. Six of these students were from an R1 public university and one was from a private university. The students who participated in the interviews represent a range of majors and minors: Minnie is an Accounting major; Elbert is an Economics major with a minor in Accounting; Gale is a Biology major with a minor in Psychology; Lia is a Mathematics/Statistics major with a minor in Business Management and Marketing; Joe is an Advertising major; Jayne is a General Studies major with a minor in Psychology, and Molly is a Physiology and Neurobiology major with a minor in Math. All students' names used in the study are pseudonyms.

Graduating between spring 2021 and spring 2022, these study participants' majors largely align with those of students across the country in recent years. For example, writing for *Forbes,* Michael T. Nietzel (2022) reports that of the two million bachelor's degrees that were conferred in 2019-2020, 58% were "concentrated in just six fields of study: business (387,900 degrees); health professions and related programs (257,300 degrees); social sciences and history (161,200 degrees); engineering (128,300 degrees); biological and biomedical sciences (126,600 degrees); and psychology (120,000 degrees)" (para. 10).

I distributed the survey in December of 2019 and began interviews that same month. Students who participated in the survey were enrolled in a first-year writing course between fall 2017 and summer 2019. I did not survey or interview any of my own students. All study participants who agreed to interviews remained active in the study through their graduation and interviewed with me at the end of each semester. The interviews were audio recorded and professionally transcribed. The interview questions, included in Appendix B, remained largely uniform across the interviews, but the semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed me "more intimate glimpses" of participants' experiences as I was able to incorporate follow-up questions and adapt questions, as necessary (Selfe & Hawisher, 2012, p. 270), particularly as we moved away from the first post-survey interview.

While the questions I asked in the survey and in the follow-up interviews were limited to reading strategies introduced in the textbook—namely annotating generally, as well as the believing doubting game, mapping, reading aloud to paraphrase, the says/does approach, skimming, reading and evaluating online sources, and reading like a writer—the study represents a step toward understanding "the full spectrum of actual reading behaviors that comprise our students' experiences as undergraduates in our institutions" ( Del Principe & Ihara, 2016, p. 242).

## Data Analysis

As noted above, forty-six students participated in the survey, although roughly half did not complete questions six through twelve, the very questions that ask about their experiences with reading. Because of the relatively limited data I was working with, I chose to use exploratory data analysis to track patterns I noticed across students' answers to questions six through twelve in the surveys. Ultimately, however, the interviews were designated as the primary source of data for this study. As detailed below, these interviews were transcribed and subjected to multiple rounds of coding and analysis. The survey data, however, was revisited to assess the extent to which it corroborated findings that emerged from the interviews. For example, in their survey responses to questions nine and eleven, several students commented on the value of skimming, which aligned with themes identified in their corresponding interviews. In addition, the survey responses were used to supplement the interview data for participants who had consented to both methods of data collection. As discussed below, Jayne indicated in her survey that she had not engaged in skim reading prior to being introduced to the strategy in her first-year writing course, valuable context for

interpreting her interview responses. Overall, while survey data offered occasional contextual support, the interview data remained the central focus of analysis.

Although interviewers often choose the response to interview questions as their unit of segmentation (Geisler & Swarts, 2019, p. 85), to get more granular data I opted to use the sentence as the coding unit, segmenting and coding the professional transcriptions of the interviews in this way. Because this segment of text might focus on more than one subject or topic, unlike a topical chain, a single sentence would often carry multiple codes. A graduate research assistant acted as a second coder, and we coded the interviews using a program called Delve. Taking an inductive approach, we independently coded each sentence, comparing codes and adding codes throughout the process, as the data required. We ended up with a total of 38 codes which corresponds to MacQueen et al.'s (1998) suggestion that qualitative "researchers concerned with achieving satisfactory reliability should work with an upper limit of 30–40 codes" (p. 35).

In our initial round of codes, we coded for reading strategies included in the textbook, as well as terms that were part of our questions because we knew participants would speak to those. However, the need for additional codes quickly emerged. For example, many participants referred to high school, which we ended up coding for, and many participants also referred to having little reading assigned in their courses, which proved necessary to code for, as well.

In some cases, developing the codes proved more complicated than we anticipated. One of the interview questions, for example, asks specifically about the role that participants' purpose for reading plays in how they choose a reading strategy. As such, we anticipated that this term, "purpose," would appear in almost every participant's answer to that question. The concept of purpose is also central to mindful reading, so for this reason, too, we coded for mentions of purpose in our initial coding schema. However, we did not anticipate that this code would trip us up more than any other. Study participants often spoke of the author's purpose or the purpose of the text they were reading (more on this in the Findings section below), which does not align with how purpose is defined in mindful reading or how we defined it as a code. In the second round of coding, we were more precise and only coded for instances in which participants were describing their purpose for reading.

Our inductive approach also meant that we needed to pay close attention to the data even if it conflicted with the codes we anticipated using. For example, although the textbook lists "reading aloud to paraphrase" as a single reading strategy, many study participants talked about reading aloud and paraphrasing as separate strategies so we coded for those individually, as well as for the two practices together. This coding practice also underscores our willingness to conceive of learning transfer as a dynamic process in which a learner may repurpose a particular concept or practice rather than simply apply it in the exact way they learned it.

Like "reading aloud to paraphrase," about a third of the codes represented reading strategies either introduced in the textbook or other reading strategies (e.g., reading to understand; reading to conduct research; reading to memorize; rereading; highlighting) that participants referred to while answering the interview questions. With the exception of the few outliers mentioned above, the additional codes fell within two other categories: disciplines (e.g., STEM, Business, English) and the specific site of reading (e.g., online course; on the job; at an internship; high school).

After independently coding the interviews the first time, comparing, revising, and adding codes, we independently coded the interviews a second time, arriving at 83.6% reliability. Engaging in multiple coding cycles allowed us to develop codes (and ultimately analyses) "rooted in the original data themselves" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 55) to best represent what we were finding empirically in the data.

# Limitations

This study has several limitations. Perhaps the most glaring limitation is that we can never know how a textbook is used in any given classroom. Still, there is a long history in the field of writing studies of treating textbooks as documentation of pedagogical practice (Barnard, 2014; Welch, 1987; Faigley, 1992; Knoublach, 2011; Hutton & King, 2024). This ongoing and important scholarship is published with the caveat that while textbooks may not accurately reflect classroom practice, as Lester Faigley (1992) points out, "they do reflect teachers' and program directors' decisions about how writing should be represented to students" (p. 133). If we adapt Faigley's point to this study, then a textbook that foregrounds reading would also reflect teachers' and program directors' decisions about how reading should be represented to students. Still, to mitigate the potential disconnect between the textbook's instruction and classroom practice, I focus on students' experiences as they applied the reading strategies rather than the textbook itself and the instruction it offers.

The study's findings are also limited by the small sample size with just 46 students responding to the survey (and far fewer completing the most germane questions) and seven consenting to the series of follow-up interviews. As such, the findings, detailed in the next section, cannot be generalized. The study also relies on self-reports. While a common qualitative source of data in the field of writing studies, and especially so with studies involving metacognitive awareness, self-reports can only convey students' perceptions and may be clouded by the inexactness of memory, particularly in a longitudinal study. Additionally, I asked students about most, although not all, of the reading strategies included in the textbook, leaving out "previewing" and "rhetorical reading." Had I included those, I wonder whether the findings might have been different. In particular, I wonder what I might have learned about any potential relationship between previewing and skimming. Finally, the fact that I, the author of the textbook, although not the instructor of any of the study participants, conducted the interviews could be seen as a limitation that led the participants to shape their responses in more affirming ways.

# Findings

While the study yielded data with a range of implications, I will focus primarily on three findings because these have the most bearing not just on the research question regarding the effectiveness of the mindful reading pedagogy, but on writing program administration across the curriculum. The short answer to my research question as to whether students are transferring into other courses and contexts what they learned about reading is yes. But when we look at some of the findings from the study, a more complicated picture emerges.

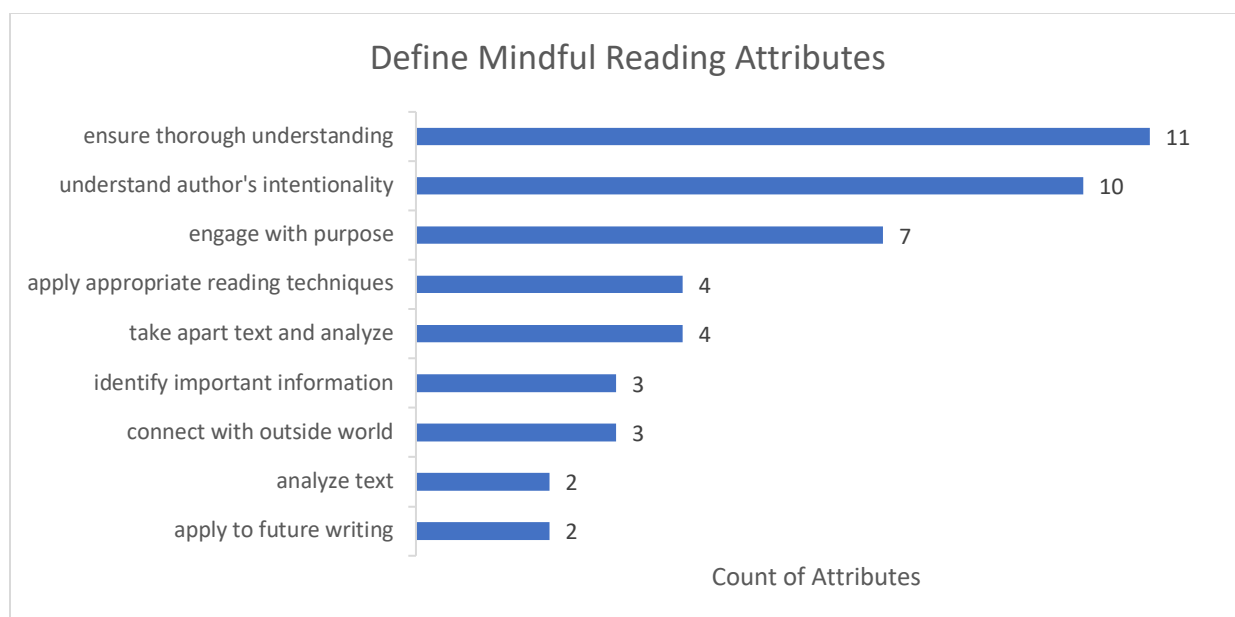## Finding 1: Students Struggle to Define Mindful Reading

Across almost all of the interviews, students struggled to define mindful reading, often describing it as if it were a reading strategy or technique itself rather than a framework within which reading strategies are taught, as it is defined in the textbook's Introduction:

> Mindful reading acts as a framework that is intended to remind you of the importance of becoming an active reader who makes careful and deliberate decisions about the reading strategies you might use. As you mindfully read, you will be learning about reading and also about yourself as a reader. These experiences can help you become an altogether stronger reader not just in this course but beyond it.

Clarifying this point, the textbook explains:

> Reading mindfully means paying attention not just to the content of the text—what it says—but rather to the process of reading itself by adjusting how you read based on what the piece asks of you. Skimming something—a newspaper, perhaps—may be a perfectly suitable approach in a particular situation. Skimming, however, might not be the best approach when you are expected to answer specific questions about a more complex reading or connect it to other complex readings, as you will likely have to do in your college classes.

As Figure 1 below shows, study participants often associated mindful reading with their own understanding of the text or with authorial intention. As evidenced by the definitions and example above, mindful reading is not defined as a reading strategy meant to help the reader understand a text or the intentions of the text's author (even if that were possible), but as a framework meant to support readers as they actively and deliberately make decisions about which reading strategies are relevant across different contexts. The third and fourth most common responses are those closest to an accurate definition of mindful reading in that they focus on purpose and applying an appropriate reading strategy, respectively.

## Define Mindful Reading Attributes

| Attribute | Count |
|---|---|
| ensure thorough understanding | 11 |
| understand author's intentionality | 10 |
| engage with purpose | 7 |
| apply appropriate reading techniques | 4 |
| take apart text and analyze | 4 |
| identify important information | 3 |
| connect with outside world | 3 |
| analyze text | 2 |
| apply to future writing | 2 |

Count of Attributes

*Figure 1: Definitions of Mindful Reading Attributes*

A closer look at the data reveals, however, that while one study participant, Minnie, did describe how mindful reading involves deliberately considering one's purpose for reading in order to choose a relevant reading strategy, other study participants misunderstood the role of purpose in mindful reading (see the section above for how this was addressed during the coding process). In her interview in spring 2021, Minnie noted "just how intentional [mindful reading] is." She elaborated: "Sometimes I used to go into any kind of reading and read it for the—I don't want to call it face value—but just going through the motions, trying to get through it versus after learning a bit more about mindful reading, I have an approach of like what I'm looking for in the reading. … So that intentionality has been really important." Minnie used the word "intentional" in other interviews when responding to the same question. The semester before, when also asked how to define mindful reading, Minnie focused on its metacognitive aspect, noting "I think mindful reading to me is taking a step back and then questioning yourself on how much you understand the material." While she, like

the majority of the other study participants ultimately connects mindful reading to comprehension, her focus on self-monitoring suggests a deeper understanding of the concept of mindful reading as compared to other study participants, who described mindful reading as being "able to read and understand the purpose of it" (Gale); "being aware of what the writer is trying to say" (Molly); or "trying to understand, trying to get into the author's mind and understanding from their point of view" (Elbert). These and other study participants invoke purpose as it relates to the text or authorial intention rather than a tool to help one determine the most relevant reading strategy.

Because I did not want to impact participants' responses, including their future responses to the same question, I did not intervene. However, because I did not intervene, I can only speculate why students may have misunderstood mindful reading as a concept even while able to practice many of the reading strategies it encompasses. One potential reason is that as a framework it is a far more abstract concept than the concrete reading strategies to which students are introduced. While one might argue that being able to define mindful reading is less important than being able to apply it, the lack of understanding of the role of metacognition can get in the way of students' ability to transfer the reading strategies because metacognition is so important to the transfer of learning.

## Finding 2: Students Neglect the Rhetorical Aspect of the Says/Does Reading Strategy

While I did not ask study participants to define the different strategies, several of the interview questions asked them to discuss which strategies they used, in which classes, and on what kinds of assignments, as well as whether they used the strategies in other contexts outside of academia, including their jobs. These questions, then, often revealed whether students understood the strategies themselves. Students regularly mis-defined the says/does approach, which emerged as the second most popular reading strategy, albeit significantly behind skimming, as shown in the figure below.



*Figure 2: Mentions of reading strategies during the follow-up interviews*

The says/does reading strategy is defined as follows:

> This approach to reading asks you to pay attention to two different elements of any given text. It asks you to notice what the text says—its content—and what the text does—how it functions. This approach is useful because it shifts attention away from content, which is often easier to figure out and toward how a text or sections of a text function." (p. 14)

Additional explanation follows an example: "This approach can help you determine how the different parts of a text work together to create meaning. When faced with a difficult or especially long text, you can annotate each paragraph by noting what it says and what it does" (pp. 14-15).

While study participants reported going "paragraph by paragraph" as they described their use of this reading strategy, they were not engaging in the rhetorical aspect of the strategy—the "does"—in which they should be focused on the rhetorical function of the paragraph. Gale explains, for example, "I do read each paragraph, especially with my Chemistry class. ... I try to go back to it and see what the paragraph is saying and then try to grasp the concept." Similarly, Elbert reports:

> For what I'm currently reading in the course that I'm taking, the high-level courses, you have to really read and reread again, and then write notes to the side, going paragraph by paragraph and analyzing. ... I've taken Econ Law. I think that's where [the says/does approach] has been the most useful. It's a lot of reading and trying to understand exactly how the teacher wants us to write the material. And for accounting. ...it's a little bit more for me studying to understand the theory side of it.

Minnie describes her use of the strategy as follows:

> So I ended up using [the says/does approach] a lot....it ended up being important to [say] like, 'Okay, this is what the paragraph is saying, but what is it doing? What is the context of the paragraph? How does it connect to who the writer is when they're writing it?,' things like that. So I found the says/does approach to be really helpful, especially when I was going back and then doing my essays on those readings."

All three students describe the "says" aspect of this approach wherein they are reading for content, but none addresses how that aspect of the strategy is intended to be complemented by the "does" part. While Minnie does mention the importance of context, she is not referring to context in terms of rhetorical context, but contexts surrounding the assigned text, such as its historical context. This content-driven approach to reading is reminiscent of Christine Haas and Linda Flower's (1988) early research on reading, replicated by Haswell et al. (1999) a decade later, research that continues to ring true and continues to be cited by many in writing studies (Goldschmidt, 2021; Carillo, 2015, 2018; and Horning, 2007) far more recently. Haas and Flower (1988) found that more experienced readers employ rhetorical reading strategies while inexperienced readers, such as undergraduates, define reading as information exchange and read for content. The (mis)use of the says/does strategy is especially noteworthy in relation to Haas and Flowers' findings. Whereas Haas and Flower were observing students' reading habits, in my study students were exposed to a reading approach containing a rhetorical component. Students, however, let the rhetorical aspect drop away in favor of the content-driven aspect.

There are many reasons why these study participants might be misapplying this reading strategy. The textbook may not explain it clearly enough or their instructor may not have reviewed it. Study participants may also be misremembering the strategy. Alternatively, students may simply be repurposing the reading strategy. No matter the reason study participants neglected the "does" part of the strategy, I would argue that because of its rhetorical component, this reading strategy holds great potential for helping students develop as strong writers within their respective disciplines. A

similar argument for teaching the rhetorical aspects of reading appears in the "CCCC Position Statement on The Role of Reading in College Writing Classrooms." If students are able to complete the "does" part of the reading strategy, which involves recognizing the function of each component (e.g., abstract, introduction, conclusion) of the texts produced in the particular discipline, then they will be stronger writers within their discipline. However, as I discuss in the remainder of this piece, we must be aware that disciplinary fields value reading in different ways, and for some, content-driven approaches are prioritized.

## Finding 3: Students Depend on Skim Reading Across their Courses

Perhaps the most striking finding from the study is the value of skim reading—not just the presence of it— across the study participants' undergraduate experiences. In the initial survey, skimming was mentioned more often than any other single reading strategy as students responded to the question "What has proven most useful to you from *A Writer's Guide to Mindful Reading* as you have moved on in your academic career?" As Figure 2, discussed in the last section, demonstrates, among the seven students who participated in the study's follow-up interviews, skimming was the most used reading strategy with 132 mentions, more than twice the number of mentions than even the second most popular strategy students used. Figure 3, below, shows the breakdown of the courses in which skimming was used.
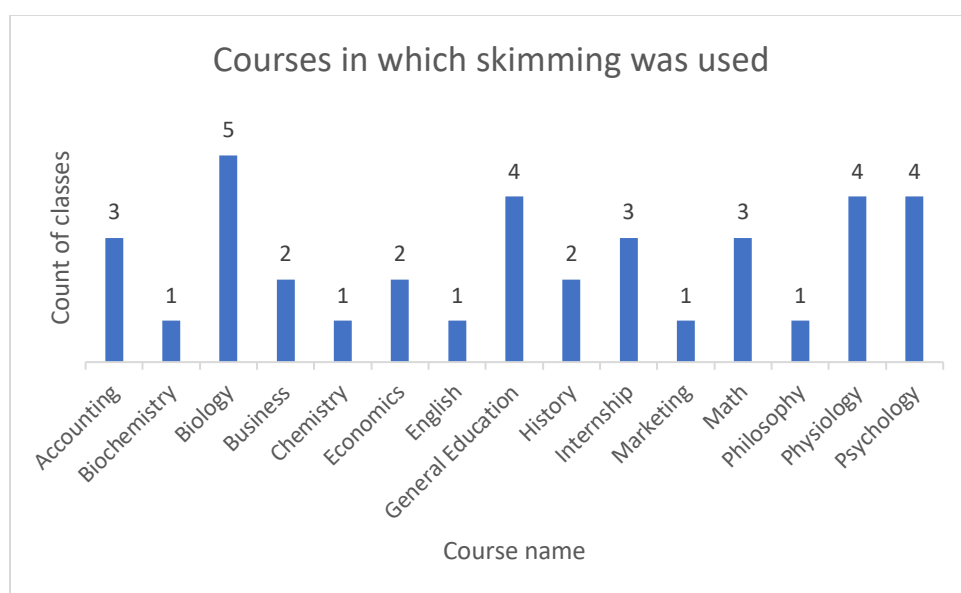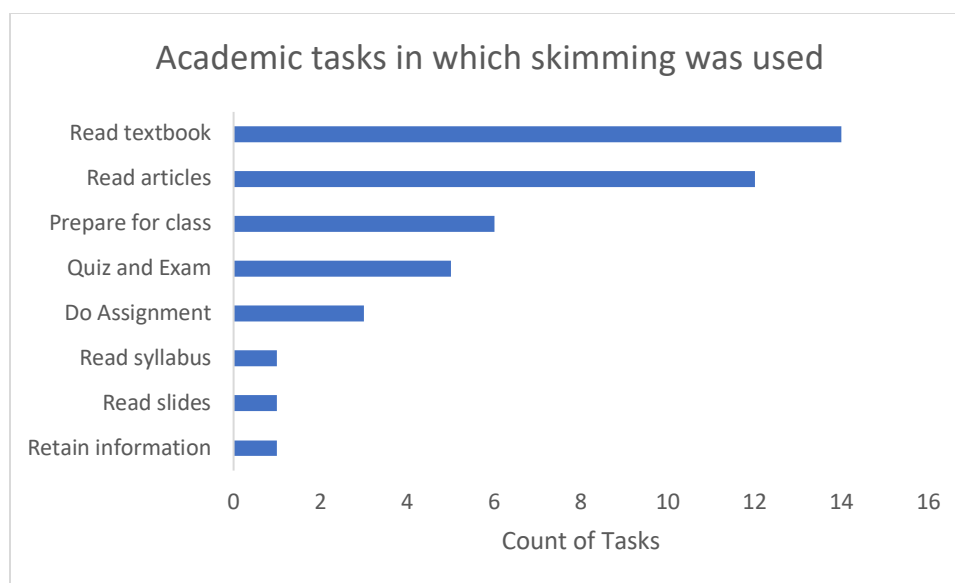


*Figure 3: Courses in which skimming was used.*

While skimming was used across the disciplines, it is used mostly in STEM courses, many of which are courses required for the majors and minors of the study's participants. Describing two courses in her Accounting major, participant Minnie explained, "I'm taking a microeconomics and macroeconomics class and my professor sends out a ton of articles each week and doesn't normally do that much with them. So I normally just skim them to get the main idea." Note how the reading strategy Minnie chose is directly tied to how—or in this case how little—the instructor does with the assigned reading, a pattern of student behavior that Mike Bunn and Del Principe and Ihara (2017) found in their respective studies of students' reading practices.

Several students in the study found skimming especially helpful when engaging with the assigned textbooks in their STEM classes, such as Gale, a biology major and psychology minor, who explained: "For psychology...we have a textbook and I would skim through the chapter a week, the important things that related to the topic I'm interested in." Elbert, an economics major and accounting minor described his experience writing a research paper on the financial crisis of 2008 in intermediate microeconomics: "I was reading articles, journals, anything [very lengthy] like that....I would look at subtitles...so reading through skimming."

Figure 4, below, provides a closer look at the kinds of tasks for which students are using skimming—tasks beyond reading textbooks and articles. As shown in Figure 4, students are also using skimming to help them prepare for class and for exams, although students are aware that skimming does not necessarily result in a deep understanding or help them retain information over time. For example, Gale noted, "I don't necessarily think 'skimming' helps memorization long term, but it does short term." When asked whether she considers her purpose for reading when approaching a text, Minnie explained, "If I knew that I wasn't going to be tested on material or I didn't have a lot of time to learn it, I would scan it instead of going through and deeply trying to understand." These responses echo Hairston-Dotson and Incera's (2022) findings that "even though students themselves consider skimming as less useful...they still report skimming very often when working on their assignments" (p. 123).



*Figure 4: Academic Tasks in which skimming was used.*

The emphasis on testing and memorization found in some STEM disciplines may encourage the use of skimming. In these disciplines, reading is often used for information-getting purposes, a finding that emerged from Ihara and Del Principe's (2018) own research on faculty perspectives in STEM: "The primary aim is not analysis or critique but, rather, the acquisition and mastery of concrete information. As our interviews with faculty demonstrate," they explain, "reading for information remains pervasive, particularly in certain disciplines" (p. 8). This was very much Gale's experience in that she described her classes as "all about memorization." The following semester she confirmed "It's still the same, all memorization." Elaborating a bit, a semester later, Gale explained, "For my classes, it's more textbook memorization. There's no 'What is the purpose of this book or this text?'"

Perhaps because students recognized that skimming did not lead to long-term retention, their overall use of skimming was often tied to purpose as well as to efficiency. Describing her deliberate choice of a reading approach in her history class, Gale noted, "I'm taking a lot of courses this semester and I don't have hours to sit and read an entire chapter. Most times I'll just scan the title, try to understand the meaning of it and then just skim throughout the chapter for anything important." Minnie described how she pairs two reading strategies— reading aloud to paraphrase and skimming to help her memorize and save time: "I definitely use skimming a lot. I'm in an intermediate accounting class, so we go through these huge financial statements, and it just doesn't make sense to read it in its entirety and try to go through all the details but rather skimming first and getting a basic idea and then going back. And then I also use reading aloud and paraphrasing….in almost all my classes just because a lot of them are reading intensive. So trying to memorize things that way has been really helpful."

The one "nontraditional" student in the study, Jayne, who returned to college as a senior citizen, was especially excited about skimming, a reading practice she had never engaged in before, per her survey answer. In her first interview, Jayne elaborated: "I'd never really skimmed over anything. I read each minute little word in detail and everything. And it's very time consuming…. Whereas if you skim it and you get the idea of the things that are being discussed, it's a lot more beneficial and I find it very, very helpful." In many cases, students were already familiar with skimming, but they noted the way that the textbook broke down the steps of skimming and offered a more comprehensive and productive approach. Joe explained, for example: "I think I've always skimmed, but I mean, before the textbook, I don't know if I skimmed well. As a high schooler, I definitely skimmed, but whether or not it was beneficial. …but I think, with skimming in the context of the ways of reading, it puts it in a professional way, I guess." Joe's use of the word "professional" to describe the way he skims now, seems to suggest a more deliberate and systematic process.

Skimming proved more useful for these students than deep reading practices. As Joe explains, assignments across his later courses didn't call for the kind of deep reading practices he encountered in his first-year writing course, practices for which I, admittedly, and many others in the field have been advocating: "I haven't done much analyzing or anything like that. …. I mean there are courses where I'm reading but I wouldn't say that it requires the level of depth that the stories in the [first-year writing] textbook had." This finding echoes Del Principe and Ihara's (2017) findings that

> in general, we saw a marked difference between all five students' reading experiences in their two required composition courses and all other courses. …. Our students were assigned and expected to read in their composition courses, and their performance in those courses was tied strongly to whether and how well they had read. However, this situation was not replicated in subsequent content courses." (p. 204)

It is worth pointing out that when Joe, a student at the private university, made this comment he was taking several courses in his major, which further highlights that this pattern exists in the context of one's major at a four-year institution. Joe's experience suggests that integrating attention to reading within disciplinary courses (rather than only first-year writing) is appropriate in order to give students not only a more balanced literacy education throughout their undergraduate experience but a better sense of the disciplinary-specific values surrounding reading in their major.

## Faculty Perspectives on Writing Assignment Design

Although my study "Tracing the Impact of Mindful Reading Beyond First-Year Composition" reports on students' reading practices, these practices are necessarily tied to the kinds of assignments— writing and otherwise—students are given by their instructors across the disciplines. There has been

research on what kinds of writing assignments are most common (Melzer, 2014; Eodice et al., 2017; Anderson et al., 2015), but perhaps just as important as the student perspectives represented above are the faculty perspectives that shed light on the factors that impact the choices faculty make when designing writing assignments. These perspectives provide insight into why students may not be given ample opportunities to employ deep reading practices.

The 2015 Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) module on writing asked faculty a set of questions parallel to the student module of the NSSE. Just over 4,500 faculty members across 28 institutions addressed the writing assignments they give students (Anderson et al.). The study revealed that the emphasis in writing assignments placed on "analyzing or evaluating something students had read, researched, or observed" varies considerably across the disciplines (p. 15). As Anderson et al., note, "Whereas 95% of faculty in Social Services Professions and 94% in Social Sciences asked students in their writing assignments to analyze or evaluate something they had read, researched, or observed, only 82% in Engineering and 76% in Physical Science, Math, and Computer Science reported doing so" (p. 15). These statistics underscore that writing is used in various ways across the disciplines, which suggests that reading, too, which often informs writing assignments, would serve a range of purposes.

Focused on a much smaller sample at his own institution, Thomas Polk (2010) conducted a study of 33 faculty members at George Mason University who teach writing intensive courses across the disciplines. He explains that the participants in this study showed that they "often make decisions about teaching based on non-pedagogical and non-disciplinary concerns. ... pedagogical intentions are often in conflict with the material conditions of their enactment" (p. 105). Polk concedes that

> deliberating over page length requirements might seem mundane, but it reveals real impacts on the kinds of instruction faculty (feel able to) deliver. These impacts include manipulating the conventions of disciplinary and professional genres and sacrificing pedagogies and practices that faculty believe to be effective (e.g., a design imperative to prompt agency might be complicated by concerns for labor) (p. 105).

In fact, when asked about her decision regarding the required length of a writing assignment, one faculty member in Polk's study remarked "'Oh well, that's probably self-preservation more than anything else'" (p. 105). Understanding how material conditions impact assignment design means recognizing that the potential lack of student opportunity to practice deep reading is not necessarily tied to pedagogical concerns and, therefore, is an issue that cannot be mitigated solely by pedagogical workshops, the usual go-to for writing program administrators and those in similar positions who work with faculty across the disciplines.

Lauriellen Stankavich's dissertation (2022) "A Nexus of Literate Activity: The Design of Writing Assignments in the Disciplines," under the guidance of Louise Wetherbee Phelps, also considers the complex and nuanced space of assignment design. Stankavich reports on her study of twenty faculty at Old Dominion University who had three or more years' experience teaching "writing emphasis courses" outside the fields of English and communication. A few of Stankavich's questions asked faculty participants about reading in relation to the goals of their writing assignments. Overall, their responses reveal that instructors at this university are not using major writing assignments to foster students' engagement with the assigned reading. For example, when asked to rank the goals for major writing assignments, "to deepen understanding of and engagement with assigned readings" (p. 136) was ranked fourth out of six goals by just 30% of faculty members. Deepening understanding of and engagement with assigned readings is, instead, relegated to "minor or extemporaneous writing assignments" (p. 136) with 60% of faculty noting this was a goal of these kinds of assignments. When instructors were asked to rank their pedagogical goals, only one participant mentioned that the goal

was to "engage reading" (p. 144). The top two goals were fostering research skills and fostering disciplinary thinking and argumentation.

When prompted to think about the role of the assigned texts within the course, 50% of faculty listed the course's textbook as playing a "central role….especially in relation to the major writing assignment(s)" (Stankavich, 2022, p. 273). However, only the syllabus, learning management system, and "detailed instructions and/or checklist for major writing assignment (in syllabus or separate)" (p. 272) are ranked above the textbook by these faculty. While this might suggest the textbook is just one of several important resources, these other materials serve more administrative or procedural functions, which underscores that the 50% figure may actually understate how central the textbook is in shaping the work of the course. Only 10% of the faculty noted that "an anthology or list of outside sources" played a central role and five percent noted that "non textbooks" (p. 273) played a central role. With a textbook as the central course text, it's useful to think about the kinds of reading practices that are relevant. Deep reading practices do not immediately come to mind when thinking about textbook reading, the very point made by Minnie's professor of accounting: "In my accounting class actually my professor's really good about these types of strategies. She's always telling us not to read textbooks straight through because it's not going to help us understand." It makes sense that in classes like Minnie's accounting course and those discussed by the faculty in Stankovich's study that students wouldn't need deep reading practices to engage with the textbook.

A similarly small study but one focused on faculty perspectives on reading, specifically, is reported in Ihara and Del Principe's (2018) "What We Mean When We Talk about Reading: Rethinking the Purposes and Contexts of College Reading." Ihara and Del Principe explain, "We wanted to know more about what instructors from various disciplines see as the purposes of reading in their classrooms, what they want reading to accomplish, and how they articulate these goals" (p. 4). After conducting semi-structured interviews with twenty faculty from across the disciplines at a public, urban community college "to gain insight into faculty attitudes and practices with regard to reading," (p. 3) they ultimately conclude: "The main lesson we draw….. is that assigned reading, like reading in general, must be understood in the context of how it is used and the purpose it serves" (p. 10). Their conclusion emerged from the range of purposes for reading that faculty described, including those that are more familiar to faculty in the humanities, such as reading to respond and reading to question, but also reading for information or disciplinary content, which faculty in the sciences consistently mentioned. Ultimately, Ihara and Del Principe argue that "we should expect and accept that faculty from different disciplines will construct 'reading' differently in their courses and will have different goals for student reading" (p. 10). We see this first-hand not only in Ihara and Del Principe's study, but in many of the other studies discussed above, as well as in the experiences of my study's participants across their courses.

Writing program administrators and those in similar roles who often hail from English departments may be taken aback by Ihara and Del Principe's (2018) report that many faculty "saw reading as a supplemental mode of information delivery" (p. 5) rather than an opportunity for deep learning or critical thinking. The statistics from FSSE also showcase the range of ways that faculty imagine the role of reading in relation to writing assignments and demonstrate how the uses of reading are tied to disciplinary values. Following Ihara and Del Principe (2018), I would also like to suggest that to believe these conceptions of reading are "inherently inferior" (p. 6) is to give into our biases and remain closed off to the notion that reading is conceptualized and valued differently across different disciplines. Taking the time to conduct local research and talk more regularly with faculty from across the disciplines about how reading figures into their classes can go a long way toward stronger writing programs.

# Preliminary Recommendations and Future Research

The findings from "Tracing the Impact of Mindful Reading Beyond First-Year Composition" have implications for the work of writing program administrators, WAC/WID directors, writing center directors, and those in similar roles, as well as the faculty with whom these administrators work.

First, we need to know more about how students are reading across their courses. This study and others mentioned above suggest that students are using skim reading more than any other practice. We need to pay closer attention to the lived experiences of our students, as does this study, rather than imagining an idealized set of circumstances that allow for sustained, deep reading. The first-year writing classroom offers a space in which to help students anticipate the value of skimming in other courses, particularly those that foreground information acquisition and retention primarily through engagement with a textbook. However, because disciplines have different uses for reading, this work can also be done in disciplinary-specific contexts by experts in the field. I realize it is controversial to encourage the teaching of skim reading in the first-year writing course let alone upper-level content courses (Carillo, 2025). However, precisely because managing one's workload in college is often much more difficult than in high school, strategic reading practices like skimming become more important—not less.

Writing program administrators also need to take the time to learn from their colleagues across the disciplines and in their specific local contexts about how reading is defined in their fields and whether any attention is paid to the practice of reading. Unfortunately, despite early calls (Horning, 2007) to attend to disciplinary-specific reading practices and studies (Zamel & Spack, 2006) that demonstrate the value of attending to reading alongside writing in disciplinary contexts, the subject has largely been neglected. However, some recent resources provide models for writing program administrators interested in learning about the reading practices expected by faculty across the disciplines. For example, Horning, Gollnitz, and Haller's (2017) collection titled *What is College Reading?* includes the contribution "Creating a Reading-Across-The Curriculum Climate on Campus," (Hollander et al., 2017) which reports on an initiative wherein three instructors from different disciplines collaborated to conduct research about student reading habits at their institution and engaged in outreach about reading to professors across the disciplines on their campus. This kind of outreach is a first step toward gauging what faculty think about reading. Faculty can be asked about their expectations for their students' reading practices, how they define reading, and the connections they imagine between reading and writing within their specific disciplinary contexts.

Once writing program administrators have a better understanding of the reading practices expected and assigned by faculty at their institution, they can create professional development opportunities to help faculty reach their goals as they relate to reading. As discussed above, it is worth keeping in mind that these opportunities will not mitigate the material conditions that often impact assignment design and related pedagogical work. Still, this kind of support is crucial at least in terms of making faculty feel more comfortable attending to reading as even faculty in writing studies, a subfield of English, do not feel prepared to teach their students critical reading practices (Carillo, 2015). Moreover, faculty generally do not receive support to teach reading in their respective disciplines (Carillo, 2015; Horning, 2021; Alster, 2004). Ongoing teacher education, supported by writing program administrators, can increase instructors' confidence in providing reading instruction and, therefore, the likelihood of their attending to reading in their courses in ways that are meaningful to their specific disciplines. Karen Manarin's 2022 collection *Reading Across the Disciplines* offers many examples of how faculty can integrate reading instruction into their disciplinary courses and could, therefore, serve as a centerpiece for professional development.

An alternative to this more traditional WAC/WID model, wherein a writing program administrator orchestrates everything, is the newer notion of writing enriched curricula (WEC) work, described by

Chris M. Anson in the introduction to his and Pamela Flash's (2021) collection *Writing-Enriched Curricula: Models of Faculty-Driven and Departmental Transformation.* Described as a "faculty-driven and departmentally focused model of WAC/WID implementation" (p. 11), this more sustainable model emphasizes the use of localized research and cross-disciplinary collaboration among faculty members to reach curricular goals related to writing instruction in one's field. Although focused exclusively on writing, this approach could easily be adapted to reading in much the same way Horning (2007) has adapted the concept of writing across the curriculum to reading across the curriculum. Curricula development on a smaller, more localized scale with extensive faculty involvement often benefits from more faculty buy-in because these initiatives are not top-down.

Recognizing that every discipline will value reading in its own way is important for writing program administrators who may be inclined toward less local and more sweeping goals. Equally important is to keep in mind that reading abilities are connected to disciplinary knowledge and, therefore, specific disciplines. Laura J. Davies (2017), who has written about teaching reading in the sciences, reminds us that "even when a student is a good reader in one class or one context, that does not necessarily guarantee that he or she will read well or read critically in another class or context" (p. 179). She continues, "Every text is different, and so teachers need to continually model and talk about how to read the genres in their discipline" (p. 179). Whether writing program administrators advocate a WAC, WID, or WEC approach, they can support instructors in creating courses that address disciplinary-specific reading habits by helping faculty see that reading, like writing, is not entirely a generic skill. This is a foundational step toward creating a more balanced approach to literacy instruction and ultimately a campus culture that embraces differing—rather than competing—reading ideologies.

## Appendix A: Survey

1. Do you consent to the above terms? By clicking Yes, you consent to participate in this survey.

2. In which semester did you take the course in which your writing instructor assigned the textbook *A Writer's Guide to Mindful Reading*?

   > Fall 2017
   > Spring 2018
   > Fall 2018
   > Don't recall/Other

3. Please indicate the format in which you accessed *A Writer's Guide to Mindful Reading.*

   > Online
   > Hard copy
   > Both online and hard copy

4. Please indicate the school where you took the course that used *A Writer's Guide to Mindful Reading.*

   > University of Connecticut
   > Manchester Community College
   > Central Connecticut State University
   > Quinnipiac University

5. What was the name of the course in which *A Writer's Guide to Mindful Reading* was assigned?

6. Based on what you learned in the course that used *A Writer's Guide to Mindful Reading*, how would you define mindful reading?

7.  *A Writer's Guide to Mindful Reading* covers the reading strategies listed below. Which strategies were new to you? Select all that apply.

> Skimming
> Says/Does Approach
> Reading Aloud to Paraphrase
> Mapping
> Believing/Doubting Game
> Reading Like a Writer
> Reading and Evaluating Online Sources

8. Have you used any of the strategies from *A Writer's Guide to Mindful Reading* (listed below) in courses that you took **at the same time and/or after** the course in which the textbook was assigned?

> Skimming
> Says/Does Approach
> Reading Aloud to Paraphrase
> Mapping
> Believing/Doubting Game
> Reading Like a Writer
> Reading and Evaluating Online Sources
>
> Yes or No

9. If you answered Yes to #7 please list the courses in which you used one or more strategies from *A Writer's Guide to Mindful Reading*.

10. *A Writer's Guide to Mindful Reading* addresses the importance of purpose or knowing **why** you are reading as you are reading. Has this lesson affected how you read in classes beyond first-year writing?

> Yes
> No

11. What has proved most useful to you from *A Writer's Guide to Mindful Reading* as you have moved on in your academic career?

12. What has proved least useful to you from *A Writer's Guide to Mindful Reading* as you have moved on in your academic career?

13. If you are willing to participate in a series (up to 5) of 15-minute phone and/or live interviews about this same subject please include your email address in the space below. You will be compensated with a gift card for each interview you complete.

## Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. What is the most memorable aspect of the mindful reading approach described in *A Writer's Guide to Mindful Reading*?

2. How would you define mindful reading?

3. Could you say a little bit about how your instructor incorporated the textbook and/or the mindful reading approach into the course?

4. In the survey you wrote that you used the following reading strategies {insert here} in other courses. Could you please talk about which courses and what kinds of assignments these were useful in?

5. In the survey you were asked about the textbook's focus on the importance of purpose in choosing a reading strategy and then reading. You responded that {insert}. Could you elaborate on that response?

6. In your survey you indicated that {insert} was the most useful strategy. Could you say more about this?

7. In your survey you indicated that {insert} was the least useful strategy. Could you say more about this?

8. Have you found yourself using any of the reading strategies you learned in the textbook outside of school? In your everyday life? Your job? Other contexts?

9. Can you anticipate any future uses for the strategies?

10. Is there anything else you would like to say about the mindful reading approach or the textbook that you haven't had the opportunity to address?

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## Note

## Contact Information

Ellen C. Carillo
Professor and Writing Coordinator
Department of English
University of Connecticut
**Email:** ellen.carillo@uconn.edu

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