



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

Published by the National Institute for Staff and Organizational Development (NISOD) • College of Education • The University of Texas at Austin

THE SELF-HELP BOOK PAPER: GETTING STUDENTS TO READ AND THINK

The Self-Help Assignment

I begin with an assignment sheet that explains communication's different forms and helps students think about how to use information. Students must write a paper summarizing the chapter, explaining how that information fits into the information we will discuss in the semester, and describing their reaction to the information and how we can use what they have learned from their reading. They must also prepare a one-page handout that could be used to teach the information from the chapter. And I include a list of self-help books that could be used to help them write successful papers.

Because the idea of reading and writing a paper can be overwhelming, I break the assignment into steps. The first step is to choose an appropriate chapter from a self-help book. I warn them that their chapter should focus on a topic we will discuss during the semester. To be sure that I do not get papers on how to raise cattle or learn to dance, I require students to submit a paragraph about the book they propose to use and the title of the chapter, including why they are interested in this subject.

The second step is to read the chapter. I encourage students to copy the chapter if it is a library book so they can underline or highlight main ideas and make annotations in the margins to help them with the final summary. I remind them that they will need to teach this information to the class so they should keep their eyes open for material to include in a handout. I strongly suggest that they outline the chapter to help visualize relationships between ideas.

The third step is to write a three- to four-page summary from their outline or notes on the chapter. I suggest they do this soon to let their summary "gel" and give them time to consider how well they described the material.

The fourth step is to complete the three additional questions I asked. They should react to the chapter—writing a few paragraphs about how this chapter relates

to their experiences. I ask them to give examples of the ideas at work in their lives. Next, they are to look through the textbook to see how this material ties to the textbook's discussion of communication. Finally, they are to write a few paragraphs about how individuals can use this information in their daily lives.

The fifth step is to develop the handout. I suggest that many books have a self-test that makes an excellent handout. Some students develop dictionaries or dialogues between individuals to highlight the ideas from the chapter.

The sixth step is to revise and edit the paper. I tell students to have an introductory paragraph that previews *their* main points in the paper as well as a summary paragraph that reviews the paper. I warn them to check for and correct sentence fragments, run-on sentences, and spelling and punctuation errors.

The final step is to print the final version. I request that students use a 10-12 point font, one-inch margins all around; and that their name, book title, author, and chapter title be included on the first page of the paper. I warn them to proofread their work carefully.

Variations on the Self-Help Assignment

If the instructor limits the book list to books that relate to the class subject, the possibilities are endless. The books need not be categorized as "self-help," although students can find useful information by reading books not used in classes traditionally. In business, limit the book list to works on leadership, customer service, motivating employees, developing effective presentations, etc. Child care and child development programs could use books on communicating with children, running day care businesses, developing lesson plans, meeting the needs of special children; students learning to be police officers could investigate conflict resolution, intercultural communication; and social work students could read about conflict resolution, special needs children.

Students can summarize and explain how information is useful. Additional questions could be added to the assignment and the handout eliminated. The paper can be lengthened or shortened.

When students are unsure readers or writers, a group could be assigned a group chapter. Additional infor-



mation beyond the assignment and a reading list can be included, also information about summarizing and outlining. Depending on class size, one or two books could be selected and chapters assigned to different students. Depending on the value of the assignment and how brave you are, students could be asked to read the entire book!

Benefits of the Assignment

This assignment helps students develop skills in singularizing and outlining, and it shows them that reading can be useful. One common college/course goal is to make students lifetime learners. I find that this assignment contributes to that goal; students must read outside of class and write about it. This assignment is also cheap because typically you can find these books at the library.

I typically assign this task early in the semester, so I know students have been introduced to some basic aspects of going to college. They have gone to the library, read, summarized, outlined, written, found the computer labs, and printed something at the computer labs.

Additionally, this assignment introduces material that the text does not cover or forces the student to integrate two sources of information. If you require an oral presentation, all the students get more information than they would have otherwise and get to practice speaking in front of a group. The task of developing the handout and teaching the information helps them remember it and focuses on the audience's needs and knowledge. Finally, it gives you a great excuse to go to the bookstore and browse!

Practical Information

I have discovered a number of issues that can make the experience less than exciting for all. Access to books, the types of books chosen by students, and student skill level and listening abilities can create problems. In smaller communities, it may be impossible for all students to check a book out of a library for the assignment. I try to put several on reserve at ours. Often academic libraries do not keep a good selection of self-help books, so it may be necessary for students to go to the public library or to a bookstore.

Students often pick books that do not work well for the assignment. They typically love the "chicken soup" books, but their narrative structure makes it difficult to complete this assignment. Warn students or modify the assignment if you want to use those types of books. In order to avoid grading conflicts, it is best to be sure the books students choose meet your expectations.

Some students arrive at college never having had to summarize or outline. I borrowed a first-year composition book, summarized information for the students, and included it with the assignment. Students like to see

sample papers; write one and include it with the assignment as a model. As you refine the assignment, put student papers on reserve in the library (remove names and ask permission to use).

Finally, do not be surprised when students turn in only a summary of the chapter. Many students do not bother to read the assignment. It might help to provide a check list, have students peer-edit, or collect rough drafts.

Conclusion

This assignment gets your students reading and thinking about what they have read. Use your imagination, and develop your own variation on this assignment. You can benefit from this assignment, too. I generally learn something new, and I do not have to face piles of "boring" papers.

Lora Cohn, Assistant Professor, Communication Arts, and Director, Master's in Communication and Leadership, Park University

When this issue was originally published, the author was at Johnson County Community College (KS). The author can now be reached at Park University, 8700 N.W. River Park Drive, Parkville, MO 64152.
Email: lora.cohn@park.edu

Showcasing Popular Issues Series

NISOD regularly receives requests to reprint previously published issues of *Innovation Abstracts*. Taken together over the last 25+ years, these requests identify some of our most popular articles.

On occasion, NISOD will reprint some of these articles, showcasing some popular contributions to professional development and the improvement of teaching and learning. We trust that they will become special additions to current readers' *Innovation Abstracts* collections.

This issue was originally published in March 2002, as Volume XXIV, Number 10.