Synthesizing theory from literacy scholars with strategies derived from classroom inquiry projects, *Rethinking Reading in College* argues for more—and more systematic—attention to the role of reading comprehension in college as a necessary step in addressing the inequities in student achievement that otherwise increase over time. Through a critique of the philosophy behind the Common Core State Standards, Arlene Fish Wilner examines the needs of college-bound high school students and interrogates the nature of “remediation” in college, arguing that when supported by rhetorical-reading assignments, students in all first-year writing classes can and should explore complex and enduring texts. Addressing both composition and reading across the curriculum, Wilner demonstrates how faculty in all disciplines and at all curricular levels can improve student outcomes by first deliberately inhabiting the persona of novices, rethinking their assumptions about what students know and can do as apprentices in a field. She also illustrates the limitations of the literary vs. nonliterary text binary through a study of the demands posed by *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a novel commonly taught in both high school and college. An outline for a two-semester first-year general education course and examples of writing-to-read assignments from a range of disciplines are adaptable across subject areas and institutions.

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Introduction

[It would be the cruelest of ironies for a school, of all places, to assume the mastery of its curriculum at the outset rather than to teach toward its gradual accomplishment over time.

—Robert Kegan, In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life

More—and more systematic—attention to the role of reading comprehension in college is needed now. This book explains why and suggests practical ways forward. These include (1) a reconception of “freshman composition” in the direction of rhetorical-reading instruction and (2) reading-across-the-curriculum programs that support faculty in teaching not just the “what” but also the “how” and “why” of their respective disciplines. Expertise in developing and implementing such measures would increase the potential of faculty to improve learning, increase retention, and better prepare students for complex challenges beyond graduation.

To argue for reading across the curriculum is to confront the stigma attached to “teaching reading” in college and to reimagine undergraduate campuses as sites where instruction in rhetorical reading is given emphasis equal to that on instruction in writing. On the college level, “reading” implies not merely basic decoding but also critical analysis (including mature understanding of generic constraints, audience, and purpose), synthesis and, often, problem solving. Increasingly, college graduates are perceived as insufficiently prepared to demonstrate such sophisticated competency.
For example, surveys conducted in 2013 and 2018 by Hart Research Associates for the Association of American Colleges and Universities revealed that the majority of employers are dissatisfied with the ability of college graduates to think critically and communicate effectively. The findings in 2011 by Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa indicating “limited learning on college campuses” (Academically Adrift) are supported by reports from information-literacy researchers and classroom instructors across the curriculum. Studies of conventional remediation offer mixed results or suggest few positive long-term effects. Yet the responsibility for cultivating the needed skills is rarely assumed consciously by college instructors, even those with the highest dedication to teaching and learning. The revelation experienced by a team of researchers investigating how students write in response to reading in first-year classes epitomizes the issue: “Although we were all interested in critical reading before this inquiry, none of us realized how absolutely central it is to our ideals of postsecondary education but how marginal it is in our actual practice” (Manarin et al. 87).

Adding to the difficulty are unconscious assumptions that can tacitly inform campus practices. I am thinking of common misconceptions such as these:

◆ Plagiarism is best dealt with as a form of dishonesty that will invoke swift and rigorous penalties.
◆ “College-level texts” is a catchall category with meanings common to faculty across the curriculum.
◆ Textbooks are a natural basis for teaching a course in most subject areas and at all levels.
◆ “Critical reading” is practiced the same way across the curriculum.
◆ Remedial or developmental courses should break down holistic skills into “building blocks” taught sequentially.
◆ Learning complex concepts is a linear process.
◆ Self-focus and “relatability” are good criteria for assignment design.
◆ The emphasis in research-writing instruction should be on accessing academic sources.
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To complicate matters further, research forces us to confront a growing inequality, whereby those who arrive at college highly skilled consistently acquire even greater skill while weaker students fall further behind. In this context, the need to align equity with excellence has motivated strategic planning and policy statements by both governmental and private agencies and is apparent in the newly rigorous assessment criteria imposed by regional higher education accreditation boards.

Meanwhile, the Common Core State Standards, in an attempt to better prepare high school students for college work, have generated robust critiques (some based on faulty premises) and are not well understood by the college instructors tasked with acculturating recent high school graduates to new academic demands. Addressing the challenges posed by the gap between expectations and reality is both an urgent ethical issue, with implications for the strength of a democratic civic society, and a practical matter because of its impact on retention and on the value—real and perceived—of a college education.

General questions that inform this book include the following:

◆ What habits and practices are associated with expertise in reading?
◆ How can research findings be translated into curricular strategies in both first-year seminars and throughout the curriculum?
◆ Why does addressing inequities in student achievement require a shift in campus culture, and what approaches are most helpful in this regard?

To make the issues concrete, I begin with four provocative “scenes of reading” from my classroom experiences—moments that disconcerted me at the time—and posit reasons for the failure of college campuses to effectively address weak reading. Included in the framing discussion are distinctions among related terms often used interchangeably in the relevant literature but with somewhat different implications—meta-reading, disciplinary reading, critical reading, rhetorical reading. Since most students do not arrive in college habituated, as most of their professors were, to making connections as well as distinctions within and
among texts, perspectives, and disciplines, we must design curricula that foster such habits. In the subsequent two chapters, I examine the challenges of the high-school-to-college transition, a topic that has gained increasing attention among practitioners in higher education composition and rhetoric.

Because the Common Core State Standards have generated some contention and because in many states they remain central to the preparation of students for higher education, I address in Chapter 2 the strengths and weaknesses of high school reading instruction based on the standards, with reference to published model lessons. In this context, I revisit the practice and predilections espoused by the iconic New Critics—whose close-reading approaches have been assailed as elitist and autocratic by some opponents of the standards—while also affirming the dangers of treating any text as “autonomous.” Thus I aim to offer a balanced and informed perspective on the debate about the standards in hopes that the recommended changes to the college curriculum will be seen as helpful in bridging the divide between secondary and higher education.

Chapter 3 analyzes the reading-comprehension challenges for undergraduates that usually remain unarticulated and therefore do not inform curricular design. Research has shown how expert readers vary their comprehension strategies, using alertness to genre, discipline, audience, purpose, and conversational context to determine whether their reading (or rereading) will be fast or slow, close or selective, with or against the grain. By comparing these findings with studies of how students read (and how they write texts based on their reading), instructors can begin to conceive of ways to help students build expertise in rhetorical reading.

In the next two chapters, I focus on theory-to-practice, modeling what such a curriculum could look like and how it can be implemented—initially in first-year composition classes (Chapter 4) and then “vertically” throughout the undergraduate program and across disciplines (Chapter 5). In both instances, examples of assignments are analyzed and critiqued in light of theories previously discussed. Examples from the disciplines are derived from classroom research conducted in campus faculty-development programs I directed: BRIDGE (Bridging Research, Instruction,
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and Discipline-Grounded Epistemologies) and FFTF (Faculty Who Frequently Teach Freshmen).

In Chapter 6, I circle back to the “scenes of reading” that introduce the book, imagining alternative responses to the students based on the ideas developed throughout. I further broaden the implications of the thesis with reference to both ethical imperatives and the increased external accountability now required of higher education.

There are four appendixes. Appendix 1 considers how the practice of rhetorical reading can be applied to prose fiction. This question is invited by the standards’ requirement that high school English language arts curricula shift their emphasis from literature to informative texts and literary nonfiction, mainly readings from which knowledge can be extracted. Analyzing strategies for teaching Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a novel frequently read in both high school and college, I try to demonstrate why it makes sense both to favor a continuum over a divide between fiction and nonfiction and to consider how prose fictions are nonetheless distinctive in their capacity to affect our habits of mind. Appendixes 2 and 3 are samples of faculty work that supplement descriptions of development projects in Chapter 5. Appendix 4 outlines a sample first-year course sequence, with assignment groups that illustrate the principles of rhetorical reading endorsed in this book.
What’s the Problem?

Scenes of Reading

Scene 1: A First-Year Composition Class

We are studying the Declaration of Independence. We have discussed the occasion for its creation, looked at earlier drafts with “peer review” notations by Thomas Jefferson’s colleagues, and carefully read the document together once (in preparation for rereading). We are now discussing difficult words. I have asked students to define selected words not just by reporting their online dictionary meaning but by speculating on the connotations of each in the context of the passage in which it occurs and the document as a whole. At one point I ask what Jefferson meant to accomplish by submitting facts to a “candid world.” I am expecting students to suggest “honest” or “not rehearsed” as conventional synonyms for candid, even though the latter would not make much sense in context. I am stumped when one of the suggested answers is “fake.” Apart from my surprise at this understanding of “candid,” I wonder why the student imagines that Jefferson would appeal to his audience by calling them fake. I assume I am missing some sequence of ideas and ask for a bit of elaboration. The room is silent, and I feel bad that I have apparently caused some embarrassment. Still, I wonder about the thinking behind this response. The explanation comes from a colleague, a professor of communication and journalism, well habituated to the varieties of students’ attempts at acontextual meaning making. “Oh,” she says, “the student was confusing ‘candid’ with ‘canned.’” I am struck by this insight; it is one I would never have arrived at on my own.
Scene 2: A First-Year Honors Seminar

As part of a unit on secular and religious ways of viewing material and spiritual nature, we are reading Robert Frost’s poem “Design.” The poem’s artfulness—including its close adherence to the discipline of the sonnet form and its oxymoronic imagery, ending with a couplet positing a possible “design of darkness to appall,” or, alternatively, a random purposelessness—is satisfying to tease out. We discuss the philosophical traditions that might have informed the poem’s vision and together ponder the ironic contrast between the esthetically pleasing tableau described by the speaker and the way the unfolding image in the octave is fulfilled and darkened in the rhetorically interrogative sestet, especially in the disturbing final couplet. In groups and then as a class, students consider the poet’s choices of diction, structure, rhyme, and rhythm. We compare the poem with a much earlier version and use history and biography to reflect on possible reasons for the poet’s revision. We discuss how the title inflects the text of the poem. We consider both the experience of reading and the overall effect once we see the entire “design.” Students are interested and offer good insights. “Design” is an option for a writing assignment that requires analysis and synthesis of two or three texts. My co-teacher and I find that most students who choose to write on “Design” interpret it as an expression of faith in a benevolent deity, a conclusion at odds with the sonnet’s language and structure. One such student, when asked to show evidence from the poem, offers none. Reporting that the source of the interpretation is prior discussion in a high school class, she has apparently chosen to affirm what she already thinks without reexamining either the poem or her thinking.

Scene 3: Another First-Year Honors Seminar

We are reading Hamlet, in this lesson focusing on Hamlet’s treatment of Ophelia and her response. A student accounts for Ophelia’s behavior by making up what she calls a “backstory,” describing how Ophelia had been “dumped” by a previous boyfriend and how that experience affected her. The student is a theater major and has been encouraged by a drama teacher to
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use the backstory approach. Others in the class are happy to go along with this line of thinking, but I am concerned that we are moving too far from the text. When I ask the student and the rest of the class to paraphrase selected lines relevant to our discussion, no one volunteers. I offer time and hints, but still no takers—attention to Shakespeare’s syntax and diction and to how selected lines mesh with larger contexts and themes is easily deflected in favor of imagined circumstances for a failed romantic relationship. While such imaginative constructs suggest engagement with the play’s human complexities and are therefore encouraging, I worry that students are evading the hard yet rewarding work of actual reading. We parse the lines together, but the theater major, miffed by my insistence that we grapple closely with the text, lets me know my limitations: “My interpretation is just as good as yours.” Taken aback by this display of arrogance, I wonder out loud what this student hopes to gain from my expertise.

Scene 4: A Class in the Literature of Adolescence

I have assigned a few essays outlining basic concepts for thinking about literature as compared with expository or argumentative writing. These include an article by Wayne Booth on the unique opportunities for emotional and ethical stretching that literature presents to readers who are willing to inhabit various personas (“Ethics”), Laurence Perrine’s essay from Story and Structure on narrative point of view (Arp and Johnson, ch. 4), and Vladimir Nabokov’s lecture to undergraduates on what makes good readers and good writers (from Lectures on Literature). Based on this reading, students are asked to select and respond to one of several posted study questions. A double major in psychology and education chooses the following: “Paraphrase the argument behind Nabokov’s claim that ‘one cannot read a book; one can only reread it.’ Does this argument coincide with your experience as a reader?” Nabokov’s point is that good literature demands from readers a complex response: a combination of “impersonal imagination and artistic delight” that is best experienced upon rereading, when we have a sense of how temporal responses fuse into a coherent sense of the whole. However, the prospective teacher in my class resists my prompt to consider Nabokov’s
insight that readers must have both an “artistic” and a “scientific” temperament—the ability to be simultaneously engaged and “aloof.” Nabokov’s essay focuses on literary texts, and one of the misconceptions he addresses is the idea that one should read literature primarily to be informed. The student, however, stays in her comfort zone: What stands out in her experience is the need to reread texts in order to “understand the information.” She misrepresents Nabokov’s point accordingly.

“A Huge Elephantine Problem”

Despite decades of teaching, I am regularly flummoxed by the habits and assumptions of students trying to make sense of texts. And I am far from alone. Evidence abounds that students at all levels and in all disciplines need better instruction and more practice in reading. In recent years, special issues of three influential higher education pedagogy journals—Across the Disciplines, Reader, and Pedagogy, in 2013, 2104, and 2016 respectively—have been dedicated to questions about how our students read and how we must reshape our practices to help them improve. Data gathered by standardized surveys and tests such as the NSSE and the ACT and by classroom instructors who struggle to help their students read effectively converge on an urgent point: As Writing Across the Curriculum has become increasingly institutionalized, it is now time to direct more attention to the support of reading, the reciprocal activity required in every high school and college classroom. However, while a clear consensus has emerged that more instruction in reading would benefit students across the curriculum, the arguments and research seem not to have had much influence on classroom pedagogies or campus faculty-development programs.

Over the past three decades, increasingly urgent calls for attention, deploying a rhetoric of increasing alarm, have marked the contributions of influential scholars representing various strands of English studies. A few examples of the shifting emphasis will make the point: Robert Scholes’s lucid and engaging Textual Power: Literary Theory and the Teaching of English, published in 1985, offered exemplary lessons in pedagogic approaches
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grounded in a thoughtfully explicated philosophical perspective and an optimistic spirit. Writing in 2002, perhaps frustrated by the (mis)application of theories that seemed to make students worse readers of texts, he declared: “[W]e have a reading problem of massive dimensions—a problem that goes beyond any purely literary concerns” (“Transition” 165). In 1992, Peter Rabinowitz, while deploiring the constraints imposed by prevalent strands of New Criticism, thought it likely that “many students engage dutifully in close reading” as preparation for discussion of literature (“Against” 239); subsequently (see, e.g., Rabinowitz and Smith; Smith and Rabinowitz), he seemed less confident of this assumption, mapping out strategies to help students “develop the literary knowledge they need to construct readings of coherence” while also honoring their experience as readers (Rabinowitz and Smith 115). In 2007, literacy specialist Alice Horning summarized the evidence of poor reading among students in the United States, noting the effects of this deficiency on degree completion and calling for intentional reading instruction across the curriculum from elementary school through college. In 2013, introducing a special issue on reading and writing across the curriculum in Across the Disciplines, Horning called the quality of students’ reading “a huge, elephantine problem” (“Elephants”). In a 2008 study of students’ reading habits on their campus, rhetorician David Jolliffe and composition specialist Allison Harl found that students generally dismissed assigned reading as boring, self-evident, or difficult (and therefore tried to dispense with it as quickly as possible), and, whether reading assigned or chosen texts, did not read “studiously,” rarely making text-to-text connections (611–12). The authors proposed strategies for addressing these challenges and suggested that other campuses study the reading habits of their students as a critical step toward more effective curriculum development. By 2014, such steps no longer seemed adequate. Co-writing with Christian Goering an introduction to a special issue of Reader, Jolliffe lamented the trends evident in both systematic data and reports of classroom experience, asking whether, in response to students’ lack of engagement with reading, both high school and college instructors had given up on designing curriculum that relies on students’ careful critical reading of assigned texts. The only solution, it appeared, was a
call for a “revolution in the study and teaching of reading, pre-K through adult” (3). What has been inhibiting such a revolution and what, if enabled, might it look like?

A major challenge has been institutional structures based on the assumption, despite evidence to the contrary, that college students arrive—or should arrive—on campus largely prepared to read college-level texts. While first-year composition classes or other comparable first-year writing courses are the norm, they do not typically entail formal instruction in reading. Reading classes in college are, by definition, deemed to be remedial, so that only the neediest students are placed into them, and often what is taught looks more like study skills than like critical reading. Moreover, such skills do not necessarily transfer well across disciplines and various types of assignments (Maxwell; Leamnson 40, 121; Jolliffe, “Learning to Read as Continuing Education” 474; Manarin et al. 11; Anson, “Pop Warner Chronicles”). Overall, despite the need for students in high school and college to consistently practice reading and interpreting texts of various kinds, the idea of “teaching reading” is regarded as unworthy of college-level instruction and therefore mostly avoided.

Addressing this problem will require, as Justin Young and Charlie Potter argue, an integrative approach that begins long before students are admitted to college and that continues an increasingly sophisticated skill-building through cross-campus attention in colleges to reading across the curriculum. In a 2014 conversation among secondary and postsecondary English instructors, literacy specialist Douglas Hartman observed that as high school lessons move from a focus on reading as a subject to the interpretation of texts, instruction in how to read those texts is not as systematic and purposeful as it needs to be (Mallette et al. 17). Horning points out that many high school teachers are not prepared to teach reading per se and that, typically, little instruction in reading nonfiction prose is offered after the sixth grade (“Reading Across”). Misconceptions about reading further compound the problem. For example, the unhelpful idea that reading is a finite skill once learned and then automatically applied (similar to a commonly held faulty view of writing) is shared by both students and instructors; this may be one reason that the focus in high school often turns to unpacking the text as
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an artifact rather than helping students consider ways of reading different texts. The notion that once it is taught in elementary school, reading as a skill need not be systematically revisited then stigmatizes reading instruction in higher education: “if you [say you’re teaching reading] among the professoriate, that’s a sort of diminishing or a dumbing down[;] . . . to say you’re teaching reading is to say we’ve got a bunch of people who haven’t progressed beyond fourth grade” (Roskelly in Mallette et al. 17–18). This stigma suggests that “reading” is understood mostly as decoding, a task students are expected to have mastered long before they enter high school.

And indeed there is ample evidence that students who, early on, achieve basic reading competency (i.e., phonemic awareness and the “spelling-to-sound code”) reap lifelong advantages in comprehension, not least because, in struggling less to read, they tend to read more, increasing their knowledge and vocabulary as part of overall fluency, thus creating a beneficial loop that continues to deepen their expertise (Stanovich; Stanovich and Cunningham, “Studying the Consequences of Literacy within a Literate Society”; Cunningham and Stanovich, “Early Reading Acquisition and Its Relation to Reading Experience and Ability 10 Years Later”). The inequalities that over time are thereby magnified produce the “Matthew effect” (Stanovich), whereby, as in the Biblical passage Matthew 25:29, the rich get richer and the poor poorer. Certainly, some students entering postsecondary study, having gotten off to a slower start at the beginning, will not have had the benefits of this reciprocal process, and college professors will not have been trained to deal with the neediest of such students. However, even for students without such basic needs, the challenges of reading across the curriculum in college—considering the range of discourse conventions, genres, purposes for reading, and expected outcomes from reading assignments—will be substantial.

This is why, according to Ken Bain, the best college teachers understand that their students have typically received little prior instruction in how to read specialized texts and therefore incorporate such support into their classes, asking themselves, “What is unique and distinctive about reading material for this course, and how can I break that reading into identifiable strategies?” (56).
Such instructors realize, based on their experience, that support for reading on this level is, in effect, support for the deepest kind of learning in the relevant discipline. It is not surprising, then, that directors of campus tutoring have called for more systematic attention to reading, citing the need for the research in reading pedagogy that is “boiling up” to be recognized by writing centers (Adams 87) and for tutors to be familiar with the body of research that addresses college reading, and “not necessarily as a remedial enterprise” (Griswold 68). Understanding of this need appears to be gaining currency in theory, if not practice. “Writing centers are also reading centers,” asserts Muriel Harris, founder of the Purdue University Writing Lab. “How could they not be?” (227). Harris deftly unpacks the ways that problems with writing derive from problems with reading, showing how tutors who understand this relationship can help students improve in both areas. But the call to train tutors accordingly has so far largely been resisted, with “no evidence of a widespread solution or response” in the literature or in institutional practices (Harris 241).

The prevalent notion that reading instruction in college by definition entails “dumbing down” is likely one reason that theories of reading, including many connected to pedagogy, while important in scholarly conversations, have not exerted much power in the design and delivery of curriculum. Compositionist Ellen Carillo has noted that work on reading pedagogies in the 1980s and 1990s “unfortunately remains terribly underrepresented in our field’s anthologies, histories, and grad courses” (“Creating” 20). Participants in the 2014 conversation mentioned above concurred that helpful research on reading remains “widely unused, and unacknowledged by the field” (Mallette et al. 28). Chris Anson laments that “over the past three decades, research on the relationship of writing and reading in higher education has ebbed” (“Writing to Read, Revisited” 22). Similarly, Jolliffe, who observed in 2007 that “no clear, salient theory of what reading is or does prevails in college composition” (“Learning to Read as Continuing Education” 474), a decade later applauded the increasing interest in and contributions to the field but noted that the ongoing nature of “the reading problem” demands a much more focused and more comprehensive effort than we have seen (“Learning to Read as Continuing Education’ Revisited”).
Ironically, even as reader-response theory gained currency in the academy, its natural connection to composition pedagogy remained suppressed. Skipping from literary studies to cultural criticism without meaningfully informing composition theory, it was paid lip service in argument textbooks where, as Patricia Harkin and James Sosnoski have argued, it was not entirely at home (111–21). Such books wanted to respect the idea of textual indeterminacy and instability as well as constructivist epistemologies but found these to be at odds with the idea that logic and reason, once understood, command assent and thereby promote consensus. As a result, students are guided in conversing with the reading but mainly with the purpose of discovering its essential meaning: “What has happened to reader-response criticism, at least in argument textbooks, is that it has become a set of instructions for ‘finding’ authorial intention as the stable meaning of texts” (104). For Harkin and Sosnoski, such textbooks betray the “critical, counter-hegemonic promise . . . of the early days of reception aesthetics” (102). They attribute this loss to the reduction of rich and complex schemas to oversimplified, more easily usable and less threatening versions of their antecedents, in effect, a transformation of theories to ineffectual “theoroids,” virtual clichés (103). Thus, while skepticism of the writer’s argument might be encouraged, consciousness of the cultural circumstances, motives, and ideologies that produced it (factors that might render it fundamentally unreasonable) was sacrificed for what might be called basic comprehension that repressed motives for dissent and alertness to the unstable meanings inherent in every text. As I see it, to call this translation of theory to practice a “betrayal” points to an ongoing tension between, on the one hand, the need to construct meaning for purposes of clear communication (thus enabling the achievement of common ground) and, on the other, the obligation to assess the tacit assumptions of an argument (thus enabling resistance).

A central reason for the disconnect between theories of reading and theories of writing may lie in the process by which composition and rhetoric defined itself as a field independent of literary studies and its offshoots. In their introduction to a January 2016 issue of *Pedagogy*, Mariolina Salvatori and Patricia Donahue not only remind us that the burst of interest in
theories of reading and their relation to teaching evident in the 1980s waned considerably in the ensuing three decades but also observe that the professionalization of composition contributed to a divergence between reading theory and other research areas such as rhetorical or cultural studies (“Guest” 2). Given the prerequisites for respectability in the academy, including the definition of rigorous disciplinary methods as independent of teaching strategies, it may be that the seminal work by Louise Rosenblatt, beginning in 1938 and extending through the 1990s, in charting how adolescent readers make meaning of texts (particularly literary ones) via evolving “transactions” was long marginalized by composition and rhetoric precisely because of its focus on pedagogy and perhaps because, as Salvatori and Donahue suggest, “capturing meandering reading processes was difficult, or risky, or suspect” (2). Indications of the profession’s declining interest, since 1991, in systematically exploring the reading-writing connection are vividly portrayed by Salvatori and Donahue in their historical examination of the calls for papers and program categories published by the Conference on College Composition and Communication. Why, the authors wonder, was the term reading “completely invisible for seventeen years?” (“What Is College English?” 210). After the promise of the 1980s, this trend suggests a sadly missed opportunity to which we may only now be summoning a sufficiently vigorous response.

Yet some positive signs have emerged over the past decade or so. These include the appearance of the category “Theories of Reading and Writing” in the 2008 CCCC call for proposals (“What Is College English?” 210), a slightly increased (but still insufficient) emphasis on reading in the 2014 revision of the Writing Programs Associates Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (Jolliffe, “Learning to Read as Continuing Education’ Revisited” 12), and an uptick in research and theorizing on the nature and pedagogies of college reading and its relation to writing by notable scholars such as Jolliffe, Horning, Carillo, Jamieson, and Anson. In the introduction to their recent collection of essays, Patrick Sullivan, Howard Tinberg, and Sheridan Blau posit the inseparability of theories of reading from the pedagogies of undergraduate writing (xix) and offer a range of convergent data, insights, and arguments on how to connect the increasingly
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compelling theory in the field with classroom practices. The task before us is to move in more purposeful and collaborative ways on these encouraging indicia of a shift in thinking.

The longed-for revolution in reading instruction can best be effected as a continuous process beginning long before college, and instructors in postsecondary settings who are alert to common high school pedagogies will have a keener sense of their students’ thinking and habits. As is well known, attempts at curricular reform (or at least rigorous assessment that might ensure reform) have been salient in K–12 public education for some time, from George W. Bush’s “No Child Left Behind” to Barack Obama’s “Race to the Top” to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), an effort to improve math and reading proficiency first discussed by state leaders in 2007, with details drafted in 2009 and a subsequent process of review and consideration for adoption by individual states. While the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in 2015 effectively reversed the CCSS federal mandate, it is important to note that the ESSA is not a curriculum but a policy that allows states flexibility in specifying standards keyed to college- and career-readiness. A major impact of this policy is that it does not make funding contingent on adoption of specified federal standards in ways that the CCSS did. However, many states are continuing to rely on the CCSS to meet the state (and federal) curricular guidelines. While the words common core are often omitted from revised state standards, the basic benchmarks remain identical or similar to those defined in the CCSS (Brown; Klein).

Moreover, the philosophy behind the CCSS will remain relevant because it addresses fundamental questions of pedagogy that continue to inform K–16 debates, including those concerning how best to teach reading comprehension in secondary and postsecondary settings (Coleman and Pimentel, 1, 3, 14). Thus it behooves college instructors to understand that some problematic elements evident in first-year reading and writing instruction—thinned-out theories, along with tensions in the uneasy accommodation of constructivism with an assumption of definite and stable meaning—also underlie the pedagogies recommended as paths to achieving the Common Core State Standards, which continue to shape precollege curricula. In Chapter 2, I propose to
offer a fresh take on the theory and assumptions that generated the standards and on the intense backlash provoked by this latest attempt to prepare every child for success in college and careers (the standards’ stated goals). I will argue that in attempting to correct ineffective reading pedagogies—summaries and “preinterpretations” on one hand and “springboard” reactions on the other—the Common Core directives are liable to go to a different extreme and thus diminish the importance of rhetorical reading. First, however, it will be helpful to consider some terminology.

**Ways of Reading: Rhetorical, Meta, Disciplinary, Critical**

*Rhetorical reading*, as defined by Christina Haas and Linda Flower, is a strategy whereby readers approach the text “not only as content and information but also as the result of someone’s intentions, as part of a larger discourse world, and as having real effects on real readers” (170). Such readers notice particular textual features—not just what the text is saying but how it is constructed (e.g., the rhetorical function of the various pieces, such as an introduction, a statement of an argument, an example, a qualification of the main idea). Rhetorical readers also go “beyond the text itself” (176); they use prior knowledge to construct a sense of authorial persona, intended audience and purpose, and the larger debates, questions, or theories in the background.

Practices associated with rhetorical reading also define *meta-reading*. An explanation of meta-reading, and a persuasive rationale for teaching it purposefully across the curriculum, has been articulated by Alice Horning, who identifies three kinds of awareness inherent in reading by experts: (1) metatextual: the rhetorical organization of the text, the relation of parts to one another and to the whole, (2) metacontextual: the place of the text in an ongoing conversation or inquiry focused on a defined problem or question and directed to an audience with assumed background knowledge in the field, and (3) metalinguistic: specialized uses of vocabulary, syntax, and verbal patterns characteristic of practitioners in the field (“Where to Put the Manicules” 6; *Reading, Writing, and Digitizing* 7, ch. 5). Meta-reading thus
entails awareness of both intratextual features (including part-to-whole connections and discipline-based uses of language) and extratextual frames (including motives for writing, historical contexts, and generic constraints), and the inseparability of all of these in the construction of meaning. While not usually named as such, meta-reading is desired by professors across the curriculum.

I am conflating rhetorical reading with meta-reading because the two accounts share an emphasis on the reader’s role in constructing meaning as shaped by consciousness of both formal conventions and assumed or implied contextual frames. The “feature/function” aspect of rhetorical reading as described by Haas and Flower includes attention to particular choices of words and sentences as well as to the roles of larger units of meaning and therefore seems to underlie the metalinguistic and metatextual kinds of awareness described by Horning. Another congruence between the two conceptual frameworks lies in the similarity of Haas and Flower’s description of expert readers’ text “construction” (which depends on extratextual inferences) and Horning’s “metacontextual” awareness. A third parallel has its roots in the broader notion of “critical reading.” Haas and Flower speak of rhetorical reading strategies as central to such a skill, i.e., the ability of students, when confronted with a challenging text, to “build an equally sophisticated, complex representation of meaning” (170). Implied in such a representation is the ability to achieve an informed perspective that allows evaluation according to accepted disciplinary methods. Horning’s description of “application skills”—students’ ability to evaluate and synthesize texts with each other and with their own work—would no doubt depend on critical reading so defined. Thus the similarities between the two accounts of reading are quite salient.

If pressed, however, to distinguish rhetorical from meta reading, one might suggest that rhetorical reading as defined by Haas and Flower puts slightly more emphasis on the relationship between text and context than does Horning’s meta-reading, which seems to emphasize intratextual understanding a bit more, perhaps because her primary aim is to help students “read informational prose texts quickly and efficiently” (“Where to Put the Manicules” 13). However, because the terms describe approximately the same expert habits, I will use them here interchangeably.
(and with the assumption that such habits are associated with what is commonly called critical reading). It is worth noting here that experimental research in discourse processing is consonant with these paradigms: a dominant model in cognitive psychology for representing reading comprehension comprises three levels of sense making—surface structure (decoding words and syntax), textbase (representation of gist), and situation model (connections with a larger conversation or context)—that correlate with the dynamics of meta-reading (Zwaan; see also Kintsch and van Dijk; Kintsch, “The Role of Knowledge”; Kintsch, “An Overview”).

A fourth term, *disciplinary literacy*, is used to distinguish modes of rhetorical reading (and writing) specific to individual academic fields. Research on the reading and writing habits of academics in various disciplines—e.g., Bazerman (physics), Wineburg (history), C. Shanahan et al. (history, mathematics, and chemistry)—have revealed differences fundamental to the values, epistemological assumptions, and discourse conventions of each field. These findings have led literacy scholars to infer that beyond the primary grades, where emphasis is on decoding, reading is best taught not as a generic skill but rather as an aspect of mastering disciplinary content. Moreover, as I hope to show in the ensuing chapters, the effects of aiming for an enrichment of students’ knowledge base from the earliest grades has not only cognitive implications but also ethical and social ones.

**Broadening the Responsibility**

My argument draws on the recommendations of literacy experts, who see instruction in rhetorical reading as “a gateway to disciplinary literacy” for high school students (Warren, “Rhetorical Reading as a Gateway”; see also Shanahan and Shanahan, “Teaching”; Moje). Concurring with the composition researchers noted above that interest in rhetorical reading, which seemed to surge a couple of decades ago among college instructors, never sufficiently influenced high school reading instruction, James Warren cautions against pedagogies that continue to reinforce the unhelpful idea that each text is sui generis (“autonomous”) and that therefore its meaning can be gleaned strictly from attention
to the words on the page. “Expert academic reading,” he says, “is rhetorical reading” (“Rhetorical Reading and the Development of Disciplinary Literacy” 4). However, since “reading” as a skill is largely ignored outside of high school English classes, “the myth of the autonomous text” (4) persists in classes across the curriculum. In light of the similar limitations that affect college instruction, the remedy entails a dual approach: both a reconceptualization of composition as a course, or sequence of courses, that could better prepare students for the challenges they will face as they are asked to read sophisticated texts from many fields, and systematic faculty development to foster effective instruction in disciplinary reading across the curriculum.

We already have good evidence that the necessary changes, both in high schools and in colleges, will be hard-fought. The changes Warren proposes, if integrated across subject areas in high schools, would require two shifts: (1) a reconception of English language arts (ELA) classes, which have mainly focused on teaching literature and/or the arhetorical reading strategies common in basic literacy instruction, and (2) more intentional integration of discipline-specific instruction in reading in each of the other content areas. Proponents of such curricula are naturally alert to the difficulties of changing deeply embedded pedagogic practices so that ELA classes can help support critical reading in all subject areas and so that disciplines other than English can, in turn, foster skills in disciplinary reading. As Warren observes, each of the recommended moves invites resistance. For ELA teachers, the risk is that the field’s traditional focus on general comprehension strategies that treat each text as autonomous will be viewed as inadequate and that therefore their role as the campus literacy experts will be diminished; on the other hand, restricting their classes to the content and methods of literary analysis (in which ELA teachers are typically trained) fails to advance the broad meta-awareness that secondary- and college-level students need to read proficiently. For teachers across the curriculum, there are reciprocal challenges: Teaching reading is perceived as outside the boundaries of their training and/or a threat to content coverage (Warren, “Rhetorical Reading as a Gateway” 393). Elizabeth Moje, in arguing forcefully for integrating instruction in disciplinary reading across the high school curriculum, notes that such a
project is “complicated”: The idea that epistemologies must be made explicit as a crucial aspect of disciplinary content “requires a radical rethinking of what constitutes a discipline and, in turn, a secondary school subject area” (100).

Resistance based on such aspects of entrenched culture is not, of course, restricted to high school faculty and administrators; it has also hobbled attempts to improve reading among college students. In their compelling study of discipline-specific reading habits by experts and the ways that high school teachers could help students understand and practice such habits, Timothy Shanahan and Cynthia Shanahan (“Teaching”) document the disciplinary understanding and finesse required to encourage professors, teacher educators, and high school teachers to try strategies designed to enhance students’ critical reading. Not surprisingly, the ideas that proved most acceptable were those most closely related to disciplinary epistemologies—i.e., those that helped students see how concrete data in the field related to “big ideas” or concepts and that offered scaffolding for enactment of expert practices (54–56). My own work with faculty on assignment design supports this finding. As I will demonstrate in Chapter 5, the needed pedagogic shifts that typically meet with skepticism or outright rejection can begin to permeate the curriculum if respect for the uniqueness of each discipline drives the approach to reconceiving one’s mission. In this way, the proposed changes are revealed as integral to the essential meaning of the field and thus to the initiation of students into the specific values and practices of the discipline at hand.

Shanahan and Shanahan end by recommending major revisions in the teacher-education curriculum—including “explicit literacy certification standards for teachers who teach in the disciplines” (57). Acknowledging the challenges of such a requirement, Warren emphasizes the benefits of training ELA teachers to introduce students to the rhetorical nature of texts and the reading practices of experts, a change he perceives as potentially consequential even in the absence of cross-campus collaboration (“Rhetorical Reading and the Development of Disciplinary Literacy” 7). However, without a concerted and integrative move toward helping students read rhetorically and in discipline-specific ways in high school, the challenges for college
instructors will continue to grow. And even if high schools across the country miraculously implemented all of the practices urged by disciplinary-literacy researchers, we would still no longer be able to pretend that sufficient instruction in reading and writing can be accomplished even in the most skillfully taught first-year skills classes and then somehow applied to various disciplinary contexts.

How, then, might college instructors address the needs of students throughout the four years by cultivating, in their design of assignments, the habits of mind that foster rhetorical reading not just in English classes but in all disciplines? Like Carillo, I imagine a foundational experience in which “first-year composition becomes about preparing students to productively engage with texts in a range of disciplines” (“Creating” 15). However, the possibilities for application and adaptation of skills based on metacognitive awareness of one’s reading practices would be subject to the same limitations Anson outlined in his case study of writing transfer: The uniqueness and complexity of each reading situation (demands of discipline, genre, class level, instructor preferences, or even “idiosyncrasies and fetishes”) require that students confront each reading assignment prepared to “create new, situationally determined knowledge.” Anson observes that we cannot rely too heavily on a generic transfer of writing skills from first-year courses alone; rather, we need faculty willing to link concepts and strategies taught in first-year skills classes with pedagogies in courses across the curriculum (“Pop Warner” 542). The same, I would argue, is true for the reciprocal skill of reading. (In Chapter 5, I offer examples of the benefits such integration, if widely practiced, might confer.)

In addition, a first-year reading-writing curriculum should, I contend, include content elements that might help to redress inequities. In thinking through the design of such a curriculum, I would attend carefully to the selection of texts, choosing more than a few classic expositions and arguments commonly familiar to college graduates. (In Chapter 4, I illustrate assignments based on such a curriculum.) Not only would such a selection help enrich the cultural and intellectual capital of all students, but it is likely to play a role in reading comprehension, since the effective construction of a rhetorical frame is enabled by background
knowledge (on this last point, see, e.g., Brent; Haas and Flower; Horning, “Reading Across”; Moje). Rhetorical reading will also require an awareness of genres and comparisons of the constraints and affordances offered by each of several, representing a range of disciplines. Assignments would be designed to support understanding of the meta aspects of texts, and to help students use such understanding in compiling a literature review, effecting a synthesis, or advancing an argument. Complementing and building on this course, classes across the curriculum would be revised to incorporate purposeful instruction in discipline-based rhetorical reading “as an integral aspect of subject area learning, rather than as a set of strategies for engaging with texts” (Moje). If a few classic or otherwise significant texts are taught across all sections of a first-year course, some instructors across the curriculum could revisit these texts in more specialized disciplinary contexts, thus increasing the potential for a more coherent curriculum that affords iterative practice in rhetorical reading and writing. In Appendix 4, I offer a sample of a two-semester first-year course sequence designed to meet these objectives.

In planning revisions to their courses, college instructors should be alert to the sorts of preparation first-year students are likely to bring with them. The literacy-instruction guidelines specified by the CCSS, intended to remedy the failed pedagogies of the past, promise to offer certain benefits but have been criticized for reinforcing instruction that is, in light of recent research, surprisingly arhetorical in its focus on the text in isolation. While regarded by some as mostly a move in the right direction (see, e.g., T. Shanahan, “The Common Core Ate My Baby”), this approach holds for others a dangerous affinity with the perceived elitism and rigidity of New Critical methods. I turn now to an examination of the Common Core pedagogies in hopes that by exploring their assumptions we can better understand some aspects of the controversy they have generated, appreciate their potential as well as their limitations in helping prepare students for college-level reading assignments, and imagine what an effective university-level reading-across-the-curriculum program might look like.
Synthesizing theory from literacy scholars with strategies derived from classroom inquiry projects, *Rethinking Reading in College* argues for more—and more systematic—attention to the role of reading comprehension in college as a necessary step in addressing the inequities in student achievement that otherwise increase over time. Through a critique of the philosophy behind the Common Core State Standards, Arlene Fish Wilner examines the needs of college-bound high school students and interrogates the nature of “remediation” in college, arguing that when supported by rhetorical-reading assignments, students in all first-year writing classes can and should explore complex and enduring texts. Addressing both composition and reading across the curriculum, Wilner demonstrates how faculty in all disciplines and at all curricular levels can improve student outcomes by first deliberately inhabiting the persona of novices, rethinking their assumptions about what students know and can do as apprentices in a field. She also illustrates the limitations of the literary vs. nonliterary text binary through a study of the demands posed by *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a novel commonly taught in both high school and college. An outline for a two-semester first-year general education course and examples of writing-to-read assignments from a range of disciplines are adaptable across subject areas and institutions.

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