Read-Me First! Guides: A Starting Point for Lessons

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The Read-Me-First! Guide is a resource for introducing lessons or units in flipped and online courses and provides students with support through the self-study experience.

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Consider this problem.

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Many asynchronous online courses in higher education consist of a collection of resources	This contrasts with asynchronous online courses for training, which are self-contained.	For efficiency, most traditional academic courses consist of pre-class readings and problem sets, with in-class lectures usually spent in transmitting content

• Readings
• Videos
• Activities
• Assessments
The relationship among these resources is not always self-evident
	• They do not involve: pe-work (homework)
	• Any assessment or testing can be included in the course package.
		Lectures often:
		• Duplicate or amplify the content in the readings)
		• Leaving little if any time to:
		  • Work on problems
		  • Verify that students mastered the skills and knowledge before moving to the next lesson

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In response, this idea emerged when designing an asynchronous course on mediated communication.

Two brainstorms arose when planning that course.	
☼	☼
When the entire course is self-study, instructors are not really stuck with the traditional cycle: 1. Read 2. Lecture 3. Practice The cycle can be broken into smaller chunks and students can be assessed for successfully mastering one part of a lesson before proceeding to the next.	**But the more one breaks up a lesson into parts, the more confusing the structure could be to students unless they have a guide through it.**

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That generated the Read-Me-First! Guide.

- Original name was Reading Guidesheet.
- Changed the name to match the Read-Me-First! Guides with product materials.

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The Read-Me-First! Guide explains the rationale underlying the lesson and then serves as a *concierge* through the instruction.

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Students receive a Read-Me-First! guide at the beginning of a session and are expected to have completed all work by the class session or designated deadline.

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Major sections of the Read-Me-First! Guide include the following.

About the lesson	Explanation of the purpose of the lesson within the larger scheme of the course Helps students see relationships with previous lessons and future ones
Objectives covered	Main objective and any major supporting objectives
Highlights	A quick overview of the activities in the lesson

Sequences of activities (heart of the lesson)	• Sequences of:
	  • Introductory activities (to surface prior knowledge and attitudes)
	  • Readings (includes guiding questions to focus learners' attention)
	  • Videos
	  • Application activities
	  • Reflections
	• Most lessons consist of 2 to 5 such sequences

Reflection on learning	Self-assessments Posts (including "minute summaries"

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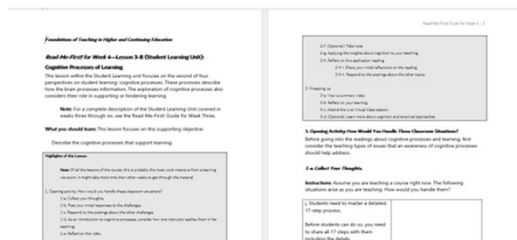
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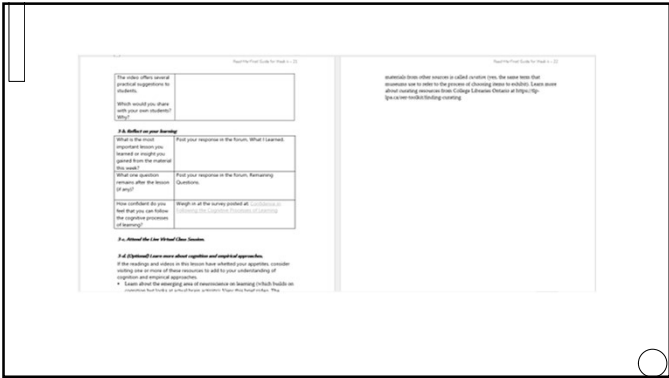
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Read-Me-First guides also include resources developed to support students apply the skills.

- Forms
- Templates
- Self-assessments
- Readings, however, are usually distributed separately.

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When materials are posted on a course management system, their description matches the sequence number and terminology in the description of the Read-Me-First! guides so students can easily find the materials.

In the Read-Me-First! Guide	On the Course Management System
2-a. Read the Chen article.	2-a. Chen, Y. (2020.) Instructional design . . .
4-b. Post your response in the forum, The Course I Plan to Design for My Project.	4-b. Course I Plan to Design for My Project.

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The concept is adapted from a webquest, which is an activity that sends students to various resources on the web to achieve particular learning goals.

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Consider this process for developing Read-Me-First! guides.

These are developed by the instructor, without limited or no third-party assistance.

(When available, third party assistance is only used for copyediting and production.)

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1. Develop the template for the Read-Me-First! Guide.

- Sections are the same in all of the Read-Me-First! Guides I develop
- The following material is boilerplate:
  - Sections
  - Reading instructions
  - Forum instructions
  - Minute summary
  - Copyright statement
- The look changes for each course

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2. Develop a general plan for all sessions.

Prepare this when preparing the syllabus.

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3. Develop a lesson plan for the session

In my case, that's a draft of the Powerpoint slides.

a. Copy the objectives of the lesson.

b. Add front and back matter.

c. Flesh out the plan for segments for each objective:
    i. Teaching strategy
    ii. Grabber
    iii. Lecture or discovery activity
    iv. Reinforcement activities
    v. Review

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4. Copy activities to the Read-Me-First! Guide and 5. Add readings.

When adding readings, guiding questions to focus student attention are added.

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6. Flesh out details of the lesson.

Also prepare forms and templates for supporting students in applying the skills.

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7. Complete introductory segments.

- Purpose of the lesson
- Objectives
- Highlights

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8. Publish

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When working on closely interrelated lessons, I develop all at once.

Usually adjust the process by beginning with the introductory material to describe each lesson and differentiate one from another.

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Although originally developed for an asynchronous online graduate course, the concept has also been applied in many other type of courses.

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Large asynchronous undergraduate course	In-person undergraduate courses	Flipped graduate courses	Blended continuing education courses.

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Some students like Read-Me-First! guides immediately, others need to adjust to the idea.

- Initially, some students had difficulty with:
  - When they should complete the activities
  - Following materials
  Note: As students identified specific concerns, the form was adjusted.
- Some students don't like to download a separate document.
- Some students don't like that each lesson has several components.
- Students do not like the extent of work, which seems greater because of the larger number of read-apply cycles described (instead of the singular one students are used to, with the time needed to practice)
- Some students do not completely finish the activities.

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Over time, students develop an appreciation for the guides.

- Clarity of the descriptions
- Support while reading
- Chunking of the content: the opportunity to develop complex skills in smaller chunks rather than all at once.

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Perhaps it's why students in several classes have commented that classes with the Read-Me-First! Guides are among the most clearly structured ones in which they have enrolled.

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Let's discuss!

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