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Academic Reading and Argumentation: Preparing Pre-University Students for Evidence-Based University Study

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ABSTRACT

The transition to university requires students to move from retrieving information towards evaluating how knowledge claims are constructed, supported and contested. Academic reading and argumentation should therefore be taught as connected practices rather than separate study skills. This conceptual article draws on selected scholarship concerning disciplinary literacy, critical reading, visual interpretation and argumentative reasoning. It develops an instructional framework in which students reconstruct an author's claim, examine the relationship between evidence and inference, compare plausible alternatives and formulate a proportionate conclusion. The framework distinguishes accurate representation from agreement and scepticism from indiscriminate distrust. It also considers multilingual participation, source selection, digital information and the assessment of reasoning. The central contribution is a model of academic readiness based on accountable interpretation: students should be able to show how their conclusions arise from particular sources and why those sources warrant the weight assigned to them. Implications are developed for pre-university programmes serving education, management, business and law.

Keywords- academic reading; argumentation; disciplinary literacy; evidence evaluation; pre-university education; academic readiness.

I. THE PROBLEM OF ACADEMIC READINESS

A student may read fluently, reproduce definitions accurately and still struggle with university study. Academic texts do more than transmit information. They establish questions, select evidence, position themselves within debates and qualify conclusions. Successful participation requires readers to recognise these activities and respond to them. The transition is therefore epistemic as well as linguistic: students must understand how a discipline decides what counts as a defensible claim. Pre-university programmes occupy an important position in this transition. They can prepare students to approach difficult texts without assuming that every unfamiliar sentence signals personal inadequacy. They can also challenge the belief that an academic paragraph becomes persuasive simply by containing several citations. Evidence must support the particular proposition for which it is offered, and the connection must be explained.

The central question is how programmes can connect reading with the construction of reasoned arguments. This article proposes that academic readiness should be understood as accountable interpretation. A student demonstrates that capacity by representing a source accurately, identifying what it supports, recognising its limitations and explaining how it contributes to a conclusion. The focus differs from general reading speed, examination technique or the mechanical presentation of references.

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II. CONCEPTUAL METHOD AND EVIDENCE BASE

The article is a purposive conceptual analysis of six scholarly contributions, covering disciplinary literacy, reasoning, reading pedagogy and teacher preparation. Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) examine disciplinary literacy among adolescents. Lewin (1984) considers critical reading in advanced language education. Brown and Savić (2023) discuss critical visual literacy through a secondary classroom redesign task. Mercier and Sperber (2011) develop an argumentative account of reasoning. The works were selected for their relevance to distinct components of the proposed framework, not to represent every approach to academic literacy.

These sources differ in method, period and educational setting. A theoretical account of reasoning cannot establish the effectiveness of a particular classroom intervention. A classroom illustration cannot determine how an entire pre-university curriculum should be organised. The analysis therefore distinguishes claims made by the sources from instructional proposals developed here. The framework is intended for adaptation within subject teaching. It does not prescribe a uniform reading strategy for every discipline or imply that students must master specialist research methods before entering university. Its purpose is to identify a manageable set of intellectual operations that can become progressively more demanding as disciplinary knowledge develops.

III. READING AS RECONSTRUCTION OF AN ARGUMENT

The first operation is accurate reconstruction. Students should identify the question a text addresses before deciding whether they agree with its conclusion. A passage about the circumstances in which a management practice succeeds can be misread as a universal endorsement of that practice. A legal commentary describing a court's reasoning can be mistaken for the author's preferred policy. Such errors arise when readers detach statements from their argumentative function. A useful reading record therefore distinguishes the central claim, supporting reasons, evidence and qualifications. These categories should be taught through short passages rather than introduced only as abstract terminology. Students can underline the main proposition, identify the evidence offered and explain the inference connecting the two. If that connection remains uncertain, the uncertainty should become a question for discussion. Reconstruction also requires attention to scope. Statements about one institution, a particular historical period or a defined sample should retain those boundaries when paraphrased. Removing a qualification can transform a cautious finding into an unsupported generalisation. Teaching students to preserve scope is an important preparation for both responsible writing and the interpretation of professional reports. Lewin (1984) argues for explicit attention to features of expository writing that inform critical reading. The pedagogical implication developed here is that students should examine how wording shapes a claim's strength. Expressions such as suggests, is associated with and establishes do different argumentative work. Reading them as interchangeable obscures the difference between a possibility, a relationship and a demonstrated conclusion.

IV. DISCIPLINARY DIFFERENCES IN EVIDENCE

Academic reading cannot be reduced to one universal checklist. Shanahan and Shanahan (2008) describe differences in how disciplinary experts approach texts and argue for advanced literacy instruction within subject areas. Their findings challenge the assumption that a general comprehension strategy will transfer unchanged into mathematics, history or science. The same caution applies to the professional subjects considered here. In a management article, students may need to distinguish a theoretical construct from the indicator used to measure it. In business analysis, they may need to ask whether a financial comparison uses compatible periods and definitions. In education, an intervention's apparent success may depend on the learners, teaching conditions and outcome selected. In law, the authority, jurisdiction and procedural position of a decision can matter as much as the attractiveness of its reasoning. A common foundation remains possible. Every discipline requires accurate representation, attention to relevance and a defensible connection between evidence and conclusion. Subject teaching should then explain how those requirements operate locally. This arrangement avoids both extremes: treating every discipline as entirely isolated and assuming that all academic arguments follow one evidential model. Students should also learn that prestigious publication does not remove the need for scrutiny. A reputable source may be irrelevant to the question, outdated for a particular purpose or more tentative than a secondary summary suggests. Source credibility is an initial consideration. Claim-specific relevance and evidential adequacy determine how the source can responsibly be used.

V. COMPARING SOURCES AND CONSTRUCTING A POSITION

Comparison begins when students recognise that disagreement may concern different things. Authors can dispute facts, definitions, causal explanations, values or the practical implications of a shared finding. A paper that values administrative efficiency and another that prioritises procedural protection may reach different recommendations without disagreeing about every empirical observation. Students need to identify the level of disagreement before attempting

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synthesis. A comparison exercise can ask learners to record each author's question, principal claim, evidence and qualification. They then explain one genuine point of agreement and one substantive disagreement. This prevents the familiar pattern in which a paragraph lists what several authors said without showing how their contributions relate. Synthesis requires an organising problem, not simply proximity on the page. The student's own position should follow from that comparison. A defensible conclusion may endorse one explanation, combine compatible elements, identify conditions under which each applies or conclude that the available evidence remains insufficient. Academic argumentation does not require certainty. It requires a conclusion whose strength matches the support available. Mercier and Sperber (2011) offer a theoretical account in which reasoning is closely connected to producing and evaluating arguments. Their discussion of motivated reasoning provides a reason to take counterargument seriously. Classroom debate should not reward only the ability to defend an assigned position. It should also require students to identify evidence that would weaken that position and explain whether their conclusion should change.

VI. AN INSTRUCTIONAL SEQUENCE FOR PRE-UNIVERSITY STUDY

An initial phase can use a short, carefully selected text with a visible argument. The teacher models how to identify the question, distinguish evidence from assertion and preserve qualifications. The demonstration should include uncertainty. Showing how an experienced reader resolves an ambiguous passage is more informative than presenting an effortless summary of a difficult text. A second phase introduces paired sources. Students compare two interpretations of the same educational, commercial or managerial problem. The task should be narrow enough that disagreement can be examined closely. Asking inexperienced learners to evaluate an entire field encourages superficial judgements and excessive reliance on whichever source is easiest to understand. A third phase requires a short written argument using the comparison. Students state a conclusion, explain the supporting evidence and address a plausible objection. The teacher assesses the quality of the connections rather than the number of references. A carefully qualified paragraph using two relevant sources can demonstrate stronger reasoning than a longer paragraph containing numerous unexplained citations. A fourth phase transfers the method to a new subject problem. Students identify which reading questions remain useful and which require disciplinary adaptation. For example, the question of evidential authority operates differently in a judicial decision and a survey report. Transfer becomes an explicit object of teaching rather than an assumption inferred from successful completion of the first exercise.

Reading circles offer one concrete way to distribute these intellectual tasks. Xu (2021) studied 26 university students of Business English who read business journal articles, undertook assigned roles and shared interpretations. The study reported favourable perceptions and improvements in reading and critical thinking within that setting. Its modest, specialised sample warrants caution about generalisation. A pre-university adaptation could rotate responsibility for reconstructing the claim, examining evidence and identifying an alternative interpretation, followed by individual writing that reveals whether each student can perform the combined analysis independently.

VII. DIGITAL AND VISUAL INFORMATION

University preparation must address information presented through charts, images, webpages and mixed media. A visual display can imply a relationship without stating it in words. Cropped axes, selective time periods, emotionally suggestive photographs and unexplained categories can shape interpretation. Students should therefore ask what a representation foregrounds, what it excludes and which conclusion it encourages. Brown and Savić (2023) present a redesign task through which secondary learners examined and reworked a multimodal advertisement. Their contribution illustrates how producing an alternative representation can expose assumptions in the original. It does not establish that advertising analysis is equivalent to evaluating a scientific figure. The transferable principle is that representation involves choices that can be inspected and justified. For academic work, students should trace a claim to an identifiable source and inspect the relevant passage. A search result, promotional summary or unattributed graphic may omit essential qualifications. The instructional aim is not to require exhaustive investigation of every sentence encountered. It is to teach proportionate verification when a claim becomes important to an argument. Digital abundance also creates a selection problem. Students can collect far more material than they can evaluate. A preliminary research question and a small set of inclusion criteria can make reading purposeful. Criteria might concern subject relevance, publication type, date where timeliness matters and access to enough content to assess the claim. Gathering sources should remain subordinate to answering the question.

VIII. ASSESSMENT, LANGUAGE AND PARTICIPATION

Assessment should make reasoning visible without confusing linguistic polish with intellectual quality. A student may identify a serious limitation but express it awkwardly. Another may write elegantly while misrepresenting the evidence. Criteria should distinguish accuracy of interpretation, relevance of evidence, quality of inference and clarity of expression, while recognising that these dimensions interact. Multilingual students may benefit from explicit teaching of disciplinary vocabulary and argumentative connectors. Such support should deepen access to complex ideas rather than replace them

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with simplistic tasks. Students can first explain a relationship orally, compare interpretations with peers and then formulate it in the language expected by the programme. Participation structures also matter. Fast whole-class discussion may reward confidence and familiarity with academic speech. Brief individual preparation and small-group comparison can create additional opportunities for students to develop a position before presenting it publicly. These are proposed design choices, not universally superior methods; their value should be assessed against the learning objective and the students involved.

An assessment portfolio might contain an annotated source, a comparison note and a short argument using both. Together, these artefacts allow teachers to identify where a difficulty arises. A weak final essay may reflect inaccurate reading, poor source selection or an unsupported inference. Diagnosis becomes more useful when the process is visible.

Implementation also depends on teachers' understanding of the intended intellectual work. Yuan and Stapleton (2020), using a focus group and follow-up interviews with pre-service language teachers, identified limited understandings of critical thinking and insufficient preparation for teaching it. Their findings concern the participants studied rather than the competence of all teachers. Nevertheless, they make staff preparation a substantive curriculum issue. Programme teams should compare examples of warranted inference, unsupported assertion and reasonable qualification before expecting consistent instruction or marking across classes.

IX. IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION:

Programme leaders should treat academic reading as a shared responsibility across subjects. A preparatory literacy module can introduce common practices, but subject teachers must demonstrate their disciplinary application. Coordination is necessary so that students encounter compatible expectations without being told that all academic writing follows an identical formula. The proposed framework is limited by its selective evidence base and the absence of a programme-level evaluation. Its effectiveness may depend on class size, staff preparation, text difficulty and learners' prior knowledge. Future studies should examine whether students preserve source qualifications, distinguish forms of evidence and transfer evaluative practices to unfamiliar tasks. Improvement should be assessed through actual reasoning, not confidence alone. Academic readiness ultimately involves a disciplined relationship between reading and judgement. Students must learn to understand a claim before criticising it, evaluate evidence without treating every source as equally credible and draw conclusions proportionate to what they can support. Pre-university education can cultivate these habits through carefully sequenced encounters with texts, comparison and argument. The resulting capacity is valuable across education, management, business and law because it makes intellectual decisions explainable and open to scrutiny.

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