

## Workshop: Supporting Notetaking and Guided Reading

Read Allision Carr’s “Failure Is Not an Option.” Choose on the following options to practice.

1. Read Carr’s essay. As you do, annotate it, using any combination of the following strategies.
  - Identify key concepts; very briefly summarize them in the margin or your notes.
  - Identify unfamiliar words or concepts; look them up and define them in the margin or your notes.
  - Note passages that you find confusing or unclear. Ask a question about it. It's okay if all you do is ask questions!
  - Make note of connections in the reading to your own experience or other texts you have read. What can you relate to or connect?
  - Identify any examples or evidence that you might find useful in a discussion of the text. What do you want to come back to? In the margin or your notes, write a reminder of why you find this worth paying attention to.
2. Write in response to **one** of the following. Don’t worry about mechanics and focus instead on exploring your thinking.
  - How might Carr’s message relate to writing in your discipline? In what ways might you risk failure in pursuit of creative, risky thinking?
  - Carr believes that the wider cultural belief that failure is “bad” needs to change. What obstacles would impede this wider change in academia? What systemic changes would have to be made?
  - What are you struggling with in Carr's text? Point to that moment and try to explain what is confusing, what you want to push back on, and / or what you think it may mean.

## Reading Strategies: Annotation, Writing, and Quizzing

In her 2021 book *How We Read Now*, scholar and professor Naomi Baron offers this simple but well-tested advice for getting the most out of your reading:

***Slow down.***

***Remove distractions.***

***Set goals for what you want to derive from the reading.***

***Actively engage with the text. (132)***

While this may seem obvious and easy, many of us don't have enough practice with active reading or well-established habits that reflect this advice.

Since writing well is in part dependent on reading well, we will practice reading strategies this semester that "actively involve our minds" (Baron 60) in order to improve our focus and comprehension.

For most course readings, you have a choice among three reading strategies:

1. annotation,
2. write in response to prompts, or
3. a reading quiz.

In some cases, only one or two of these options will be available.



### Annotate a text.

#### Form

- You may annotate digitally, using the comment tool, and uploading the annotated version.
- You may write by hand on the printed copy of text; you can take a photo or scan of the text to upload.

#### Content

Use a combination of the following strategies.

- Identify key concepts; very briefly summarize them.
- Identify unfamiliar words or concepts; look them up and define them.
- Note passages that you find confusing or unclear. Ask a question about it.
- Make note of connections in the reading to your own experience or other texts you have read.
- Identify any examples or evidence that you might find useful in class discussion or assignments.

I don't require a specific number of annotations per reading, but I will mark responses "needs revision" if they don't address the entire reading, or if they need more details for a reader (the professor) to understand your thinking.

### Write in response to prompts.

For many of our readings, I'll provide prompts, questions that will ask you to not only demonstrate your understanding of the reading, but to respond to it in some way.

I don't require a specific number of words in response, but I will mark responses "needs revision" if they don't fully address all parts of the prompt, or if they need more details or explanation for a reader (the professor) to understand your thinking. At the start of the semester, many students get grades of *needs revision* and then rewrite a bit before I change the grade to *complete*.

Here are prompts I have used in past semesters for Inoue's blog post, "Do Grades Help Students Learn in Classrooms?"

- *Reflect on your experience of risk aversion or risk taking and their relationship to grades. Explain and describe what you know.*
- *Inoue tells us that grades can diminish students' interest in what they are learning. When has this been true for you? When has it not? Explain and describe what you know.*
- *Inoue notes that grades can create a preference for easy task. Have you seen this play out in education? Explain and describe what you know.*
- *What do you make of Inoue's explanation of how grades may reduce the quality of our thinking? Explain and describe what you know.*
- *What did you find most confusing or in need of more explanation? Describe this section of the text. Then, write down a few questions that may direct our conversation about it.*

### Take a quiz.

For many readings, I will provide a quiz on D2L that will test your reading comprehension.

To receive a grade of "complete" you should score a grade 100%. This may seem a lot, but, first, they are very short quizzes, and second, you may retake these quizzes immediately after completion, up until the start of our class in which the reading is due.

## Excerpts from “Failure Is Not An Option” By Allison D. Carr

From *Bad Ideas About Writing*, Edited by Cheryl E. Ball & Drew M. Loewe. West Virginia University Libraries Digital Publishing Institute, 2017, pages 76-81.

Failure, so goes the dominant cultural narrative, is a sign of weakness. Of laziness. Of stupidity and bad breeding and busted bootstraps. Failure will ruin your life. In action, suspense, and sports films, failure is not an option. In real life, failure only happens to bad people. Or, more to the point in this context, to bad writers. Failure in writing betrays dullness of mind, smallness of imagination. The failed writer—the one who cannot learn to write well (which is to say, according to accepted conventions of good writing)—is discounted as dim, unprepared, non-serious, wacky, or weird, distracted, behind.

Or, failure is acceptable if we learn from it. If we can recuperate it, if it brings us virtue and strength and morality because what doesn't kill us makes us stronger. And if we never, ever do it again.

No. Stop with this. This is stupid, and the opposite is actually true: Failure should be welcomed, if not actively sought out, signaling as it does both the presence of creative, risky thinking and an opportunity to explore a new direction. To writing especially, failure is integral, and I will go so far as to assert that the best writing (and the best learning-to-write) happens when one approaches the activity from a mindset trained on failure. Failure represents a certain against-the-grain jettisoning of established ideas about what counts as good writing in favor of rogue, original, attention-capturing, and intentional art. To fail willingly in writing is to be empowered by the possibilities that emerge. It is to trust oneself and one's ideas, a quality too rare in the age of hyper-achievement, in which the only progress that counts is progress that moves up.

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But cultural attitudes toward failure remain as sinister as ever, perhaps more so in the wake of standardized testing, No Child Left Behind, and Race to the Top. Failure continues to represent not just ill preparedness, but weakness in spirit and mind, stupidity, inadequacy, and a lifetime of toiling. And there is something about failure in writing that amplifies these judgments, suggesting that the subject somehow deserves to be judged and disadvantaged in these ways.

### **An Alternative View**

What we have failed to grasp—why the idea that failure is bad needs to die—is the integral connection between failure and risk, creativity, and innovation, not to mention emotional and cognitive resilience. This relationship is well documented, making its tenacious hold on cultural ideology especially confounding. For example, many of us use and benefit daily from innovations discovered by accident: penicillin, Corn Flakes, Post-it Notes, Corningware, WD-40, oral contraception, and potato chips. All of these were discovered when the discoverer was working on a different puzzle. And discoveries like these are the norm, not the exception. This is the primary activity of lab research, after all: A researcher may run hundreds, thousands of trials and experiments, each a failure in its own unique way (and some leading to accidental discoveries) before landing on, say, the polio vaccine or the secret to the expanding universe. Likewise, in the tech industry, we need only look as far as Silicon Valley and the dozens of stories of failed startups to understand how integral failure is to the culture of innovation

there (even when it is difficult to stomach). In fact, failure is so common and so prominent in tech, they've developed an entire annual conference around it, FailCon.

And though writing is not obviously about discovery of life-altering products, it is about discovery of a different sort and thus, the virtue of failure should be similarly celebrated. In fact, knowing what I know about learning to write (as a writer and a writing teacher myself), I would argue that it is impossible for one to develop anything approaching a good writing ability without years—decades, probably—of repeated failure. We aren't born pen in hand, fully primed to write sonnets or political treatises as soon as we get a grip on those fine motor skills. Writing is learned slowly, over a long period of time, and with much difficulty, and anybody who says otherwise is lying or delusional or both.

Consider the testimony of renowned journalist and public intellectual Ta-Nehisi Coates who, in an interview for *The Atlantic's* "Creative Breakthroughs" series, describes writing as a process of repeated failures that, with persistence, accumulate to create breakthroughs. "I always consider the entire process about failure," he says, "and I think that's the reason why more people don't write." Similarly, novelist Stephen King speaks publicly (and repeatedly) about his impressively large stack of rejection slips before *Carrie* was finally picked up by Doubleday, thereby launching his illustrious career (powered by persistence, no doubt, in the face of his continued fear "of failing at whatever story I'm writing"). Pulitzer Prize winning novelist Junot Díaz writes memorably of his difficulty in writing his second novel, a years-long exercise in failure; it famously took Jane Austen fourteen years to write *Sense and Sensibility*; and Joyce Carol Oates, in her "Notes on Failure," reminds us that Faulkner considered himself a failed poet and that Henry James only became a novelist after a failed turn at playwriting.

There is much disagreement, or shall I say healthy debate, in the community of writing scholars about the best and most effective ways to teach writing. The specifics in this case are immaterial, because these scholars do agree on (at least) one foundational idea: that writing is a process, which is a coded way of avoiding the harsher truth: Writing—and learning to write—involves a great deal of failure. We start a draft; we get frustrated or stuck or sidetracked, or we discover halfway through that we're actually interested in something else. We move to a clean sheet of paper or a fresh document and start again. And the process continues until we've made something cohesive, something that works. We scholars know this not only because we've researched it, but because we are writers ourselves, and we spend a great deal of time with people struggling to improve their writing. Writing scholars don't use the word "failure" very often (or at all), but we should. There is something bold there, something that a dogged denial of failure closes off: permission to make a mess, to throw something away, to try thirty different ideas instead of toiling away on one. It's a reset button for the brain. That didn't work! Let's salvage what we can and try again! Scholars and teachers don't use this word, but we should—it is the most honest thing we have to say about writing.....