Riverside Community College
Directed Learning Activity: Reading
Combined Skills using Reading in the Content Areas: Science

To have success in all content area classes at Riverside Community College, one of the most important skills you can develop is good reading ability. The variety of courses that a college student takes requires different types of reading. If the reading material is easy for you or if you have significant prior knowledge (schema) of the course content, you may read at a quicker pace. If the material is new or significantly difficult, you may need to read the content more slowly.

The passages use combined skills in social studies focusing on the content areas of biology, weather, and scientific laws.

Questions will utilize the following six reading skills: main idea, subject matter, supporting details, conclusion, clarifying devices, and vocabulary in context.

Main Idea: As you read, it is always important to ask, what is the point the writer is trying to make? Answering the main idea questions in this book, you are given three statements and you are asked to select statements that express the main idea of the passage, the statement that is too narrow and the statement that is too broad.

Remember, the main idea of a passage is what the author wants you to know about the topic. It is the broadest, most important idea that the writer develops throughout the passages. The entire passage explains, develops, and supports the main idea.

When a statement expresses an idea that is too narrow, it is only part of the main idea. It is often a statement that is too specific. On the other hand, when a statement expresses an idea that is too broad, it is too general in scope focusing on one limited aspect that may or may not be expressed in the paragraph.

Subject Matter: The subject matter question can help the reader with the most important reading and learning skill of all: concentration. The solution for concentration consists of reading a few lines of a passage and asking, what is the subject matter of this passage? If you can identify immediately the proper content area the passage belongs, you will be actively thinking about the passage and concentration comes naturally.

Supporting Details: When many readers see the word detail, they sometimes see it as relatively unimportant. But in reading, details are important. In a passage, the details are the plaster, wall board and brick of a building, while the main idea the strong steel or wooden frame. A solid passage must contain both. In a factual passage, the main idea is often embedded among the details. As you read, you must be able to distinguish between the main idea and the supporting details. When looking for the difference between the two, these characteristics may help: 1) supporting details come in a variety of forms. They can be examples, descriptions, comparisons, definitions, contrasts, analogies, similes, and metaphors. 2) some supporting details support the main idea. In order to find a detail that supports the
main idea, take a passage apart sentence by sentence and ask, does this sentence support the something, or is this the idea being supported?

**Conclusion:** Conclusions and inferences are the same thing. We make inferences and conclusions every day. When you see that there is a long line of cars at your neighborhood gas station, you could conclude that the prices for gasoline are particularly low, even without seeing the sign stating the price. Conclusions by the author can be distinctly intended and expressed, or completely unintended and left for the reader to make. As a reader you must ask yourself what general thought or idea emerges when you put all of those individual pieces of information together. Here it helps to ask yourself what common thread the individual sentences seem to share. Once you have completed this process, you must think, where is the writer leading me?

**Clarifying Devices:** Words, phrases, and techniques that a writer uses to make main ideas and supporting details clear and interesting are known as clarifying or controlling devices. By recognizing these devices you will be able to read with greater comprehension and speed:

1) Transitional or signal words keep ideas, steps in a process, or lists in order. Some of the most common transition words are *first, second, next, last, finally, however, because, in conclusion, therefore, since, and consequently*

2) Patterns of organization assist the reader in deciding what the writer is attempting to say in a passage. Paying attention to whether the author is organizing according to chronological events, steps in a process, cause and effect, compare, contrast, classification, listing/enumeration, and definition, assists in reading the material with better clarity.

3) Textual devices, such as bulleted lists, boldfaced or italicized words, subheadings, or charts and diagrams make the author’s significant ideas clearer.

4) Figurative Language is used by writers to describe something that makes sense on an imaginative level but not on a literal and factual level. The three most common kinds of figurative language are *similes, metaphors, and symbols.* *Similes* make a comparison of two unlike things using *like,* or as. *Metaphors,* on the other hand, directly equate two objects.

**Vocabulary in Context:** A strong reader is able to figure out the meaning of many words from their context (the words and phrases around them). When one reads a passage and comes across an unfamiliar word, what does one do? If the reader skips and glosses over the word, comprehension of the content is at risk. If a reader is able to use the context clues from the sentences and words around the unknown word, one will become a better reader. There are three kinds of context clues to look for:

1) Definition clues are used by giving a brief definition or a synonym. Look for words and phrases such as *means, is, refers to,* or *can be defined* as point directly to definition clues

2) Example clues help explain or clarify a word. Let’s say you don’t know the word *legume.* An example clue sentence looks like this: *Legumes,* such as peas and beans, produce pods. The sentence then explains that legumes are vegetable plants that produce pods.

3) Contrast clues make it possible for an unknown word to be determined from a word or phrase in context that has an opposite meaning.
1. Once you have read the directions for this combined skills activity, answer the following questions.

   A. What question must you as a reader ask to determine the main idea? ____________________________

   B. Explain the difference between statements that are too broad and too narrow. __________________

   C. What are two characteristics of supporting details? ____________________________

   D. What does a reader do when he make a conclusion? ________________________________

   E. What are the four kinds of clarifying devices that a reader must pay attention to when working in the Reading in the Content Area text? ____________________________

   F. Describe the three kinds of vocabulary context clues. ____________________________