Objectives
This handout will:

- Provide strategies to improve reading comprehension that will help you understand:
  - Paragraph Organization
  - Main Idea(s)
  - Paraphrasing Techniques
  - Context Clues
  - Vocabulary

- Provide strategies to improve timed writing that will help you understand and employ:
  - Elements of an Argument:
    - Thesis statement
    - Qualification(s)
    - Evidence
    - Warrants
    - Backing
    - Counterargument(s)
  - Writing an Argument
  - Analyzing an Argument

- Provide strategies to improve knowledge of basic conventions of writing, including:
  - Active vs. Passive Voice
  - Concision

Reading Comprehension

Paragraph Organization
- Understanding paragraph organization will help you to analyze passages more efficiently.
- Look for hints about how the paragraph will be organized, such as:
  - If the passage mentions three main points, you know you will be looking for three important ideas.
  - If the passage mentions comparison, you know you will need to identify what is being compared and how.
- Be aware of signal words to understand where the passage is going.
  - Signal words often used for simple listing:
    - In addition
    - Another
    - For example
    - Also
    - Several
    - A number of
  - Signal words often used for definition:
    - Is defined as
    - Means
Main Idea

- The topic and the main idea of a paragraph are often confused.
- The topic is the overall subject of the paragraph.
- The main idea is the most important point that the author is making about the topic.
  - The main idea is typically stated in the topic sentence of the paragraph.
  - The topic sentence could be anywhere in the paragraph, although it is usually at the beginning.
- How to find the topic:
  - Ask yourself: What or who is the paragraph about?
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- How to find the main idea:
  - Ask yourself: What is the overall message or argument being made by the author about the topic?

- Tips for finding the topic and main idea:
  - Headings or titles may contain the topic and/or main idea.
  - First and last sentences in the paragraph are usually helpful.
  - Repeating words often indicate the topic and/or main idea.

❖ Activity #1: Determine the topic and main idea of this passage (2 minutes):
  - In his book *Literacy with an Attitude*, Patrick Finn uses the term “oppositional identity” to refer to the resistance that certain minority students feel against the school system. Students develop an oppositional identity because they feel that the school system is oppressive and unaccepting of their culture. This can lead to serious friction within the school environment and create challenges for both students and teachers. Schools should be aware of oppositional identity in order to make education equally accessible to all students.

Paraphrasing

- Paraphrasing involves putting ideas into your own words in order to gain a better understanding of the passage.

- Strategy:
  - *Step 1*: Read a paragraph.
  - *Step 2*: Ask yourself: “What the main ideas and details of this paragraph?”
  - *Step 3*: Put the main ideas and details into your own words.

- You can remember these steps through the acronym RAP: Read, Ask, Put.

❖ Activity #2: Paraphrase the following passage (2 minutes):
  - In his book *Literacy with an Attitude*, Patrick Finn uses the term “oppositional identity” to refer to the resistance that certain minority students feel against the school system. Students develop an oppositional identity because they feel that the school system is oppressive and unaccepting of their culture. This can lead to serious friction within the school environment and create challenges for both students and teachers. Schools should be aware of oppositional identity in order to make education equally accessible to all students.
Context Clues

- A useful strategy for figuring out the meaning of an unfamiliar word is to look at its context. Context is the other words and sentences surrounding the unfamiliar word that help to explain its meaning (Merriam-Webster).

- **Strategy:**
  - *Step 1:* Check for synonyms or definitions within the text. Reread the sentence with the unfamiliar word, keeping that synonym or definition in mind.
    - **Example:** My sister was *reticent* when I asked her how her weekend was. When I asked what she did, she just mumbled something and then left the room.
      - In this example, both *reticent* and *she just mumbled something and then left the room* describe the sister's actions. Therefore, we can understand *reticent* to mean *not revealing one's thoughts or feelings readily.*
  - *Step 2:* Check for antonyms clues. If you find one, consider what its opposite would be. Reread the sentence and replace the unknown word with its opposite.
    - **Example:** My roommate was so furious after failing her final that she started ripping all the pages out of her textbook. Rather than trying to *mitigate* the situation, I let her be upset and stayed out of her way.
      - The phrase *rather than trying to mitigate the situation* tells us that whatever comes next is going to be an example of *not* mitigating the situation. Therefore, *I let her be upset and stayed out of her way* is the opposite of *mitigating.* Using this antonym definition, we can understand *mitigate* to mean *to make less severe.*

- **Activity #3:** Using context clues to learn new words (2 minutes):
  - What is the meaning of “opaque” in this passage?
    - The point my professor was trying to make was opaque. No matter how many times she repeated it I couldn’t figure out what she was saying.
  - What strategies did you use to figure out the meaning of this word?

  - What is the meaning of “unequivocally” in this passage?
    - Every time we met to work on the project, my group members just talked about their favorite TV shows instead of helping me with the PowerPoint. They were unequivocally disinterested in being there.
  - What strategies did you use to figure out the meaning of this word?

Vocabulary

- Understanding the meaning of a part of an unfamiliar word can help you to decipher the definition of the word.

- **Common root words:**
  - Anthro = man, *anthropology* = the study of man
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- Bio = life, biology = the study of life
- Cardio = heart, cardiac = pertaining to the heart
- Cede = go, precede = to go before
- Dyna = power, dynamic = characterized by power and energy
- Hydro = water, hydrophobia = fear of water
- Ject = throw, eject = to throw out
- Magni = great/big, magnify = to enlarge, make bigger
- Mono = one, monoplane = airplane with one wing
- Psycho = mind, psychology = study of the mind
- Pod = foot, pseudopod = false foot
- Script = write, manuscript = hand written
- Terra = earth, terrace = a raised platform of earth
- Zoo = animal, zoology = the study of animals

- Common prefixes:
  - Anti- = against, antifreeze = liquid used to guard against freezing
  - Auto- = self, automatic = self-acting or self-regulating
  - De- = reverse/remove, defoliate = remove leaves from a tree
  - Dis- = apart, dislocate = to unlodge
  - Dys- = bad, dysfunctional = not functioning
  - Equi- = equal, equidistant = equal distance
  - Hyper- = over, hypertension = high blood pressure
  - Hypo- = under, hypotension = low blood pressure
  - Inter- = between, intervene = come between
  - Intra- = within, intramural = within bounds of a school
  - Poly- = many, polygonal = having many sides
  - Post- = after, postgraduate = after graduating
  - Pre- = before, precede, = to go before
  - Pro- = for, proponent = a supporter
  - Pseudo- = false, pseudonym = false name
  - Sub- = under, submerge = to put under water
  - Super- = above, superfine = extra fine
  - Trans- = across, transalpine = across the Alps

❖ Activity #4: Break down the following words using roots and prefixes (3 minutes):
- Equiangular = _______________________________
- Subterraneous = ______________________________
- Interpersonal = ______________________________
- Orthoscopic = ______________________________
- Hydrodynamic = ______________________________
Timed-Essay Writing

Elements of an Argument

- It is important to understand the elements of an argument in order to analyze one and be able to write your own.
  - The elements of an argument include:
    - Thesis
    - Qualifications
    - Evidence
    - Warrants
    - Backing
    - Counterarguments

- We will use a sample claim and prompt in order to examine the elements of an argument.
  - Sample claim: Academic merit should be the most important factor considered in a college application.
  - Sample prompt: Write a response in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with this statement. Develop and support your position by considering the consequences of adopting the claim.

Thesis:

- The sentence or sentences that state your argument.
- This statement should:
  - Specifically follow the guidelines presented in the assignment.
  - Be a focused response to the essay prompt and clearly articulate the central argument you will be expressing in the body of your essay.
  - Focus your argument to make it more manageable in the length of time you have to address the prompt.

- Sample thesis: Colleges should consider a wide range of qualities when selecting undergraduate applicants. Academic merit should be considered, however, it should not be the most important determining factor of an application.

Qualification(s):

- The statements that refine or limit the scope of your argument.
- These statements should:
  - Serve to help you limit the topic to make it more manageable within a timed setting.

- Sample qualification: While academic merit can be an indicator of college success, other factors such as leadership experience and resiliency are also important to consider in a college application.

Evidence:

- There are two primary types of evidence to use in a timed essay: logical and anecdotal.
  - Logical evidence should:
    - Provide a logical statement.
    - A logical statement proposes an idea and provides specific examples that illustrate why this logical statement is true.
Sample logical evidence: Being successful in college requires a wide range of skills and attributes, such as organization, critical thinking, and the determination necessary to overcome personal obstacles.

- In this sample statement, the writer proposes that “being successful in college requires a wide range of skills and attributes,” and provides “organization, critical thinking, and the determination necessary to overcome personal obstacles,” as evidence that illustrates how the original proposition is true.

Anecdotal evidence should:

- Provide examples from your personal experiences that can be used to prove the thesis you present in your argument.
- Specifically address the prompt and prove the thesis you propose.

Sample anecdotal evidence: Although my parents’ divorce made it difficult for me to succeed academically in high school, I was an active member of the ASB, where I gained important experience that helped me to be successful in college.

Additional notes about evidence:

- Because of the short time frame and limited factual evidence you are given in a standardized test, anecdotal and logical evidence can be incredibly helpful.
- Some questions may even ask that you respond to a prompt using your personal experience as evidence.
- Use caution and make sure that whatever personal evidence you use to prove your thesis specifically pertains to the subject you are discussing.

Warrants:

- The actual statements (general, hypothetical, logical) that serve as the links between your thesis and your evidence.
- These statements should:
  - Serve as the logical bridges between your thesis, each main point discussed in the body of the essay, and your eventual conclusion.
  - Provide clarity and direction throughout your essay to maintain a logical and cohesive structure and aid in readability.
- Sample warrant for logical evidence: These characteristics can be demonstrated through a variety of achievements and may not be adequately portrayed through one’s GPA.
- Sample warrant for anecdotal evidence: I can attribute much of my college success to experiences I had outside of an academic setting, such as learning how to lead a group of peers in my school’s ASB.
- Sample warrant for anecdotal evidence: Therefore, college applications should consider leadership experiences such as these to be as important as academic merit.

Backing:

- The statements that support your warrants.
- These statements should:
  - Prove that the warrants’ logic is accurate and realistic in scope.
- Sample backing: Since college success cannot be predicted on grades alone, considering academic merit as the most important factor in an application would not be an appropriate measure of an applicant’s potential.

Counterargument(s):
The statements that address argument(s) against your argument or instances when your argument does not hold true.

These statements should:

- Be accompanied by rebuttals to each counterargument.

Sample counterargument: Grades are the only measurable factor in predicting students’ potential success, and therefore allow colleges to compare applications on an objective basis.

Sample rebuttal: While grades are the only measurable point of comparison and should be considered within an application, they should not be the most important factor because they do not offer a well-rounded assessment of students’ character and potential for success in college.

Writing an Argument

- The following chart provides two examples of possible essay outlines:

| Introduction | Introduction |
| Thesis | Thesis |
| Topic sentence | Topic sentence |
| Evidence | Evidence |
| Warrant | Warrant |
| Backing | Backing |
| Counterargument | Counterargument |
| Rebuttal | Rebuttal |
| Conclusion | Conclusion |

Activity #5: Write an outline for the following prompt (5 minutes):

- Claim: Parents should provide a structured environment with explicit disciplinary consequences for their children.

- Prompt: Write a response in which you discuss the extent to which you agree or disagree with this statement. Develop and support your position by considering the consequences of adopting the claim.

Plan a response to this prompt using one of the argument outlines. Keep in mind that outlining is only the first step to writing a timed essay. Your outline should consist of brief notes, rather than complete sentences.
Analyzing an Argument

- A common method for analyzing an argument is to identify any fallacies that are present.
- A fallacy is a way of arguing that is considered incorrect.
- In your own writing, you should be aware of avoiding using fallacies.

- Common fallacies:
  - *Ad hominem*: This kind of argument attacks the person raising the argument rather than the argument itself.
    - *Claim*: Einstein’s “Theory of Relativity” is incorrect because he was a really mean man.
    - *Response*: This argument is incorrect because it is attacking Einstein instead of his theory.
  - *Straw man*: This kind of argument oversimplifies the opponent’s argument and then attacks that shallow argument.
    - *Claim*: Anyone who eats meat clearly supports the mistreatment and torture of animals.
    - *Response*: This argument reaches to the most extreme possible point of the opponent’s argument. People who eat meat probably have a wide variety of reasons for their dietary choices. Ignoring those arguments, the author does not properly consider their opponents’ argument, nor do they refute any specific position.
  - *Appeal to authority*: The argument must be true because the person/originator is typically regarded as a credible authority on the subject.
    - *Claim*: Former President George W. Bush stated that “America is the greatest country in the world,” thus proving that America is better than every other country, ever.
    - *Response*: Just because former President George W. Bush claims that “America is the greatest country in the world,” does not make that statement true. Forming an argument around “this authority figure said something I agree with, so it must be true” would be a fallacious argument.
  - *Appeal to majority*: This argument claims that X must be true because a large number of people believe that it is true.
    - *Claim*: Reality T.V. is the best kind of television because millions of people watch it.
    - *Response*: This argument is incorrect because it assumes that Reality T.V. is the best kind of television simply because millions of people watch it. However, millions of people can be wrong, so it is insufficient evidence.
Circular reasoning: The claim restates the argument without providing any evidence or proving the argument.

- **Claim**: Chicken wings are delightful because they are delicious.
- **Response**: Chicken wings might be delightful, and they may be delicious, but claiming they are delightful *because* they are delicious is simply restating the claim and does not provide any actual evidence.

Slippery Slope: This argument claims that because A happens, a series of events will happen that will lead to Z, therefore equating A to Z.

- **Claim**: The government should stop giving out welfare money. Next thing you know, all the poor people are going to be rich and there won’t be any money left in the government.
- **Response**: The argument claims that if the government keeps giving out welfare money there will soon be no money left in the government without providing a logical series of steps between these two points.

Hasty Generalization: This is an argument that rushes into a conclusion without having sufficient evidence.

- **Claim**: My brother eats McDonald’s every day and he just ran a marathon. McDonald’s must be the best food to eat to stay in shape!
- **Response**: The argument does not provide sufficient evidence to support the claim that McDonald’s is the best food for athletes.

Activity #6: Analyze the fallacies in the following argument (5 minutes):

- SFSU has faced significant budget cuts within the last several years. Many students complain that there are not enough classes offered; however, not every class at SFSU is full every semester so clearly there is not a shortage of classes. If SFSU keeps spending money on classes that aren’t full, soon the school will be broke. SFSU should direct money towards establishing more restaurants and stores on campus. These businesses will help to bring more money into the budget in the long run. In a recent campus-wide survey hundreds of students have agreed with this plan, so it must be a good course of action.
Active vs. Passive Voice

- In academic writing, it is generally preferred to use the active voice over the passive voice.
  - When using the active voice the subject of the sentence performs the action expressed in the verb.
  - Using the active voice makes your writing clear and keeps it from being too complicated or wordy.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passive:</th>
<th>Active:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thirty essays were graded by the teacher.</td>
<td>The teacher graded thirty essays.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The lawn was mowed by the woman.</td>
<td>The woman mowed the lawn.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Subjects of passive sentences do not perform the action. Instead, the subjects of passive sentences are acted upon, and the passive sentence may or may not have an agent. For example:
  - Thirty essays were graded.

- In that case, here is a test:
  - Add “by zombies” onto the sentence. If it makes grammatical sense, it is passive and does not have an agent that performs the action.
  - Thirty essays were graded by zombies.
    - It makes grammatical sense, therefore it is passive.

❖ Activity #7: Determine if the following sentences are active or passive. If they are passive, translate them into the active voice. You may need to add words for the new sentences to make sense. (3 minutes):

- The speeding driver was pulled over by the police officer.
- I wrote a fifteen page story by the seaside.
- Voting is considered to be the most important part of democracy.
- Waterslide parks are loved.
Concision

- In academic writing, concise language is preferred.
- Writing concisely means eliminating unnecessary words.
- Using the active voice can be one way to write more concisely.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Not Concise:</th>
<th>Concise:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• In this essay is a discussion of the importance of eating ice cream every day.</td>
<td>• This essay discusses the importance of eating ice cream every day.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- You can use the Paramedic Method to get rid of unnecessary words:
  1. Circle the prepositions (of, in, about, for, onto, into).
  2. Draw a box around the “is” verb forms.
  3. Ask, “Where’s the action?”
  4. Change the “action” into a simple verb.
  5. Move the doer into the subject.
  7. Eliminate any redundancies.

❖ Activity #8: Rewrite the following sentences so that they are more concise (3 minutes):

- It was at the end of the day that the feeling of sickness overcame me.
  ____________________________________________________________

- Nervousness was not something she felt as she was about to begin the presentation.
  ____________________________________________________________

- Something that I would like to point out is that it is a fact that college is very expensive.
  ____________________________________________________________

- When baking a cake it does not make sense to open the frosting when you are just starting to bake the cake.
  ____________________________________________________________
Activity #1

**Topic:** Oppositional identity

**Main Idea:** Schools should be aware of oppositional identity in order to make education equally accessible to all students.

Activity #4

**Equi:** equal – **angular:** angles

**Sub:** below – **terraneous:** the earth

**Inter:** between – **personal:** persons/people

**Ortho:** straight/normal – **scopic:** vision

**Hydro:** water – **dynamic:** power

Activity #6

**Hasty Generalization:** Many students complain that there are not enough classes offered; however, not every class at SFSU is full every semester so clearly there is not a shortage of classes.

**Slippery Slope:** If SFSU keeps spending money on classes that aren’t full, soon the school will be broke.

**Appeal to Majority:** In a recent campus-wide survey hundreds of students have agreed with this plan, so it must be a good course of action.

Activity #7

1. The speeding driver was pulled over by the police officer. **(Passive)**
   - **New Sentence:** The police officer pulled over the speeding driver.

2. I wrote a fifteen page story by the seaside. **(Active)**

3. Voting is considered to be the most important part of democracy. **(Active)**

4. Waterslide parks are loved. **(Passive)**
   - **New Sentence:** People love waterslide parks.

Activity #8

1. It was at the end of the day that the feeling of sickness overcame me.
   - **New Sentence:** I began to feel sick at the end of the day.

2. Nervousness was not something she felt as she was about to begin the presentation.
   - **New Sentence:** She did not feel nervous before her presentation.

3. Something that I would like to point out is that it is a fact that college is very expensive.
   - **New Sentence:** College is very expensive.

4. When baking a cake it does not make sense to open the frosting when you are just starting to bake the cake.
   - **New Sentence:** When baking a cake, do not open the frosting in the beginning.
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