

**Read, Think, Listen, Speak:
A Guide for New Students**

by

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Welcome to the Basic Program of Liberal Education for Adults. You and your classmates are about to embark upon a voyage. A voyage that adults in Chicagoland have embarked upon for 50 years. A voyage that, experience shows, may literally change your life. To help you get your “sea legs,” as it were, I offer the following words of advice.

A good place to start is to think about the purpose of the Basic Program. What is it? Is the purpose of the program, for example, to acquaint students with the “highlights” of Western culture and history as the background for making informed decisions in the present? Or is the purpose of the program to help students hone their thinking skills? Is it to study a selection of texts that reveal “truths” about the human condition? Or do we offer the program simply because, for a certain kind of person, reading such texts is simply fun?

It may surprise you, as it did me when I joined the Basic Program, that there is no simple answer to this question. Different people, among both the teaching staff and the student body, tend to emphasize different purposes. As one becomes acquainted with the program, however, one learns that this inability to articulate the purpose of the program reflects the fact that the Basic Program does all of these things. Not to the same extent with every text and every student, to be sure. But over the course of four or more years, students in the Basic Program do learn more about Western culture and history, do hone their thinking skills, do uncover “truths” about the human condition, and do have a great deal of fun.

Perhaps this is what makes the Basic Program the vital institution it is today. For the new student, however, this multiplicity of purpose can sometimes be bewildering. After all, just how are you supposed to go about doing all these things in the Basic Program?

Student Responsibility

Perhaps the single most important thing to realize about Basic Program classes is that they are designed to be collaborative learning experiences and thus are based on discussion by everyone rather than lecture by the instructor. This means that the focus of the classes (and hence to a large extent their success or failure) depends upon the responsible participation of the students — that is, you and your classmates. A class in which students are prepared, thoughtful and courteous will be far better than a class in

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which only a few people have done the reading, in which people wander far from the text at hand and/or in which people are continually interrupting each other.

So what is the role of the instructors? Although all Basic Program instructors are knowledgeable and experienced professionals, they are not in class to “give answers”. Indeed, you will rarely be in a class in which the instructor is an “expert” in the field from which the text is drawn (e.g. your Shakespeare class will not likely be taught by a Shakespeare scholar). Rather, Basic Program instructors are experts at reading and thinking about a wide variety of great works and at facilitating class discussions. In a very important sense, therefore, Basic Program instructors are ultimately participants in the collaborative exploration that Basic Program classes undertake, responsible primarily for providing structure, guidance and encouragement which enables a group of students to instruct itself. (Indeed, a number of us are reluctant to use the term “teacher” or “instructor” at all.)

Read

It has always been a tenet of the Basic Program that it is valuable and important for lay people (i.e. non-specialists) to have first-hand acquaintance with as many of the great works of Western civilization as they reasonably can. This is not to say that we think that people should not have first-hand acquaintance with the great works of non-Western civilizations. Far from it. It is to say, however, that we believe that Westerners should have first-hand acquaintance with at least works such as these.

The notion of “first-hand acquaintance” is key. For in contrast to many people who believe that great works can only be properly engaged by “the few,” the Basic Program staff has always believed that one of the things that makes truly great works great is that they can be, and should be, engaged by “the many.” This is not to say that the useful engagement of a great work is easy; it is not. (That’s why we do it collaboratively.) But it is to say that it is possible and worth the effort. Thus, the focus of everything we do in the Basic Program is the reading of primary texts. In other words, we read what the author wrote (often in English translation) and very little else. We don’t generally read commentaries or notes as part of the program (although instructors and students often do as a personal supplement to the reading).

From this you can see why the first pre-requisite to a satisfactory experience in the Basic Program is doing the reading. Now, one of the joys of learning as an adult in a non-credit environment is that there is no one to tell you what to do. No one is going to force you to read or embarrass you if you don’t. On the other hand, very little that takes place in class will have meaning for you if you have not done the reading. Moreover, since the quality of the discussion is often directly proportional to how well-read the class as a whole is, a class in which everyone has done the reading is much likelier to be a good one than one in which no one but the instructor has done the reading. Thus, not reading is a disservice to your classmates as well as to yourself. (We realize, of course, that there will be times when you simply cannot do the reading. Please, please, please come to class anyway. You will still learn something and attending will make it easier for you to catch up when you have the chance.)

A word also needs to be said about what we mean by “reading” one of these texts. Although much could be (and has been) said on this subject, suffice it to say that reading a great work is work — it requires time, effort and skill. It is not something that any of us can generally do on a bus or in the few minutes before going to sleep. (Reading one of these works is not the same as reading a newspaper.) Thus, to get the most out of these works and the classes which revolve around them, let me suggest that you set aside some “quality time” each week which you can devote to your homework. And use it. (For more on this theme, see Mortimer Adler’s excellent introduction to *How to Read a Book*.)

Think

One of the main reasons that reading a great work is work, requiring time, effort and skill, is that reading a great work requires thought. Thought about what the author is saying — and not saying. Thought about what others authors have said on the same or related topics. Thought about what you think about the subject being discussed. Thus, a second tenet of the Basic Program is that reading a great work is practically pointless if you don't think about it. For in a sense, a work is great only in proportion to the quality of the thoughts it evokes.

So, as you're reading at home or in class, go slow. Take your time. Think about what you're reading. Underline significant passages. Make notes in the margin. Jot down questions you'd like to tackle in class. In short, make reading an active, two-part process where the printed page becomes a stimulus for a range of intellectual, emotional and aesthetic responses.

Listen

While reading and thinking are indispensable parts of gaining a first-hand acquaintance with a great work, they are ultimately activities that you could do alone. Indeed, you will do them alone as you prepare for the seminar each week. A third tenet of Basic Program, however, is that great works are best approached collaboratively. In other words, understanding is a "team sport," as it were. A class which pools its thoughts, observations, questions and insights is a class in which each member (including the instructor) grows more in concert with the others than he or she could have grown in isolation.

For this reason it is important for participants in a class to listen to one another. And not just to the points which "obviously" "make sense." Often it is the point that seems initially the most far-fetched that can help you see a work in a way you never imagined before. Indeed, you might want to think of your classmates's remarks as "great works in the rough," to be absorbed and considered with the same seriousness as the text that started the discussion in the first place.

Speak

The flip side of listening, of course, is speaking. Although you will not be forced to speak if you do not want to, a fourth tenet of the Basic Program is that students essentially teach themselves by discussing issues with other students under the guidance of an instructor. This is why your instructors will not be lecturing. Rather, each of your instructors will act as much as possible like a "first among equals," responsible primarily for initiating and guiding the conversation. (If you feel that an instructor — or another student — is dominating the conversation, you should say so. Bear in mind, however, that an instructor sometimes speaks a lot because no one else will — and somebody has to.)

It is natural for new students to feel uncertain and therefore reluctant to talk. After all, most of us spend our adult lives demonstrating our knowledge and competence and hiding our ignorance and incompetence. And it is the rare student indeed who enters the program feeling that s/he "knows anything" about *Antigone*; for example, or even feeling that s/he "knows anything" about "how to know anything" about it. But "not knowing" is exactly the reason you and your classmates are here! And it is only the marriage of one person's question to another person's answer that enables everyone to grow.

So, please, speak. Offer your questions to the class. Offer your answers to the questions of others. And try to do it in a spirit of cooperation, observing all the ordinary rules of conversation. (Nothing can kill a class quicker than a "know-it-all" bent on demonstrating his or her superiority.) Most especially, try to support your questions and answers with citations from the text being considered — it will give more force to your point and help the conversation stay focussed.

Finally

The Basic program experience is essentially a human one. It's about you and the people in your classroom getting together to read and think and listen and speak about important ideas contained in and evoked by important works. And like any human experience it is subject to all the vicissitudes of human interaction. A first-year class in which everyone "clicks" is likely to stay together through the entire four years and often beyond. A class which doesn't "click" will likely fall apart within a few quarters.

Similarly, you will find that each of your instructors has a distinct personality, approach to texts and teaching style. Necessarily, therefore, you will respond differently to different instructors: some you will "love;" some you may "hate." But I am sure that you will learn something valuable in the company of each and every one of them. Indeed, the exposure to a wide range of instructors is an essential part of the Basic Program experience and one reason why we will constantly rotate different instructors through your section over the next four years.

Of course we hope that you immediately click with your class and instructor. If you don't, however, please don't despair. Talk with your classmates and your instructor. Talk with students who have been in the program for a while, your class's Basic Program Association representative, and/or Mark Cwik who is leading the BPA this year. Please also talk with me. Most of the time a problem can be easily remedied. Occasionally, we may suggest that you move to a more congenial section. In any case, I'm certain that together we can find a way to make your Basic Program experience everything that it can and should be.

Enjoy your Basic Program voyage of discovery.