



Deb Talbot Summer Institute

# **Reading Difficult Texts, Asking Better Questions**

July 9-10, 2026  
Department of English

# Welcome from the Talbot Team!



**Rebecca  
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Professor of  
Applied  
Linguistics



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Professor of  
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**Donal Harris**  
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Assistant  
Professor of  
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# Logistics

1. All sessions in Patterson 229
  - Morning sessions from 9am-11:45am
  - Lunch from 12-1pm (in Lounge on Patterson 4<sup>th</sup> Floor)
  - Afternoon sessions from 1-4pm
2. Restrooms, stairs/elevators, and vending machines all accessible directly outside classroom
3. Parking passes available in Wilder Lot for both days
4. Lunch orders
5. Stipends
  
6. **All course materials, slide decks, handouts, etc. are accessible through this QR code ! →**



# Deb Talbot Summer Institute

## Mission and Goals

The Talbot Institute supports teachers and researchers of language, reading, and literature in their professional development.

This year, the first of a two-year cycle, we have three goals.

1. Discuss the factors that inhibit student reading, comprehension, and textual analysis.
2. Develop concrete, measurable strategies and learning documents to address *difficulties* and enhance *literacies* in your own classrooms.
3. Share the brilliant breakthroughs you develop with other educators and students throughout the next year (and beyond!)
  - And help us plan for the 2027 Talbot....

# Agenda: Thursday\*

## Session 1: Donal Defining “Difficult”

|          |                                    |
|----------|------------------------------------|
| 9 AM     | Logistics / Intros                 |
| 9:30 AM  | What makes for difficult readings? |
| 10:30 AM | Q/A with students                  |
| 11:30 AM | De-brief and action items          |

## Session 2: Rebecca Collaborative Reading

|         |                                                    |
|---------|----------------------------------------------------|
| 1 PM    | What is Collaborative Reading?                     |
| 2:00 PM | CR Experience with “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” |
| 3:00 PM | Lesson Planning and Presentation                   |

\*full agendas can be found in the OneDrive folder

# Agenda: Friday

## Session 3: Adam Visual Aids for Active Reading

|         |                                                 |
|---------|-------------------------------------------------|
| 9 AM    | Active Reading                                  |
| 9:30 AM | Two Strategies:<br>Color Coding and<br>Graphing |
| 11 AM   | Practicing Visual<br>Aid Strategies             |

## Session 4: Elliott Technology and Teaching / Learning to Read

|         |                                            |
|---------|--------------------------------------------|
| 1 PM    | Multimodality and Literacy                 |
| 1:45 PM | Multi-literacy and GenAI                   |
| 2:30 PM | Brainstorming Big Ideas for<br>Talbot 2027 |

# Focusing on Takeaways

We'll cover lots of different material today about student, teacher, and environmental barriers to reading completion and comprehension.

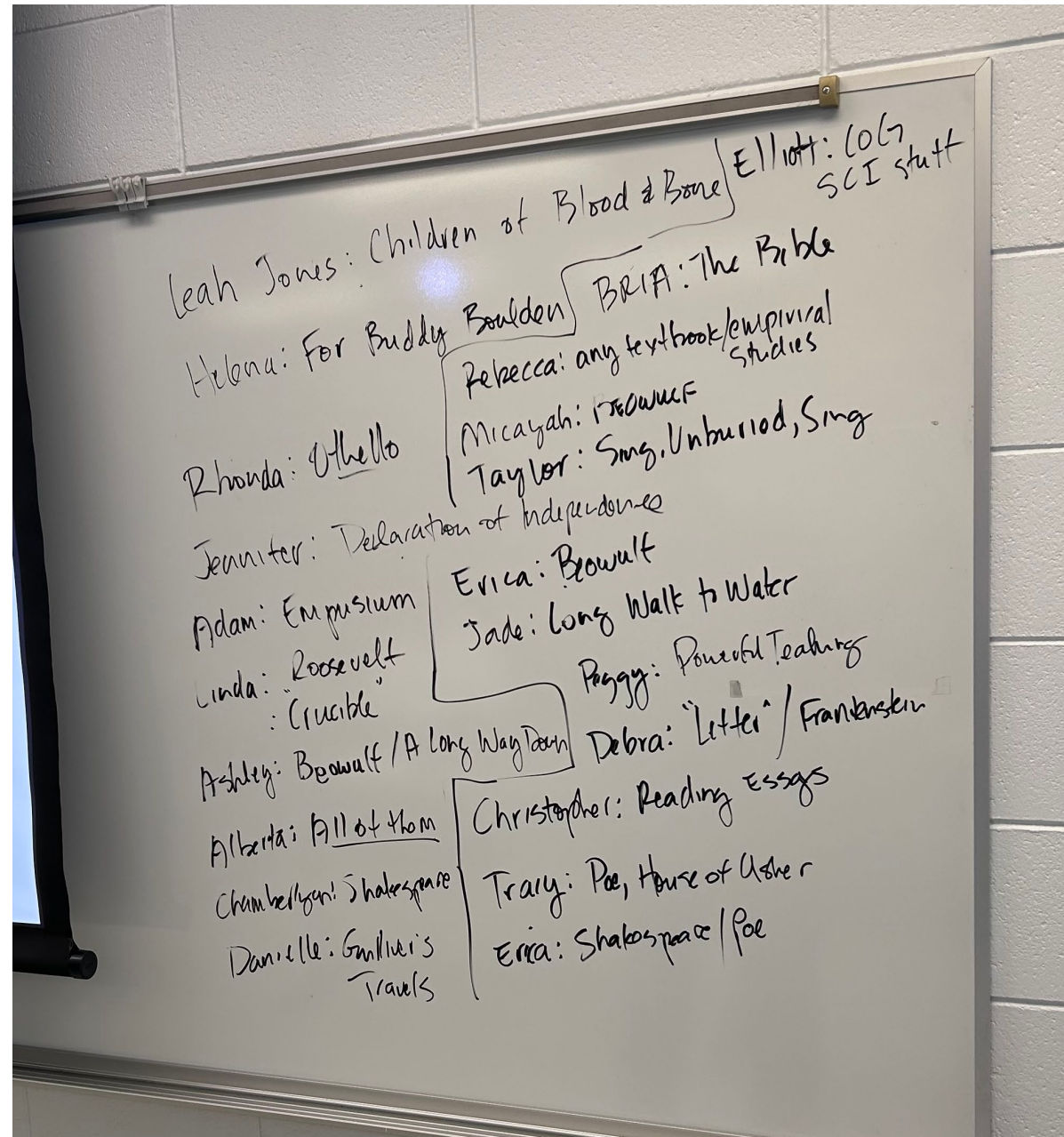
Our Big Ask for today and tomorrow:

- Keep track of one idea, strategy, approach, or insight that you want to follow up on tomorrow afternoon
  - We'll spend the final hour on Friday developing one or two specific classroom interventions that address the learning barriers that we discuss
  - That work will inform next year's Talbot Institute, which will be an "action lab" for teachers to deploy our strategies with small groups of high school students and assess outcomes
- We'll work on making the intervention feasible, scalable, and outcomes-oriented

# Introductions

1. What's your name?
2. Where do you teach? What grade/subjects?  
How long?
3. What's the last difficult book or text that you read or taught?
4. What made it difficult, and what made it worth reading or teaching?

## Intros and Texts that are difficult



## Intros and Texts that are difficult

Difficulties

- > Assessment/Comprehension
  - Lang/syntax ||||
- > "It's Shakespeare"
  - Genre recognition
  - character motivation
- > "then/now" -> relatability
- > Rhetoric/rhetorical devices (recognition) -> Arcane lang.
- > My own interest -> plot/character development
- > Unfulfilled expectations/closure -> Political situation
- > Dialect recognition -> Motivation -> Application/translation to new formats
- > Time management -> purpose/genre
- > Appropriateness for situation -> Context/excerpts

- STAMINA  
- MEDIA/AVAILABILITY  
- Background knowledge/specialized subpts

# Discussion: What makes for a difficult text?

What makes a text ‘difficult’ for you or your students?

- It can be a specific text, a type of assignment/activity, a standard, a distraction, a particular moment of the day—anything that you think students found difficult, for any reason
- Take a moment. Jot it down on one of the Post-It notes.
  - If it’s a text, what makes it difficult?
  - If it’s standard or skill, what text exemplifies it?

# Ideas Board

This is a placeholder for tracking the types of difficulty we encounter.

# Defining “Difficult”

Reading “Difficulty” can vary by the student, the situation, and the expectations. Researchers have broken the factors that contribute to difficulty in reading comprehension into several types.

## 1. Linguistic

- Vocab, grammar, word-recognition, orthographic processing (reading slowly)

## 2. Cognitive and Metacognitive

- Inference, background knowledge, self-assessment strategies

## 3. Textual and Task-Related

- Unfamiliar genre, unclear about ‘purpose,’ cross-text synthesis

## 4. Motivational and/or Psychological

- Interest, anxiety, other academic/extracurricular demands

## 5. Instructional and Environmental

- Insufficient support, poor materials, competition for attention, issues outside of school

# Can we categorize our examples?

Let's return to the challenges we discussed.  
Can we place them in one of the five types?

- Linguistic
- Cognitive/Metacognitive
- Textual or Task-Related
- Motivational
- Instructional/Environmental

Which seem to be the most common? Do we have examples that don't fit a category?

# Student Panel Questions

Let's approach our categories from the student's perspective

1. What questions do you have for the student panelists about their experience of reading comprehension in class?
2. Let's also hypothesize: do we think they'll prioritize the same categories / types of difficulty that we (the teachers) do?

# Student Panel

# **Student Panel De-brief**

What did we find surprising or obvious from our students' perspectives?

Did our hypothesis prove correct?

# Setting Up the Next Section

1. We'll break for lunch, upstairs
2. We'll meet back here (in 229) at 1pm
3. Rebecca will lead Session 2, on Collaborative Learning
4. You can find all of these materials in the OneDrive