

How and Why to Annotate a Book

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Note-Taking vs. Annotation

Most serious readers take notes of some kind when they are carefully considering a text, but many readers are too casual about their note-taking. Later they realize they have taken notes that are incomplete or too random, and then they laboriously start over, re-notating an earlier reading. Others take notes only when cramming for a test, which is often merely "better than nothing." Students can easily improve the depth of their reading and extend their understanding over long periods of time by developing a systematic form of annotating. Such a system is not necessarily difficult and can be completely personal and exceptionally useful.

First, what is the difference between annotating and "taking notes"? For some people, the difference is nonexistent or negligible, but in this instance I am referring to a way of making notes directly onto a text such as a book, a handout, or another type of publication. The advantage of having one annotated text instead of a set of note papers plus a text should be clear enough: all the information is together and inseparable, with notes very close to the text for easier understanding, and with fewer pieces to keep organized.

What the reader gets from annotating is a deeper initial reading and an understanding of the text that lasts. You can deliberately engage the author in conversation and questions, maybe stopping to argue, pay a compliment, or clarify an important issue—much like having a teacher or storyteller with you in the room. If and when you come back to the book, that initial interchange is recorded for you, making an excellent and entirely personal study tool.

*****Criteria for Successful Annotation*****

Using your annotated copy of the text six weeks after your first reading, you can recall the key information in the text with reasonable thoroughness in a 15- to 30-minute review of your notes and the text.

Why Annotate?

- Annotate any text that you must know well, in detail, and from which you might need to produce evidence that supports your knowledge or reading, such as a book on which you will be tested.
- Don't assume that you must annotate when you read for pleasure; if you're relaxing with a book, well, relax. Still, some people—let's call them "not-abnormal"—actually annotate for pleasure.

A Reader's Guide to Annotation

Marking and highlighting a text is like having a conversation with a book – it allows you to ask questions, comment on meaning, and mark events and passages you want to revisit. **Annotating is a permanent record of your intellectual conversation with the text.**

Laying the foundation: A Resource and Planning Guide for Pre-AP English

As you work with your text, think about all the ways that you can connect with what you are reading. What follows are some suggestions that will help with annotating.

~Plan on reading most passages, if not everything, twice. The first time, read for overall meaning and impressions. The second time, read more carefully. Mark ideas, new vocabulary, etc.

~Begin to annotate. Use a pen, pencil, post-it notes, or a highlighter (although use it sparingly!).

- *Summarize important ideas in your own words.

- *Define words that are new to you.

- *Mark passages that you find confusing with a ???

- *Write questions that you might have for later discussion in class.

- *Comment on the actions or development of characters.

- *Comment on things that intrigue, impress, surprise, disturb, etc.

- *Note how the author uses language. A cursory list of possible literary devices is attached.

- *Explain the historical context or traditions/social customs used in the passage.

~Suggested methods for marking a text:

- *Marginal Notes: Use the space in the margins to make comments, define words, ask questions, etc.

- *If you are a person who does not like to write in a book, you may want to invest in a supply of post it notes.

- *If you feel really creative, or are just super organized, you can even color code your annotations by using different color post-its, highlighters, or pens.

- *Brackets: If several lines seem important, just draw a line down the margin and underline/highlight only the key phrases.

- *Asterisks: Place an asterisk next to an important passage; use two if it is really important.

- *Underline/highlight: Caution! Do not underline or highlight too much! You want to concentrate on the important elements, not entire pages (use brackets for that).

- *Use circles, boxes, triangles, squiggly lines, stars, etc.

The key is to have a “conversation” and “hold” your ideas of the moment in the margin for further discussion when you revisit the passage.