

Annotating a Text

The skill of **reading actively** is one you will practice all year, with every assignment. "**Active**" reading means that you don't just follow the plot; you're engaged in thinking about what the author is doing (**on** the lines, **between** the lines, and **beyond** the lines) while you're reading the text. One way to help you be an active reader is to annotate the text, and I expect students to do this every time we read. Sometimes I grade annotations, sometimes I don't. Frequently, students tell me they have no idea how to annotate at text; they're confused about what to mark. I hope this helps.

According to the Merriam Webster Online Dictionary--

*Annotate -- to make or furnish critical or explanatory **notes** or comment*

I emphasize "notes" in the definition because that's the most crucial thing about **annotation** – making notes. As you read, think about what you're seeing and make comments about what you're thinking. Michael Degen of Jesuit College Preparatory in Dallas has probably put it best:

Annotation is a form of conversation with a text. Conversation is defined as the spoken exchange of thoughts, opinions, and feelings. When you read and comprehend the words on the page, you have one part of the conversation--the part where you are listening. When you think critically about what you are reading and respond to what the author is saying to you, your annotations supply the other side of the conversation.

If all you do is circle or highlight or underline some clumps of words, how do you supply the "conversation?"

So how do you annotate?

First, get a copy of the text that you feel comfortable writing in. *But, Mrs. Turner, I just CAN'T write in my books. They're sacred!* Please make it your mission to get over this notion. Of course, you don't want to write in your parents' copy of *The Riverside Shakespeare*, but paperbacks are relatively cheap, and if you really consider *Hamlet* to be an awe-inspiring, can't-defile-it-by-writing-in-the-book story, you can buy yourself a nice copy later. Get in the habit of writing in your books. If you just can't bring yourself to do this, use Post-It notes. *(But I think this creates much more work for you.)*

I find that pencil works best for me when I annotate (as long as I keep a really sharp point on it.) But whatever works for you is fine. Be sure it doesn't bleed through the page. And then start writing. You'll need to develop a quick system that you can remember and that works for you. Mine's pretty basic. I CIRCLE individual words that seem important, and I UNDERLINE whole passages that stand out to me. The really important thing is that you MAKE NOTES (remember, it's **annotation**) about why you circle or underline those things. My notes tell me why I circled or underlined that item.

So what do you look for? What should you mark and comment on?

There's really not a right or wrong way to do this, but some marks will yield better discussions and papers than others. Writing "*I like this. . .*" or "*Oooh, that sounds scary*" or "*Cool word*" are honest responses to the literature, but you wouldn't write those ideas in your essay. As annotations, they're mostly useless.

Start with D.I.D. – Diction, Imagery, and Detail. Mark strong DICTION. Some words should stand out to you either because they are unfamiliar (*Psssssssst: Look them up!*) or because they seem very special and/or particular for the story. Why would an author choose the word *glided* instead of just *walked*? (*Because you get a different picture in your head when you think of someone “gliding” than you do when he just “walks.”*)

After diction, look for striking IMAGES and other DETAILS that seem to stand out. Note how characters are related to each other if it's a particularly dense piece of writing. If you can annotate just for D.I.D., that's over than half the battle when you read poetry.

Other things that you might want to include in your annotations:

- Questions you have about what's happening
- Connections to your own experience
- Predictions about what you think will happen
- Similarities to other novels/stories/poetry you've read.
- Direct allusions to other works you've read, especially mythology or the Bible
- Things that appear to be metaphorical or symbolic *See note**
- Anything that seems remarkable to you

Then, as you get the hang of this annotation thing, move a step further into noticing PATTERNS as they develop. (*Being able to discuss intelligently the patterns you find in your subject matter is a skill you will use every day in college, regardless of whether it's an English class or not.*) Notice

- **Repetitions** – ideas you see repeated throughout the work, though not necessarily using the same words
- **Similarities** – ideas in one part of the book that are similar to ideas in another part
- **Contradictions or Incongruities** – ideas that just stand out because they don't seem to fit neatly into the story.
- **Themes** you see developing

Some people find it useful to summarize key points at the end of each chapter. Again, what you circle or underline isn't nearly as important as the notes about why you circled or underlined it. *In fact, when I grade annotations, you get zero credit for just underlining phrases without making a note of why you did it.*

Close Reading (*of any textual material, not just literature*) is one of the most important skills you can take with you to college. It does take some practice. **But you cannot be successful unless you are more engaged with the text than just following the plot.** You have to think while you read about what you're reading and about why the author chooses to write as he/she does. If you'll get in the habit of having this thoughtful conversation with your text now, our class discussions – and your writing – will be much improved.