

QUICK GUIDE TO ANNOTATING LITERATURE

WHY ANNOTATE?

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. 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.

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. 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.

TOOLS FOR ANNOTATING

- **A Highlighter:** While you read, highlight whatever seems to be key information. At first, you will probably highlight too little or too much; with experience, you will choose more effectively which material to highlight.
- **A Pencil:** While you read, use marginalia—marginal notes—to mark key material. Marginalia can include check marks, question marks, stars, arrows, brackets, and written words and phrases. Use the following system:

WHAT TO ANNOTATE

1. **Mark key lines:** Any time you read a passage that is significant to the plot or character development, underline it and write a brief note to yourself in the margin describing the passage and/or why it is important.
2. **Ask questions:** If a passage or scene is confusing, or if you want to know more about what is occurring, bracket the passage or scene and jot your question in the margin. Then you can bring the question to class discussion for clarification.
3. **React to what you read:** If something in the text strikes you, surprises you, troubles you, or even makes you laugh, mark it and write your reaction in the margin. Often these passages are intentionally written by the author to elicit such a response, so they can prove important later.
4. **Track repeated symbols/images, possible themes, character development, echoed sentiments:** As you read, you will begin to discern the text's symbols, nuanced meanings or themes. Once you notice them, you can begin marking them every time they occur. This is especially valuable when it comes time to write an essay on the book.
5. **Notes at the end of each chapter:** If the book is broken up into chapters, you should take a few minutes at the end of each one to list its 4-5 most important plot events. Do it right

there in the book, right at the physical end of the chapter itself. That way, when you remember a key plot event but do not remember where in the text it occurs, or when you cannot recall which event occurs before which, you have a resource for easy reference instead of having to thumb through the entire book, mining it for one little piece of plot.

6. **Vocab words:** If you don't know a word, look it up and consider writing the definition in the margin. Sometimes the author's word choice can be a telling detail.

Example Format/Abbreviate Key for Annotation

Inside Front Cover: Major character list with small space for character summary and for page references for key scenes or moments of character development, etc.

Inside Back Cover: Build a list of themes, allusions, images, motifs, key scenes, plot line, epiphanies, etc. as you read. Add page references and/or notes as well as you read. Make a list of vocabulary words on a back page or the inside back cover, if there's still room. Possible ideas for lists include the author's special jargon and new, unknown, or otherwise interesting words.

Beginning of Each Chapter: Provide a quick summary of what happens in the chapter. Title each chapter or section as soon as you finish it, especially if the text does not provide headings for chapters or sections.

Top margins: provide plot notes—a quick few words or phrases that summarize what happens here. Go back after a chapter, scene, or assignment and then mark it carefully. (Useful for quick location of passages in discussion and for writing assignments).

Bottom and Side Page Margins: Interpretive notes (see list below), questions, and/or remarks that refer to meaning of the page. Markings or notes to tie in with notes on the inside back cover.

Interpretive Notes and Symbols to be used are:

- **Underline** or **highlight** key words, phrases, or sentences that are important to understanding the work.
- Write **questions** or **comments** in the margins—your thoughts or “conversation” with the text.
- **Bracket** important ideas or passages.
- Use Vertical lines at the margin: to emphasize a statement already underlined or bracketed
- Connect ideas with **lines** or **arrows**.
- Use **numbers** in the margin: to indicate the sequence of points the author makes in developing a single argument.

- Use a **star, asterisk, or other doo-dad** at the margin (use a consistent symbol): to be used sparingly, to emphasize the ten or twenty most important statements in the book.
- Use **???** for sections or ideas you don't understand.
- Circle words you don't know. Define them in the margins.
- A check mark means "I understand".
- Use **!!!** when you come across something new, interesting, or surprising.
- And other literary devices (see below).

Some of the things you may want to mark as you notice them are:

- ☐ Use an **S for Symbols**: A symbol is a literal thing that also stands for something else, like a flag, or a cross, or fire. Symbols help to discover new layers of meaning.
- ☐ Use an **I for Imagery**: Imagery includes words that appeal to one or more of the five senses. Close attention to imagery is important in understanding an author's message and attitude toward a subject.
- ☐ Use an **F for Figurative Language**: Figurative language includes things like similes, metaphors, and personification. Figurative language often reveals deeper layers of meaning.
- ☐ Use a **T for Tone**: Tone is the overall mood of a piece of literature. Tone can carry as much meaning to the story as the plot does.
- ☐ Use a **Th – Theme**: In literature, a theme is a broad idea in a story, or a message or lesson conveyed by a work. This message is usually about life, society or human nature. Themes explore timeless and universal ideas. Most themes are implied rather than explicitly stated.
- ☐ **Plot elements** (setting, mood, conflict, etc.)
- ☐ **Diction** (effective or unusual word choice)