

HOW AND WHY TO ANNOTATE A TEXT

WHY TO ANNOTATE

In his work *How to Mark a Book*, Mortimer J. Adler asserts that while you should learn to read between the lines to understand a work, you must also learn to write between the lines in order to read effectively and truly understand and interact with a book.¹ Annotating a book benefits the reader in a number of ways:

1. It keeps you awake and alert. Have you ever been reading for some time when you suddenly realize you have no idea what the last few paragraphs (or pages or chapters) had to say? We all have. Reading with a pencil or highlighter in your hand and marking your book as you go keeps you more engaged in what you are reading.
2. It causes you to read actively. When you are reading a book of light fiction for pleasure, you may not need to interact with that work at a deeper level (or the book might not lend itself to such a reading). However, great works of literature are complex and multi-layered, addressing larger questions of human experience and existence. To read, appreciate, and understand a great work, you must actively engage with what the author is doing. You cannot do this passively. You must actively engage in the author's purpose, looking for how he or she is accomplishing it.
3. It facilitates a conversation between you and the text. The act of writing or marking your responses in a text brings you into an active exchange with the ideas presented in the work. You can question, respond, disagree, and comment on what is being said and how it is revealed. While there is a certain level of humility that is encouraged when approaching a great work, that does not mean the reader should be a passive receptacle for the author's ideas. Just as you interact with a teacher, actively conversing with a book allows you to more fully interact with the ideas presented in it.

HOW TO ANNOTATE

Your annotation of a text will work hand-in-hand with your dialectical journal. Marking a book (or using Post-Its in school-owned books), story, or poem as you read will make for more active and close reading and will provide you with notes to refer back to when you fill out your journal or write about the text. Since you will be annotating works all year, you should come up with a system that works for you. Effective annotating is both economical and consistent.

When marking or annotating a text, use any combination of the following methods:

- Make brief comments in the margins or any blank space available (between the lines, inside the front cover, random blank pages, etc.)
- Ask questions in the margins when something strikes you as curious

¹ Adler, Mortimer J. and Charles Van Doren. *How to Read a Book*. New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1972.

- Circle or put boxes, triangles, or clouds around important words or phrases
- Use abbreviation symbols to note your response to certain passages (brackets, stars, exclamation points, question marks, etc.)
- Connect words/phrases/ideas with lines or arrows
- Put other page number references in the margin when you see a theme or symbol repeated or expanded upon
- Underline, but use this method sparingly- underline only a few words at a time and never do so without a comment in the margin. If you want to draw attention to an entire passage, instead use a bracket to enclose the section and comment in the margin.
- Highlight- use the same caution as with underlining
- Color code a work- you may choose to use different colors when marking passages that refer to important symbols or reveal development in main characters
- Use Post-It notes when you cannot write in the book

WHAT TO ANNOTATE

While some of what you should mark has been commented on above, here are some suggestions of what to watch for or mark:

- Character development- Is something important revealed about the character? Does the character change? Why? How?
- Setting- Is this key in the work? When does the work take place? Does the author use time and/or place in a significant way?
- Point of view- What is the effect? Is there a narrator? How reliable is he or she?
- Narrative pace/time/sequence of events- what is the effect if they are out of the ordinary?
- Irony- Is it present? How so? Why? To what effect?
- Tone and mood
- Imagery
- Themes
- Symbols
- Key events- summarize in the margins or at the beginning or end of chapters
- Powerful, important, meaningful, or significant lines or quotations (with a note in the margin)
- Contrasts/contradictions/juxtapositions/shifts- These are always significant and purposeful in great works of literature.
- Note how the author uses language and how it is significant- the effects of word choice (diction) and sentence structure (syntax)
- Make predictions as to what is coming or why something is mentioned or emphasized
- Connect ideas to other ideas within the text
- Note the repetition of words, phrases, actions, events, patterns
- Make a note if you experience an epiphany
- Note anything you would like to discuss or do not understand

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Inside the front cover: Make a character list with a small space for character summary and page references for key scenes, moments of character development, etc.

Inside the back cover: Make a list of major themes, symbols, motifs, allusions, etc. with space for page references to be added as you read.

Top, bottom, and side margins: Interpretive notes, questions, or remarks that comment on the events and literary elements on that page or that tie in to notes in the front and back cover.

*** Please use one color to mark your initial thoughts as you read, and another to mark more thoroughly after you have read and reflected on a passage (or after/during class discussion).**

WHEN TO ANNOTATE

Before you read:

- Examine the front and back cover
- Read the title and any subtitles
- Examine the way the text is set up (book, short story, dialogue, diary, how the chapters work, etc.)

During reading:

- Mark in the text (as discussed here)
- Write in the margins (as discussed here)
- Add quotes to your commonplace book

After reading:

- Reread your annotations- draw conclusions to questions you have asked
- Examine patterns/repetitions- determine possible meanings
- Determine the significance of the title now that you have read the work

You do not need to catch everything an author is doing. This is the benefit of this system combined with classroom discussion: you will notice some things, and your classmates will notice other things. You do need to make your thinking visible. Part of your grade will rest on how thoroughly you annotate your work.