

An Annotation Guide: 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.

Think of annotations as "showing your work" while you read just as you sometimes show your work in a math problem. You are showing what you are thinking while you read and analyze— and thinking is a word-based activity, not just a nebulous puff of energy. If you can't articulate your thoughts, then you have to question if you know what you're thinking. Thinking is how you connect to the text. This, of course, requires ACTIVE participation with the text, engaging your mind while you read, not skimming the page. Listening to your iPod or the TV can split your focus so that you don't have as much of a connection with the text. Marking important sections can also be helpful in locating them quickly in discussions.

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.

Why Annotate?

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

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. Don't annotate other people's property, which is almost always selfish, often destructive, rude, and possibly illegal. For a book that doesn't belong to you, use adhesive notes (sticky notes) for your comments, removing them before you return the text. Don't annotate your own book if it has intrinsic value as an art object or a rarity. Consider doing what teachers do: buy an inexpensive copy of the text for class.

Tools: Pencil and Your Own Text

Pencil: A pencil is better than a pen because you can make changes. Even geniuses make mistakes, temporary comments, and incomplete notes.

Margin Notes

Front Cover: Inside the front cover of your book, keep an orderly, legible list of "key information" with page references. Key information in a novel might include themes; passages that relate to the book's title; characters' names; key quotes; important settings, scenes, passages, and chapters; and maybe key definitions or vocabulary. Remember that key information will vary according to genre and the reader's purpose, so make your own good plan.

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 comments 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** important statements, descriptions or passages. Look for powerful statements or passages that you can tell are important in terms of theme, character development, or conflict. Think of this as hunting for the most important quotes from the text.
- **?** Write any questions you have in the margin so you can go back to them later.
- **!** Write down things you notice as you read, connections you make, or ideas the text generates for you.
- **★** Star really important things (events, actions, decisions, significant moments) that you know you will need to find later. You may even want to tab these pages with a post it note or something similar.
- **○** Circle characters, settings, or symbols when you notice them. Circle characters the first time you meet them or when they do something significant. Circle symbols when they appear.
- **CHAPTER TITLES** – Consider giving each chapter a title that will help you remember what it was about. You may even want to write a very short summary of main events at the beginning or end of each chapter in the novel.

As you mark, you begin to notice patterns the author has or where he or she deviates from a pattern and much of the work of a critical or analytical reader is noticing these patterns and variations. Notice that annotations are meant to be more than a "scavenger hunt" for literary techniques and rhetorical devices. Along with marking these you should comment on the effectiveness or significance of the device. It's great if you can detect alliteration in a passage, but that in and of itself is useless unless you can tell that this alliteration demonstrates the mental breakdown of the character, for example. It's amazing if you recognize the hubris of a character, but how does this instance differ from those occurring previously in the novel?

Adapted from "An Annotation Guide: How and Why to Annotate a Book" by Nick Otten SAMPLE ANNOTATION