

Student Aide to 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.

Below are instructions adapted from a handout that I have used for years with my high school honors students as well as graduate students.

Criteria for Successful Annotation

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.

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.

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 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.

The following paragraphs begin E. M. Forster's essay "My Wood," written in 1936. In the essay, Forster considers his reaction to owning the small estate he bought with royalties from his novel *A Passage to India*.

Write an essay in which you define Forster's attitude toward the experience of owning property and analyze how Forster conveys that attitude. In your discussion, consider Forster's word choice, his manipulation of sentences, and his use of Biblical allusions. *playful seriousness*

A few years ago I wrote a book which dealt in part with the difficulties of the English in India. *introduces role of guilt* Feeling that they would have had no difficulties in India themselves, the Americans read the book *irony/smirgness* freely. The more they read it the better it made them feel, and a cheque to the author was the result. I bought a wood with the cheque. It is not a large wood—it contains scarcely any trees, and *"blood money"* is intersected, blast it, by a public footpath. Still, it is the first property that I have owned, so *comic* it is right that other people should participate in my shame, and should ask themselves, in accents that *re: purchase* will vary in horror, this very important question: What is the effect of property upon the character? Don't let's touch economics; the effect of private ownership upon the community as a *aside - rhetorical denial* whole is another question—a more important question perhaps, but another one. Let's keep up *denial* psychology. If you (own) things, what's their effect on you? What's the effect on me of my wood? *rhet. questions* *witty definition of parable*

In the first place, it makes me feel heavy. Property does have this effect. Property produces *play on word* men of weight, and it was a man of weight who failed to get into the Kingdom of Heaven.¹ He *of parable* was not wicked, that unfortunate millionaire in the parable, he was only stout; he stuck out in front, not to mention behind, and as he wedged himself this way and that in the crystalline entrance and bruised his well-fed flanks, he saw beneath him a comparatively slim camel passing through the eye of a needle and being woven into the robe of God. The Gospels all through couple stoutness and slowness. They point out what is perfectly obvious, yet seldom realized: that if you have a lot of *movt. away from central issue* things you cannot move about a lot, that furniture requires dusting, dusters require servants, servants require insurance stamps, and the whole tangle of them makes you think twice before you *quip re: Leo Tolstoy* accept an invitation to dinner or go for a bathe in the Jordan². Sometimes the Gospels proceed further and say with Tolstoy that property is sinful; they approach the difficult ground of asceticism *why not?* here, where I cannot follow them. But as to the immediate effects of property on people, they just show straightforward logic. It produces men of weight. Men of weight cannot, by definition, *humorous scene* move like the lightning from the East unto the West, and the ascent of a fourteen-stone³ bishop into a pulpit is thus the exact antithesis of the coming of the Son of Man. My wood makes me feel heavy. *Note tone of final line*

¹ Matthew 19:24 "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

² The Jordan is the river in which John the Baptist christened repentant sinners.

³ A stone is a British unit of weight; 14 stones equals 196 pounds.

imagery of weight

lightness with which he uses Biblical allusions reflects deeply embedded uncertainty

the use of Biblical and religious allusions supports his point, Forster's position reflects through his taunting manner a distrust for the clergy

Tools: Highlighter, Pencil, and Your Own Text

1. Yellow Highlighter

A yellow highlighter allows you to mark exactly what you are interested in. Equally important, the yellow line emphasizes without interfering. Before highlighters, I drew lines under important spots in texts, but underlining is laborious and often distracting. Highlighters in blue and pink and fluorescent colors are even more distracting. The idea is to see the important text more clearly, not give your eyes a psychedelic exercise.

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.

2. Pencil

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

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. Create your own system for marking what is important, interesting, quotable, questionable, and so forth.

3. Your Text

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; salient quotes; important 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.

As you read, section by section, chapter by chapter, **consider doing the following, if useful or necessary:**

At the end of each chapter or section, **briefly** summarize the material.

Title each chapter or section as soon as you finish it, especially if the text does not provide headings for chapters or sections.

Make a list of vocabulary words on a back page or the inside back cover. Possible ideas for lists include the author's special jargon and new, unknown, or otherwise interesting words.

Just how idiosyncratic and useful can annotating be? A good example is in William Gilbert's *De Magnete, Magneticisque Corporibus, et de Magno Magnete Tellure* (On the Magnet, Magnetic Bodies, and the Great Magnet the Earth), one of the seminal works of the Renaissance, published in the year 1600. Gilbert was the personal physician of Queen Elizabeth I and has been called the father of experimental science in England. Robert B. Downs, in *Famous Books Since 1492*, writes that in *De Magnete*, Gilbert annotated the text prior to publication by putting stars of varying sizes in the margins to indicate the relative importance of the discoveries described. Gilbert also included in the original edition a glossary of new scientific terms that he invented.

Okay, a self-annotated book on magnetism by a celebrity doctor from the time of Shakespeare, with variable-size stars in the margins and a list (in the back) of his own new vocabulary words that changed science as we know it—that's useful idiosyncrasy.

To notate a text is to write annotations about it. This technical term should not be used as a synonym for the simple verb "note." As an "active reader," you already know that when you read textbook assignments, you should have questions in your mind. As you read, you should be looking for the answers to these questions. You should also have a pencil in hand so that you can

The following passage was written by Richard Rodriguez, the first college-educated member of his family. Read the passage carefully. Then write an essay analyzing how Rodriguez' presentation of the events in the passage suggests his attitude toward his family and himself. You might consider such elements as narrative structure, selection of detail, manipulation of language and tone.

Overall tone: reflective

reality vs illusion

illusion

My mother is not surprised that her children are well-off. Her two daughters are business executives. Her oldest son is a lawyer. She predicted it all long ago. "Someday," she used to say when we were young, "you will all grow up and all be very rich. You'll have lots of money to buy me presents. But I'll be a little old lady. I won't have any teeth or hair. So you'll have to buy me soft food and put a blue wig on my head. And you'll buy me a big fur coat. But you'll only be able to see my eyes."

emptiness (and later irony) of her prediction

Every Christmas now the floor around her is carpeted with red and green wrapping paper. And her feet are wreathed with gifts. metaphor

Christmas imagery

shift from pleasure of Christmas ritual to anxiety, leave-taking

By the time the last gift is unwrapped, everyone seems very tired. The room has become uncomfortably warm. The talk grows listless ("Does anyone want coffee or more cake?") Somebody groans. Children are falling asleep. Someone gets up to leave, prompting others to leave. ("We have to get up early tomorrow.")

social platitudes

repetition of "tradition"

"Another Christmas," my mother says. She says that same thing every year, so we all smile to hear it again. Children are bundled up for the fast walk to the car.

cold/warmth

My mother stands by the door calling good-bye. She stands with a coat over her shoulders, looking into the dark where expensive foreign cars idle sharply. She seems, all of a sudden, very small. She looks worried.

shift in mood

Narrative Elements:
description
dialogue
rhetorical questions
contrasts
chronological organization

"Don't come out, it's too cold," somebody shouts at her or at my father, who steps out onto the porch. I watch my younger sister in a shiny mink jacket bend slightly to kiss my mother before she rushes down the front steps. My mother stands waving toward no one in particular. She seems sad to me. How sad? Why? (sad that we all are going home! sad that it was not quite, can never be, the Christmas one remembers having had once?) I am tempted to ask her quietly if there is anything wrong. (But these are questions of paradise. Mama.) impossibility of perfection

repetition rhetorical questions - focus on sadness

My brother drives away. "Daddy shouldn't be outside," my mother says. "Here, take this jacket out to him."

cold/warmth

Contrasts:
cold/warmth
age/youth
illusion/reality
arrival/departure
rich/poor
mother/father

She steps into the warmth of the entrance hall and hands me the coat she has been wearing over her shoulders. I take it to my father and place it on him. In that instant I feel the thinness of his arms. He turns. He asks if I am going home now. It is, I realize, the only thing that he has said to me all evening.

final awareness: one of sadness

Significance of final lines?
Why does focus shift from mother to father at end of passage?

"annotate" your text. As the word suggests, you "take notes" in your textbook.

Unlike "highlighting," which is a passive activity, the process of annotating text helps you to stay focused and involved with your textbook. You'll find that the process of taking notes as you read will help you to concentrate better. It will also help you to monitor and improve your comprehension. If you come across something that you don't understand or that you need to ask your instructor about, you'll be able to quickly make note of it, and then go on with your reading.

Some techniques that you can use to annotate text:

- Underline important terms.
- Circle definitions and meanings.
- Write key words and definitions in the margin.
- Signal where important information can be found with key words or symbols in the margin.
- Write short summaries in the margin at the end of sub-units.
- Write the questions in the margin next to the section where the answer is found.
- Indicate steps in a process by using numbers in the margin.

In the following passage Nancy Mairs, who has multiple sclerosis, calls herself a "cripple." Read the passage carefully. Then write an essay in which you analyze how Mairs presents herself in this passage. In addition to discussing the significance of Mairs' choice of the word "cripple" to name herself, you should consider such rhetorical features as one word choice and rhetorical structure.

syntactical repetition / first person focus

shift from self to language

allusion/historical precedent

horse racing imagery / witty though sardonic tone

political allusions

comparison of degeneration of language to degeneration of physical self

sets up the extensive repetition of "cripple"

slight syntactical shift suggests power, arrogance, confidence

shift from physical descriptor of self to intellectual description

parallelism

(Mairs gains power through language that she has lost physically.)

allusion

paradox - she's denied their worth in first paragraph - ironic

twist, turn back to self focus

I am a cripple. I choose this word to name me. I choose from among several possibilities, the most common of which are "handicapped" and "disabled." I made the choice a number of years ago, without thinking, unaware of my motives for doing so. Even now, I'm not sure what those motives are, but I recognize that they are complex and not entirely flattering. People—crippled or not—wince at the word "cripple," as they do not at "handicapped" or "disabled." Perhaps I want them to wince. I want them to see me as a tough customer, one to whom the fates/gods/viruses have not been kind, but who can face the brutal truth of her existence squarely. As a cripple, I swagger. But, to be fair to myself, a certain amount of honesty underlies my choice. "Cripple" seems to me a clean word, straightforward and precise. It has an honorable history, having made its first appearance in the Lindisfarne Gospel in the tenth century. As a lover of words, I like the accuracy with which it describes my condition: I have lost the full use of my limbs. "Disabled," by contrast, suggests any incapacity, physical or mental. And I certainly don't like "handicapped," which implies that I have deliberately been put at a disadvantage, by whom I can't imagine (my God is not a Handicapper General), in order to equalize chances in the great race of life. These words seem to me to be moving away from my condition, to be widening the gap between word and reality. Most remote is the recently coined euphemism "differently abled," which partakes of the same semantic hopefulness that transformed countries from "undeveloped" to "underdeveloped," then to "less developed," and finally to "developing" nations. People have continued to starve in those countries during the shift. Some realities do not obey the dictates of language. Mine is one of them. Whatever you call me, I remain crippled. But I don't care what you call me, so long as it isn't "differently abled," which strikes me as pure verbal garbage designed, by its ability to describe anyone, to describe no one. I subscribe to George Orwell's thesis that "the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts." And I refuse to participate in the degeneration of the language to the extent that I deny that I have lost anything in the course of this calamitous disease: I refuse to pretend that the only differences between you and me are the various ordinary ones that distinguish any one person from another. But call me "disabled" or "handicapped" if you like. I have long since grown accustomed to them; and if they are vague, at least they hint at the truth. Moreover, I use them myself. Society is no readier to accept crippledness than to accept death, war, sex, sweat, or wankies. I would never refer to another person as a cripple. It is the word I use to name only myself.

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comparison of degeneration of language to degeneration of physical self

sets up the extensive repetition of "cripple"

slight syntactical shift suggests power, arrogance, confidence

shift from physical description of self to intellectual description

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parallelism

limitations of language

allusion

paradox — she's denied their worth in first paragraph — ironic

twist, but back to self focus

BEFORE READING

- > Examine the front and back covers (books)
- > Read the title and any subtitles
- > Examine the illustrations
- > Examine the print (bold, italics, etc.)
- > Examine the way the text is set up (book, short story, diary, dialogue, article, etc.)

As you examine and read these, write questions, and make predictions and/or connections near these parts of the text.

DURING READING

Mark in the text:

- > Characters (who)
- > When (setting)
- > Where (setting)
- > Vocabulary ~~~~~
- > _____ Important information

Write in the margins:

- > Summarize
- > Make predictions
- > Formulate opinions
- > Make connections
- > Ask questions
- > Analyze the author's craft
- > Write reflections/reactions/comments
- > Look for patterns/repetitions

AFTER READING

- > Reread annotations—draw conclusions
- > Reread introduction and conclusion—try to figure out something new
- > Examine patterns/repetitions—determine possible meanings
- > Determine what the title might mean