

Annotating Texts

To annotate is to examine and question a text, to add critical notes. You can do this with fiction and non-fiction. For example with fiction, good readers do more than just read a text for plot, they think about the text, interact with a text, make connections between the text and the “real world.” The same is true for non-fiction except there is no plot. In many cases, plot is substituted with a presentation of information (informational texts like history books) or logic (persuasive pieces like editorials or essays).

Regardless of the type of text you encounter, you should always be engaging it (this means you are thinking about it as you read it, not that you are asking for its hand in marriage). If you do not engage a text, you run the risk of the information becoming mental floss and you either have to reread it or sacrifice its meaning.

How do you go about doing this? One way to start is to learn through annotation. An annotated text is often marked with underlines, highlights and symbols that mean something to the reader. Of course, too many markings will make a text illegible, and too few won't help much at all.

What should you note in your annotations of fiction texts?

- Important plot details
- Point of view
- Character names and traits
- Setting
- Symbols
- Themes
- Examples of literary elements: foreshadowing, irony, flashback, metaphor, personification, etc.
- Unusual sentence structures or language features
- Vocabulary that needs defining

And don't forget that sometimes what isn't there can be as important as what is there!

What should you note in your annotations of non-fiction texts? Thanks to The Bentonville High School website, I don't have to recreate the wheel. The annotation section of this document comes (almost word-for-word) from the website noted at the base of this document.

Annotating Non-fiction

Pre-reading

1. Circle the title and consider what it means by asking a question about the title.
2. Identify information about the author, source, and publication date.
3. Skim through the piece and turn all subheadings into questions.
4. Circle all unusual text features and read any post-reading questions.
5. Identify the topic/subject and WRITE anything you already know about the topic and anything you want to know about the topic.

During reading

1. Read everything without marking the text.
2. Read again and mark the text.
3. Identify and underline the thesis (if this document has one)
4. Highlight any:
 - parallel structure,
 - repetition,
 - restatement, and
 - rhetorical questions
5. Underline signal/cue words that help you identify the text structure:
 - cause and effect,
 - compare and contrast,
 - chronological
 - problem solution
6. Answer questions you created from any subheadings
7. Put parentheses around vocabulary
8. Write in the margins:
 - Summary of paragraphs
 - Predictions of what you think might be coming
 - Formulate opinions (agree or disagree with the author)
 - Make connections to anything: other texts, dates, opinions, people, etc.
 - Identify and analyze the author's
 - a. point of view (narrator's perspective)
 - b. tone (attitude toward subject)
 - c. diction (style of speaking and word choice)
 - d. syntax (sentences and their patterns)

After Reading

1. Complete this statement, "The author's purpose for writing this is..."
2. If you can't answer author's purpose questions, go back and reread the introduction and conclusion.
3. Go back to the title and answer your question and reflect on the significance of the title.

Rhetorical Précis

Once you feel that you have an excellent understanding of the text, you will need to write a rhetorical précis which is a very concise summary following a specific format.

1. Sentence one provides the name of the author, the genre (essay, novel, etc.) and title of the work with the date (in parentheses), a concise appropriate verb (claims, posits, argues) followed by a “that” phrase in which the thesis of the work is stated (either paraphrased or quoted).
2. Sentence two provides an explanation of how the author goes about supporting his/her thesis. (Brevity is important).
3. Sentence three states the purpose of the piece (which may reflect the thesis, but should also include the writer’s motive—why is she/he writing this piece?) This is accomplished with an “in order to” phrase.
4. Sentence four explains the author’s intended audience and how the author positions his or herself with that audience.
5. Not part of the précis but a recommended addition is a personal reflection. Once you have the facts of the argument, you need to reflect on what they mean to you and how well the author put forward his/her argument.

Précis Example

Turkle, Sherry. "Cyberspace and Identity." *Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum*. Ed. Laurence Behrens and Leonard J. Rosen. 8th ed. New York: Longman, 2003. 271-280.

(1) Background information and thesis. In her essay "Cyberspace and Identity" (1999), Sherry Turkle *argues that* "today's life on the screen dramatizes and concretizes a range of cultural trends that encourage us to think of identity in terms of multiplicity and flexibility" (272).

(2) How the thesis is supported. Turkle *supports her assertion* by juxtaposing theories of cyberspace and identity formation with older understandings of identity found in psychology, sociology, and philosophy.

(3) Author's purpose. *Her purpose* is to show readers that theories on cyberspace and identity, which claim that identity is multiple and cyclical, do not overturn, but rather add to our understandings of identity *in order to* encourage her audience "to rethink our relationship to the computer culture and psychoanalytic culture as proudly held joint citizenship" (278).

(4) Author's audience. Turkle's tone assumes a highly educated audience who is familiar with theories not only of cyberspace and identity, but sociology and psychology as well.

(5) Reflection: Turkle is one of the leaders in the discussions of identity and cyberspace. Her tone is appropriately scholarly for her intended audience. Because I have studied works by Turkle before, including her seminal piece from 1984, I had a better understanding of the theories she was referring to, and at times challenging. For the novice reader, however, I can see that this would indeed be a very taxing read. Still, Turkle's well-organized essay, which provides everyday examples, can be understood by the careful reader, even if he or she does not fully understand all the theory and knowledge that is assumed by Turkle.

(<http://portal.bentonvillek12.org/kmoore/Lecture%20Material%20and%20Handouts/Reference%20Sheets/Annotating%20Fiction%20and%20Nonfiction.pdf>)

<http://www.rsu.edu/faculty/lgray/precis.htm>