

Annotation: Noting Evidence for Later Use

Rather than discouraging students from writing in books, teachers should require students to learn annotation techniques so that they can have a conversation with the text.

Douglas Fisher and Nancy Frey

Do you write in your books? We do. If you were to pick up any professional book or journal article from our shelves, you'd see underlining and margin notes. Those notes allow us to focus deeply on what we read, while we read. They also provide an easy way to find information later, especially when we want to use evidence from the text in a discussion with colleagues or in something we're writing.

Annotating text—the practice of making notes for oneself during reading—is an essential component of analytic or close reading. (See Adler & Van Doren, 1972.) When writing analytically about a text, students can consult their annotations to help them formulate arguments, analyze information, and make connections within and outside of the text. Annotations also have a life beyond their initial construction. Students refer to them during discussions, and some teachers collect annotated texts for the purpose of grading and assessment. In addition, students are expected to use their annotations as they develop their written products.

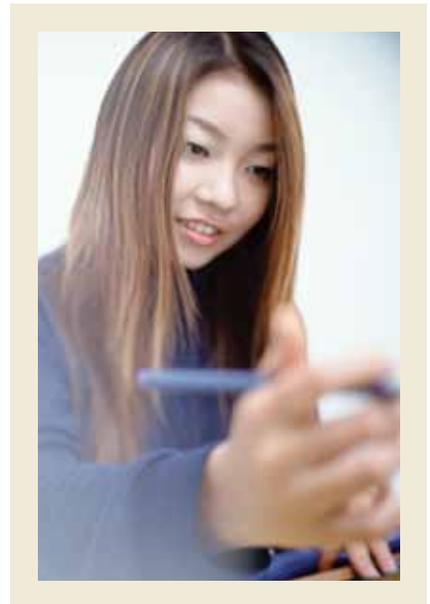
Formal annotation has traditionally been associated with college read-

ing. At the elementary and secondary school levels, informal annotative practices include writing notes on sticky pads or on forms designed by the teacher, but there is less attention paid to what is done with those notes after the initial reading.

As we reflected on the development of our annotation skills, we realized that we were never formally taught how to annotate or even necessarily what to annotate. Doug remembers his college roommate reading with a ruler in hand, dragging it down the page and periodically underlining and writing margin notes. The roommate was performing better in their shared abnormal psychology class, so Doug started using the same technique. Nancy remembers receiving advice from the college writing center about study habits, including annotation skills.

Colleges are still recommending that students annotate the texts they read. For example, the Writing Center at Colorado State University suggested that

Annotating is an important skill to employ if you want to read critically. Successful criti-



Watch the Video

A teacher models strategies for annotating text and using it as a resource.

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cal readers read with a pencil in their hand, making notes in the text as they read. Instead of reading passively, they create an active relationship with what they are reading by “talking back” to the text in its margins. (Writing@CSU, n.d.)

Edgar Allan Poe (1844/1988), himself an unapologetic penciler, wrote, “In the marginalia, too, we talk only to ourselves; we therefore talk freshly—boldly—originally—with abandonment—without conceit” (p. 7). Adler and Van Doren (1972) laid out a case for engaging in repeated readings with accompanying annotation:

Why is marking a book indispensable to reading it? First, it keeps you awake—not merely conscious, but wide awake. Second, reading, if active, is thinking, and thinking tends to express itself in words, spoken or written. The person who says he knows what he thinks but cannot express it usually does not know what he thinks. Third, writing your reactions down helps you remember the thoughts of the author. (p. 49)

They go on to describe the most common annotation marks:

- Underlining for major points.
- Vertical lines in the margin to denote longer statements that are too long to be underlined.
- Star, asterisk, or other doodad in the margin to be used sparingly to emphasize the ten or dozen most important statements. You may want to fold a corner of each page where you make such a mark or place a slip of paper between the

pages.

- Numbers in the margin to indicate a sequence of points made by the author in development of an argument.
- Numbers of other pages in the margin to indicate where else in the book the author makes the same points.
- Circling of key words or phrases to serve much the same function as underlining.
- Writing in the margin, or at the top or bottom of the page to record questions (and perhaps answers) which a passage raises in your mind. (Adler & Van Doren, 1972)

In Practice

As part of an eighth-grade unit of study on adolescents, English teacher Paula Brown used several pieces of text that allowed her students to practice their annotation skills. She had modeled annotation on several pieces of print and digital text and knew that her students could tackle complex texts. She introduced the lesson to her students by saying, “Adolescence is a time when important decisions—some of them life changing—occur. It can be scary to think that some of the choices you make now can last a lifetime. In this unit of investigation, you will explore what a parent, a poet, and a psychologist have to say about making decisions that seem small at the time but are big in hindsight. The purpose of this unit is to examine adolescent decision making from three perspectives to locate central themes.”

As part of that unit, students read and annotated an article titled “Psychologist Explains Teens’ Risky Decision-Making Behavior” that is quantitatively a high school level text.

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Figure 1 Text-Based Questions

Teacher Paula Brown used the following questions to help students interact with the text in-depth. Sample answers follow the questions.

General Understanding

Q: What is the main finding of Dr. Gerrard's research?

A: Teens make decisions differently than adults. They operate in one of two modes: a reasoned one and an impulsive one.

Key Details

Q: What role does image play?

A: In the impulsive mode, people compare their decisions to the image of a person who would make a similar choice. If it is a favorable image, they are more likely to do it.

Vocabulary and Text Structure

Q: How did you figure out what impulsive and reasoned mean? Use contextual and structural analyses.

A: Contextual analysis for impulsive: What's not going through their heads; they just do it; risk-taking.

Structural analysis for impulsive: the -ive suffix means it is an adjective; root word is impulse; puls- means drive or push; related words are pulse, compulsory, compulsive, expulsion.

Contextual analysis for reasoned: (contrastive) "motivated behavior"; "how much they want to do it"; (synonyms) thoughtful, experienced.

Structural analysis for reasoned: root is reason (verb form)—to think through logically.

Author's Purpose

Q: Why is this genre (informational) appropriate for the content?

A: It's the results of science research. Purely narrative would undermine the credibility.

Q: Who is the intended audience for this article?

A: It is written for parents and adults who work with adolescents. If it was written for teens, it would probably be in second-person form and include examples from teens; offers advice to parents and prevention programs.

Inferences

Q: How can you determine that this is a credible source?

A: It's from *ScienceDaily*. The article tells you the researcher is a psychology professor, and the data is from 10,000 participants over 12 years of study.

Opinions, Arguments, and Intertextual Connections

Q: Reread the first reading in the unit Who's Right? How does this informational article explain some of the conflict occurring between mother and daughter?

A: Both are thinking about decision making in different ways. The mother can't understand why her daughter doesn't think like she does. The daughter can't see the risk she took. Both would benefit from having some insight into impulsive decision making.

Note: For more information about text-dependent questions, see the Instructional Leader column in the September 2012 issue of *Principal Leadership*.

Javier, one of Brown's students, annotated the text as follows:

Gerrard said that the initial risk-taking experience will influence an adolescent's intention to repeat the behavior in the future. They do consult their conscience over risk-taking, but not always in a classic "good vs. evil" way. "From a kid's perspective, if you're operating in this more reasoned, thoughtful [experienced] mode—then you have the proverbial devil and the angel over your shoulder," she said. "If you're operating in the more experiential [impulsive] mode, you don't even know the angel is there. Those things

are not in your mind at all, and the devil's only saying, 'This could be [interesting][NFI].'" **EX** (Iowa State University, 2007)

After students read the work a couple of times, Brown used text-based questions to engage students in a discussion, which encouraged students to reread the article and consult their annotations to deeply comprehend the passage, requiring that they provide evidence from the text for their responses. (See figure 1.)

Précis Writing

Following their discussion, Brown asked students to summarize their understanding of the text. The specific instructions were to "write a short summary (about 100 words) that

accurately summarizes this article. Be sure to include the name of the researcher and their findings. Use your annotations to guide your writing."

Précis writings are written summaries of a text or passage that require students to distill the main points, while "also selecting, rejecting, and paraphrasing ideas" (Bromley, 1985, p. 407). Teaching students how to compose précis writing develops their ability to understand the text more deeply and to learn essential content. Such summaries do not contain the student's opinions or questions and should not include any information that isn't discussed in the text itself. The students in Brown's class will later use these précis writings to produce a longer essay in which they address the topic of adolescent decision

making from different perspectives.

Without annotations, students' discussions, responses to text-dependent questions, and ability to summarize a text as well as synthesize across texts would be weak. When students have annotated a text, they've thought more deeply about it and they can easily muster evidence in support of their responses. As teachers focus on close reading of complex texts, they can't let students wait until college to be taught how to annotate. Annotation is a skill that should be integrated into middle and high school classrooms across the curriculum. Knowing how to read with a pencil, pen, or stylus in hand should be part of the skill set students have when they graduate from high school. **PL**

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