

Language Arts Division October eNews 2018

Urban Dictionary defines annotations as “the endless and time consuming notes most students are required to take when they cannot write in textbooks, usually results in a notebooks filled with sticky notes that are stolen from friends or faked to look like the real notes that should have been taken.” Sarcasm aside, annotating is a key skill that good readers need to master to enable them to achieve more challenging targets or standards such as making simple and complex inferences, determining themes, analyzing word meanings, and evaluating an author’s craft. Wego students learn to annotate as freshmen and sophomores and continue to develop those skills as upperclassmen through a variety of forms of guided reading.



Freshman English teachers **Jen Culbertson**, **Leslie Fireman**, and **Mary Fremeau**, as well as their co-teachers **Cat Thielberg** and **Jen Walker** teach annotation through modeling, direct instruction, small group work, and formative assessment. **Mrs. Fireman** explained, *"With each novel, our EI students are also looking for quotes/passages that speak to a particular [thematic topic] (i.e. family and survival in *The Glass Castle*). They are highlighting those passages in different colors as they read. . .We care about are their notes - so if highlighting/color-coding boggles them down, then they should just focus on writing a few comments on each page."* Ninth graders discover that quality annotations highlight on questions about words, paragraphs, or concepts that are unclear or complex, predictions about potential plot events, connections to other texts or formal allusions or references to pop culture or personal experiences, summarizing or making inferences, identifying new or significant vocabulary, and tracing patterns that emerge throughout a text.

English 1 students are also applying their annotation skills in a coming of age unit that includes a variety of poems. Students are pairing annotation with one-sentence summaries and a poetry analysis procedure called the “Big Six” to deconstruct poems like Billy Collins’ “On Turning Ten.” One of **Jen Culbertson**’s students noted that stanza one of the poem illustrates *“the speaker is describing his dread of [turning ten]; he feels sick about it and compares it to disease.”* Students use these observations as prewriting to structure formal writing about character change and development.

English 1 Honors students began learning about formal annotating this summer when they read Mortimer Adler’s “[How to Mark a Text](#)” as one component of their summer reading. Adler argues that active reading requires “‘writ[ing] between the lines.’ Unless you do, you are not likely to do the most efficient kind of reading.” Freshman honors English teachers **Steve Aiello**, **Shannon Atkian-Sanchez**, **Kyle Etheridge**, and **Brian Turnbaugh** reviewed annotation through the summer reading novel, *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho, and the first unit of the school year, which focused on Joseph Campbell’s mythic hero cycle. The teachers have reiterated Adler’s assertion that written annotations increase comprehension: “the physical act of writing with your own hand, brings words and sentences more sharply before your mind and preserves them better in your memory.”

Adler recommends these annotations:

1. **Underlining**: of major point, of important or forceful statements
2. **Vertical lines** at the margin: to emphasize a statement already underlined.
3. **Star, asterisk, or other doo-dad** at the margin.
4. **Numbers in the margin**: to indicate the sequence of points the author makes in developing a single argument.
5. **Numbers of other pages in the margin**: to indicate where else in the book the author made points relevant to the point marked
6. **Circling of key words or phrases**.
7. **Writing in the margin or at the top or bottom of the page**, for the sake of: recording questions (and perhaps answers) which a passage raised in your mind; reducing complicated discussion to a simple statement; recording the sequence of major points right through the books.

Sophomore English teachers, **Tara Deleon**, **Lauren Stewart**, and **Kelsey Wirkus** with co-teacher **Patrice Dobry**, utilize a variety of strategies to engage students in close reading. English 2 students who are completing a unit on dystopia have learned how to annotate for a variety of elements of the genre. Whether reading short fiction such as Kurt Vonnegut's "Harrison Bergeron" or Ursula Le Guin's "The Ones who Walked Away from Omelas," students learn to trace themes such as how propaganda is used to control citizens or that information, independent thought, and freedom are restricted. The use of annotation is perhaps even more necessary and valuable in full length texts, such as *Fahrenheit 451*, by Ray Bradbury.

English 2 teacher, **Mrs. Wirkus**, described an acronym, CAMP, that sophomores use to guide their annotations. CAMP, which stands for **Circle unknown words**, **Ask questions**, **Make connections**, and **Paraphrase complex sentences**, offers students a procedure they can use to focus their reading. In the final pages of Part 3 of *Fahrenheit 451*, students



might circle the word "Phoenix," an allusion to the mythical bird that lived for hundreds of years before burning itself to death and then rising from the ashes ready to live again. Another student may ask the question, "why does Granger tell Montag, 'You're not important. You're not anything'?" Another student may make a connection to the line, "If the men were silent, it was because there was everything to think about and much to remember." Others may paraphrase the sentence, "The other men lay awhile on the dawn edge of sleep, not ready to rise up and begin the day's obligations, the fires and foods, and its thousand details of putting foot after foot and hand after hand" into *the men were just waking up but didn't want to move because of the challenging day that they had to face*. The CAMP acronym focuses and clarifies students' reading and offers them a structure that they can internalize and ultimately use independently.

Hopefully, annotating gets a better reputation with this generation of readers; then, Urban Dictionary will lighten up on this important reading skill.

Articles from division administrators are provided on a regular schedule in our Community eNewsletter to keep parents and community members informed. Questions on this article may be directed to Ms. Mary Howard, language arts division head, at mhoward@d94.org or by phone at (630) 876-6363.