

HOW TO ANNOTATE A BOOK

Annotation is **marking the text with insightful comments or questions** you have. Most proficient readers already do this in their heads, but as soon as they are on the next page their memory of what they just read becomes fuzzy, and analysis becomes a hit-or-miss game of trivia recall—you might remember what happens or what you notice...you might not.

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.

Some of the things you may want to mark as you notice them are:

- Literary elements (symbolism, theme, foreshadowing, etc.)
- Figurative language (similes, metaphors, personification, etc.)
- Plot elements (setting, mood, conflict, etc.)
- Diction (effective or unusual word choice)
- Images (striking imagery that helps to create meaning)
- Highlighting key words, phrases, or sentences and passages that are important to understanding the work
- Writing questions or comments in the margins
- Bracketing important ideas or passages
- Connecting ideas with lines or arrows

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 sibilance in a passage, but that in and of itself is useless unless you can tell that this sibilance 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?

Note: If you find annotating while you read to be annoying and awkward, do it after.

Use the following format:

- **Inside Front Cover:** Major character list with small space for character summary and for page references for key scenes or moments of character development, etc.
- **Inside Back Cover:** Build a list of themes, allusions, images, motifs, key scenes, plot line, epiphanies, etc. as you read. Add page references and/or notes as well as you read.
- **Bottom and Side Page Margins:** Interpretive notes (see list above), questions, and/or remarks that refer to meaning of the page. Markings or notes to tie in with notes on the inside back cover.
- **Top Margins:** plot notes—a quick few words or phrases which summarize what happens here. Go back after a chapter, scene, or assignment and then mark it carefully. You should be reading assignments twice, so this isn’t any less efficient than marking as you read and then rereading the material. (Useful for quick location of passages in discussion and for writing assignments).