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# Beyond the Yellow Highlighter: Teaching Annotation Skills to Improve Reading Comprehension

Annotating a text can be a powerful strategy to comprehend difficult material and encourage active reading. High school teacher Carol Porter-O'Donnell provides several activities and tools to help students learn to purposefully mark up what they read.

The hottest-selling item at the university bookstore when I was a college student was the yellow highlighter. I know because I stocked and sold them while working my way through college. I also purchased them and made the pages of my books very colorful. Annotating, or marking the text to identify important information and record the reader's ideas, was a skill I had observed other learners using but never practiced myself because I did not own the books I read in high school. The yellow marks in my college textbooks, which left little of the page in its original color, did not help me to learn very much. Unfortunately, I was nearly a junior in college before I knew how to highlight key ideas and write marginal notes that helped me make connections, pose questions, and interpret ideas.

I still did not know how to teach this skill effectively until two years ago, when I worked with two teachers—one who had the language for teaching annotating and one who was making the process of marking a text visible to his students. Janell Cleland and Tom O'Donnell co-taught a reading class and, by bringing Janell's language and Tom's methodology together, their students and mine are no longer left to learn this process by chance.

## What Is Annotating, and How Do I Teach Students to Do It?

Annotating is a writing-to-learn strategy for use while reading or rereading. Annotating helps readers reach a deeper level of engagement and promotes

active reading. It makes the reader's "dialogue with the text" (Probst) a visible record of the thoughts that emerge while making sense of the reading.

### Determining Categories for Responding to Text

Before teaching annotating, we ask that students examine their written responses to a short story and determine the ways readers think about text after reading. Students read a sentence from their responses and we ask the class, "What type of comment is this? What category would that sentence fit into?" Once a category is named and recorded on newsprint or an overhead transparency, we have students read additional sentences that would fit into the category. Students can hear what each type of response sounds like and see the variety of ways to react or respond to a text.

Typically, classes generate six or seven ways of responding. Readers usually make predictions, ask questions, state opinions, analyze author's craft, make connections, and reflect on the content or their reading process. Once the list of categories is completed, we have students create a cluster or another visual aid that they can use as a reference while writing about their reading. Depending on the class and the responses that emerged, we might continue adding categories and specifics related to the categories as we examine more responses to text. For example, students might make connections to similar personal experiences or their actions in similar situations, but they might add connections to other "texts" (books, short stories, movies, TV shows, lyrics, artwork, and so forth) on their visuals to remind them of the varied ways of making connections.

## Using the Categories to Teach Annotating

To introduce annotating, we use a short story that can be read aloud in one class period. We make each student a copy of a story from the class anthology and make an overhead transparency of each page. In addition, we make a transparency of the Annotating Text bookmark, shown in Figure 1, with ideas for symbols to use and marginal comments to make. My colleague Monica Fairman was influential in designing this format to support active reading. We also help students to distinguish between marks and marginal notes they might use for surface meaning and other marks for identifying deep-meaning ideas. For example, students might create a coding system of circles, squares, and underlining to identify information related to the surface meaning (vocabulary, who, what, when, where, and why) of the text. While annotating for deep meaning or underlying messages, students might mark these areas with a symbol such as an asterisk, and marginal notes would be shortened versions of the types of responses readers write after reading.

While listening to the first page of the short story, students use the symbols listed on the overhead to mark information typically found in the opening pages. At the end of the first page, or at a natural pause in the text, we stop reading and give students time to go back and add marks. Next, we ask them to share what they have marked, and we make the same markings on the transparency of the first page of the story. We also ask if anyone wrote any comments in the margins. Typically, if the problem or conflict has been introduced, several students will have written a prediction. If this happens, we write the prediction on the overhead. If there are none, the teacher can write a prediction, a question, or a connection to the story that has been read to this point. Finally, we ask that students go back and make at least one marginal comment related to this portion of the text.

We continue reading aloud and stopping every few paragraphs, at the end of the page, or at a natural break in the text, and we continue to solicit marginal comments from the class and record them on the overhead transparency. If we see that some types of comments are not being used, we ask for annotations based on a certain type. After going through a short story in this way, we provide each student with an individual bookmark with the same information that was on the overhead. Many students use it as a

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**FIGURE 1.** Annotating Text

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### 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

Use the "After Reading" strategies to write a notebook entry.

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reference while they read and to guide their written responses. In the next days of class, students practice annotating short stories or the opening chapters of a novel that they purchase.

## Improving Annotations through Analysis

Examining and analyzing models of annotated texts have been successful ways for students to see what can be done when using annotation as a reading strategy. Students have found that models of the same annotated texts that they are reading are the most helpful. These models can be from former students (see fig. 2), and we often share our own annotations of the

FIGURE 2. Annotation of "The Story of an Hour" by Kate Chopin

She knew that she would weep again when she saw the kind, tender hands folded in death; the face that had never looked save with love upon her, fixed and gray and dead. But she saw beyond that bitter moment a long procession of years to come that would belong to her absolutely. And she opened and spread her arms out to them in welcome.

There would be no one to live for her during those coming years; she would live for herself. There would be no powerful will bending hers in that blind persistence with which men and women believe they have a right to impose a private will upon a fellow-creature. A kind intention or a cruel intention made the act seem no less a crime as she looked upon it in that brief moment of illumination.

And yet she had loved him—<sup>often</sup> sometimes. Often she had not. What did it matter! What could love, the unsolved mystery, count for in face of this possession of self-assertion which she suddenly recognized as the strongest impulse of her being!

"Free! Body and soul free!" she kept whispering.

Josephine was kneeling before the closed door with her lips to the keyhole, imploring for admission. "Louise, open the door! I beg; open the door—you will make yourself ill. What are you doing, Louise? For heaven's sake open the door."

"Go away. I am not making myself ill." No; she was drinking in a very elixir of life through that open window.

Her fancy was running riot along those days ahead of her. Spring days, and summer days, and all sorts of days that would be her own. She breathed a quick prayer that life might be long. It was only yesterday she had thought with a shudder that life might be long.

She arose at length and opened the door to her sister's importunities. There was a feverish triumph in her eyes, and she carried herself unwittingly like a goddess of Victory. She clasped her sister's waist, and together they descended the stairs. Richards stood waiting for them at the bottom.

Some one was opening the front door with a latchkey. It was Brently Mallard who entered, a little travel-stained, composedly carrying his grip-sack and umbrella. He had been far from the scene of accident, and did not even know there had been one. He stood amazed at Josephine's piercing cry; at Richards' quick motion to screen him from the view of his wife.

But Richards was too late.

When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills.

the realization that she'd never see him alive again is finally hitting her.  
4 - welcoming the unfolding future/ accepting his death.

feeling guilty

this is only the way humans function. It's always a love-hate relationship because we will never fully relate to someone else. More on this later.\*

glad he's dead, in a half-sies kind of way.

Through death, she finds a new exuberance in life.

It almost sounds insane...

little does he know...

but he's still alive!!

But Richards was too late. When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills. but chances are, after her realization of this new sort of "freedom," she most likely wouldn't have been especially thrilled to see him.

\* "Often times she had not." I think we're all guilty of this at times. Even our closest relatives, best of friends, and trustworthy companions will get on our nerves. Unfortunately, distaste and hate are facts of life. Opinions will differ, and actions will upset us. But ultimately, I find that forgiveness gets the better of me. 😊

texts we are reading with them. They will see that specific marginal comments recorded in these texts may vary from one reader to another and comments can change with the demands of the text, the purpose for the reading, and the background experiences of the reader. They can also see that there is no one right way to annotate but that there are patterns and categories that seem to be used by readers as they work to make sense of their reading.

**Alternatives to Annotating:  
My Students Don't Have Books**

**Photocopy Selected Documents  
and Public Domain Texts**

Reading aloud portions of informational texts provides students with a foundation for understanding topics that they will encounter in later readings. This is also an opportunity to model the interplay between written and visual texts and the thinking processes required to put the parts together. Newspaper, magazine, or online articles are also excellent sources for annotating that can provide alternate viewpoints, more in-depth information, or present-day applications of topics being studied.

Many students have developed the habit of reading without pausing to consider the ideas. By reading aloud and having students annotate, the teacher can force this pausing, and students can begin to see the benefits. This is especially helpful when students are first learning annotation skills.

**Use a Dialectical Journal**

In a dialectical journal (Berthoff), students record a quote, phrase, or word with a page number in the first column, and in the second column they record their reactions or interpretations (see fig. 3). This is an ex-

cellent tool to use with informational texts because the journals can be used as study guides for tests—especially if they are designed so that class notes can be added. A variation is to use index cards—one for each bold heading in a textbook. One side of the card can be used to record important information and the other side for writing a response.

**Use Sticky Notes or Highlighter Tape**

Readers can make their comments on removable pieces of paper and then stick them on the margins of the text. Or, students can highlight texts that don't belong to them with highlighter tape, which can later be erased with an eraser or their fingertips. With either tool, students mark the portion of the text they want to comment on and then record their thoughts in their dialectical journal.

**Benefits of Annotating**

Some students complain about annotating. By asking probing questions and having students reflect on their growth as readers through the use of annotations, we are able to see the source of their complaints and either offer them solutions or talk to them about the difference between reading for enjoyment and reading to learn information.

At the end of their first semester, I asked students in my ninth-grade English classes and my ninth-grade reading class to reflect on their changes as readers and their use of reading strategies to support comprehension. From their reflections, I saw that annotating had helped students see that *reading is a process* and that applying the ways of responding to text through annotation *changes comprehension*. Because *annotating slows the reading down*, students discover and uncover ideas that would not have emerged otherwise. Many students discovered that this helps them become more *active readers*. The italicized phrases are the categories that emerged from my sorting of student reflections. Students' statements and my interpretations and insights explain the categories more fully.

**Annotating Helps Teach Reading  
as a Process**

I had intended to teach the struggling readers that reading is a process, but I worried that proficient

FIGURE 3. Dialectical Journal

INFORMATION	INTERPRETATION

readers would find such teaching to be a hoop they had to jump through rather than a technique to help them process information. Daniel, a proficient reader, reveals that he understood the surface meaning of the text before he learned to annotate, but he now understands reading as a process. He can flexibly apply different ways of thinking about the reading, which changes both his process and his understanding.

At the beginning of the year I really enjoyed reading, but I do not think that I knew how to really comprehend what the book was trying to tell me as well. At that point, I saw reading as a form of entertainment, not necessarily as a way to learn. Deep and surface meaning might not have been as clearly interpreted a few months ago. . . . I have learned how to effectively annotate by trying to understand the author's craft, connecting the story to other ideas, reflecting and most importantly trying to find deep meaning. My attitude towards reading has remained the same, but the way that I read has changed. I can now read by using writing as a comprehension skill.

Manny's reflection in his reading portfolio reveals that his cluster of the different ways to respond to text made the invisible, mental reading process visible to him. He then applied this newly found understanding through the use of annotating and writing responses. This helped him to *really* read.

The cluster was the thing that helped me a lot. Before making the cluster, I didn't even know there would be so many different ways to think about the story while reading and annotating or ways to write about the story after I read. . . . Annotating makes me understand better because I can look back, and I'm writing so it gets more in my head.

Daniel is using his knowledge of annotating and other writing-to-learn strategies to become a more sophisticated reader, while Manny is finally seeing the complex thought process involved in making sense of text that previously remained hidden to him.

### Annotating Changes Comprehension

The many different ways to think about a text, in particular analyzing the author's craft and making connections beyond similar personal experiences, change the ideas readers consider and the associations they make. The act of connecting the new to the known is enhanced because both the new and the known have

been expanded to include many more sources of information. In her reading portfolio, Lucy describes this change in comprehension as simply thinking more about things. She is no longer just asking questions to clear up parts of the text that she didn't understand; she is now curiously and confidently asking questions for which the answers don't specifically reside in the text.

My reading now has changed. It has changed because now when I read I understand things that I am not always interested in. The annotating and written responses help me understand things now. This has slowed my reading down where I think about more things. I think more about what the meaning is and when I think that I analyze that more and think, Why could they have said that? and Why did that happen? Stuff like that. It's weird because now when I read a book at home I feel like annotating it and writing a written response so I can put all my thoughts down on a piece of paper. I don't know, it would feel weird not to do that.

Daniel reveals that annotations have helped him read more carefully and distinguish between literal information and underlying, inferential analysis.

I feel challenged by the analysis of books we read without feeling overwhelmed. I think that the extensive use of annotations has taught me how to be a more careful reader. At the same time, I sometimes feel frustration by the amount of annotations required because they interrupt the flow of my reading. . . . Surface meaning was what I was taught to look for in middle school, but deep meaning and underlying themes have become the focus of literary analysis this year. The bookmark [with ideas for annotating] was useful in cutting through the surface meaning and finding common ways to locate deep thoughts and themes. . . . While this was very time consuming, my annotations allowed me to make great meaning of the text.

Daniel's frustration with annotations interrupting the flow of his reading led to our designing a short lesson for the class because many students shared this concern. We decided that marking important quotations or passages with an asterisk while reading would help with the problem of interrupting the flow. These students would then go back into the text to reflect on the importance of the passage and record their thoughts in the margins of the text and/or write about these important passages in their journals or use some other writing-to-learn strategy.

### Annotating Slows Down the Reading

Interestingly, slowing down the reading was not as much of a problem or a source of complaint for struggling readers because they found that the time it took to annotate was less than the time it took to reread the text several times. Manny indicates that annotating takes more time because now he really has to read. In part, he is being forced to read because he is required to record his thoughts.

Annotations do make me read a lot slower and I wish I didn't have to do them. It is so much harder to fake read if you have to annotate like we have to do now. So now I actually read, because it's too hard to fake annotate.

Lucy's reading portfolio reflection is not unlike those of other students in the class who have difficulty focusing on the reading.

I find it a lot easier to annotate or make notes about what I am reading because it is easier to comprehend. I have also learned how to be less distracted when I am reading. Annotating basically helps me comprehend and focus easier when I am reading. I used to get distracted easily which would cause me to read something over and over so that I can completely understand. I have found reading a lot easier for me and more enjoyable.

Students who felt that they could read and "understand" without annotating seemed to be the ones who complained the most about annotating; it took them longer to read when they had to mark in their texts. Because students examined their annotations and written responses over time and reflected on how their reading had changed with the use of these strategies, they discovered that they understood in different ways when they slowed down—they became more actively involved in the reading and their comprehension changed. In her English portfolio, Sunny writes,

I think I really understand texts a lot more than I used to . . . I really don't mind annotating. I think pausing to comprehend what is going on helps me rather than just swallowing a lot of information and then trying to analyze it.

Lauren describes the ways that annotating made her think, which, along with slowing down the process, changed her comprehension.

It [annotating] has helped me gain understanding of the text and it is easier to connect my readings to real life situations. It also is an easier way to make predictions and see what the author does to write the piece. I have learned to not read very fast so I can comprehend the reading better. I used to read fast and it made me not understand what exactly I was reading. I discovered that even if annotating is an annoyance it can really help in the end. It helped me with studying and writing responses.

In writing their reflections, students discovered for themselves that annotations were serving their intended purpose. When the reflections were shared in class, students who were concerned about annotations consuming their free time were able to see from their peers that slowing down may not be such a bad thing, especially when they considered the learning activities and assignments that required a close reading of the text.

### Annotating Promotes More Active Reading

The previous reflections hint at, and the ones that follow state explicitly, the belief that when readers slow down they become more active. Readers give themselves the opportunity to become more aware of their thinking process when they are active, and they consider and work to make sense of ideas that they may not have been aware even existed when they read quickly. Many students found themselves reading to make meaning rather than reading to complete the assignment or to prove to the teacher that they understood the information presented. Katie describes this change in her reading:

I have found that by annotating I am a much more active reader. I understand the literature a lot better and have interesting responses to it, which makes reading more enjoyable.

Daniel describes a similar change that produces different results:

[A]t the beginning of the year I was more of a factual reader. I would absorb all of the main facts but I would miss some important details that aren't exactly in the text. This is the information that you really need to read between the lines to find that may help understanding the deep meaning of the story . . . annotating and writing written responses

made me more of an active reader. I have really thought about what I was actually reading more.

The sorting of student reflections into these categories was easy but also difficult. It was easy because, when I consider my use of annotating, I am able to see how all of these categories apply to my own experiences. The difficult part has been writing about them as if they are separate and distinct. My movement of student quotations from one category to another while writing and revising attests to that fact. For example, annotating changes comprehension because it slows the reading down, which helps readers to be more active, and they are more active because they have more thinking tools available to them now that they see reading as a thinking process. Becca's reflection shows the interconnectedness of these reading skills and approaches to making meaning of text, and she describes how they work together to support her comprehension.

I have found that my style of reading and comprehending has changed drastically. Instead of approaching a book passively, I have used the skills I have acquired through annotating to really analyze the book as I read. . . . I truly believe that my comprehension has improved through the development of these skills, and I believe this is why I am not so frustrated with complicated stories. The skills of being an active reader through annotating allow me to grasp a better understanding of the literature and now I feel more confident taking on more complex pieces of writing. Through this new level of comprehension, I have noticed another big difference in my reading. I still love getting very emotionally involved with a book, and still feel strongly about reading material that appeals to these emotions. However, I acknowledge that this won't always be possible for me in school, and that I will need to read literature that I wouldn't have otherwise picked on my own. But now, I am able to achieve many more deep meanings through reading that aren't so obvious, so I am still able to find interest in stories that I least expected. For example, in *Of Mice and Men*, I didn't originally like the setting, style of writing, or characters of the story. But by analyzing the story through my annotations, I found many ways in which this story related to friendship, desire, and many other rich and layered human emotions that intrigued me.

Having students reflect on their growth and the experiences or reading strategies that helped or did not help to move their learning forward is beneficial to the learner on a metacognitive level. However, these reflections are just as important to the teacher because they provide important instructional feedback. For example, from Becca I learned that annotating can help students connect to a piece of literature on an emotional level—something I want to learn more about. From several other students, I learned that annotating supported them in their writing.

### Annotating Helps Improve Writing

Since I hadn't specifically taught students to use their annotations while writing, I was surprised to read Katie's reflection.

I have also found annotating extremely helpful when I was writing responses to literature. . . . I feel that I didn't have a very good writing quality at the beginning of the year. I would jump from idea to idea and only cover the surface meanings. Yet, as I became more experienced I was able to focus on important ideas in my writing. I used my annotations as a resource to uncover deep meanings, and wrote about my finding in my responses.

Raven writes that annotations helped her writing by providing her with a record of her ongoing thoughts.

Knowing how to annotate has resulted in better responses because I am reflecting thoughts that struck me throughout the reading rather than just at the end.

And, in her reading portfolio, Chelsea reveals that annotating helped her find supporting evidence to incorporate into her writing.

Annotating helps me because if I have to write an essay and I need to know something out of the book I can quickly find it. Also annotating helps me because I can keep better track of what is going on.

The use of annotating to help with writing was something I hadn't intentionally taught. I'm wondering if I can make it work for more learners by structuring my teaching to focus on the use of marginal notes to support students' writing.

As a reading teacher, I have introduced students to many reading strategies they can use before reading a chapter, short story, article, or novel. Like many teachers, I have students use a variety of strategies after they complete their reading to assist them in clarifying what they don't understand and in arriving at interpretations and new ideas about the text. But, aside from reading aloud and then stopping and discussing, I haven't learned of many strategies to help readers *while* they're reading. Marking a

text while reading is something that readers do outside of school; it is what we need to do with the students in school, too.

#### Works Cited

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## Join the NCTE Reading Initiative: A Professional Development Network Making a Difference in Schools across the Country

NCTE's Reading Initiative can make a difference at your school! Educators who have worked with this versatile professional development program find it valuable. Read on to learn of their experiences.

Southridge High School in Huntingburg, Indiana, is completing its third year of affiliation with the Reading Initiative network. Group leader Keith Younker pulled together staff from across the curriculum: the vice principal who teaches one class and math, science, English, social studies, health, and business teachers. Affiliation with NCTE was one component of a school plan to increase the literacy achievement of students in this rural, low SES school community. The spring 2002 state test scores reflected the time the study group committed, as well as the inclusion of silent sustained reading two mornings a week and writing throughout the day. Southridge is one of sixteen Indiana high schools that received four-star status in 2002–03 due to increased scores. Group members shared key strategies that led to their success at the Atlanta 2002 convention: <http://www.ncte.org/profdev/onsite/readinit/groups/tour/110177.htm>. Read more about their efforts at <http://www.ncte.org/profdev/onsite/readinit/groups>.

Discovery K–8 School in Glendale, Arizona, sought out the NCTE Reading Initiative to better focus their commitment to offering quality literacy experiences and hands-on, project-based instruction, an investment in teacher knowledge and decision-making rather than in the scripted literacy curricula adopted by nearby schools. Classified in 2002 as a low-performing school, Discovery experienced overall gains on 2003 reading test scores and achieved Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). But more important to this school community was the movement toward a research-based understanding of the reading process. Teachers report that connections between the Reading Initiative experiences and classroom research have made a significant impact on Discovery's classroom instruction. See more at <http://www.ncte.org/profdev/onsite/readinit/site/111126.htm>.

Visit our Web site at <http://www.ncte.org/profdev/onsite/readinit> to read more about how the NCTE Reading Initiative is effecting K–12 school change across the country. Contact us at 800/369-6283, ext. 3627 or 3604, to learn more about how your school community might share this professional development resource in support of literacy teaching and learning.