



How to Annotate in Your English Class

Every English teacher will recommend that you annotate (make notations) your texts. Some students are naturally gifted at annotating a text, others are confused by this process. Every year I teach I still have students who are puzzled when I ask them to annotate their readings. You should know that highlighting and underlining alone is not annotation! Knowing that a passage is important is not the same as knowing WHY it is important. In the following pages are some recommendations on strategies for annotating that should help clear up any confusion.

I. Summarize/Paraphrase:

This seems basic, but can actually be really helpful when you are going back through a text to remember and locate where something happened (like when you are writing an essay, for example). Jot down in the margins key words or phrases that simply summarize/paraphrase what just happened.

Another trick is to keep a list of important events in a chapter (or act/scene, if reading a play) in the blank space at the beginning of the first page of the chapter. Usually the first page of a chapter begins about a third to halfway down the page, leaving you with valuable margin space. This technique is especially helpful, again while writing an essay and trying to remember what happened in what part of the reading. Another useful strategy in terms of summary is to give a chapter that has only been assigned a number a title of your own composition that in some way summarizes the main action of the chapter.

For those of you who are mathematically inclined, this type of annotation should make up only about 20% of your total annotating of a text. Summarizing and paraphrasing should not dominate your notes; rather, they should function to help you orient yourself as to the basic action of the plot.

II. Literary Elements:

Ok, so this is a long, but most definitely not exhaustive, list. Don't be intimidated. Start off slowly and keep practicing; I promise you will eventually get better and faster. This list is basic, and is not the extent of what you will need to know or be able to do. But this is a solid start and should serve you well.

Plot Structure/Devices: You remember the diagram you learned in grade 8? It's still important. Remember that the beginning of a novel or short story is the exposition and that it establishes all the basics you need to know.

A helpful strategy here is to draw some diagrams that establish character connections. A family tree or bubble diagram can be particularly helpful if you are trying to remember who is who and how they are related. Try to identify the crucial moment or climax of the plot.

Identify the resolution or denouement. Identify and make note of any important transitions or shifts (twists and turns) in the plot.

Characters & Development: Jot down indication of how characters are developing and what affects change or growth. Note physical description of characters and be aware that writers use a character's physical appearance to indicate character qualities and flaws. Note particular features or disfigurements. Be aware of detailed descriptions of a character's inner thoughts, feelings, impressions, suspicions, etc. Also, consider what motivates your characters and how they act on those motivations. Make note of dialogue as indication of character development, as well.

Conflict: Consider the different types of conflict. (Character vs. character, character vs. nature, character vs. self, and so on...). The point is to be aware of when conflict rears its ugly head and how that conflict is driving the plot. Though this may seem pretty basic, it's important to keep in mind that without the conflict, we have no story!

Setting (physical place, conditions, time): Know where the author has placed his/her story. Note important locations, physical conditions, weather, time of day, month, season, etc. As cliché as it may seem, storms or intense heat often function as foreshadowing. Setting is also important as it establishes a historical context for what is happening in the novel. Establishing an understanding of what was taking place historically during the action of the novel, and/or during the writing of a novel, can provide a deeper understanding of the characters and plot. Be aware of any shifts in setting or time.

Narration (point of view, technique, flashback, authorial intent): Know who is telling your story and consider why. Identify the point of view right away and consider why the author chose this and why it is effective. Consider how the point of view affects you as the reader. Some literature has many different characters narrating a story. Be aware of these shifts/transitions. Be aware of possible flashbacks, or think about any shifts or departures from a strictly chronological telling of the story. Consider your narrator's credibility and reliability. Do you trust him/her? Are you meant to? Establish a relationship with the narrator. Consider the narrator's tone or attitude. Also, consider dramatic asides and narration or stage directions when reading a play.

Diction, Language & Sentence Structure: Always be aware of the language an author is using. Is it descriptive, flowery, and romantic, or is it concise, terse, or economic?

Are the sentences complex in structure, brief and simple, or to the point? Is the language poetic? Consider poetic devices like simile, metaphor, alliteration, etc. Notice any imagery. Think about and make note of particular diction and where the author's word choice is especially effective. Make note of any use of dialect or regional accents. Note use of elevated vocabulary and look up and words you don't know. Don't be lazy when you come across new words! Write a brief definition in the margins (this is the best way to increase your vocabulary, hands down!) Make note of how the language affects you as the reader.

Symbols, Motifs, & Archetypes: The trick here is not only to identify them, but to establish what they mean and how they function. Know the difference between symbols, motifs, and archetypes. If you don't know the difference, stop right now, go get a dictionary and annotate this document by writing the definitions in the margins! During your reading, if you think something might be a symbol, motif, archetype, make note of it and place a question mark next to your thought. You will feel so gratified when you discover that you were right! "I knew it!" you'll say to yourself.

Themes: There is an important difference between themes and motifs. These two terms are often used interchangeably and erroneously. Know this difference. (Again, here is a great opportunity for you to practice annotating in this document). Be aware of how your teacher defines and uses these terms. Also, understand that identifying theme may not take place until you are nearly finished, or even finished, reading a text. And while we're on the subject, just because you finish reading doesn't mean you are finished annotating. Always try to go back and add more!

Irony (verbal, situational, dramatic): Know the difference between the different types of irony. Yes, look it up or ask your teacher right now. I will tell you this: a reader who is aware of irony is a sophisticated reader. Make it your goal to always be looking for irony. It is almost always present and it is usually subtle. Identify it, but also know why it's important and how it functions.

Foreshadowing: Again, identify it and consider how it functions. If you think something might be foreshadowing, make note of it. If it is, then you have an "I knew it!" moment; if it isn't, who cares? At least you're trying and at least you're awake!

Again, to those of you who are mathematically inclined, I argue that your annotations on literary elements and devices should comprise the bulk of your annotations, and I estimate this to be at about 80% of your work.

III. Personal Reactions and Questions:

Though not necessarily academic, I don't underestimate the importance of this type of engagement with a text. If something you read strikes you as funny, intense, confusing, enlightening, etc. feel free to honor those reactions and record them in the margins! Not only is this perfectly acceptable (we English teachers do it, too),

but it indicates that you are paying attention, engaging with the text, and internalizing what you read.

If you have a specific question about what you are reading, write that question down. Research it on your own or ask your teacher in class the next day.

If what you read reminds you of something else, whether that be another text you've read, a movie you saw, something you heard once, a person you know, a personal situation, a memory, etc. honor that connection and record your reaction. This is just further evidence of your internalization of the text.

Furthermore, connecting, comparing, contrasting texts is an important skill, and one that will be valuable to you in college/university, where your professors expect you to be able to do this and draw from your previous experience and knowledge. Though this type of annotation is important, it should not dominate. In fact, this should comprise 10% or less of your total annotations.

A Few Final Thoughts:

Annotating a text is a learning process. Experiment and find the methods that work best for you. Some students use color marking techniques, or fancy post-its. Others prefer simple highlighter and pen. How you do it matters less than how effective it is for you and how well you internalize the literature. The main objective in annotating a text is that you have a deeper and more individual understanding of what you read.

Ask to read your friends' annotations and compare your notes. Add to your own, as needed. Better yet, ask to see your teachers'! What we write in our books is no trade secret!

Annotating takes a long time. This will make you a slower reader, but a more conscientious one, and ultimately, a more sophisticated one. Ideally, you should evolve to the point that it is actually a little awkward for you to read without annotating!

A question I'm often asked by students is, "How much annotating is enough?" This, to an English teacher, is like asking how long an essay needs to be. My answer is going to be the same, and sadly, just as vague and irritating: as much/as long as it needs to be. Admittedly, I'm most impressed by copious annotations in a text. But I am also interested in the quality, thought, and sophistication behind your annotations.

Also, you should know that I actually read your annotations, and your penmanship is quite important. If I can't read what you write (and I'm pretty forgiving when it comes to handwriting) I get cranky.