



How to Annotate a Text

Annotation is an excellent tool to familiarize yourself with texts during your undergraduate years. Some of the ways you can annotate text are by marking/underlining, making notes in the margins and circling or highlighting important words and concepts. These allow you to actively engage with the text and make sense of ideas and their organization. Therefore, annotation is a necessary precursor to the writing process as it is only after understanding a text thoroughly that you can begin writing about it.

A carefully annotated text will have the following characteristics:

1. The texts' main ideas and concepts, identified
2. Comments and questions about the text
3. The development of ideas, traced and noted

The four ways you can annotate any given text are as follows: highlighting/underlining, paraphrasing/summarizing main ideas, descriptive outline, and comments/responses. In the section below, you can find a brief overview of these methods and a sample annotated text using these methods.

Highlighting/Underlying:

This is the most common and one of the earliest note taking methods. You can highlight key terms, concepts, sentences and ideas. One misconception is that one should only highlight ideas that are important and those that understand. However, you can also underline and make note of things that don't make sense and need to be further analyzed.

Paraphrasing/Summarizing:

A lot of times, it is not enough to simply mark important ideas. Sometimes, the language is dense, or there is extensive use of jargon and figurative language. In these cases, rewriting the ideas in one's own words can often lead to better understanding and clarity. This is especially beneficial when you have to make sense of large chunks of text; summarizing the main ideas simplifies and helps in digesting the text.



“Letter from Birmingham Jail”

Martin Luther King Jr.

I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's [great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom] is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

¶1. White moderates block progress.

metaphor: white moderate = obstacle

Contrasts: order vs. justice, negative vs. positive peace, absence vs. presence, ends vs. means

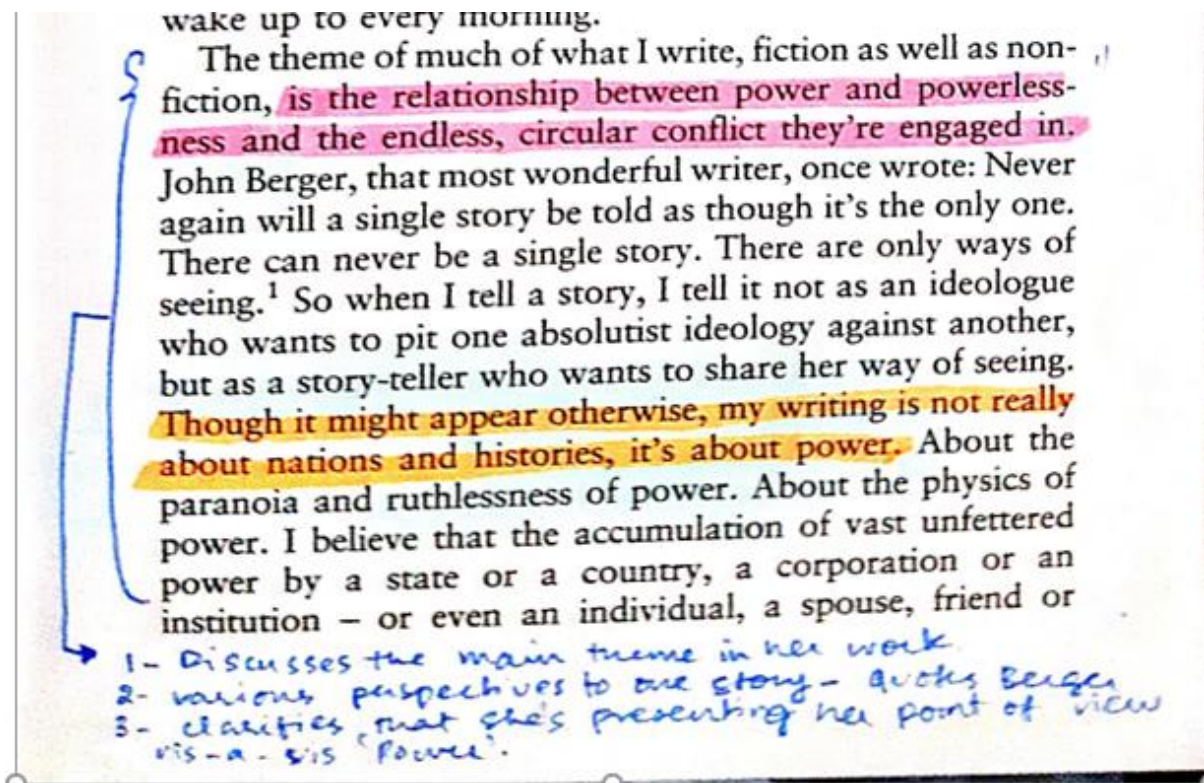
(treating others like children)

more contrasts

In the above example, you can see that underlined phrases have been rewritten in the right column for better clarity. For instance, the reader has explained what white moderate implies within the text. Additionally, the term ‘paternalistically’ has been paraphrased as ‘treating others like children’.

Descriptive outline:

Every formal essay and text has an outline. Descriptive outline is when you identify the format of the text to make sense of its organization. You identify how the writer might have introduced his/her main idea/claim, supporting ideas and conclusions. This method is especially relevant when reading academic articles.



The above excerpt is from *Come September* by Arundhati Roy. You can see in the above example that the reader has broken a paragraph down into numbered points. This is an example of reverse outline as it helps the reader clearly understand each point made in a given paragraph.

Please note that the example above is an excerpt of the overall essay. For your class readings, you'll have lengthier texts but the technique is the same as illustrated above.

Comments/Responses:

This is where you move beyond the text. You can now include your reflections on the paper, agreements, disagreements, link the text you're reading to other texts in your prior knowledge etc. This method can eventually help in the analysis section of a paper where you will use the annotated text at hand to write your response.