

smart reading. annotating a document

Reading isn't a one-size-fits-all practice. We adjust our reading style according to various contexts and purposes. When many of us were children, we sometimes “got lost” in a book, immersing ourselves so fully in the story that the real world seemed temporarily to disappear, and the artificial world of the tale became “real.” Oftentimes, reading fiction or non-fictional texts demands nothing more than a space of time. Readers regularly make time to read texts in print and digital form in bed, on the subway, even while walking on a sidewalk. But assigned college reading demands a different method, and a different mode of attention. As a student, you are asked to interpret, analyze, or otherwise make use of the text you are reading, often to help you produce your own writing, or to catalyze your participation in an upcoming class discussion.

There is more at stake when you take on intellectual reading. First, you want to read in a way that will enhance your later recall of the discourse. Also, you want to make note of your thinking and reflections as you read, to highlight certain terms, phrases, or passages, to add marginalia, to sketch an argument's structure as you discern it, and to pose questions about an author's meanings—all in an attempt to make that text “your own.” In essence, you will want to have a conversation with the text, to bring that “quiet” document to new life based on your intellectual interactions with the document.

If you are like many students, you are accustomed to reading with a highlighter in hand. Highlighters color texts, but they are not very useful for recording your interactions with a document. They are the clunkiest of tools for making a text your own. To do that, you need to “write back” to the text, to respond to its terms, phrases, passages, data, or structure with annotation. That will likely involve drawing special kinds of attention to aspects of the document, posing questions and making comments in the margins, and developing a set of notes that you can refer to after you read. Each of these strategies will help you recall the gist of your reading and will allow you to recover your readerly thoughts. Here are some strategies to consider:

Read and re-read

We offer this strategy first because it is the most difficult to hear. Though most of us wouldn't think of reading a novel for pleasure twice, or re-reading even the most provocative *New Yorker* essay, you will be amazed at that powers re-reading a scholarly document will confer. We suggest that you read any scholarly article, report, chapter, or essay twice: the first time to get the “lay of the land,” to see where the argument is going; the second time to respond by annotation and marginal comments. Refrain from marking the text the first time through—at most make minimal markings in the margin. Save underlining terms, phrases, and passages, posing questions, and responding for the second time through. If possible, let some time pass between readings. You'll be amazed how well you understand the text and how rich responses will be if you read and then re-read.

Develop Your Own Annotation System

Though digital documents can be annotated, if you do so online you are limited to the several tools available for marking the text. In a digital document, it is challenging (or impossible) to make marginal comments easily, so if you plan to make use of a document in class discussion or in your own writing, it is wise to operate with printed copies of texts. Plus, cognitive psychologists tell us that the action of physically writing on the page (going analog, if you will) enhances memory, activating some important connection between instrument, hand, and brain. Plus, physical writing allows you to be flexible (to invent new marking symbols as needed) and to customize your marks to fit your personal needs.

Underlining, Encircling

Underlining comes in a variety of styles: a single line, a double line, a squiggly line, a dotted line. These various styles can signal levels of importance, or differentiate claims from reasons, or reasons from evidence. Some of us take underlining a step further and, say, draw a box around a writer's central claim, or encircle key words, or put a triangle around ambiguous or problematic terms. For further differentiation, you could put a dotted circle around what you find to be dubious assertions, or two lines encircling a writer's reference to another's text that you would like to find. The key here is that this system of codes, however simplistic or complex, is your own, and meets your needs as a careful reader.

Marginal Symbols

You have at your disposal a nearly endless array of simple symbols that you can place in the margin to indicate the special status of some phrase or passage. A five-pointed star might mean super important; an asterisk (*) could mark a less important passage; an X could mark a passage that you call into question. A check mark (✓) could stand next to an element in an important list, or a number in a circle could do the same (②). Be inventive but be consistent so that you can learn—and remember—your own system. Just think of all the possibilities for smart coding.

Marginal Comments

It is also important that you actively respond to and question the text efficiently—by way of short phrases or efficient sentences. “Definition of X term,” “core value,” or “questionable assumption,” for example, can both help you decide your angle of approach as you discuss the document in class or factor some of its parts into your own writing, but don't hesitate to extend your comments as full sentences, complete questions, or even a short reaction paragraph, which you can do either on the pages of the printed document or on a separate sheet of paper.

Remember that all these annotation techniques give you ready access to a document when you need to make use of it, either in class discussion or in your own writing. If you arrive to a class discussion with an unmarked document, for practical purposes, it might as well be unread since you'll likely struggle to identify important passages, will have no record of your thinking, and will waste precious time when you could be contributing to the discussion.