

## Upper School English Book Annotation

Why annotate?

Annotation allows you to

- flag important information or particular passages to help you find them later
- process your reading more fully by reading actively
- keep a record of your first reading

Even though I am on reading 26+ of *The Great Gatsby*, I use the book I first annotated as an adult reading the novel in order to remember what the novel emphasizes (as I understood it via that first reading), to understand what foreshadowing or other patterns (motifs, themes) I picked up on, and to find material quickly when I need it. I keep annotating the same book as my ideas change and my brilliant students point out new patterns I had not noticed.

Students are sometimes afraid to annotate

1. because books are somehow sacred, mystical objects
2. because students are afraid they are misreading and will make a mistake
3. because they are afraid they will annotate too much or not enough

Let me refute:

1. If you have a first edition or other version of the novel that has intrinsic worth as an art object, you should buy a \$10 copy of the novel to annotate. But, really, writing in books is a practice that's been around since the monks doodling or annotating in the scriptorium—and later readers will enjoy your ideas. The book is enhanced, not marred, by your annotation.

2. One idea I emphasize in all high school classes is that **your misreadings are important**. When my students are reading *As I Lay Dying*, a moderately difficulty modernist text, they will frequently try to figure out passages by writing in the margins, and they will frequently be wrong. I try to help students react by seeing that something in the text is pushing them in that direction, and while their inference may not have been right, they are right to pick up on the tension created by the book's use of misdirection or overlapping themes. Rather than castigate yourself as a poor reader, consider asking: "Why did I think that? What in the novel caused me to think that way?"

3. As for annotating too much or not enough, I think you develop balance not magically through maturity but incrementally through practice. You want to be able to see what's important on the page—annotate simply and carefully keeping the basic reasons for annotation in mind.

How to annotate

Many teachers have many different methods of annotation, involving different colors of highlighter, different abbreviations, and so on, but I think that over time you will develop your best system. In the meantime, here is how you should get started:

1. Use a pen or pencil to write words in the margins. Depending on what the difficulties of the text are, you might write in the margin:
  - the name of a newly introduced character
  - the name of the character speaking if it is at all confusing
  - your reaction (“Whoa!”, “I can’t believe I feel sorry for Stiva!”, “Yes!”) in order to track the emotional effect of any given passage as you encounter it in the larger sweep of the text
  - to flag a motif or developing pattern in the text (“water words,” “music motif,” “symbol?”)
  
2. Use a pen or pencil to write words at the top of pages. Do this mainly so that you can find important scenes later, when you need them for a discussion or paper.
  - Flag an important scene when the text is at all complex or the narrative is not chronological, so you can find it later: “Dunya and Svid revolver scene,” “Rask’s dream of the horse,” etc.
  - Flag a pattern you are tracking.
  - Make a connection to another text (“like *Macbeth*”) or to another place in the current text (“cf. p. 42 train symbol”)
  
3. Some people underline important passages with highlighters. I say this is fine, but if you have one writing instrument with you when you read, it should be a pen or pencil, which can underline as well as allow you to write words or phrases in the margins. Writing words will help you more and keep you more active than highlighting will.
  
4. Use the inside front and back covers to keep track of events if the novel is not presented in a linear way (*Mrs. Dalloway*); to keep track of characters (Russian novels or any texts where names are confusing to you); to keep track of which house or estate belongs to which characters and which county people live in (any Jane Austen novel); to make family trees (Faulkner or *The Iliad*); and so on.

But...

Won't I enjoy the text less and be less immersed if I annotate?

Maybe at first. Once you are well practiced in annotation, you will want to annotate in order to process your reading more deeply and to heighten your concentration. Those benefits count as deeper enjoyment and don't slow you down.