

Annotation

The practice of annotation serves multiple practical purposes. First, it keeps us actively engaged in the text, enhancing recall and reducing the “blur” or “drift” effect that occurs when our attentions lapse for pages at a time. Second, annotation trains us to look for significance and nuance in a text. It is dissection, in the biological sense; it’s anatomy; it’s opening the watch face and exposing the mechanism inside. As a creative person, you love this – you love to discover how things work, and annotation is a means to that end. Third, annotation helps us to keep track of our thinking. It is invaluable outside of class in reviewing for a test; it is invaluable in class for finding that one part of that one chapter where that one person said that one thing while everyone around you twiddles their thumbs expectantly, waiting for you to finish flipping through the pages.

Annotation is not “homework,” or “busy-work,” then; it is a practical necessity in the study of a text. An annotation is a signpost that calls attention to a particular, noteworthy feature in a piece of literature. It is an expression of surprise, of amazement, of curiosity, and a good reader is a good tour guide who is able to point out to others what deserves to be admired, questioned, or challenged. If you already have a strong critical eye, we will need to rely on you to tell us what we *should* have been seeing in the reading. If you are new to this and a little unsure of yourself, then we will need you to probe the thinking of the more experienced readers, testing their abilities to articulate precisely what they mean and why we should even care. It’s a win/win for everyone.

In addition, your annotations will be the springboard for class discussion, and as anyone could be called on at any time to participate in a “fishbowl,” it would behoove you to come to class prepared.

Some reassurance: Your comments do not have to be lengthy. Most of my own comments are from one to five words long, and read something like this (from *A Farewell to Arms*):

“Ha.”; “He’s still injured.”; “They’re the same.”; “Uh, that’s weird advice.”; “Wow. Relevant, and modernist.”; “Doesn’t sound like macaroni.”; “Hypocrisy”; “All alone now. Where’s he even going?”; “What’s that about?”; “Hmm.”

An exclamation point might suffice; a question mark might do – as long as you can later remember what your symbols mean. Understand also that on some pages, I’ll jot down five or six things, while on another page, I might just underline a phrase. Don’t feel pressured, in other words, to make a million comments on every single sentence because that would defeat the purpose; it would slow your reading down to a crawl, and it would actually make it more difficult for you to find what you’d be looking for later on.

Now, study the chart below (Highlight and annotate it! You have been doing that, right?), and understand that these are the things for which you should be actively searching. Whenever you notice one of these elements at work, highlight or underline the text, and make a brief comment: what you’ve seen might be important, and we should probably talk about it together.

Element of Literature	Definition	What to Look For
Setting	The details that establish a specific sense of time and place	Note any shifts in time and place that indicate new scenes (Where/when are we now?). Note the names of places that seem important. Note how setting reflects the moods/personalities of the characters, or how it reflects plot and/or theme (Dark? Sunny? Raining? Why?). Note descriptions of objects of human manufacture (Is this a symbol? A metaphor?).
Character	The characters in a story, including the protagonist, the	Note the appearance of characters who seem important. Figure out

	<p>antagonist, the villain, the foil, and so on. Characters can be flat or round, static or dynamic.</p>	<p>who a character is by noting what s/he says, does, looks like, wants, and what others say about her/him. Note whether or not the character changes, and where those changes may occur. Note the relationship between characters. Note the interaction between the characters and the setting.</p>
Plot	<p>The sequence of events in a story. Almost every plot can be described by this “plot sentence”:</p> <p><u>[character] wants to [character’s desire], but [the conflict – or, “that which confounds the character’s desire”], so [the conflict’s outcome].</u></p> <p>As in:</p> <p><u>Odysseus wants to return to Ithaca, but he has angered Poseidon, so he must wander at sea for ten years.</u></p>	<p>Note how the narrator builds suspense, which is also called “rising action.” Note the causes and effects in a plot – how one thing leads to another, which leads to something else. Note what seems as if it may be <i>ominous</i> or may foreshadow events to come. Note how the characters’ actions and desires drive the events in a story, as well as how the characters respond to outside events. Note the relationship between scenes, considering how they have been ordered.</p>
Theme	<p>The author’s exploration of a universal idea.</p>	<p>Look for symbols and <i>motifs</i> – repeated images, phrases, and, in particular, ideas that reoccur throughout the entire text, particularly in the characters’ speech (what do they always seem to be talking about?), their desires, and their actions, and note them. Consider the plot: do you notice certain patterns in the things that happen? Overall, what does the author (as distinct from the narrator) seem to be suggesting about this universal idea: if it’s “love,” then what does the author want us to think about it?</p>
Point of View	<p>The narrator’s position in relationship to her/his story, either first-, second-, or third-person. Narrators can be omniscient or limited, intrusive or unintrusive, fallible/unreliable, or self-conscious.</p>	<p>Pay attention to how the story is actually told. Note changes in the story’s <i>tone</i> and/or changes in the <i>syntax</i> (how sentences are put together). Note times when the narrator includes or <i>implies</i> her/his own opinion on her/his own story. How trustworthy is the narrator? Note the things/people to whom the narrator seems to be paying attention. Note what seems strange about the story that s/he is telling.</p>