

Annotating That Goes the Distance

Many of my students begin class with years of experience underlining and highlighting. After the first assigned reading, they proudly show me pages that have little untouched space remaining and that boast multiple colors of highlighted lines. When I ask questions about the main ideas or details in the text they marked, they have to reread all of it.

To help them learn to mark a page in a way that is meaningful and that prevents the need to reread every word, I begin by offering short text that is reader-friendly: it begins with a stated main idea and signal words or features of font like italics that mark the major supporting details. Most college textbooks are reader-friendly, so I am showing a technique that will be applicable across disciplines and that relates directly to how they can write more clearly as well.

After we read the text once without a pen or highlighter in hand, I ask them what the author is promising, at the beginning of the paragraph, to tell them. Then we pick up our pens and pencils. When they verbally identify the topic, I ask them to mark it with the letter "T" above it or circle the topic word and write "T" or "topic" in the margin. Then I ask them what the author promises to use to make her point. When we find the proof, we mark it with numbers and/or short notes in the margins. Following that, I ask them to explain what the marks they have made indicate to a neighbor. They put this aside, and at the end of that class and at the beginning of the next one, I ask questions their marks will help them to answer, such as "What's the topic and point of this text? What proof does the author give the reader to support that point?" Many are amazed that they remember that information without looking at the page, and those that look at the page are surprised by how quickly they locate what they want. It's much easier to sell annotating as an active reading tool after experiences like this!

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