

Active Reading Strategies

WRITING AS YOU READ: MARKING AND ANNOTATING

Some college students are hesitant to write in their textbooks. Many were not allowed to mark their textbooks in high school, and some believe that it will reduce the price they will get when selling textbooks back to the Bookstore.

Beginning now, you are encouraged to develop a different belief: marking in college texts is not only allowed, it is encouraged. Reasonably marked texts are easily sold back to the Bookstore, and often benefit the students who purchase them the next semester.

Think of what you are doing when you write in a journal. You are actively engaged in reflecting on your life and the meaning of events and interactions with others. When you write in your textbook, you are doing the same thing: responding and reacting to the reading material. Writing allows you to become fully engaged in the reading process, making it one of the most important aspects of reading.

The “Three Bears Rule” for Marking Text

The following example helps to illustrate how text marking should identify only main ideas and major supporting details—without too much or too little information being marked.

Over-marked text

Think again about how you best learn information (see Chapter 1). Outlines and maps help you predict and organize information while surveying. This is particularly true if you rephrase headings and subheadings into questions or connect chapter titles with headings and subheadings to questions. Questions require you to look for answers, and thus, make reading more active. You read to answer *what, how, when, who, which, where, and why.* When previewing, you will normally be looking for main ideas. Thus, why, how, and *what* questions will form the basis of your previewing outline. Question outlines and maps make previewing less covert and more concrete. They help set goals for reading.

Under-marked text

Think again about how you best learn information (see Chapter 1). Outlines and maps help you predict and organize information while surveying. This is particularly true if you rephrase headings and subheadings into questions or connect chapter titles with headings and subheadings to questions. Questions require you to look for answers, and thus, make reading more active. You read to answer *what, how, when, who, which, where, and why.* When previewing, you will normally be looking for main ideas. Thus, *why, how, and what* questions will form the basis of your previewing outline. Question outlines and maps make previewing less covert and more concrete. They help set goals for reading.

“Just right” marked text

Think again about how you best learn information (see Chapter 1). Outlines and maps help you predict and organize information while surveying. This is particularly true if you rephrase headings and subheadings into questions or connect chapter titles with headings and subheadings to questions. Questions require you to look for answers, and thus, make reading more active. You read to answer *what, how, when, who, which, where, and why.* When previewing, you will normally be looking for main ideas. Thus, *why, how, and what* questions will form the basis of your previewing outline. Question outlines and maps make previewing less covert and more concrete. They help set goals for reading.

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Source: Carol Rosenthal, Academic Resource Center, Study Skills Instruction Module, Text Book Reading Skills.

Reference: Longman, D.G. and Atkinson, R.H. College and Learning Skills. 6th ed. 2002, Wadsworth Thomson Learning.

MARKING AND ANNOTATING TEXT

When Should You Mark and Annotate Your Text?

Marking and annotating should be done after a “chunk” or unit of thought has been presented and the information can be viewed as a whole. This may mean marking after only one paragraph or after three pages. If you mark as you read, too much is marked and you are unable to see the “big picture” or main concepts. It takes time for the brain to organize information, so if you read, think, and then mark, the main points will develop, and you can decide what you need to mark to remember later.

How Do You Mark and Annotate Your Text?

You isolate key information by underlining and highlighting topics, main ideas, and important details. You create meaningful organization of that information by annotating. Annotating refers to writing explanatory notes in the margins of your textbook to organize and remember important information.

While you read, look for signals that will tell you what information may be important:

- Headings
- Key terms and definitions
- Lists
- Illustrations
- Important people
- Time sequences or dates

Then mark and annotate your text:

1. Headings:

- Turn each heading into a question by writing a question phrase in front of the heading. Use who, how, why, what, when to start your question.
- Underline or circle the answer. In the margin, write ANS and a few words to answer the question. Most texts are dense with facts and dates, and there may be several parts in the answer to your question. Mark and number each part that answers your question.

2. Terms and definitions:

Terms are usually printed in italics or bold, but the definitions that follow appear in regular print.

- Circle a key term and underline its definition.
- In the margin, write the key term.
- If the key term is also an answer to a question, write ANS above the words in the margin.

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3. Important information signaled by lists:

Textbooks include many facts and data in the form of lists. Watch for the signals that indicate lists.

- Put a star next to the words that tell you what a list is about.
- Circle and number the items in the list if they do not already have numbers and letters.
- In the margin, write what the list is about in a word or two. Then list the points in an abbreviated format.
- If the list is also an answer to a question, write ANS in the margin next to the words which introduce the list.

4. Illustrations such as charts, graphs, and diagrams:

- Circle the title of the illustration, if it has one.
- If an illustration has no title, use the explanation of the illustration to give it a title. Explanations are usually given on the same page as the illustrations. Write your title near the illustration.
- Write a brief summary of the information next to the illustration.

What System of Notation Should You Use?

Highlighting material is not just underlining; it is also circling, starring, numbering, and generally making an effort to put the material into perspective visually. Notations vary with the individual, and each student develops a number of original creations. Anything that makes sense to you is a correct notation. The following are examples of a notation or marking system.

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Main idea



Word that you must be able to define



Supporting material or definition

1 2 3

Numbering of supporting ideas under main idea

✓

Possible exam question

?

Didn't understand and must seek advice

Topic or Def. or Ex.

Notes in the margin

How does it operate?

Study guide questions, statements, or terms in the margin



Indicates a relationship

Source: Academic Resource Center, Study Skills Instruction Module, Text Book Reading Skills. Graphic created by: Penny Findlay, Academic Resource Center.