

How to Read: Using Annotation in the Composition Classroom

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Each semester, students enter my classroom nervous and resistant. I hand them a syllabus loaded with readings, expecting them to enter a conversation and write about it. Yet, by mid-semester, it becomes clear that students have stopped reading the assigned texts. This summer, I addressed this problem by attempting to reform my composition classes in accordance with Rebecca Moore Howard's *The Citation Project*—which shows that students struggle when using and citing sources and “are not engaging with texts in meaningful ways” (Jamieson and Howard 4). Through this process, I realized that I had neglected to teach a fundamental part of the composition class: reading. Of course, students already know how to read the words on a page; it is a skill they have been using since Kindergarten. But they have not perfected it. And, because most of my students are in first year, they have trouble comprehending the type of reading required.

This semester, I spent the first week teaching them how to read with the help of a handout titled “How to Read.” The results have been promising. My students read the material more enthusiastically and seem to understand it better. They come to class more prepared and ready to discuss and analyze the essays. Several times one student told me how much he learned in that one week that he wished he had known earlier. As a younger college student, he failed English 1010 and is now back trying to make it through again. He says he has never understood the reading in college classes until now and finally is able to remember what he reads. This is exactly what English teachers long to hear. We want our students to enjoy reading as much as we do. We want them to comprehend and then write about what they know. We want them to find joy in learning.

My approach is not necessarily new or unique, but represents a compilation of ideas from other educators and researchers. I use several annotating techniques in tandem to maximize students' comprehension and to give them many strategies for learning. Composition research focused on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), a scale that psychologists use to determine personality types, has shown not all students have the same learning style. Thomas C. Thompson, who has produced dozens of articles and presentations on type theory in composition, edited a book of essays on personality and writing. He suggests that “Designing instruction to appeal to all of the possible functions is the simplest way to use type theory to make teaching more effective” (15). If teachers create activities or assignments that require a combination of many personality types, they will give all students the chance to excel. Understanding that students are unique, and therefore learn differently, will help teachers identify why a student is struggling and how to help. My combination of several annotating and comprehension strategies aids this process.

On my handout, I included the following suggestions, required for the first reading assignment and encouraged for study throughout the semester. First, read the title and the first paragraph, and then stop and predict where the reading will go next. Write down two or three subjects the article will subsequently cover and two or three questions about those issues. Vivian M. Rosenberg, author of a textbook and articles on critical reading echoes the suggestion to predict, recommending that students “scan your reading selection, noting the title, chapter headings and subheadings, and glancing at the introduction and conclusion, the illustrations, and anything else that catches your eye” (86). This pre-reading strategy gives students a sense of what’s coming and may even help them to pay closer attention to the words. Rosenberg also tells students to “T-A-P your assignment by thinking about topic, audience, and purpose” (86). Again, her aim is to help students connect and identify with the topic before reading a word.

Second, I instructed my students to list three or four things they already know about the topic and three or four things they want to know about the topic. This activity engages their minds and helps them to invest in what they are reading. While they read, they will look for the ideas they have written down, thus actively countering “the disquieting limitations of mechanical reading” (Huse 708).

Third, I advocated for annotating with a pen or pencil. If students do not want to write in their books, I suggest making a photocopy or using sticky notes. Perhaps one of the biggest proponents of annotating is Mortimer J. Adler. As a class, we read Adler’s “How to Mark a Book,” in which he suggests writing in books because “reading, if it is active, is thinking” (11). He also says that “writing helps you remember the thoughts you had, or the thoughts the author expressed” (11). Many students report that annotation helps them do this. One student reported that annotating has helped him to remember the major themes of each essay so he can write about it without forgetting. I am pleased with these results because I expect students to recall what they have read. If I am to expect my students to think about and remember what they are reading for class, however, they must first know how to annotate and be encouraged to do so.

My fourth suggestion to students is to emphasize short phrases and key ideas when marking passages: use circles, boxes, squiggles, double-underlines, stars, or checkmarks. Adler too has specific ideas about marking books. His list includes underlining, circling, and writing in the margin, where he suggests vertical lines, numbers, stars, asterisks, other doodads, or numbers of other pages (12). This practice not only encourages students to interact with the text, but also to make connections to other texts and other passages. I tell students to write comments on each page with short reactions or connections to other texts we have read. Students are also encouraged to use their cell phone texting skills as a way of making comments in the margins.

Such marks slow down a reader. But, Adler says, “There is no such thing as the right speed for intelligent reading” (13). My students delight in this idea, as most of their school experiences up until college have emphasized speed in standardized testing. Students recounted their negative experiences or anxieties with the elementary school reading test Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS), or finishing a section of a college entrance exam in time. They connected with Adler’s assertion that speed reading does not prove understanding or application — and it certainly does not guarantee comprehension. But, as Jolene Zywic and Kimberley Gomez suggest, the slower speed annotation requires will “help students become better readers [. . .], increase their reading scores [. . .], and improve their content understanding” (155-56).

There have been many successful reading outcomes in my English composition course this semester. Several students agreed to share their experiences with annotating.¹ Heidi said that annotating has given her “greater retention and easier recall for writing,” while Timothee expressed that annotating has “helped me tremendously in comprehending what I was reading more

¹ I include the students’ statements with permission. Their statements were obtained following the ethics protocols for interviewing students as outlined by the university where I teach.

thoroughly” and Brett, who confessed his fear of English class, said that the practice “has helped me because I understand the reading much better [. . .]. It makes me feel smarter knowing I can annotate well. This has helped me build my confidence, and makes me enjoy reading more.” Giving these students the tool of annotating has improved their reading comprehension and study skills.

The last step for students is to compose two or three questions about the reading. I tell them to write genuine questions rather than those they think I might ask. We use these questions for class credit and to spark discussions. Sandra McCandless Simons, author of many texts about reading, says writing and asking questions helps students to understand what they have read. She suggests, “Once they understand the passage on a literal level, they are ready to think about its content: evaluate it, apply it to new situations, draw conclusions from it, foresee consequences of it, and generate alternative hypotheses” (426). Discussion questions help students do all of these things. In addition to asking questions, students should list three to four things they have learned from the reading. The last part of my handout says: “Were any of your questions answered? What else do you still want to know?”

I always try to impress upon students that their reading and writing in a composition class is a conversation, as many textbooks frequently point out. Last year, I used a textbook titled *Conversations: Readings for Writing* by Jack Selzer and Dominic A. Delli Carpini. Rosenberg takes the idea of conversation a step further, saying, “we have to make a special effort to keep in mind the very real person who authored the text and *listen* to what this other human being is trying to communicate” (97). She promotes empathy and good listening skills as part of the conversation, and thereby also promotes good reading comprehension.

Not only has this annotating practice helped my students to read and remember, but it has also helped reduce the anxiety sometimes associated with taking an English composition class. Each semester, I hear how much students hate English or how hard it has always been for them. This semester, several of these former naysayers scheduled office time to thank me for giving them the tools to succeed in reading. My “How to Read” handout has helped them to navigate their English assignments and reduce anxiety. Some research suggests that “The documented link between study skills and academic achievement can be interpreted with respect to theories of anxiety, social cognition, and self-regulated learning” (Onwuegbuzie 238). Teaching my composition students how to read, and the results of this exercise, illustrates that connection.

In connection to Howard’s research, mentioned earlier, this annotating exercise has led students to better summarizing skills. Her research suggests that students have trouble paraphrasing and summarizing; because of annotating, I have seen an improvement. They now tend to write summaries that focus on the main ideas of a text rather than just restating the first paragraph. I can also see a difference between students who annotate and students who do not, because those who use this skill more accurately convey ideas from the text. Students articulate authors’ ideas more clearly because they have a more complete sense of what they have read. When asked, my classes informed me that annotating makes the process of summarizing easier. They find that annotation helps them to summarize because they have already located the important points and made notes to themselves about them. One said, “It makes or helps me break down my essays or the stories into the key facts. It helps me organize better.” Clearly, annotation is helpful in both summarizing and articulating ideas.

Noticing connections is also an important part of my composition class; connecting ideas prepares students for synthesizing sources when they begin to do scholarly research. Students who use annotation tend to make more thoughtful connections. Before using annotation, many students pointed out surface connections, such as noting that both assigned essays are about education. After annotation, however, students tend to notice that less prominent ideas can connect, even when the themes of the essays are dissimilar; as Daryl says, annotating “helps me organize my thoughts and make connections to other essays.” He recognizes the importance of using annotation to “read between the lines while reading” and look for ways to enter the conversation among texts.

Students also see benefits to their critical thinking skills. Alyssa said, “[I] read more critically so that I pick up on the main points and then I can write more effectively.” Critical reading leads students to critical thinking. In one class, a student demonstrated this by noticing a connection between an essay’s title and closing paragraph that I had not. Many such insights have occurred this semester. When my students notice more about the readings than I do, I am impressed. Their insights prove they have fully engaged with the text while studying. Many students claim that they are thinking more deeply about the concepts in the texts, and I see evidence of this in our lively class discussions.

I can also see critical thinking demonstrated in the discussion questions each student is required to write after each reading. One astute question from Evan read, “Did you notice the cultural aspect of this story that men’s communication of ‘doing’ occurred in place of ‘conversing,’ like that of women’s? In this respect, what do you think would be an equivalent experience for mother and daughter?” This student used the differences in communication styles for men and women, articulated in an essay we had previously read by Deborah Tannen, and applied it to E.B. White’s “Once More to the Lake.” The student’s approach came through thoughtfulness and critical thinking, and his ability to see the connection because of his annotations.

All of these skills are useful beyond the composition classroom, which is a place where students should be learning how to write for upper-level university courses, no matter the discipline. I always spend time convincing skeptical students that they will take writing skills with them into any profession. I also emphasize the idea that this is a study skill that should apply to their other courses as well. Emily says, “Annotating has helped me in my other courses, especially my history class, because if I’m studying for a test or a final, I can look back at the little notes that I made.” Other students have relayed the usefulness of annotation in math, computer science, communications, nursing, criminal justice, and physics classes. It feels elementary to be telling them how to study; however, many of them were unaware of these skills before I introduced annotation into my classroom. No matter what courses they take or professions they enter, reading and writing will always be important.

Harold Bloom, well-known literary critic and Yale humanities professor, is another scholar who has written on the subject of reading. His book *How to Read and Why* focuses mainly on literature and its value, especially when part of a traditional canon. However, his suggestions can extend to the college freshman learning to write. He says, “reading is scarcely taught as a pleasure” (22). Hence reading becomes drudgery to children, instead of a means of enlightenment. He admonishes readers to “Read deeply, not to believe, not to accept, not to contradict, but to learn to share in that one nature that writes and reads” (29). Essentially, this is what composition teachers want for their students, to synthesize their abilities to read and write and to find pleasure in that process.

The suggestions in this essay are the product of trial and error in my own study habits, recommendations from professors in my graduate program, and time-tested methods of reading and annotating. I wrote my “How to Read” handout because I was frustrated when students came to class unprepared and uninterested. So far, my efforts have succeeded. Despite his disinterest in English class, Jaden admits that annotating “helps me appreciate what I’m reading even if it’s something I’m not interested in.” As well as students who have commented directly on how much they are learning, the success of my handout is also attested to by the many students who now seem more engaged and may, quite possibly, be enjoying English.

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