Note-Taking vs. Annotation

Most serious readers take notes of some kind when they are carefully considering a text, but many readers are too casual about their note taking. Later they realize they have taken notes that are incomplete or too random, and then they painfully start over, re-notating an earlier reading. You can easily improve the depth of your reading and extend your understanding over long periods of time by developing an organized form of annotating.

First, what is the difference between annotating and “taking notes?” Annotating refers to a way of making notes directly onto a text such as a book, a handout, or another type of publication. The advantage of having one annotated text instead of a set of note papers plus a text should be clear enough: all the information is together and inseparable, with notes very close to the text for easier understanding, and with fewer pieces to keep organized.

What the reader gets from annotating is a deeper initial reading and an understanding of the text that lasts. You can deliberately engage the author in conversation and questions, maybe stopping to argue, pay a compliment, or clarify an important issue—much like having a teacher or storyteller with you in the room. When you come back to the text, that initial exchange is recorded for you, making an excellent and entirely personal study tool.

Criteria for Successful Annotation

Using your annotated copy after your first reading, you can recall the key information in the text with reasonable thoroughness in a 15- to 30-minute review of your notes and the text.

Why Annotate?

• Annotate any text that you must know well, in detail, and from which you might need to produce evidence that supports your knowledge or reading, such as a text on which you will be tested.

• Don’t annotate other people’s property, which is almost always selfish, often destructive, rude, and possibly illegal. For a book that doesn’t belong to you, like our textbooks, use sticky notes for your comments, removing them before you return the text.

Tools: Sticky Notes, Pencil, and Your Own Text
How to Annotate

1. Identify unknown and unfamiliar words as you read. You may need to come back and reread the sentences before and after the word to get at the meaning in context. Write a brief definition on a sticky note when you get it.

2. Identify sentences that provide you with definitions of key terms. Write "Def." in the sticky note so you can locate the definition quickly.

3. Mark an “X” or an asterisk (*) on a sticky note next to a sentence that provides an important example or a main topic.

4. Draw a question mark on a sticky note beside a point that is confusing. You may need to research this further or ask about it.

5. Number lists of ideas that the writer provides as support points to back up the main concept. Write a number on a sticky note in the margin next to each supporting detail that clarifies the main idea.

6. Place a check or star next to important passages on a sticky note. This is a good practice when taking a test that requires you to read a passage, because the questions that follow the reading will most likely refer back to these main points.

7. Make notes to yourself on sticky notes in the margins. As you read, write any questions or comments that occur in your mind in the margin next to the passage. Use these annotations in class discussions, essay writing or exams.

8. Keep it simple. Remember, you are trying to connect with the reading in some way. Mark no more than 15 percent of the text.

As you read, section-by-section, chapter-by-chapter, consider doing the following, if useful or necessary:

- At the end of each chapter or section, briefly summarize the material.
- Title each chapter or section as soon as you finish it, especially if the text does not provide headings for chapters or sections.
- Make a list of vocabulary words on a back page or the inside back cover. Possible ideas for lists include the author's unusual slang and new, unknown, or otherwise interesting words.