## An Effective Reading Process: Student Strategies

Being able to annotate and take effective notes helps you actively engage with your texts and improve your reading comprehension.  The strategies included in this handout can help you identify critical components of a reading, understand the content on a deeper level, and recall concepts for later use.

### STRATEGY #1: Developing and Using an Annotation Code

As you begin highlighting any text, you should establish a personal code and use it consistently. This will help you recognize the purpose of your annotations when you review the reading. Otherwise, the annotations will look like mysterious hieroglyphics! Write your code on a piece of paper you can keep next to you as you are reading. The front or end pages of the book are also a good place to record this.

You can create whatever system you like; here's an example to the right to get you started. Your instructor might be willing to share their own annotation code and an example of their annotating in action.

While you may find this complicated at first, over time it will become automatic. Develop your own system, and bring your textbooks to class and practice. Spend a few minutes comparing with your classmates.

ANNOTATION CODE

Main idea: underlined and * in margin
Supporting ideas: squiggly line
Other important ideas: underlined with check mark in margin
Vocabulary/Concept: circled
Definitions: square around the words
Interesting/Shocking idea: exclamation point in margin
Questions: question mark in margin

## STRATEGY #2: Annotating

A multi-staged annotation strategy uses annotation symbols, along with pencil underlining and highlighters, to target key concepts and terms. This allows you both to learn as you go and to test your knowledge as you review for exams or create projects related to the reading. Here are instructions you can follow:

1. **During the first reading:** Use pencil only to underline key ideas.

2. **After finishing a paragraph or section in a textbook:** Review the pencil underlines and then highlight only key ideas and key words. Avoid highlighting more than three to five consecutive words. This helps you isolate major ideas for later review and greater comprehension.

3. **When finished highlighting a paragraph:** Make annotations in the margin. Consider the purpose of the paragraph. These annotations may include: key ideas to remember, questions, lists, reactions, and notes to think about the content more.

4. **After annotating:** Finally, transfer your annotations to a Word document or notebook dedicated to the course. This helps consolidate understanding and is a great tool for studying for exams.

**STRATEGY #3:** **Selective Highlighting**

When highlighting to mark important content in a reading, you may quickly realize you have pretty much colored the whole thing yellow. Instead, use three or four different colors and establish a code for yourself to help you differentiate between ideas. For example: yellow highlights vocabulary, blue highlights main ideas, pink highlights supporting details, and orange highlights facts and concepts.

Here are instructions you can follow:

1.  Use one color to highlight key vocabulary and the corresponding definitions or explanations. Focus on how authors reveal the meaning of new terms within this context.

2.  Use different colors to highlight the main ideas and supporting details.

3.  Use yet another color to highlight the facts and concepts that support a particular viewpoint.

4.  After completing the reading and highlighting, go back and review. Take a few minutes to annotate the text by creating lists, comments, and questions. Then take some book notes based on your highlights and annotations to consolidate your learning and as a great review strategy for exams.

To make this a useful strategy, remember to use pencil to underline the first time you read a section or paragraph; otherwise you could highlight too much information. Then go back over the underlines to pick out key words and phrases to highlight as suggested above.

## STRATEGY #4: Summarizing Annotations for Notes

This strategy uses specific annotations to help you write a summary of the reading. You can record them in your reading journals, submit them as reading notes, or post them online throughout the semester depending on your instructor's needs. Here are instructions you can follow:

1. Number all the paragraphs in the selection to be read.

2. Put a star next to the thesis, marking it as the central idea of the entire reading or section.

3. Label all Main Ideas (main points) with M, all Sub-points (ideas which directly relate to the main idea) with SP, and all supporting details (ones that explain, illustrate, or otherwise develop by adding support) with S.

4. Take notes and make comments in the margins (or on paper, identifying which paragraph the notes came from).

5. In your own words, transcribe the notes into a cohesive paragraph that summarizes the thesis, the main ideas, and supporting ideas.

Here are some tips for your summary.

1. A summary should begin with a sentence that includes the author's name, "The Title of the Selection that You Are Summarizing" and the *Title of the Publication or the Citation for Where You Found It*.

2. If you have several paragraphs (such as one for each paragraph in the essay), see if you can combine these into just a few paragraphs by chunking similar ideas. This should read like an essay, not twenty two short paragraphs.

3. If you have labeled your essay by paragraph numbers from the original source, remove these references.

4. Remove specific examples. Instead, focus on summarizing the use of these examples and why the author used them.

5. Attribute the ideas you are writing about by using the author's last name at least once in each major paragraph to attribute the writing to the author. Ex: "Mills explains that …"

6. Use specific, active verbs to show what the author is doing. Ex: "Mills illustrates… explains…details… demonstrates... shows...  believes…"

7. Pay attention to any indications that you have missed a main idea, and go back to that section and reread it before you make a correction.

## STRATEGY #5: Structured Notetaking

When assigned a reading, you can use this four-columned chart--or create one yourself. The columns will help you create good notes you can use for review. Annotate the text first with these ideas in mind.

| Citation: | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Main Ideas:<br>(What are the big ideas of the reading?) | Explanatory Information:<br>(How are the main ideas explained?) | Support:<br>(How are the main ideas supported? statistics, examples, testimonies, etc.) | Connect:<br>(How does this connect to other ideas/readings from the course, answer questions you have, or relate to personal experiences?) |

After reading a section or chapter, you should then fill in the chart.

**STRATEGY # 6:** **Using Sticky Notes for Annotation and Notetaking**

Some of you are not going to be comfortable writing in your textbooks. For you, sticky notes can be used as a type of annotation instead. Although this can be accomplished with one color of sticky notes, multiple colors can be used to emphasize different types of ideas such as yellow for main ideas, red for supporting ideas, and so on. Adding page and paragraph numbers at the bottom of the notes is good practice for the type of notetaking you will be using for research activities during your academic career and can prevent a potential disaster if the stickies come loose. This is also a good annotation strategy for library or borrowed books.

Use one color of sticky notes to write the main ideas of paragraphs and attach them to the margins next to those paragraphs.

Use another color of sticky notes for supporting details.

Use a third color of sticky notes for vocabulary, definitions, comments, questions, or notes on connections.

**STRATEGY #7: Using the Cornell Method**

Forty years ago, Walter Pauk developed what is known as the Cornell Notetaking Technique to help Cornell University students better organize their notes. Today, Pauk's notetaking technique is probably the most widely used system throughout the United States. Traditionally, it was used for taking notes in a class during a lecture. However, with some modification, this method can also be an effective note taking strategy for reading.

Divides your paper into two columns: the notetaking column (usually on the right) is twice the size of the key word column (on the left). You should leave five to six lines, or about two inches, at the bottom of the page. In this modification, notes from the reading are written in the notetaking column. Notes usually consist of the main ideas of the text, and long ideas are paraphrased. Then, in the "Cues" and "Questions" column, relevant key words are written to be used as memory cues, and study questions can be formulated as well. After the notes have been taken, write a brief summary at the bottom of the page. This helps to increase understanding of what has been read

Here is how you should divide your paper.

| Student Name: _____ | Name of Class: _____ |
|---|---|
| **Cues** | **Notes from the Reading** |
| | |
| **Questions** | |

The summary should be in your own words and reflect the main points you want to remember from the reading.

## Useful Resources

Reading strategies: Scaffolding students' interactions with text.
> http://www.greece.k12.ny.us/instruction/ela/6-12/Reading/Reading%20Strategies/reading%20strategies%20index.htm

Although this website is designed for K-12 students, it features 22 reading strategies that are adaptable to all student levels. Three different methods of annotation are linked on this index page.

Tools for reading, writing and thinking.
> http://www.greece.k12.ny.us/instruction/ela/6-12/Tools/Index.htm

This journal discusses the effectiveness annotating a text has with students. Strategies for annotating texts are also outlined.

Van Blerkom, D. L. (2010). *Orientation to college learning* (6th. ed.).  Boston: Wadsworth Group.

This book is reference for various college learning techniques and applications. Included is a chapter on marking textbooks. Also explained is the technique of making marginal notes, or annotations.

\*\*Please bear in mind that documents on the web might change location or go away. If a link provided here does not work, try searching the key terms in a search engine or locating more of your own resources.