

Annotating Nonfiction

To read carefully, it is essential that you write "all over" what you read, usually in the margins or between the lines—wherever there is space. Marginal notes will help you to conceptualize the piece as you read and will save you time later on if you have to summarize or discuss it. By annotating, you'll be creating a shorthand version of what you're reading to which you can return later for reference. It's always much easier to navigate something you read a few days ago if you have taken detailed marginal notes. Also, careful marginal notes make the process of summarizing the article a snap. And you'll probably find that you tend to have a better understanding of articles you've annotated than you have of pieces you've only read. (Studying a work after you've annotated it is a good way to "master" the article, but if you won't be tested on it, that's not always necessary.) Much of this applies to works of fiction as well, though annotating fiction is a somewhat different process. Here are some general tips for annotating non-fiction:

Right next to each paragraph, write a brief phrase or two summarizing what happens in it. You might say something like "author introduces argument about music" or "here, she shifts into the second part of her discussion." Or you might write something like this: "This paragraph explores example of her point: film of *Hamlet*."

Underline passages that seem crucial to the point of the paragraph or to the larger thesis of the piece, if it has one. Beware of over-underlining. It is always a good idea to make a note in the margin to indicate the importance of the underlined passage.

Put a star, asterisk, or some marker of your choosing next to sections that seem to be very important: passages that make a crucial point or that might be the main point of the piece

Note sections you don't fully understand with a question mark. Or, if you have space, you might write your actual question right there: "What is he saying here?" "What does this mean?" "Doesn't this contradict her earlier argument?"

You'll want to note your response as you read. Does something sound odd, unlikely? Do you agree with what is being said? Do you find a certain section funny, fascinating, etc.? Insert your own reactions into the margins as well.

Outline points being made and the examples given to support them. If the author lists a number of reasons or factors that cause something or says something that can be divided up into a certain number of parts, list the parts or factors in the margin.

Note parts that remind you of things you've read or seen or even said yourself. You might say, "reminds me of movie about" or "that's what I always say."

Don't worry about neatness or correctness. It really doesn't matter if anyone else can understand the notes you are taking; it only matters that you can. Of course, if your writing is so small or sloppy that even you can't understand it five minutes later, you're in trouble.

Other Careful Reading Tips

Look up words you do not understand.

Reread sections you don't understand.

If what you are reading is important (e.g., you have to write a summary of it, it's a source for your paper, or you're going to be tested on it), read it more than once. Sometimes it takes a first read just to get a general sense of a piece; only in the second read do you fully understand what is being said.