

Active Reading Strategies

In order to read effectively, you need to develop a strategy that will work for you. Annotating a reading passage—writing notes on the pages of the reading selection itself—is one strategy you can use to become actively involved in what you’re reading (whatever the course).

Although annotating may seem to take more time, it will benefit you in at least two ways:

1. If you have to return to the text (for example, when studying for a test or writing a paper), you won’t have to reread the entire piece. Notes written within the text and in the margins can serve to remind you of important ideas.
2. When you write notes about reading selections, you develop active rather than passive reading skills. In general, when you are involved with what you read, you will better understand, remember, and engage with texts.

Here are the basic steps for approaching a reading:

Previewing

It is always a good idea to begin reading a text by previewing it. Previewing will give you some sense of what the text is about. This will make it easier for you to understand the argument and information and to think critically about what the text is saying. These are the basic steps in previewing a text:

1. Read the main title
2. Read all subtitles
3. Read the first sentence of each paragraph
4. Read the introductory paragraph
5. Read the concluding paragraph
6. Study any charts, illustrations and photographs

Annotations (Notes in the Margin)

1. Write key ideas or facts and their brief explanations opposite the paragraphs in which they appear.
2. Summarize in the bottom margin the significant ideas on that page. For review, all you have to do is read the bottom margins. If there is any question about these notes when you review them later, all you need do is check that page.
3. Use your own personal system of symbols to mark significant ideas: check marks, asterisks, arrows, vertical and parallel lines, etc.
4. Pose questions in the margins to express your difference of opinion about the author’s message, or put a question mark next to anything you don’t understand (what teachers mean when they ask, “Any questions about last night’s reading?”)

5. Underline vocabulary that is unfamiliar.

Notes in a Binder

1. After reading the first page or section, stop and consider what the main point of the text seems to be so far, and writing it down. Depending on the text, this may be difficult to determine. At the very least, write down what you think the main topic is. As you move through the rest of the reading, you can keep considering what the main point or thesis is.
2. Read a paragraph or two or some manageable portion. Reflect a moment on what you've read and on what it means. Relate this to the thesis and major ideas gained so far. Restate briefly and clearly IN YOUR OWN WORDS the essential and important ideas. You may add brief supporting details, but be sparing. Absolutely avoid copying from the text as this hinders learning instead of helping.
3. Use a simple outline form to show logical and important relationships between ideas. Use space to create an uncluttered and ordered arrangement so that the eye can immediately distinguish the more important from the less important.

Review Notes and Annotations

Review notes and annotations immediately after completing the reading. This may well be the most important review for you as it will reinforce what you have just learned. This secures the initial learning, permitting it to enter the long-term memory, and subsequent periodic reviews will be merely review instead of relearning. Only a few minutes are required. This review also synthesizes the material into a whole.

Underlining and Highlighting

1. Underlining or highlighting is the least helpful. It requires little mental involvement and discourages reworking the information in your mind to check understanding. Moreover, there is a tendency to underline or highlight too much.
2. If you must, underline or highlight sparingly—only key terms, concepts and significant ideas within a sentence. It is assumed that review of the underlined or highlighted concepts and words will immediately bring forth the necessary understanding without rereading the paragraph.

This handout was created by E. Garabedian of Diablo Valley College