Interacting with Text: Close Reading and Annotation

"I don't understand it, and I don't like what I don't understand." - E. B. White, *Charlotte's Web*

Why is marking a book indispensable to reading it?

- First, it keeps you awake – not merely conscious, but wide awake.
- Second, reading, if it is active, is thinking, and thinking tends to express itself in words, spoken or written. The person who says he knows what he thinks but cannot express it usually does not know what he thinks.
- Third, writing your reactions down helps you to remember the thoughts of the author.

As you read and reread, your annotations will become more and more detailed; eventually, they will lead to your own interpretation of the work. Annotation is a discrete skill, and like any skill, it takes significant practice to hone your ability to the point of acquiring expertise.

Before Reading:

- Examine the front and back book cover
- Read the title and any subtitles
- Examine the illustrations
- Examine the print (bold, italic, etc)
- Examine the way the text is set up

As you examine and read these, write questions and make predictions and/or connections near these parts of the text.

During Reading:

Close Reading. WHAT should you annotate? The possibilities are limitless. Keep in mind the reasons we annotate. Your annotations must include comments (evidence of thinking).
- Have a conversation with the text. Talk back to it. [Give it a little sass?]
- Ask questions (essential to active reading). You need to try to answer them as well.
- Comment on the actions or development of a character. Does the character change? Why? How? The result?
- Comment on lines / quotations you think are especially significant, powerful, or meaningful.
- Express agreement or disagreement.
- Summarize key events. Make predictions.
- Connect ideas to each other or to other texts.
- Note if you experience an epiphany. [the Aha! moment]
- Note anything you would like to discuss or do not understand.
- Note how the author uses language (literary devices, rhetorical devices, style). Note the significance if you can:
  - effects of word choice (diction) or sentence structure or type (syntax)
  - [effects of whole text structure]
  - point of view [perspective / narrator type] / effect
  - repetition of words, phrases, actions, events, patterns
  - narrative pace / time / order of sequence of events
  - irony
  - contrasts / contradictions / juxtapositions / shifts
  - allusions

- o   any other figure of speech or literary device
- o   reliability of narrator
- o   motifs or cluster ideas
- o   tone / mood
- o   imagery
- o   themes
- o   setting / historical period
- o   symbols

The most common complaint about annotating is that it slows down your reading. Yes, it does. That's the point. If annotating as you read annoys you, read a chapter, then go back and annotate. Reading a text a second time is preferable anyway.

Annotation is a key component of close reading. How do you annotate? You need to develop a system that works for you (within the following guidelines). Effective annotating is both economical and consistent. The techniques are almost limitless. Use any combination of the following:

- Make brief comments in the margins. Use any [blank] space available – inside cover, random blank pages, etc.
- Make brief comments between or within lines of the text. Do not be afraid to mark within the [text] itself. In fact, you must.
- Circle or put boxes, triangles, or clouds around words or phrases.
- Use abbreviations or symbols – brackets, stars (multiple stars for varying degrees of importance), exclamation points, question marks, numbers, etc.
- Connect words, phrases, ideas, circles, boxes, etc. with lines or arrows.
- Underline – CAUTION: Use this method sparingly. Underline only a few words. Always combine with another method such as comment. Never underline an entire passage. Doing so takes too much time and loses effectiveness. If you wish to mark an entire paragraph or passage, draw a line down the margin or use brackets.
- Highlight – use CAUTION – don't highlight everything!
- Color-mark: Mark with a different color each type of image, image pattern, or motif that is predominant in the passage. Carefully examine what is occurring within, prior to, and following the passage.
- Create your own code.
- Use post-it notes ONLY if you have exhausted all available space (unlikely) [or don't own the book – stupid economy…]

After Reading

- Reread annotations – draw conclusions
- Reread introduction and conclusion – try to figure out something new
- Examine: patterns / repetitions / contradictions; determine possible meanings [HOW and WHY].
- Determine what the title might mean
- If you color-marked or highlighted, is one color predominant? Why?

Further Resources
Sample Close Reading of Bleak House opening: http://www.mantex.co.uk/2009/09/14/what-is-close-reading-guidance-notes/
Close reading walkthrough of "Spring and Fall": http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/lit.margaretpoem.html
Sample pattern identification: http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/documents/CloseReading.html
How to Annotate Literature: http://teachers.sduhsd.k12.ca.us/sfarris/Files/How%20to%20Annotate%20LiteraturePDF.pdf

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