

## Reading Like a Writer: A Guide to Annotations

One of the best ways to learn the craft of writing is to study the work you admire. To truly understand how a piece of writing works, or even how one small part of it works, it's important to articulate your observations and understanding carefully, in writing.

An annotation is a brief analysis of a piece of practical writing intended to help the writer learn about some aspect of craft. This Guide tends to focus on annotating fiction, but the approach can be applied to poetry, nonfiction, plays, etc..

### Where to Start

- 1) Start with a craft topic suggested by the work, such as
  - a) An element, technique, device, or choice obviously essential to the piece\* (\*used throughout to mean short story, novel, chapter, excerpt, essay, poem, etc.)
  - b) An element, technique, device, or choice that is unusual in some way, or
  - c) An element, technique, device, choice, or effect that is either puzzling or for some other reason interesting to you

OR

- 2) Start with a craft topic suggested by a class or lecture or by an essay about writing (or even about something analogous to writing), and work to understand how the piece you've read illustrates or demonstrates what the lecturer/author said.

### *For example:*

Reading an obituary of George Melly, you've become curious about how the author creates such a vivid portrait of this man you have never heard of in such a short space. Having recently studied the work of sentences, you propose that the specific craft of the sentences makes the whole piece fly, and you undertake an annotation to investigate.

### A Very Limited Beginning of a List of Possible Annotation Topics

The effects of active verbs in X.

Diction in X.

The effects of sentence structure in X.

Effective repetition in X.

Parallel structure in X.

The effects of sentence variety in X.

The effects of adjectives and adverbs in X.

Irregular punctuation in X.

The use of figurative speech in X.

The evolution of characters in X.

The gradual revealing of character in X.

The influences of secondary characters on the main character in X.

Multiple perspectives of the main character provided in X.

Variation on stereotype in X.

The effectiveness of character names in X.

Surprise in characters in X.

The relationship between setting and character in X.

Characterization through dialogue in X.

Tension between the said and unsaid in X.

Jargon, slang, and technical vocabulary in X.

Descriptions of faces in X.

Physical descriptions of characters in X.

The creation of atmosphere in X.

Description of setting in X.

Description filtered through POV character in X.

Conflicting descriptions in X.

Accumulating descriptions in X.

Energized description in X.

## Once You Have the Topic and the Text

You'll read the piece repeatedly— at least three times—when writing your annotation.

- 1.) The first time, you're simply reading for content and first impressions.
- 2.) The second time, you should read more narrowly, looking for specific language (local effects) that illustrates your topic: words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, scenes. In many cases, you'll want to demonstrate either progression or variety; this requires carefully selecting enough illustrative passages to demonstrate the progression or variety, without turning the annotation into an enormous list, or repeating yourself. In most cases, three or four passages will be sufficient; in some cases, one is sufficient (if, for example, you're examining how the terms of a story are established in its opening paragraph, or how plot, meaning, and character are resolved in its final paragraph). You might underline or highlight the most apparently useful passages, but it can be even more useful to write or type them out.
- 3.) The next step is to analyze—to attempt to understand and explain—those passages. Keep in mind that an annotation can record the act of exploration, or the process of moving toward understanding. You need not assert knowledge you don't have; you should feel free to pose questions, so long as you try to answer them.

It may be easiest to think of analysis in terms of a few steps:

- 1) Describe what you see.
  - 2) Explain the local effect of what you see.
  - 3) Explain how that local effect serves one or more of the piece's larger goals.
- 4.) In turning these individual analyses into an annotation, you'll need to find a useful structure for your evidence. As you analyze the chosen passages, relationships among them will emerge. An analysis of one passage might refer to another; and by being aware of these relationships and by consciously creating transitions, you can discover the best order for your examples. A common mistake is to simply track an aspect of craft—say, description of setting—from the beginning of the piece to the end, when a more illuminating organization would emphasize the most significant descriptions, or the changes in setting, or the pieces repeated use of certain descriptive words or phrases.
- 5.) Before you consider the annotation complete, you should read the piece a third time, both to see if you've overlooked anything and to see if the conclusions you've drawn still seem to be in harmony with the actual text.

When in doubt, looking at less material more carefully will always be beneficial.

## Common Issues

The annotation is a unique genre and one that you likely have never attempted before. Here are some of the most common issues I see in reading annotations—and suggestions to address them:

- ❶ The craft focus is not sufficiently narrow.

*Zero in on a single aspect; focus your analysis on just part of the text, if necessary. While the story you're discussing may be fascinating for many reasons, you need to examine only the single craft topic you've selected.*

- ❷ The craft topic is not clearly stated or defined.

*Tell us what you intend to look at; have a thesis.*

- ❸ The annotation does not investigate its stated topic in sufficient detail.

*Check yourself: are you still pursuing the same idea on page 2? If you can't find enough detail in support, maybe you to revise your focus.*

- ❹ The annotation does not cite specific passages/examples from the text.

*Don't assume I have photographic recall of the text. Quote it.*

- ❺ The annotation consists largely of plot summary.

*You can, however, assume I recall the contours of plot. Reference plot only as it supports your analysis.*

- ❻ The annotation is primarily about theme or meaning.

*When you read like a writer, you primarily answer how a piece means.*

- ❼ The annotation lists examples, but does not provide analysis or comment.

*You've offered evidence: good. Now, tell me what you want me to learn from that evidence. Explain it.*

- ❽ The analysis is not clearly expressed.

*Take time to demonstrate your logic. When things are more complex, break your explanation into separate steps and walk me through them.*

- ❾ The annotation emphasizes opinion or passes judgment without sufficient supporting analysis.

*In general, an annotation doesn't traffic in opinion or judgment. But any evaluation needs an explanation that is directly tied to evidence.*

- ❿ The annotation is not clearly organized.

*Consider an annotation a micro-essay and invent a structure that will create coherence and show your idea advancing. Often, the structure of an annotation matches its subject text; you might track a craft topic from beginning to middle to end of a piece.*

- ⓫ The annotation contains numerous mechanical or grammatical errors.

*You need not be formal, but you should be presentable. Read aloud to yourself and you'll catch these issues before submission. Still, annotations are meant to be functional rather than publishable—they should always help you.*