WRITTEN BY TEACHERS FOR TEACHERS

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TEACHING STUDENTS TO TALK TO THEIR TEXTS

Can the teaching of effective annotation be the key to unlocking students' learning of texts? Steve Chiger explores this idea and how we might go about building it into our classroom practice.

Stephen Chiger

Back in 2019, researchers made one gem of a discovery: what appears to be Milton's copy of Shakespeare's first folio. As you'd imagine, it was a finding met with wide-eyed, bookish glee. Cambridge fellow Jason Scott-Warren reported that as he put the clues together, he became "quite trembly… You're gathering evidence with your heart in your mouth."

And why shouldn't he have felt this way? Scott-Warren notes that Milton's annotations "give you a sense of his sensitivity and alertness to Shakespeare." It's a bit like we're getting to peek into Milton's mind.

Readers have long used annotations to provide commentary, mark memorable passages, simplify complex ideas, or even – as Edgar Allan Poe put it – to let their mind "unburden itself of a thought; — however flippant — however silly — however trivial…." For those reasons, most of us encourage them in student work. But we could be leveraging annotations for so much more.

With the right classroom coaching, your students' marginalia can become the key to unlocking their reading comprehension. Here's how.

COACH STUDENTS TO NAME THE CLAIMS

In many ways, annotation is just thinking made visible. But when students are making sense of challenging texts, what sorts of thoughts do we want them to have? To answer, we can step into the classroom of Indiana University's Professor of History, David Pace.

Concerned about his students' reading skill, Pace wanted to demonstrate what was important to him as he read a text. Here's an example he modelled for them; the larger the font, the more important the idea. What do you notice about the lines he emphasised?

The Jewish apocalyptic genre emerged from earlier prophetic tradition but is distinct from it. The Jewish prophets from the eighth to the sixth centuries B.C. – Amos, Joel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the others – functioned primarily as preachers, focusing on the people's transgressions and foretelling the Lord's renewed favor if they repented and further woes if they did not. The prophets were present minded and specific as they addressed a people beset by enemies and continually straying from the path of righteousness.

While Pace's students may have been inclined to spend more time on small details, as a more experienced reader he knows to watch for something else: the text's claims. Watching for those, he argues, helps readers trace and make meaning of the thesis. Pace's approach highlights a powerful insight: the heart of any writing is the statement it makes.

From editorials to tweets to encyclopaedia entries, everything we read makes claims about the world. These range from the obvious ("here are five reasons your class should use retrieval practice") to the less so ("here are the causes of World War I") – but all texts make arguments about our world. For students, there is power in realising that these can be debated.

Our students don't need to believe everything they read. Far from it. Their job as readers is to find the claims of a text and to then decide whether or not they accept them. Developing that critical eye is one way we can empower them to take on an information-rich world. Annotations give us a way to coach them how.

CREATE HABITS OF MIND

Pace's approach calls to mind the topic-comment model described by researchers Peter Johnston and Peter Afflerbach in the 1980's. In simple terms: the central idea of a text is the topic plus the comment it makes about it. The approach has the potential to help students read with far more sensitivity and at the same time develop a healthy skepticism about what they encounter. But for this approach to become a habit of mind, students need to practice it. What better place than how they annotate?

Imagine your students encountered the following paragraph. In terms of comprehension, what might you want them to note as they annotate?

For years, researchers have believed life on Venus wouldn't be possible. The planet was too chaotic. There wasn't enough oxygen. The atmosphere was car-battery-level acidic. However, recent findings are leading us to question everything.

As an experienced reader, I see a number of things. I can see the topic is about life on Venus, so I might jot that right away. But I know there might be claims later in the paragraph, since not every claim shows up in the first sentence. So, I also take note of the word "however" in that last sentence. I know a word like this usually means the claim of a text is about to shift, typically in an important way. This helps me notice that there's another argument to consider, that new findings are encouraging researchers to consider whether life on Venus may be possible after all.

In our minds, this happens almost automatically, but annotations can allow us to help students work in slow motion. The process for annotating a non-narrative text then becomes like this:
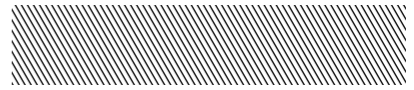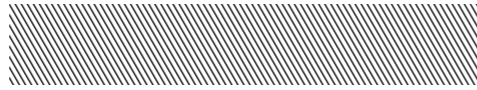
• After reading the first few paragraphs: jot the topic and your early sense of the text's claim

• Jot a quick note when you encounter key claims
   - Underline claim-revealing lines: how/why statements, rhetorical questions, "I" statements, charged language

   - Underline claim-shifters: "however," "despite," "but," "others argue that"

• After reading the full text: Review your annotations and jot the author's overall claim about the topic

That's just a start. You might adjust

this process for your discipline (for example, in History I'd also spend time considering the speaker, occasion, audience and purpose). Or you might do as our English teachers did and ask students to think about metacognitive strategies to use when they struggle. (If you're interested in the full strategy we employ, you can find it here: stevechiger.com/resources.)

Shared annotation systems help students develop reading habits that will serve them well with difficult texts in any content area. But that's not even the best reason to use them. When you have a shared system in class, you won't have to wonder about whether or where students are struggling as they read. The answers will be written all over their page.
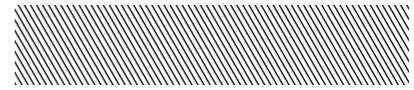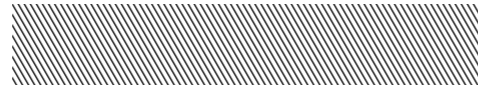
MAKE THINKING VISIBLE

Imagine you were teaching that Science article we discussed. You've annotated it in the same way you hope that students will, and you've noted three key claims you're hoping they can spot accurately.

Because you and your students share an annotation language, you can keep an eye out for what students are writing and how their work compares with yours. Of course, students are welcome to jot notes on whatever else they'd like, but with this mutual core, you can see if students are tracking the text's big ideas as they go.

Let's use that that first paragraph from our Science article. Your note says something like "scientists once thought life impossible on V, new disc. say maybe." As you scan student work, however, you see a lot of responses that read more like: "scientists: no life on V."

Love & Literacy Teacher Handbook

Reading and Annotating for

Claim

Make sense of the most challenging informational texts.

Every text is arguing something. Read to find the topic and claim about the topic, and you can unlock the most challenging texts.

Beginning	**Read the Beginning to Identify the Topic & Opening Claim**
	• Start with the title, blurb, and the first paragraph(s) — carefully read and annotate:
	  ○ Identify the speaker and genre; note any obvious bias
	  ○ Jot the topic in the margin after 1-2 paragraphs
	  ○ Jot the opening claim

Middle	**Read the Middle for Sub-Claims & Shifts**
	Annotate words/lines that develop the initial claim and/or establish additional claims:
	• Annotate arguments:
	  ○ Underline sentences that make a "how" or a "why" claim (esp. at beginning of paragraphs)
	  ○ Circle key words that signal arguments and author's perspective (e.g., "similarly," "in other words," "surprisingly," rhetorical questions, charged diction, "I" statements)
	  ○ Jot a claim note next to key claims, sub-sections and charts/graphs
	• Annotate shifts in thinking/transition words:
	  ○ Circle words that show a shift in thinking (e.g., "however," "although," "despite this," "in fact")
	  ○ Circle phrases that signal the author is addressing counterarguments (e.g., "critics say," "some might argue," "while many people believe")

End	**Generate an End Note that Captures the Claim**
	• Review your annotations: How do all of my notes connect to reveal the author's claim about the topic?
	• Write a final end note: What is the claim about the topic that this text makes (the central idea)?
	• Check your end note for precision:
	  ○ Does it articulate the author's perspective on the topic?
	  ○ Does it synthesize all of the key sub-claims you annotated?

When You Struggle, Level Up	

If the paragraph or sentence is challenging	**Anytime you Struggle with a Paragraph or Sentence, Level Up**
	• Slow down and reread—increase your annotations to every 2-3 lines
	• Paraphrase the most difficult lines
	  ○ Identify subjects & verbs (particularly when there are unclear pronouns and/or multiple subjects)
	  ○ Chunk a sentence into smaller parts and try to paraphrase each
	  ○ Unpack challenging vocabulary—use context clues to define terms or for connotation
	  ○ Review the surrounding text for phrases that provide additional context
	• Skip ahead and come back later
	  ○ Learn the future content and use it to come back and understand

If a larger section looks challenging	**Scan to the End [difficult texts only]** • Shorter text: read the final paragraph & opening/closing sentences of each paragraph to ID key claims • Longer text: read the final section, subheadings, and the end of each section to identify key claims **Gut Check your Knowledge** • Ask yourself: does this text assume I know something I don't? If so, look it up.

"When you have a shared system in class, you won't have to wonder about whether or where students are struggling as they read. The answers will be written all over their page."

A-ha!, you think. Students are missing that shift in the first paragraph. Now, you know exactly where understanding is breaking down, in real-time. Because you've made students' thinking visible, you have the power to act on it, whether individually or as a class-wide response.

As Paul Bambrick-Santoyo and I write in Love and Literacy, what is often seen as a helpful study tool becomes something far greater: an engine for supporting student reading.

In their book Annotation, Remi Kalir and Antero Garcia recall a quote from Kenneth Grahame, author of The Wind in the Willows: "the child's scribbling on the margin of his school-books is really worth more to him than all he gets out of them." There's wisdom in this observation, and it's wisdom educators can add to.

Students can use annotations to better understand texts. Teachers can use them to better understand students.

"Because you and your students share an annotation language, you can keep an eye out for what students are writing and how their work compares with yours."

15 STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING AND SUPPORTING DYSLEXIC STUDENTS

There's a perennial question that keeps many conscientious teachers awake at night: how can I best support my dyslexic students? It's a complex question, that doesn't yield a single solution but, as with so many things in our profession, it has a simple and universal starting point: care.

By Rob Potts

I feel fortunate to have worked in schools with a high proportion of dyslexic students. Helping any student to attain heights that they may not previously have felt were within their grasp is the payback most of us crave. But when those same students include those who have previously felt like square pegs in an education system designed primarily for round holes, the rewards are even more profound.

15 USEFUL STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING DYSLEXIC STUDENTS

1) Start by getting to know the individual child and, where necessary, focus on building their confidence/self belief. Often dyslexic children will have spent many years not having their needs adequately met and will assume (wrongly) that the difficulties they've experienced are their fault.

2) Don't make assumptions. Some of your most creative, perceptive and articulate students will happen to be dyslexic. Your job is to give them the tools, support and confidence needed to work around their dyslexic difficulties and achieve their full potential.

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