



## How To Annotate a Text

*These annotation instructions have been adapted from Chris Rokous's excellent guide to annotating which, in turn, was in part inspired and informed by "How to Mark a Book," an essay by Mortimer J. Adler, Ph. D*

**Definition:** Annotate - v. To furnish [a literary work] with critical commentary or explanatory notes.

### Why Annotate?

Annotation helps you to think critically about what you are reading. While the amount of annotation may vary widely from page to page, any notes you add to a text will help you to read more critically - any attempt to annotate your book will help you to understand the reading as you read - and will help you return to the reading with confidence later.

Your annotations should follow this format:

- Inside Front Cover: Character list with small space for character summary and for page references for key scenes, moments of character development, etc.
- Inside Back Cover: Themes, allusions, images, motifs, key scenes, plot line, epiphanies, etc. List and add page references and/or notes as you read.
- Additional Markings:  
Chapter summaries/titles: At the end of each chapter, write a brief summary of the plot as it occurred in that chapter. This does not have to be long or greatly detailed, but should include all relevant incidents. **Supply an instructive title for each chapter of the book.** This practice will help you solidify your understanding of a chapter in just a few of your own words.

- Underline: Within the text of the book, and as you read, underline or otherwise note anything that strikes you as important, significant, or memorable. If possible write brief comments within the side margins that indicate your motivation in underlining.
- Brackets: Use brackets [ ] as you read, together with abbreviations or symbols to indicate passages (too long to underline) that contain important themes and/or wonderful descriptions, especially delightful phrasing or syntax, provocative assertions, and figurative language. And write comments to clarify your thinking.
- Vocabulary/unusual diction: Within the text of the book, circle words that are unfamiliar to you or whose use strikes you as unusual or inventive. Look up words in a dictionary that seem essential to an understanding of the meaning or the sense of the author. If it helps to do so, jot a brief definition or synonym nearby.
- Questions: Actively engage the text and further/confirm your understanding of each chapter by writing at least two open-ended questions for each.
- Shifts: Note all shifts in point of view. Note all shifts in time. Note all shifts in diction and syntax.

### The Process

There are a number of ways to make annotation practical and effective:

1. Implement a **consistent system**. Use your own system of abbreviations, color coding, etc.
2. Use one **color** ink to do initial marking while reading; then go back with another color or colors to mark more thoroughly once you have finished a larger section and have had time to think about it. Why? You may change your mind or get it wrong the first time, or subsequent discoveries may prompt a reevaluation of earlier findings.
3. Do **underlining, bracket notations, and circling** as you read.
4. At chapter or section ends, stop to index page numbers on your **front cover list** of character information and traits as well as on your **back cover list** of themes, images, allusions, etc. Also, write chapter summaries at that time.
5. Be **neat** and be disciplined.