Modern European History

Annotation Guidelines

How do you remember the most important parts of an assigned reading for a class discussion, quiz, or exam? Most students use memorizing, rereading, or “looking over” to read and study a text. But this type of reading doesn’t make you *do* anything with the text and studies show that students don’t remember as much information using these methods. The same studies show that students who annotate a text (add explanatory notes) remember the most important information better and for a longer period of time. They also spend less time overall learning and studying the material in preparation for assessments.

There are many different ways of annotating text. The basic idea is if you highlight something of importance you should write something in the margins that explains why you thought it was worth highlighting. Here are some suggestions of types of annotations:

1. write a brief summary in your own words

2. list main ideas

3. give examples of the concept being described

4. write possible quiz/test questions

5. pose questions raised by the material

6. develop your own personalized coding system (as in, SS = succinct summary or MI = main idea)

For practice, read and annotate the following excerpt of a study supporting the use of annotation:

**Why Annotating is Better**

We used two dependent measures to analyze the data: the raw scores of the three multiple choice tests, and the self-reported studying times (in minutes) for each of the three passages. Both variables were analyzed using separate repeated measures.

The annotation group performed statistically better than the preview-question group. Across the three tests, the annotation group scored an average of 73%, whereas the preview-question group had a mean score of 67%.

The annotation group was also statistically more efficient in learning as measured by the amount of time spent in studying the information. The preview-question group spent 77% more time in learning the material than did the annotation group. Considering that we did not specify a required amount of study time for either group, this finding is especially intriguing.

As reported by the students in the annotation group and validated by the marked passages that we collected, only a small number used test preparation strategies in addition to annotation. In preparing for the tests, and average of 10% of the students reported using other strategies in addition to annotation. The most widely reported additional strategy was memorizing, followed by rereading.

The results were considerably different for the pre-view question group, with 83% using additional strategies for the first test. The most widely reported strategy for the preview-question group was rereading, followed by outlining, taking notes, memorizing, and "looking over" the material. Thus, even though we encouraged the preview-question group to preview the text and then to create questions and answers once they had read the text, a majority of them chose to use alternative strategies.

The results of this study indicated that annotating texts enabled students to perform effectively over time. The students in the annotation group maintained test scores that fell in the B/C range throughout the 3 weeks of the study, but scores in the preview-question group were lower, falling into the C/D range. The students in the annotation group not only performed more effectively than those in the preview-question group, but also did better with less test preparation time. Finally, the data indicated that the annotation group consistently continued to use the strategy.

Thus, we concluded that students who chose to use textbook annotation would subsequently perform more efficiently and effectively.

excerpted from Simpson, Michele L., and Sherrie L. Nist. "Textbook Annotation: An Effective and Efficient Study Strategy for College Students." *Journal of Reading*, Oct. 1990. JSTOR Web. <http://www.jstor.org/pss/40032053>.