

Annotating Literary Texts

from *How to Read a Book* (Mortimer Adler & Charles Van Doren)

If you have the habit of asking a book questions as you read, you are a better reader than if you do not. But . . . merely asking questions is not enough. You have to try to answer them. And although that could be done, theoretically, in your mind only, it is easier to do it with a pencil in your hand. The pencil then becomes the sign of your alertness while you read.

When you buy a book, you establish a property right in it, just as you do in clothes or furniture when you buy and pay for them. But the act of purchase is actually only the prelude to possession in the case of a book. Full ownership of a book only comes when you have made it a part of yourself, and the best way to make yourself a part of it -- which comes to the same thing -- is by writing in it. 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 people who say they know what they think but cannot express it usually do not know what they think.

□ Third, writing your reactions down helps you to remember the ideas expressed by the author.

AP Language and AP Literature are both courses of intense study. We suggest that you annotate the major literary works that we will be studying.

Note: Reading assignments should be read and annotated before class. It is perfectly acceptable to add to your markings (in fact we encourage you to do so) while we discuss in class or after you finish the book and are working on an essay, but the bulk of the job should be done in conjunction with your reading for class preparation.

Note: If you find annotating while you read to be annoying and awkward, do it after you read. Go back after a chapter or assignment and then mark it carefully. You should be reading assignments twice, so this isn't any less efficient than marking as you read and then rereading the material.

AP Literature Annotation Suggestions

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.

Bottom and Side Page Margins: Interpretive notes, questions, and/or remarks that refer to meaning of the page. Markings or notes to tie in with information on the inside back cover.

Top Margins: Plot notes—a quick few words or phrases that summarize action (useful for quick location of passages in discussion and for writing assignments).

Additional Markings:

- ❖ circling: done while or after reading to help locate characters and settings
- ❖ underlining: done while or after reading to help locate passages for discussion, significant diction or syntax
- ❖ brackets: done while or after reading to highlight key speeches and descriptions that are too long to underline easily

Marking and Note-taking tips:

□ 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, have had time to think about it, and are able to see development of images more clearly.

□ 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.

□ Use underlining as you read and do side margin notes as you finish a page or two.

□ Add to side margin notes during class discussion also.