

Annotation as a Powerful Reading Tool

Recently we came across a document that Harvard College sends incoming freshmen to prepare them for academic life. “Interrogating Texts: Six Reading Habits to Develop in Your First Year at Harvard” describes reading behaviors that will help students get the most out of text. The suggestions include previewing, annotating, summarizing and analyzing, looking for patterns, contextualizing, and comparing and contrasting. All contribute to thoughtful reading. Here we share what Harvard has to say about *annotating*, because our *Toolkit Texts* offers a terrific opportunity for kids to merge their thinking with the information through annotation.

Make all of your reading thinking intensive...

Mark up the margins of your text with WORDS: ideas that occur to you, notes about things that seem important to you, reminders of how issues in a text may connect with class discussion or course themes. This kind of interaction keeps you conscious of the REASON you are reading and the PURPOSES your instructor has in mind. Later in the term, when you are reviewing for a test or project, your marginalia will be useful memory triggers.

Develop your own symbol system: asterisk a key idea, for example, or use an exclamation point for the surprising, absurd, bizarre. . . . Like your marginalia, your hieroglyphs can help you reconstruct the important observations that you made at an earlier time. And they will be indispensable when you return to a text later in the term, in search of a passage or an idea for a topic, or while preparing for an exam or project.

Get in the habit of hearing yourself ask questions—“What does this mean?” “Why is he or she drawing that conclusion?” “Why is the class reading this text?” etc. Write the questions down (in your margins, at the beginning or end of the reading, in a notebook, or elsewhere). They are reminders of the unfinished business you still have with a text: something to ask during class discussion, or to come to terms with on your own, once you’ve had a chance to digest the material further, or have done further reading.


http://hcl.harvard.edu/research/guides/lamont_handouts/interrogatingtexts.html

So we ask: why wait until our kids go off to college? We suggest kids read thoughtfully and leave tracks of their thinking as early as elementary school. Obviously elementary school kids cannot write in their books, but you can demonstrate how to use Post-its to annotate texts as they read, or provide photocopies of these articles on which they can write in the margins. The articles in this collection lend themselves to active reading and responding.

When we design instruction, we peel back the layers of our own reading process to decide what and how we need to teach with a particular text. So we have annotated an article here to show how we would model our thinking for our students.

First, we read through the entire piece ourselves, authentically responding to it by jotting our thinking in the margins or on Post-its when there is not enough room to annotate on the page. To think critically about important issues and ideas, we need to think and react in a thoughtful way as we read. We first consider our purpose for reading. It might be to answer a question, to pick out important information, or simply to learn more about a topic. We pay attention to our thinking, especially the strategies we use and the reactions we have, coding the text accordingly. Then when we teach, we think out loud as we read, demonstrating the strategies and language we use to understand.

Wings in Water



A huge, flat creature leaps out of the sea. It skims over the waves and flips backward with a splash. Could this be a fish? Yes. It is a **manta ray**.

These diamond-shaped giants live in warm oceans. They can be 22 feet wide and weigh as much as a small car—up to 3,000 pounds.

Speed Swimmer

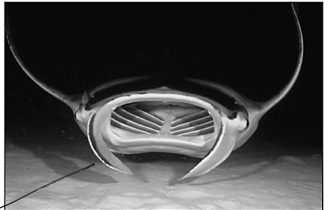
Their skeletons are made of soft bone called **cartilage**. This flexible cartilage skeleton helps to make the manta a graceful, powerful swimmer.

Slowly flapping their two large fins like wings, mantas fly under the water.

They do fly (sort of)

Eating on the Run

Mantas eat tiny plants and animals called **plankton**. The manta uses fins on the sides of its mouth to guide plankton into its big mouth while it swims.



Mantas swim with their mouths wide open when they feed.

Friendly Giants

Mantas may be big, but they are gentle. They are curious. They will sometimes swim near human divers, and even let the divers reach out and touch them. A manta's tail looks scary, but it is harmless and will not sting a diver.

Big Babies

When a female manta mates, her baby grows in an egg that hatches inside her. Later the baby is born, rolled up in its fins. It uncurls these fins, then swims away. At first, the baby stays close to shore. But soon it will fly through the ocean and leap and somersault above the waves.

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As we read “Wings in Water,” we find ourselves visualizing the manta ray in its habitat. The writer paints pictures with words that give us strong mental images that help us better understand the topic. We code spots where we visualize with a V. We also find ourselves asking questions and searching for answers to our questions. When we come across information that answers our questions, we code those answers with an A. Occasionally we underline words and phrases, and place our reactions in the margins. To understand this article, we jot our thoughts in the margin and rely primarily on visualizing and questioning.

Works Cited

- Harvey, Stephanie, and Anne Goudvis. 2005. *The Comprehension Toolkit. Language and Lessons for Active Literacy*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann/Firsthand.
- Harvey, Stephanie, and Anne Goudvis. 2007. *Strategies That Work: Teaching Comprehension for Understanding and Engagement*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse.
- President and Fellows of Harvard College. 2007. *Interrogating Texts: Six Reading Habits to Develop in Your First Year at Harvard*. Available at: http://hcl.harvard.edu/research/guides/lamont_handouts/interrogatingtexts.html.

The Genre of Test Reading: Thoughtful Test Prep

In addition to providing guided and independent practice, the articles in these volumes may be used to help students prepare for high-stakes tests. The articles are quite similar to the selections that kids encounter on many state tests. To maximize the usefulness of these pieces when teaching the genre of test reading, first study the format and demands of your state test and develop practice lessons that parallel the structure of that exam. For a more detailed explanation of how to teach test reading as a genre, please see our test reading

section on p. 74 in *Extend and Investigate* in *The Comprehension Toolkit*.

Building strong readers is still the best test preparation. Since prior knowledge is the most powerful determinant in reading comprehension, building background knowledge is ultimately the most direct route to raising scores. When kids read extensively across many topics and subject areas, they will add to their store of knowledge, which is one reason we urge our kids to read so much nonfiction.