Annotating Sources

Much of what contributes to the quality of research papers is the level of detail involved in supporting your claims. In order to obtain this detailed support, a student must mine sources for supporting elements in the forms of facts, statistics, and quotes. Annotating sources helps you to extract the relevant pieces of information and helps you catalog and organize important details.

Remember that you will be dealing with both qualitative and quantitative data. Qualitative data cannot be measured. Examples include qualities such as red, blue, yellow (descriptors), or quotes from an expert witness. Quantitative data can be measured, and an example would be a statistic from a United States Census Bureau report.

This handout first provides some general strategies for annotating, followed by some sample annotated passages.

General Annotation Strategies

Alternatives to Highlighting
Consider using a pen or pencil instead of a highlighter, so you can underline important passages while also making notes in the margins. This allows you to “crystallize” information in your head. Highlighting a source is passive. When you write notes, you are actively engaging with the material.

Icons
Think about using circles, boxes, and triangles to denote different types of data. When you return to your research, the different shapes will help guide you along. For example, you might want to use triangles for quantitative data that “stands out” in some way. Boxes might be used for important qualitative data. Other useful indicators are asterisks, double asterisks, the tilde sign (~), or even arrows to indicate connections between ideas.

Definitions
Note any words or jargon that you need to define and put a brief definition in the margin or on a sticky note to help you remember.

Questions
Note any questions you might have about a particular passage. This will make your reading slower, but it should help you develop your own ideas and, more importantly, develop the relationship between your ideas and your research.

Connections
Make connections to other works or passages. Jot down page numbers from other sources that seem connected to what you are currently reading.
Roadmaps
For longer, sustained arguments, a good plan is to establish a “roadmap” by indicating the main topic of each paragraph. That way, when you return to your text, you will see the “backbone” of the argument. The supporting details are just the “meat” on the bones, and your underlining will point you to specific details if needed.

Note-taking
Establish some kind of system for making margin notes. You might decide to write a few words in the margin representing the topic of a particular paragraph.

Details
Note important details. How do you tell what might be the most significant or important details?
- Look for details that strike you as “standing out” from the norm.
- Note important dates (for historical sources).
- Look for common patterns that might emerge.
- Mark any details that are relevant to your current research project.

Look at the following sample annotation for some insights into effective annotating.

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This example is taken from F.O. Matthiessen’s work, American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman, first published in 1941 by Oxford University Press. Matthiessen’s work covers a wide range of topics, and includes over 650 pages of critical analysis. It is imperative, when annotating a work so large, that you devise some system to keep track of important data.

In the example to the left, the reader has used several strategies for effective annotating.

- The topics of the paragraphs are noted in the margins, and important pieces of data are circled. (One could just as easily number these statements as well).
- The main claim is underlined with a squiggly line, flagged with an asterisk, and briefly summarized.
- A “*” symbol is used to denote an expression with a negative (not), such as “should not be regarded as.”
- Context or historical references are in boxes.
- Names that appear frequently are abbreviated to save space in the margins.

 NOTE: If it looks like a text will not be one of your main sources, then simply noting the topics of a section or paragraph may be sufficient.

Even when annotating a main source, try not to clutter your page with too many annotations, to the point that your notes become unreadable.

Devise a simple system for annotating and dive in!

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