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February 20, 2006

Twelve Ways To Mark Up A Book

Books are a fantastic way to gain knowledge. With books, one can learn new techniques, gain new skills, and learn from role models who have been to where one wants to be and can show the way. There are many different ways to read books and just as many ways to remember their salient points. One of the most effective ways to get the most out of a book is to mark it up. There is no standard way to mark up a text, but below are a few ways that students have found effective in marking up a textbook so that one can see the important points quickly, make it more memorable, and make it easy to pick up years later and re-acquaint oneself with the major concepts.

What Not To Do

- **Don't use a highlighter** – Quality marking isn't done with a fat-tipped highlighter. You can't write, which is an important part of marking the text, with a large marker. Get yourself some fine point colored pens to do the job.
- **Don't mark large volumes of text** – You want important points to stand out. Although we all know that everything can't be important, we often highlight all of the text on the page. You want to find the 20% of the text that is important (remember Pareto?) and mark that.
- **Don't take the time to mark up items that you read on a daily basis** – (e.g., magazines, newspapers), unimportant or irrelevant items.
- **Don't mark the obvious** – Don't waste time marking up things that are already in your knowledge-base or skill set. If you already know it, you don't need to mark it.

What To Do

- **Mark the text with a pencil, pen, or, even better, colored fine-tipped pens** – Remember, you are not highlighting, you are writing.
- **Know your preferences** – Some of you have an aversion to mark directly in the text. Books are precious things to many people and they want to protect them from damage and even the wear and tear of everyday use. If this describes you, grab some Post-It brand notes and do your marking and writing on them. This also gives you the advantage to move and reorganize them should you see fit. As for me, I like to mark directly on the page. I find that my books become more valuable to me when I add my contributions to the information that they contain.
- **Underline the topic sentence in a passage** – Remember, each paragraph has one topic sentence. The rest is supporting information and examples. Identify the topic sentence to find it easier.
- **Use codes** – Flag text with codes (e.g., Question marks to indicate disagreement, Exclamation marks to note agreement or to flag a strong statement, triangles to indicate a change in thinking, or a star for the topic sentence).
- **Write the passage topic in the margin as a reminder** – Just a word or two.
- **Write questions in the margin** – When you don't understand something or when you don't understand the author's thought process on a particular topic, write the question in the margin as a reminder to settle the question.
- **Circle new and unfamiliar words** – Look them up as soon as possible.
- **Add your or other author's perspectives in the margins** – Other authors have surely written on the same subject. What do they say? Do they agree with this author? If not, what do they say. Add these ideas in the margins.
- **Add cross-reference notes to other works on the same topic** – Use the author's name and a shortened version of the other book's title.
- **Add structure to a narrative text** – Use 1, 2, 3, 4...or an outline format I. A. B. C. 1, 2, 3, a, b, c...to add a structure that you understand.
- **Draw arrows to related ideas** – Or unrelated ideas...
- **Summarize** – Add your own summary after the last paragraph. That simple exercise will crystalize your thinking on the topic. If you can't write it, you don't understand it.

Extras

Post-It Brand Notes are great ways to also mark locations within books, much like bookmarks do. With Post-It Brand Notes, however, you can mark on them so you can see where you are turning before you start flipping through the pages. One can also use colored paper clips to identify pages or chapters that are important.

Conclusion

The idea is to enter, by way of your markings, into a conversation with the author so that his knowledge is added to yours so that a synthesis occurs and you gain a new understanding.

A new — or new looking — book is a treasure. In my experience, however, I have found that a well-marked book, becomes more like a treasured friend — one that you enjoy seeing again and again. It becomes much more enjoyable than a sterile copy that comes straight from the bookstore. Don't be afraid to mark up the books that you love.

Feb 20, 2006 12:05:00 AM | Books

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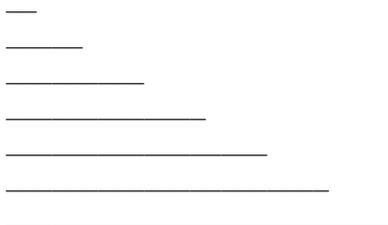


For those books that you cannot mark up, I saw a tip on Lifehacker.com that I thought was great and kind of expanded it a bit. If you are doing something like a report or paper using books that are not yours, or you don't feel comfortable marking up, try this.

Go to the local dollar store and buy the cheapest envelopes you can find. I can get 100-200 for a dollar here. White ones work best, unless you have problems using white paper. Some people have problems due to eye strain.

Skip this step if you want to, but pull up your favorite word processing program and do a template with lines in the lower right and left corners, probably going all the way across, unless you want to save some ink by breaking them in the middle. You can, in most programs, put a "text box" shaped like a triangle aligned with the left and right corners and just slap the lines in them. Use this template to print as many envelopes as you need, you will see why in a second.

Now, clip the corners of each envelope as far up as you can, to get the maximum writing surface. You should get something like:



Which you can slide over the corner of any page in any book. Then you can make the notes you need without damaging the book, and maintain your place for that note too. If you are really needing to organize a lot of data, color coding the edge of the "cornermark" will let you know exactly what info you are going to be at when you open your book.

Just an example, a minister preparing a sermon could mark the pages with red corners for his sermon, but also mark pages with blue corners for his Sunday school class and mark anything he wants to come back to with a plain one. I use this example as many people do not like to mark in their bibles.

The same could be used if preparing for a presentation. Say you need a generic presentation packet, but need to mark pages for use when you have 30, 15 and 5 minute time slots, you can mark the ones to take out for the 30 and 15 easily this way.

Posted by: MichaelAB | February 20, 2006 at 01:40 AM



Great post. There's a nice piece on book writers vs. preservationists written by Steve Leveen over on Levenger's website:

<http://tinyurl.com/pqtwg>

For general tips on reading more effectively, I got lots out of his "The Little Guide to Your Well Read Life" <http://yourwellreadlife.com/>

Posted by: [ted bongiovanni](#) | [February 20, 2006 at 06:30 AM](#)



Pretty please, put this in with <blink!>emphasis</blink!!>: There should be a death penalty for writing in books which are not yours.

Posted by: [era](#) | [February 20, 2006 at 12:08 PM](#)



Era--

I agree! All my comments are meant for books that one owns!!!! One person's annotations may not be suitable for another person, as they are so individualized. In addition, I consider it vandalism if one defaces (annotating in an unowned book) a book belonging to another person!

Posted by: [Bert Webb](#) | [February 20, 2006 at 12:24 PM](#)



I would be truly interested in seeing a sample page from you, Bert. One that displays many of the ideas you have described. I, for one, rarely mark up a book. However, this is not because of some desire to keep it pristine. I've found that it does me little to no good to do so. This may be because my focus of work is quite technical and most of the information I need to refer back to can be quickly found through indexes or online search engines (mostly the latter as books rarely compile a list of real-life errors for trouble-shooting).

So the need to markup a book first stems from the necessity of the reader and should not be done just because it is recommended.

Posted by: [Charles Martin](#) | [February 20, 2006 at 12:34 PM](#)



Charles--

Not just the necessity of the reader, but also the learning style of the reader and the type of book it is. I am a visual learner...seeing my notes, in all colors and thicknesses of line, arrows, codes, etc., enhances my reading -- and reviewing in particular -- experience. But that's just me. It's not for everyone. However, Mortimer Adler, author of the classic, *How to Read a Book*, advises everyone to mark up their books. Yet, even though I mark my books in this way, I rarely mark up reference books, as all information may, at one point or another be important to me.

I'll dig up a book with some of my markings and scan it, although it may be late Wednesday before I can post it due to work priorities. Gotta get some things done! :)

Posted by: [Bert Webb](#) | [February 20, 2006 at 12:47 PM](#)



Good advice! But there are a few things that doesn't make sense to me:

"Don't use a highlighter". Why?

"Underline the topic sentence in a passage – Remember, each paragraph has one topic sentence." Does it? I would say that is very different from book to book.

Posted by: [Oyvind](#) | [February 20, 2006 at 12:49 PM](#)



Oyvind--

With this style of annotating, writing (engaging the author in a conversation through annotation) requires a small enough point to actually write with. Most highlighters are simply too fat to write with in the margins of a book.

Yes, each paragraph (a group of sentences on one topic) should have one topic sentence. It might be at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end, but it should be there. Among other things, the rest of a paragraph contains supporting details, elaboration, and examples.

Paragraphs that address more than one topic and contain numerous topic sentences are recognized as not well written. My qualifications on this matter? I am a former teacher and, presently, an educational administrator. I supervise teachers who teach writing.

Posted by: [Bert Webb](#) | [February 20, 2006 at 12:58 PM](#)



I use the little Post-it notes, you can get them about the size of your pinky and then a size up which is about the size of your thumb. That way if you are borrowing the book you write directly on the post-it and I place the post it so it barely sticks out the side of the book, but I put it directly below or above the text I found interesting or wrote about on the post-it. When you are done with the book you can pull them out and toss em, leaving the book in pristine condition.

Posted by: Adam | [February 20, 2006 at 02:01 PM](#)



You might also enjoy this post on processes that help you to "read with gusto" -- <http://blogs.bnet.com/leadershipnow/?p=100>

Posted by: [Don Blohowiak](#) | [February 20, 2006 at 04:09 PM](#)

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