



Close Reading and Annotation

Introduction

Before brainstorming, outlining or writing an essay, you must develop a clear understanding of the reading assignment about which you must write. For successful writers, this will involve utilizing two main skills: annotating and closely reading the text. Below you will find some important resources that will help you build such skills.

Close Reading

Critical reading is when a reader pays close attention to the most important features of a text. Becoming an effective reader involves the annotation of relevant information about the text or on the text itself whenever possible because you are actively reading. As an active reader, you are participating in a discussion or dialogue with the author and his/her ideas. If you can, think of the text as the way an author is communicating with you. Similarly, your annotations can be thought of as your way of responding to the author.

Some Features of a text that a critical reader will notice and make note of are:

- What the author's topic is
- What the author wants readers to know about this topic (the author's purpose)
- What the author argues about this topic
- How these ideas or arguments develop
- How the author's examples relate to the main ideas and arguments
- Why the author argues what she argues
- How the author differentiates their argument from the arguments of others
- Where in the text each of the above is located
- How the text's content relates to the reader (you)

Annotation

You should think of annotation as the process by which you achieve a close reading of a text. To be an effective critical reader, a text should be read more than once with different goals in mind. First, read the text without annotating the text at all but keep track of your first impressions of the text, identify the topic, and the author's main idea-- keep these in mind as you read the text a second time. Use items from the list above to guide your annotations.

During the second reading it is a good idea to **underline, highlight, and write in the margin**. Some students also like to number each paragraph before the second reading, so that they can refer to each paragraph by its number (i.e. "paragraph 3 is where the author introduces her main argument."). As you continue to read, you might want to **underline the main argument of a text**, and then write in the margins next to the paragraphs **where the author expands on this argument**.

The blank spaces outside the text are known as margins.

Example – You might write the following in the margins of a paper in the middle of an article: *author supports her main idea here*

If you underline or highlight more than half of a given paragraph, make sure to make a note about *WHY* you have so that you don't bury the significance of the information. When we annotate, we should try to only underline the information that is **most important** in the text.

The process of writing in the margins might also help you decide which parts of a paragraph are most important. For example, you might notice an example that the author includes, or a quote that supports the author's points. In this case, you would underline only the example and/or the quote, and write in the margin next to this, *author uses this example to prove her point*. You might then draw a line or an arrow connecting your words in the margin to the author's argument.

Active and experienced readers underline and/or highlight any unfamiliar vocabulary and use a dictionary or thesaurus (or both) to define it. It helps

immensely to write synonyms (a word having the same or nearly the same meaning as another) above or beside the unfamiliar word that you have defined.

Overall, annotation is a hands-on process in which readers look closely at each sentence and notice how the author's points or opinions build from sentence to sentence. After annotating, a reader should return to a text and look at each paragraph as a whole. Noticing the theme, topic, purpose or main point of each paragraph can help a reader understand how the author chose to order or sequence the information in the article.

NOTE: Once you have completed the second reading, you might want to read the text one last time to see if there is anything you have missed. You could also return to the notes you took on your first impressions and see if those first impressions were accurate. If your understanding of a text has changed, then you can edit those notes as needed.

Practice Makes Better

The article below, by Ian Head and Darius Charney, can be used to practice the reading and annotation skills outlined on the previous pages.

DON'T LET THE N.Y.P.D. CO-OPT BODY CAMERAS BY IAN HEAD and DARIUS CHARNEY THE NEW YORK TIMES

(1) The [New York Police Department](#) will begin one of the most controversial experiments in policing on Thursday [when it outfits some officers](#) in Washington Heights with body cameras. Unfortunately the department policy that governs how the cameras will be used is so flawed that the pilot program may do little to protect New Yorkers' civil rights. Instead, it might shield police officers from accountability when they engage in misconduct.

(2) Most notably, the policy affords police officers and their supervisors too much discretion as to when to turn the cameras on and makes it easy for them to tailor their statements and reports to match videos. This could give them the opportunity to justify any illegal or abusive behavior caught on film.

(3) The whole point of this body camera pilot is to curb police officers' violations of New Yorkers' rights. That's why a federal court ordered the program in 2013 in [Floyd v. New York City](#), which we litigated. The decision in the case said that body cameras could be "uniquely suited to addressing the constitutional harms" that the court found were pervasive in everyday street encounters known as stops-and-frisks.

(4) As it stands, the policy, called an "operations order" in department parlance, allows officers to view not only their own camera recordings but also those of colleagues before they complete reports or make official statements to investigators. This permits officers to fit their statements to video recordings, which [public defenders say](#) is already a significant problem.

(5) Civilians don't have this luxury. If New Yorkers want to see footage so that they can file misconduct complaints about incidents captured on police cameras, they must file either a Freedom of Information Law request for the video footage,

which can take months to years, or give an interview to investigators without an opportunity to review the video first.

(6) In the eyes of the court, body cameras are not meant to function “[just like an officer’s notes](#)” but as a “contemporaneous, objective record of stops and frisks” that would allow courts and police supervisors to review officers’ behavior. Body cameras can’t tell the whole story of an interaction between a police officer and a civilian. But they can provide an independent narrative.

(7) This makes it imperative that officers not be allowed to view their own, or fellow officers’, videos before writing reports or making statements, especially after situations that result in violence or during investigations into potential misconduct.

(8) That’s only one flaw in the policy. Just as significant, the policy is vague on whether and when officers must record street encounters short of an arrest. Instead, officers are told to record “interactions with persons suspected of criminal activity.” This ambiguous language gives too much discretion to individual officers, who might have different understandings of when such “interactions” begin and end. Not to mention recent cases in other cities in which officers “forgot” to turn their device on in time to capture a critical moment, or even at all.

(9) For the courts, the court monitor and police oversight agencies such as the Civilian Complaint Review Board to get a more complete picture of what might have led an officer to take action, all officers involved need to begin recording at the start of the encounter.

(10) Street interactions are not neatly planned. Consider an encounter in Queens between our client David Ourlicht and a police officer who approached him in 2008 as he walked home from class at St. John’s University. The officer asked him to provide identification, which he did, and within minutes patted him down, forced him against a wall, searched his clothing and gave him a ticket for disorderly conduct. An officer later told Mr. Ourlicht that he thought a notebook in his pocket might have been a gun. If the officers who stopped Mr. Ourlicht had been wearing cameras, the moment when they activated their cameras would provide, or hide, crucial information about the encounter and the reasons for the officers’ actions.

(11) Surveyed New Yorkers overwhelmingly agree with this. Last summer over 20,000 New Yorkers and more than 5,000 police officers participated in two surveys commissioned by the Police Department. Eighty-two percent of public respondents and 58 percent of officer respondents answered that officers should be required to turn on their cameras “anytime an officer approaches someone as part of investigating criminal activity.”

(12) But the department disregarded this feedback as well as written comments from legal experts, community groups and advocacy organizations when it wrote the operations order. Instead, it decided, as one official said, that it “can’t learn any more by reading and talking.” It is telling that the official forgot to mention “listening.”

(13) Cameras are not a panacea. But with proper policy and oversight, they can bring new transparency and accountability to policing. In a report on the survey of officers conducted last summer, New York University researchers noted that a major concern officers had about videos was that the recordings would “show a different side of the story than what would otherwise be told.” But that’s exactly the point.

(14) This pilot is different from other body-camera programs because it was conceived as part of a court-ordered mandate to hold the police accountable. Without independent oversight, better mechanisms for community input and stricter policies, the technology could easily be used as a tool for surveillance and evidence collection. This is especially worrisome alongside advances in facial recognition technology.

(15) We urge the Police Department and others who will analyze the body camera pilot to incorporate additional and broad community input into their evaluations. The department’s inspector general, the Civilian Complaint Review Board and other oversight agencies must also examine whether the body camera policy enhances or hinders the cameras’ effectiveness as an accountability and transparency tool. Any potential benefits of body cameras are lost if we let the Police Department write the rules.