Close Reading and Annotation

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**.

Some features of a text that a critical reader will notice 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
- *where* in the text each of the above is located
- *how* the text's content relates to the reader's life or experience

Annotation, Glossing and the Roles of the Paragraphs

The tasks in the above bullet points may appear difficult to accomplish if you are reading a text only once. But effective critical readers **read through a text more than once, with different goals in mind for each reading**. The first time you read, you may want to read without annotating the text at all. The first reading should only keep track of your first impressions of the text, grasping its topic and writing that topic down on a scrap piece of paper. You might only address the first and second bullet points above during your first reading.

Following this first reading, it will help to identify the rest of the features in the above list. 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 on the outsides of the text is known as the margin.**

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

If you underline or highlight more than half of a given paragraph, you have highlighted too much. But when we annotate we only underline the information that is **most important** in the text, so it's rare that you will need to underline an entire paragraph. The process of writing in the margins might 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 between your words in the margin and the author's argument, which is normally located in previous paragraphs.

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 can 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. Combined with glossing—writing the topic of the paragraph in the margins next to it—annotation can be an incredibly useful tool to keep track of how an author has organized her writing.

ONCE YOU'VE 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 THESE NOTES AS NEEDED.

Defining Challenging Vocabulary

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. Once you have done this, it's a good idea to reread the sentence using the synonym in place of the unfamiliar word. It also helps to think of your own synonyms for such words, using these synonyms to define and understand the terms in the reading that you find challenging.

Some writers choose to write down in a separate notebook all of the new words they learn each time they read. These writers slowly expand their vocabulary and gain a greater understanding of these words, incorporating them into their writing when appropriate.

Differences in Points of View: Facts and Opinions

Many professors assign students opinionated articles. Authors of such articles seek to prove a point and to support their arguments with examples, statistics or other concrete evidence (*i.e. New York City has a higher rate of food insecurity than the rest of the nation).* Using these statistics or examples, people form opinions (*i.e. New York City's poverty problem needs to be addressed immediately so that more people can have access to healthy food).* These authors will also attempt to show how their own opinions are different from the opinions of others who have written on the same topic. With all of this information, students often get confused, assuming that evidence *is itself the author's opinion.*

Here is an example: If an author were to express that climate change is real, that statement would not be an opinion because there is no debate around the fact that every year is hotter than the year before it. Virtually all scientists who study the matter agree that human-caused climate change is real. But if an author's goal is to convince readers of the best way to solve this problem, then she might consider many ways that individuals can address climate change and choose the option *she believes* is the most effective, which, in the example below is not driving cars.

FACT: The earth is warming at a faster rate due to human activity.
FACT: Driving cars contributes to climate change.
OPINION: The best way for individuals to slow down climate
change is to stop driving cars

Continuing with the above example, an author may choose to talk about those who disagree with her on the issue of climate change, writing: "Many conspiracy theorists think that climate change is fake and has been made up to prevent economic growth." Such sentences are called **counter claims,** or points that go against the author's argument**.** After such sentences, skilled readers check in with their own understandings of the text to note that, from what they have read, the author likely does not agree with such statements, judging from what the author has written in previous sentences.

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.