

highlighters, I drew lines under important spots in texts, but underlining is laborious and often distracting. Some colors can be distracting – avoid those that are unpleasant. The idea is to see the important text more clearly, not give your eyes a psychedelic exercise.

While you read, highlight whatever seems to be key information. At first, you will probably highlight too little or too much; with experience, you will choose more effectively which material to highlight.

Never just highlight without a key because the information that you highlight will become meaningless in a longer text. In a short piece, it is easier to realize why you highlight something. Plus, Mrs. North and your other teachers that may be checking your annotations want to know that you know what you think.

(Choose the following link to view highlighting on sample pages from *Walden*.)

[Figure 1: Walden, pp. 212-213 \(.pdf/1.6MB\)](#)

2. Pencil

A pencil is better than a pen because you can make changes. Even geniuses make mistakes, temporary comments, and incomplete notes. *You are Flawsome – full of flaws but awesome – this means no one is perfect.*

While you read, use marginalia—marginal notes—to mark key material. Marginalia can include check marks, question marks, stars, arrows, brackets, and written words and phrases. Create your own system for marking what is important, interesting, quotable, questionable, and so forth.

Create a key for your annotations in the front of your book or on a sticky note.

3. Sticky Notes: Some of us struggle with marginal notes because sometimes, there is not enough room or abbreviations to get across the point you want to convey. Sticky notes are an excellent way to help organize your thoughts or write more detailed notes. Some students like to use color coded sticky notes about different motifs, symbols, conflicts, ideas or characters to help them keep track of where things happen in the book.

4. Your Text

Inside the front cover of your book, keep an orderly, legible list of "key information" with page references. Key information in a novel might include themes; passages that relate to the book's title; characters' names; salient quotes; important scenes, passages, and chapters; and maybe key definitions or vocabulary. Remember that key information will vary according to genre and the reader's purpose, so make your own good plan.

(Choose the following link to view the inside cover of *Walden* with sample handwritten notes:)

[Figure 2: Walden, inside front cover \(.pdf/844KB\)](#)

As you read, section by section, chapter by chapter, **consider doing the following, if useful or necessary:**

- At the end of each chapter or section, **briefly** summarize the material.
- Title each chapter or section as soon as you finish it, especially if the text does not provide headings for chapters or sections.
- Make a list of vocabulary words on a back page or the inside back cover. Possible ideas for lists include the author's special jargon and new, unknown, or otherwise interesting words.

Just how idiosyncratic and useful can annotating be? A good example is in William Gilbert's *De Magnete, Magneticisque Corporibus, et de Magno Magnete Tellure* (On the Magnet, Magnetic Bodies, and the Great Magnet the Earth), one of the seminal works of the Renaissance, published in the year 1600. Gilbert was the personal physician of Queen Elizabeth I and has been called the father of experimental science in England. Robert B. Downs, in *Famous Books Since 1492*, writes that in *De Magnete*, Gilbert

annotated the text prior to publication by putting stars of varying sizes in the margins to indicate the relative importance of the discoveries described. Gilbert also included in the original edition a glossary of new scientific terms that he invented.

Okay, a self-annotated book on magnetism by a celebrity doctor from the time of Shakespeare, with variable-size stars in the margins and a list (in the back) of his own new vocabulary words that changed science as we know it—that's useful idiosyncrasy.

References

Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. New York: The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1960.

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Figure 1: Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. New York: The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1960. Photo by Nick Otten.

Figure 2: Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden*. New York: The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1960. Photo by Nick Otten.

Nick Otten has taught for nearly 40 years—the last 20 at Clayton High School—specializing in American literature, creative writing, and student publication. He has also been adjunct professor at Webster University in St. Louis for 30 years, specializing in teacher training in the Master of Arts in Teaching graduate program. He has published widely on reading, written an editorial column in English Journal, and presented workshops for teachers in the United States, Canada, Mexico, and China.

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