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Students interpret and analyze short video clips through structured discussion and writing, developing critical interpretation strategies they can use in the future.

In this issue of *Classroom Notes Plus*, you'll find a series of steps for studying parody, an in-depth look at a tool for cultivating active readers, and a lesson on analyzing short videos that could be used as a stand-alone or in conjunction with a literature or media studies unit.

Though their focus varies, all three lessons carry a common emphasis on examining and responding to texts—actively, thoughtfully, and critically. Whether students are examining literary texts, as in the first two lessons, or visual texts, as in the third, the outlined strategies will aid them in developing and deepening habits of close analysis, active response, and meaningful interpretation.

Download the handout for this issue from the April 2010 *Classroom Notes Plus* web page at <http://www.ncte.org/pubs/journals/cnp>.



Reading with Your Pen: Helping Students Interact with Text

by Ryan Goble

Context: Developing Active Reading

Presently, I teach a college class called “Literacy across the Curriculum.” This course is designed to help pre-service teachers become comfortable with reading and writing strategies in their subject areas.

During the first week of class I took an informal poll. I asked students, “How many of you annotate when you read?”

A student raised her hand, “What exactly do you mean by annotate?”

“I know you’re familiar with formal annotations at the bottom of a text, but I’m wondering how many of you add your own personal annotations and notes to a text?”

A third of my undergrads raised their hands.

Next I asked, “How many of you were taught how to take notes or annotate in school?”

Again, about a third of the class raised their hands.

I certainly remember times when I was teaching high school and asked students to “take notes,” without any further explanation, but unfortunately that instruction alone is not enough to cultivate active readers.

For students to develop into active readers—at any grade level—it’s important to explain to them the value and purpose of *writing to learn*. Jennifer Railsback nicely defined the term with some help from the National Writing Project:

Writing to Learn (WTL): Rejecting the notion that writing serves primarily to translate what is known onto the page, advocates of writing to learn suggest teachers use writing to help students discover new knowledge—to sort through previous understandings, draw connections, and uncover new ideas as they write (NWP & Nagin, 2003). WTL activities may also be used to encourage reflection on learning strategies and improve students’ metacognitive skills. Examples, described further below, include journals, learning logs, and entrance/exit slips. (19)

Adding to that definition, Toby Fulwiler and Art Young explain Writing to Learn as situations when we

“...write to ourselves as well as talk with others to objectify our perceptions of reality; the primary function of this “expressive” language is not to communicate; but to order and represent experience to our own understanding. In this sense language provides us with a unique way of knowing and becomes a tool for discovering, for shaping meaning, and for reaching understanding. (x)

In addition, writing to learn is powerful because it allows students to make a wide range of unique and personal connections to texts.

Overview of the Tool and Lesson

I worked as a literacy coach and new teacher mentor for four years at a public high school in New York City. During this time I collaborated with school faculty and, at times, with Ruth Vinz, a professor of education from Teachers College Columbia University.

In 2007, I planned a spring retreat for our staff with Dr. Vinz about “literacy across the curriculum.” One of Dr. Vinz’s opening workshops focused on practices she refers to as “reading with your pen” and “talking back to the text.”

These poetic expressions were a brilliant and effective way to re-frame annotation and note taking for the teaching staff. Faculty were quick to “read with their pen” and to “talk back to a text” during the workshop—the phrases themselves were enough guidance for these adult learners.

Many teachers left the retreat excited about the possibilities of this practice. But the following year 9th grade English teacher Lauren Fardig and social studies teacher Elizabeth Davis gave the practice a spin and quickly discovered that students struggled to “read with their pen.” To them the phrase still meant “take notes.”

Reading tests showed our 9th graders’ reading levels as being distributed on a perfect bell curve between second and tenth grade. Because of this wide range of abilities, I met with Lauren and Elizabeth to think about ways we could elaborate on Dr. Vinz’s idea to help students engage with texts. Aided by our brainstorming, I broke ground on some specific annotation strategies.

I began by revisiting a brilliant series of “discussion moves” by Stephen Brookfield & Stephen Preskill (99–100). These moves were designed to guide adult learners in discussion through suggestions like, “Ask a question or make a statement that shows you are interested in what another person says.” or “Use body language to show interest in what different speakers are saying.”

I rethought some of their “moves” in a print context and added some ideas from the quirky personal annotation system I use in my own reading. From there I thought about artists dipping their paintbrush into a paint palette as they interact with their canvas. This became the metaphor behind the “Reading with Your Pen” Palette as students dipped into the “pen strokes” to guide their interactions between pen and paper.

Lauren and Elizabeth helped me experiment and refine the Palette as we experimented with some of the basic “pen strokes.” Some strokes are symbols and others are suggestions for how a student might annotate a text. Each pen stroke guides students toward annotations that facilitate active reading, such as questioning, disagreeing, commenting, noting a main idea, and so on. Our collaboration led to the reproducible document shown on page 9.

How to Implement

The Reading with Your Pen Palette can be used in myriad ways. No matter how you use the pen strokes, it is important to make your teaching objectives clear to students.

Teaching Objectives

Using the Reading with Your Pen Palette will

- strengthen connections between reader and text.
- allow readers to become independent and active readers over time.
- allow readers to understand and engage with the texts they read.
- allow readers to create a footprint of their learning and thinking on paper.
- help students to remember, retain, recreate, and remix the texts content in future learning experiences.
- give students a differentiated assessment that helps them find their own unique ways of interacting with a text.

Advance Preparations

Before you start using the Palette with your class I recommend these steps:

Decide on 3 to 5 initial pen strokes you think would be useful for a reading assignment. Over time you can introduce students to more pen strokes, but if you give them more than five strokes initially, students can be overwhelmed.

Cut those pen strokes out as individual strips of paper. Make enough copies of the whole Palette for each student. You or the students can cut out individual pen strokes if you choose. Consider laminating the “pen strokes” for easy re-use.

Show students a picture of an artist’s palette and ask them what it is used for. You may need to have a definition ready—students aren’t always familiar with the term “palette,” even though they encounter formatting palettes in many computer programs.

Explain the idea of active reading, a.k.a. “talking back to the text.” Explain that reading with your pen is one way to practice active reading. Model the use of the pen strokes to annotate a paragraph of text via overhead or white board. Students should have a clear idea of what reading with your pen looks like.

For practice, assign a short reading and ask students to read with their pen using a manageable number of pen strokes.

Don’t assume that using the Palette for one class period will magically turn your students into active readers. If students have not developed their own habits for interacting and annotating texts, these models for reading could be foreign to them.

Practicing these artificial prompts as part of their routine for about two months will help them develop the skills to talk

back to texts without assistance. As students build familiarity with the pen strokes over time, they begin to differentiate their annotation practice by working with the strokes they find most useful.

The handout for the Reading with Your Pen Palette is written at a 6th-grade Flesch-Kincaid reading level but users should feel free to adapt and remix the vocabulary as needed for their students. We decided that the activities represented by pen strokes 1–11 are the essential active reading skills. The remaining activities are a bit more unique.

General Tips and Extensions

We simply recommend selecting the pen strokes that sound familiar, comfortable, and fun for you and your students—there is no need to use all 21 pen strokes. Encourage students to add their own pen strokes and add them to your class’s Palette. Consider having students make poster-sized illustrations of the pen strokes for display in the classroom.

It can be handy to create laminated class sets of the pen strokes. This way you can allow students to randomly select five strokes from a hat/bucket and work with those strokes over the course of an in-class reading assignment.

After students are familiar with the pen strokes you might also consider using them as a peer revision tool. The Palette creates a wonderful framework for students to give meaningful feedback to fellow writers if you select the appropriate pen strokes.

Lastly, you can use the pen strokes to help develop students’ meta-cognitive skills. At the end of a Reading with Your Pen activity you can ask students to do an exit slip in which they reflect on why they used specific pen strokes in specific parts of the text.

When you collect a text covered in “pen strokes” you are given a painting of a reader’s thoughts. This learning footprint is easy to a grade by spot-checking annotations. More importantly, reading student annotations generates a lot of feedback you can use to improve or clarify your instruction.

The Reading with Your Pen Palette in Action: Teacher Narratives

I’m including three short teacher narratives that will give you ideas of the ways different teachers have used the Reading with Your Pen Palette with different disciplines and student populations.

Getting Comfortable with Annotation—Elizabeth Davis, 9th Grade Social Studies, Banana Kelly High School, New York, New York

One of the ways that I began using the Reading with Your Pen strategies with my students was through a lesson that would introduce them to philosophies of ancient China with a short text.



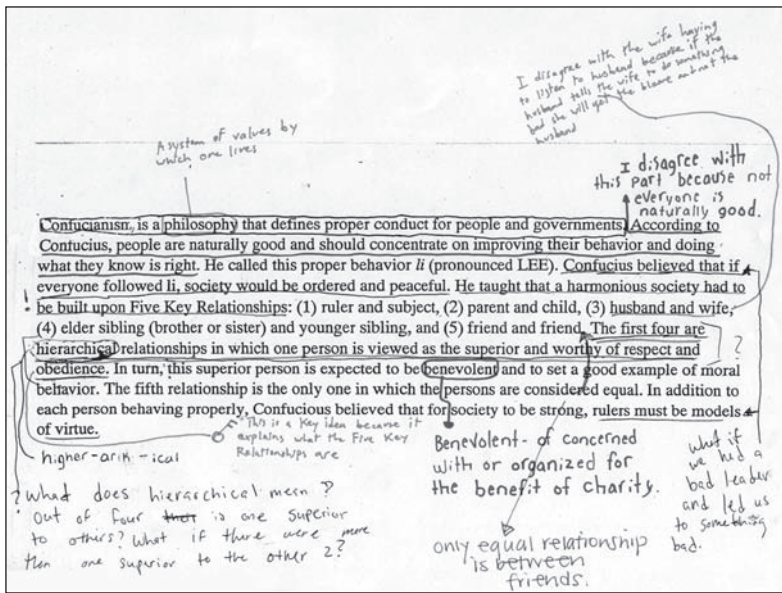


Figure 1: Passing a text from group to group helped students become comfortable using the pen strokes and produced a model of what an annotated text looks like.

For this lesson I chunked the reading into five sections that were easily understood independently of each other. From there I created large posters of each section.

I broke the class into five groups—one for each section. Groups consisted of three or four students of mixed abilities. Each group was given three different pen strokes from the Palette.

Before assigning text to each group, students had five minutes to look at their assigned pen strokes and discuss what they might look like when using them with a reading.

Next each group was assigned a section from the reading. Because my classes have up to thirty students, multiple groups read the same text. Each group was assigned a specific marker color so that we could easily distinguish which pen strokes belonged to each group.

Students then had ten minutes to read the poster-sized text given to them. They were required to use at least two pen strokes on the reading where appropriate. After ten minutes, students passed their text to the next group, while receiving a partially annotated text from a different group. At that point, groups again had ten minutes to read and annotate, using their unique marker color.

We repeated this process until each group had received all five of the paragraphs. By the end of the lesson students had read the entire text and had created an interesting set of annotations. We placed them all in the front of the room so everyone could see the results. (See an example of one annotated section in Figure 1.)

My objectives for this early reading with your pen activity were to help students become comfortable using some of

the strokes and to create a model showing what an annotated text looks like.

To wrap up the two-day lesson I had the class reflect on a few questions.

1. What did you learn from the text about the philosophies of ancient China?
2. What do you want to know about Ancient China based on your annotations?
3. Can you think of any important annotations that might be missing?
4. Did the act of “reading with your pen” help you to learn more from the reading? How?

I had them answer these questions on sticky notes and share in pairs and with the whole group.—E.D.

Using Annotations with Difficult Texts—Jane Wisdom, English Teacher, Maine West High School, Des Plaines, Illinois

Many of my regular level English III juniors are reluctant readers and have difficulty with Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I turned to the Reading with Your Pen Palette as a means of getting students to “talk back to the text” and engage more with this novel.

For one period of sustained silent reading, I cut out and laminated multiple sets of all the pen strokes. Each student chose two from a pile on my desk. Yet as I watched them read, I noticed that no one was actually annotating. I interrupted to ask why, and one student said, “I think we’re just lazy,” then added, “I’m too busy trying to figure out what’s going on.” Others agreed that stopping to annotate was distracting.

The next day, instead of giving each student one or two strategies, I copied the entire list of pen strokes on one side of a handout, and on the other side I listed definitions of the terms *annotation*, *active reading*, and *close reading*.

Then I asked them to choose any two pen strokes with which they felt comfortable and that they felt were most relevant to the novel chapter they had read the day before. After they spent a few minutes paging through the text and adding their responses—on text or sticky notes—I had them partner up and share the pen strokes they had chosen as well as what they had noticed during their annotating.

I listened as they shared. Suddenly students were asking questions about the main character Janie; they noticed a repeated reference to the pear tree and decoded the dialect in the margins of their text. They noticed that two characters, Logan Killocks and Jodie Starks, had the same deadening effect on Janie’s spirit. Their responses snowballed into a large-group discussion for the remainder of the period.

THE “READING WITH YOUR PEN” PALETTE for Annotating Texts

Developed by Ryan R. Goble with Lauren Fardig and Elizabeth Davis at Banana Kelly High School - Bronx, NY



1	Write a question or make a statement about something you read in the margin. Draw a line to the relevant part of the text.
2	Circle a word you don't know. Look up the word's definition using a dictionary or www.dictionary.com . Write the definition or synonym of the word in the margin.
3	Draw an → (arrow) to illustrate the link between two parts of the text. Write your explanation near the arrow or in the margin.
4	Circle an idea in the text that you find enlightening (an idea that you find very interesting or that taught you something). Find a way to “thank” the author for that idea in the margin.
5	<u>Underline something you disagree with</u> and write a note in the margin to explain why. Be constructive!
6	Draw a ☺ next to something that made you laugh or smile, and explain why in the margin.
7	Draw a 🦄 (horn) next to a passage that made you hear a sound in your mind. Next to the 🦄, describe the sound and the feelings created in your mind.
8	Underline a sentence you found totally confusing. Draw a big ? (question mark) next to the sentence and in the margin, write about why you found it confusing.
9	Write an E near part of the text where an event is described. In the margin write down what you think are the cause and the effect of this event.
10	Is there a word in the text that is hard to pronounce? If so, ask how that word is pronounced and make note of the pronunciation next to the word using a phonetic (FO-NEH-TIC) spelling.
11	Draw a box around a sentence that you think is the main idea, thesis, or organizing concept of the text you're reading.
12	Write a specific comment about how you find an idea in the text interesting or useful. You may also reflect on what it made you think about.
13	Remix/rewrite/translate/paraphrase part of the text into your own words. Write your own version of the text in the margin.
14	Draw a ★ (star) next to a word, concept, or idea from the text that you learned about in another class. Write what you remember about that word or concept in the margin.
15	Write down a comment that builds on what you just read. For example, you might make a connection between the reading and your life, imagine you're in a conversation with the author, or predict what might happen next.
16	Draw a 🔑 (key) next to something that you think is a “key” idea. Explain in the margin why you think this idea is important.
17	<u>Underline a sentence you found surprising.</u> Draw a big ! (exclamation mark) next to the sentence that caught your attention in the margin.
18	Draw a 🪝 (hook) next to a part of the text that “hooked” your attention. In the margin write why the passage hooked you.
19	In the margin, draw a simple picture or cartoon to help you understand something in the text. Draw an arrow connecting your picture and the text.
20	Write and answer the 5Ws & 1H (Who, What, When, Where, Why, How) in the margin of the text.
21	Draw an ✂ (ax) next to a part of the text that you think is unnecessary and should have been cut. Explain why you felt that part of the text wasn't necessary for the reader.

I could tell that students seemed more comfortable annotating after they read rather than during reading, and when I asked my students about this observation, the overwhelming response was that it was much more valuable to use the procedure post-reading.

The great thing about the pen strokes is their versatility; the students had more choice in how and what to annotate, and they were able to reflect on and connect more meaningfully with the text as a result. (See example in Figure 2, this page.)—J.W.

**Active Reading As a Habit—Nicole Trackman,
English Teacher, Illinois Math and Science Academy,
Aurora, Illinois.**

During the first week of school I asked my students, about 100 gifted sophomores and juniors, what they did while reading. Many of them looked at me with confusion. Of course, they *read* while they were reading.

I asked them if they were in the habit of annotating, or “talking with the text.” About one-quarter of my students were familiar with annotating, but admitted that they didn’t do it consistently while reading because they saw it as a distraction. Some students had the view that advanced readers didn’t annotate because, of course, they remember everything of importance. Yet in my experience, strong and reluctant readers alike often struggle to find the important parts of a text, especially if the text is not high interest.

I introduced the Reading with Your Pen Palette as I gave out the first reading assignments for the year. I explained that it was not enough to be fast readers; students needed to get into the habit of having a conversation with the text.

I began by giving each student a copy of the entire Palette. We went over it in class and discussed the strategies they were familiar with and those that needed clarification. Many students recognized strategies that they had been asked to practice before, but that had fallen by the wayside as soon as the teacher stopped checking.

With that first reading assignment, I asked students to choose three strategies to use—two strategies that they were familiar with and one they weren’t quite as comfortable with.

When students returned to class

the following day, I was not surprised to see that many of them chose to circle the words that they didn’t know and draw smiley faces next to passages that made them laugh. They recognized that they didn’t know as many vocabulary words as they thought. Instead of glossing over them and assuming their meaning, students employed reading strategies to decode the new words.

Students also realized that they enjoyed much more of the text than they anticipated. They looked back in their texts during class discussion and shared favorite passages and new words that they had encountered.

I was a bit surprised to learn that many students found the eighth pen stroke (the one that asks students to underline confusing sentences and insert question marks next to confusing passages) to be the most challenging.

Students explained that they weren’t in the habit of questioning a text as they read. They often didn’t realize if they were confused until they had completed the text and were asked to discuss it. The process of identifying and working through that confusion on the spot took longer but allowed

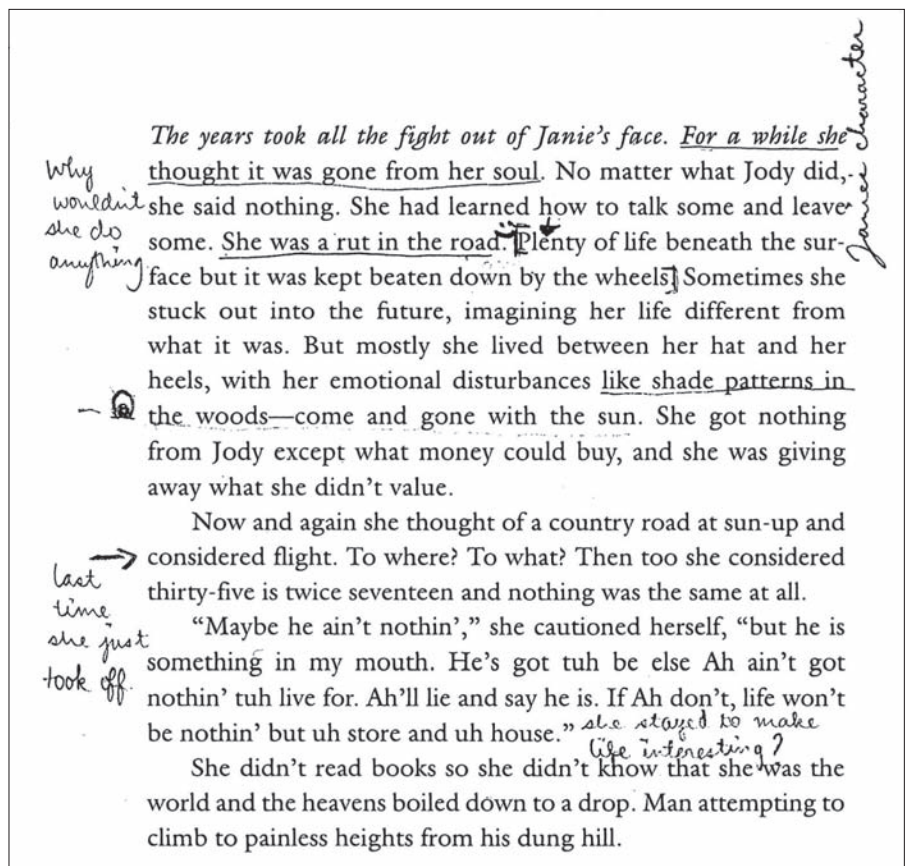


Figure 2: Annotation can be especially helpful with a text that students find challenging, such as Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Students in Jane Wisdom’s class found “reading with your pen” most valuable when used as a post-reading strategy.

them to have a greater understanding after their first read.

Throughout the semester, I gave students the opportunity to practice new pen strokes for each text that they encountered. By the end of the semester, students had grown comfortable with all of the pen strokes on the Palette and were able to choose appropriate strokes for their reading.

Recently, I asked my students to reflect on our class work and their personal learning throughout the semester. Many students suggested that one of the most important and useful skills that they learned was annotation.

Using the Palette for responding to text allowed the students to think not just about what they read but about how they read. This meta-cognitive aspect of the pen strokes is why it is so valuable to the students and to me as a teacher.—N.T.

Conclusion

Annotation is an old practice, and it's gradually being updated; we're all accustomed to word processing "with markup," and there is a lot of Pop-Up Video-style software available that allows students to create annotation bubbles on video. This is a natural evolution toward "reading with your computer or digital tablet." Clearly, learning to "read with your pen" is a concept that becomes even more important over time, as we are asked as students, teachers, and citizens to interact in meaningful ways with a wide world of multimodal texts.

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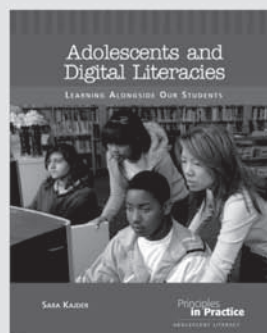
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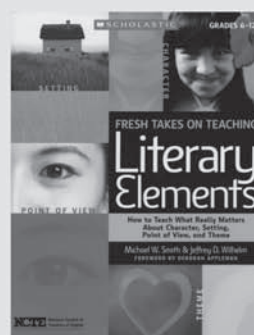
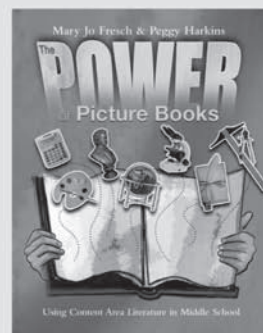
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