

Matthew D. Brown

# I'll Have Mine Annotated, Please: Helping Students Make Connections with Texts

Matthew D. Brown asks students to enter into conversation with the texts they read, connecting personally to make meaning. The process of annotation—analyzing the purposes for annotation, brainstorming connections, developing ideas through peer feedback, and writing detailed responses to text—allows students to consider how active interaction between reader and text is vital to their understanding.

**E**ach year I strive to explain to students why I love to read, to communicate the connection I have with books. Mocking disbelief is usually the only response I receive. How can I get students to see that what they read can connect to their lives—to what is important to them? How can I help students see that reading will help them understand the confusing and chaotic world in which they live?

Two years ago, I sat in on a discussion with Dr. Valerie Wayne at the Folger Shakespeare Library while she was working on the new Arden edition of *Cymbeline*. Of all the people who have worked with this play, she must know it best. She worked for two months that summer, editing and annotating twenty lines of the play each day. Yet, her effort that summer was a small fraction of the time—ten years!—she will spend with the play. For all of us who love plays, the chance to study one so well, so intimately, is a dream. My students, on the other hand, would rather cut grass with nail clippers.

Even so, I was interested in the work that Wayne was doing. Specifically, I was intrigued by the annotations that she was writing to go along with the play's text. While these annotations were not necessarily personal, they reflected her interaction with the text. I wondered what would happen if I had students annotate a piece of text. I wasn't looking for detailed analysis and research, and I certainly wasn't looking for the academic rigor that goes into the annotations of professionally published works, but I wanted a way to view the interactions students

were having with text. What were they thinking about as they read? What connections were they making? What questions did they have, and could they find answers to those questions?

## Allowing Students to Begin a Conversation

Reading is one thing, but getting something of value from what we have read is another. When we take up a text, we are engaging in a conversation with the author, with others, and with ourselves. Yet, so much of what takes place in the classroom isolates reading so that true, authentic, and meaningful interactions with a text are sometimes ignored.

Think back to the books that you love. Why are they so significant to you? I would be willing to guess that there was a personal connection with the text—something that moved you. Yet look at our classrooms today. How much of what we do helps students make those personal connections with the text? And how much of what we do allows students to share those ideas?

I desire to have students enter into a conversation with the text they are reading.<sup>1</sup> Whether it is a conversation with me, their peers, their parents, or themselves, I want them to think about what they have read and then strive to make meaning of that text for themselves. Without allowing students to interact with text in a meaningful way, we miss the chance of allowing them to see the value of what they are reading and to form new ideas about who they are and how they fit into the world in which they live.

## First Steps: Helping Students Make Connections

If I desire that students make some sort of meaning from what they read, then writing is the means that must be used to get them there. Writing helps students think about the text they are reading and work out their ideas.<sup>2</sup> More importantly, though, any writing that students do needs to connect to their personal experiences, and those experiences must inform their understanding of what they have read. Taking a piece of text and annotating it can accomplish that.

I give students a handout with a page of published text that has been annotated. Any play by

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Shakespeare works well as a model since nearly all publishers provide annotations for the text of his plays. (I have found that a selection of a play by Shakespeare from the Red Reader series published by Teacher's Discovery works nicely for this exercise.) The students get into small groups and look at the professional model. They make notes in the

text's margins, describing the kinds of information being given to the reader through these annotations.

Once the small groups have exhausted their ideas, we come back into a whole-class discussion. I ask students to help me create a list—a rubric of sorts—that helps show what good annotations do. Using an overhead, I first ask them to share what they discovered in the professional model. These are easy enough for them to list. Students often point out how annotations

- > give definitions to difficult and unfamiliar words;
- > give background information, especially explaining customs, traditions, and ways of living that may be unfamiliar to us;
- > help explain what is going on in the text;
- > make connections to other texts;
- > point out the use of literary techniques and how they add meaning to the text;
- > can use humor; and
- > reveal that the writer of these annotations knows his or her reader.

The process of generating this list usually moves into a discussion about where these annotations came from—who wrote them and why. Here is a teachable moment. Someone had to write these ideas, to look at the text and do more than just read it, to make a *connection* with the text. It is vital that students begin to realize that our understanding of what we have read comes from our interaction with what is on the page.

I have the class consider the many ways that reading can affect us—how we can connect to something that we are reading. I usually get the ball rolling by sharing how stories that I read often remind me of movies that I have seen. I add this to the list and then ask students to think of some ideas. This list can and often does grow, getting deeper and deeper into students' understanding of what it means to connect to a text.<sup>3</sup> Students often share how a piece of text

- > touches them emotionally, making them feel happiness as well as sadness;
- > reminds them of childhood experiences;
- > teaches them something new;
- > changes their perspective on an issue;
- > helps them see how they can better relate to their parents and others around them; and
- > helps them see the world through someone else's experiences.

Students are now ready to create their annotations, so I take the brainstorming list and generate a guide sheet (see fig. 1). Students must choose a passage from the text we are studying—one that they believe is meaningful in some way. I ask them to type or write out one to two paragraphs of that passage. The text should not take up more than a quarter of the page once it is typed. I know that it may be tempting for teachers to select the passages for the students so that there is variety in the pieces the students annotate, but students become engaged in an assignment when they are given choices.<sup>4</sup> This is especially true since the nature of these annotations is often personal and reveals how students have connected to what they have read. So, I allow students to make their own choices, encouraging them to choose a passage that they like.

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**FIGURE 1. Making Annotations: A User's Guide**


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As you work with your text, consider all of the ways that you can connect with it. Here are some suggestions that will help you with your brainstorming.

- Vocabulary—define words or slang; make them real for us; explore why the author would have used those words.
  - Make connections to other parts of the book. Don't be afraid to use quotes—just use MLA style.
  - Make connections to other visual and graphic material, such as movies; comics; news events; and books, stories, plays, poems, and so on that you have read.
  - For visual connections, include the artwork, photo, or drawing in the footnotes (don't just describe it).
  - Rewrite, paraphrase, or summarize a particularly difficult part of the text.
  - Make connections to your life.
  - Give the historical context of situations described.
  - Give an explanation of the text for clarity.
  - Give an analysis of what is happening in the text.
  - Do research on the Internet to see what others are saying about the text.
  - Challenge yourself: Find some literary criticism on the author or text.
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### Making Meaning, Making Annotations

Now comes the fun part! The students create annotations for the text they have chosen. But, like all other writing assignments, there is a process. Students should first take the text they have typed or written out and spend some time brainstorming, making as many connections with words and phrases in the text as possible. Figure 2 shows an example of what Kimberly, a senior, did for a piece of text from *The Great Gatsby*.

While this brainstorming example shows that Kimberly's ideas are somewhat simple ("This is an awkward moment—I've had these."), there is evidence that she is thinking about and connecting with the text. I would even suggest that she has ideas that aren't fully communicated in her brainstorming. But, that is what brainstorming is for—getting ideas on paper. These will then be expanded with more detail as the writing process continues.

From this point, I work with students to help them choose their best ideas to turn into annotations. As the user-guide handout suggests, there are numerous possibilities with annotations, so I encourage students to use as many of the functions of annotations as possible. Variety *is* the spice of life. I ask students to keep this assignment limited to just one page (text and footnotes combined).

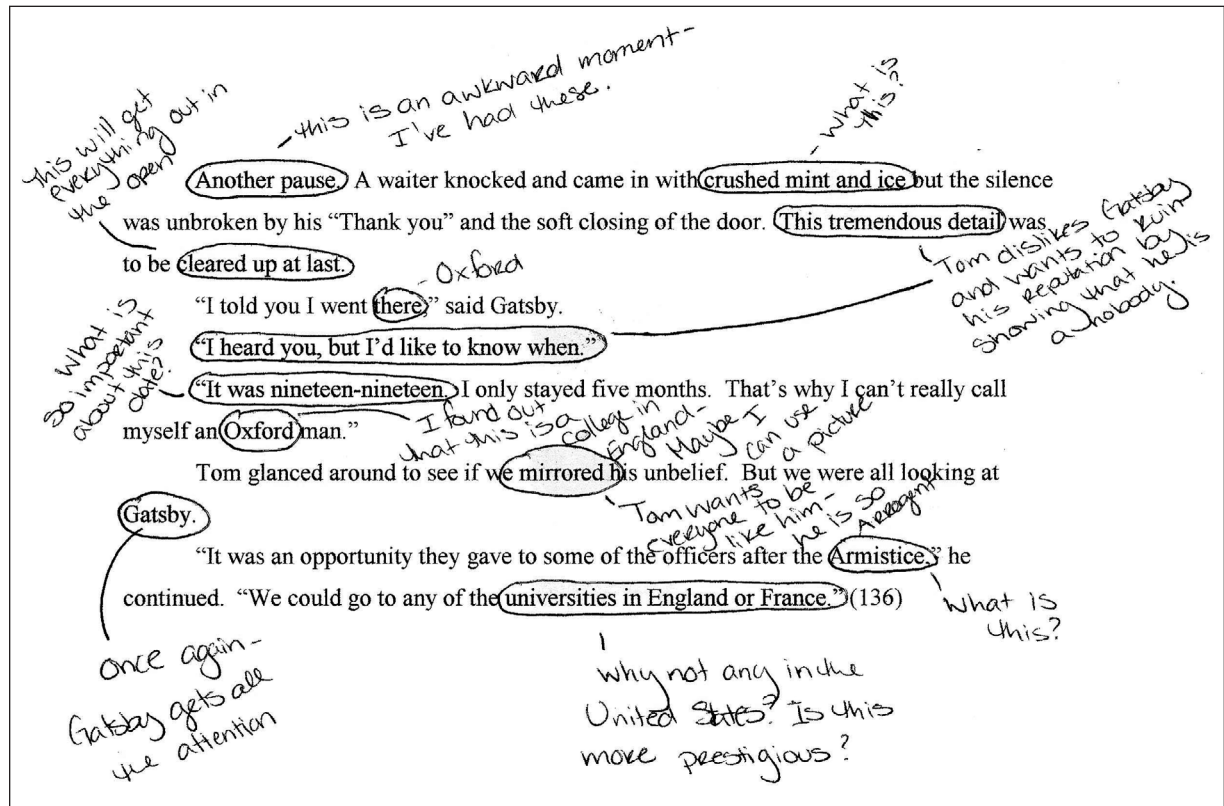
The most difficult part of this assignment for students, then, becomes narrowing down their annotations from the brainstorming that they originally did. I have considered relaxing this one-page limit but have come to the conclusion that I desire to see the most meaningful connections students make with text, not necessarily all the connections that they make.

Before students complete this assignment, I encourage them to get feedback from their peers. To accomplish this in a way that is effective for both the reader and the writer of the paper, I have adapted an idea from Joseph Tsujimoto's work with teaching poetry. Students are required to answer three questions when they read another student's paper:

- > What part of the writing did you like? Why?
- > What part was difficult to read? Why?
- > If this were your paper, what would you change? Why?

Each of these questions gets the students beyond simply stating that a paper is "good." They must point out specific parts and give reasons why those passages elicited either a positive or negative response. The final question helps the peer reader to become a critical reader, looking for ways to

FIGURE 2. Kimberly's Annotations of *The Great Gatsby*—Brainstorming



improve the writing. I have had success with this approach every time.

As the students begin to type up their final drafts, it may be necessary to give a minilesson on how to create footnotes on the computer. The students quickly pick this up and are excited to see their ideas come together. In her final draft (see fig. 3), Kimberly has successfully navigated herself from the beginning stages of a brainstorming session to well-thought-out and detailed responses in her annotations. She defined words, added clip art,<sup>5</sup> explained parts of the text, and gave background information for confusing references in the text. I like how Kimberly made two connections to her life. First, she talked about the awkward silences she can have with her parents. The description she uses (“I pray for someone to call”) helps us connect to what the people in *The Great Gatsby* were feeling. She also connects a part of the text with a significant life event: a major move for her family. Only she was able to see this connection; only she was able to identify with the text in this way. I find it thrilling to see how this part of the story helped her

deal with something that was obviously an emotional experience.

### Continuing the Conversation

According to Peter Elbow, writing offers a “metacognitive understanding of the nature of the reading process” (12). That is why annotating a text can be beneficial for students as they explore new ways to understand what they have read. This assignment should only be the beginning. This interaction—this meaning making—should continue in other areas of our classrooms. Imagine the possibilities.

- > Allow students to annotate their books as they read. Have them either write directly in their books or give them sticky notes on which they can write annotations as they read. The connections with text become immediate and meaningful.<sup>6</sup>
- > Hold discussions that explore the important connections students make with the text they have read. You will find that these discussions will focus more on relevant issues in the lives of teenagers and less on literary

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**FIGURE 3.** Kimberly's Annotations of *The Great Gatsby*—Final Draft
 

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Another pause. A waiter knocked and came in with crushed mint and ice but the silence was unbroken<sup>1</sup> by his "Thank you"<sup>2</sup> and the soft closing of the door. This tremendous detail was to be cleared up at last.<sup>3</sup>

"I told you I went there<sup>4</sup>," said Gatsby.

"I heard you, but I'd like to know when."<sup>5</sup>

"It was nineteen-nineteen. I only stayed five months. That's why I can't really call myself an Oxford<sup>6</sup> man."

Tom glanced around to see if we mirrored his unbelief.<sup>7</sup> But we were all looking at Gatsby.

"It was an opportunity they gave to some of the officers after the Armistice,"<sup>8</sup> he continued.

"We could go to any of the universities in England or France." (136)

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<sup>1</sup> At this point in the story, Jay Gatsby, Nick Carraway, Jordan Baker, and Daisy and Tom Buchanan are all at a hotel relaxing and Tom is trying to put Gatsby in a bad light in front of the others by questioning him about his past.

<sup>2</sup> Whenever I have a fight with my parents, there is always an awkward silence and I pray for someone to call, or the doorbell to ring or something can take everyone's mind off the incident, but even when the phone rings I am always disappointed because they ignore it and say they will return the call later. In tense situations, it can be very unnerving when the silence is unable to be broken.

<sup>3</sup> Earlier this year, my family and I were not sure where we would be moving. My dad had job offers, and the choices were narrowed down to: Miami, Florida, Newark, New Jersey, Chicago, Illinois, and Los Angeles, California. While we waited, it was very stressful to us to not know where we would be moving, and we couldn't wait until the detail was cleared up and we would know what we were going to be doing.

<sup>4</sup> "There" refers to the University of Oxford. Tom Buchanan had been thinking that Jay Gatsby had been lying to everyone about his attending Oxford University.

<sup>5</sup> In the line "I heard you, but I'd like to know when" we see Tom's mistrust and genuine dislike for Gatsby. Throughout the book, Tom disapproves of him all along thinking he is a "Mr. Nobody from Nowhere" (137). Tom continually distrusts Jay, and thinks he is lying by asking Gatsby to keep telling him to tell him of his days at Oxford and not just taking his word for it.

<sup>6</sup> Oxford University is the oldest English-speaking University in the world. It has been around since the eleventh century. The student population of Oxford University numbers over 17,000. Almost a quarter of students are from overseas, and there are more than 130 nationalities are represented at the school.

<sup>7</sup> "Mirrored" commonly refers to the exact same of something, an imitation of an emotion or action.

<sup>8</sup> The term "Armistice" means a ceasing of hostilities as a prelude of peace negotiations. In the context of the First World War, "the Armistice" refers to the agreement between the Germans and the Allies to end the war on November 11, 1918.

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technique and style, but you will also find that these discussions are much more meaningful to the students and will help them connect to the text in more significant ways. The ideas that the students generate will keep the conversation alive in the classroom for quite some time.

- > Rather than using footnotes, have the students create a Web page or a PowerPoint presentation made with hyperlinks in the text. Clicking on one word in the text will link you to another page of text, which could also contain other hyperlinks, revealing a chain of thinking about the reading. If given enough time, students could create an extensive set of links that shows the numerous ways in which someone can enter into and weave through a piece of text.

I may not get all students to love books as much as I do, and I still may not convince students that reading a book is a good way to spend their

free time. But, I will show students how to connect with the text that they read, finding meaning for themselves. As a result, I may one day find my students holed up in a library someplace, poring over a book, wringing from it all that they can.

#### Notes

1. In *Curriculum as Conversation: Transforming Traditions of Teaching and Learning*, Arthur N. Applebee talks about what he calls *traditions*—or ways in which we interact or connect with the world. These traditions form our understanding, and entering into conversations about these traditions allows us to grow and learn. Applebee argues, then, that teachers should tap into the ideas that students bring to the classroom rather than force them to learn information out of context.

2. Jim Burke discusses this effectively in *Writing Reminders: Tools, Tips, and Techniques*. Also, see works by Kathleen Dudden Andrasick, Peter Elbow, and Joseph Tsujimoto.

3. Tim Gillespie wrote a wonderful article entitled "Why Literature Matters" for *English Journal*. He discusses how literature can shape us as human beings. He believes that "literature offers a different form of learning than just

processing information; it requires us to experience, to participate" (20). I couldn't agree more, and I want to use this assignment of annotating a piece of text to prove it to my students as well.

4. A study done in 2001 by the National Assessment of Educational Progress and the National Writing Project and reported by Art Peterson in *The Voice* corroborates this idea of student choice, showing that giving students more freedom within their writing creates better writing.

5. Because of copyright restrictions, the clip art has been removed.

6. In the May 2004 issue of *English Journal*, Carol Porter-O'Donnell discussed this topic in the article entitled "Beyond the Yellow Highlighter: Teaching Annotation Skills to Improve Reading Comprehension."

#### Works Cited

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Throughout his twelve years of teaching English at Santa Clarita Christian School, **Matthew D. Brown** has enjoyed guiding students through their discoveries in the literature that they read. His teaching has been greatly informed through the completion of his MA degree at California State University-Northridge, his work with the South Coast Writing Project, and his experience during the 2004 summer institute at the Folger Shakespeare Library. *email*: [mrbccs@aol.com](mailto:mrbccs@aol.com).

#### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Brown reminds us that the best way to comprehend texts is to make personal connections to what we are reading. The lesson plan "Weaving the Threads: Integrating Poetry Annotation and Web Technology" engages students in meaningful research using poetry as a focal point. Students identify words and phrases in a poem by a Native American, and in the process they learn about Native American culture and history. Students create a Web site using the poem as a "launching" space that takes readers into various explanations of words and phrases. While poetry is the genre explored here, this strategy can be used with any text.

[http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson\\_view.asp?id=36](http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=36)

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## Winner of the Richard Ohmann Award

Paul Kei Matsuda has been named winner of the 2006 Richard Ohmann Award for his article "The Myth of Linguistic Homogeneity in U.S. College Composition," which appeared in the July 2006 issue of *College English*.