



## CHANGING THE TEXT: ANNOTATION AS INTERACTION

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When I write in a book, I am breaking through the walls around it. Everything tells me that I shouldn't, that I have no right to be there, that I'm destroying something. But I see writing in books as my way of sharing space with them, and this destruction as an act of participation. Books are public spaces, and by breaking in, I am refusing to be denied entry—I am claiming my right to be in conversation with ideas and to play an active role in language.

Historically, books have been the domain of the wealthy, requiring the education to make reading possible. That much is still true, and reading remains systemically inaccessible to many people. But commodification of the written word has made it so we come into contact with thousands of words on a daily basis— words on screens, signs, and pages. Mass printing, the publishing industry, and universal education have made books accessible in an unprecedented way; almost anyone can access the ideas and language previously reserved for those with wealth and status. Most books in a college setting are one of thousands of identical copies. Mass-produced books are not precious by nature of their conception, but rather acquire preciousness through our interactions with them: the epiphanies we have in seminar, the rare sunny days spent reading in the grass, the spines that break at a favorite page. And yet, many students view books—and by extension the ideas contained within them—as hallowed artifacts that are complete and unalterable. We continue to treat books like they cannot be messed with, as sacred, unique vessels of knowledge greater than ourselves.

Culturally, we place the Authors of books at the center of the reading experience. Information, knowledge, ideas, and Truth only move in one direction: from the Author, through the word, to the reader. This perpetuates a hierarchy in which the Author is right and the reader is trying to find out what being right means. Even on the level of the word “authority,” we credit Authors with unquestionable ownership over ideas.

Because of this, many readers approach reading from the perspective of tracking down that Truth, a hunt where only the person who follows all the right steps will find it. If Authors owned the Truth, and it were identifiable, this approach would be completely reasonable (and the world would be a much simpler place). But there's no such thing as a single Truth that can be owned—rather, there exists a multitude of truths. When readers are looking for the Truth, they can't hear when their own voice speaks in the act of reading.

The hierarchy that places the Author at the center of reading prevents dialogue between the work and the reader. When students perceive the Author of a text as unquestionable, it prevents them from identifying flaws in the work. Countless times I've asked people what they think about a text and heard, "I don't think I have anything to add," or "I don't feel like I'm allowed to say anything about this." They don't think they have the right to speak to the material they study. Many struggle to center themselves within the process of reading and interpretation. For most people, it means reevaluating many years of schooling that demanded right answers about the symbol of the green light in *Gatsby*. Our culture privileges certain voices over others, and many of us have internalized the message that our voices shouldn't be heard.

But if looking for Truth in a text closes it to the interactive process that is reading, annotation restores the reader their right to interact with a text, to use it and play with it. Books, sentences, and even words are spaces that we can enter by reading—both physically, as material objects and symbols on a page, and metaphorically, as gatherings of ideas and thoughts. To consider language as a space allows the possibility for it to be manipulated by the person who enters that space; words are not empty or finite, but as alive as the person who reads them. Each reader's lived experience makes them uniquely qualified to read the text in a way that no one else can—there is no Truth, because for each reader there is a different truth. The truest text, made up of more than the words on the page, is the amalgam of all these truths, the mingling of every possible truth, present at once. Every reader brings to their reading the entirety of themselves and the wealth of experience, knowledge, and understanding that makes them who they are. The words change. That is the magic of reading.

From a young age, I was taught to revere books, and this meant keeping them in "good condition." I found myself preserving my books out of fear—fear that my words didn't belong there or that what I wrote would be wrong. If I wrote in a book, anyone could pick it up and see a record of my failure. I overcame my fear of marking my books out of frustration, not epiphany. For fear of being wrong, I had developed a convoluted note-taking system that put too much distance between myself and my books, and I finally got tired of navigating it. Only in retrospect do I recognize annotation as an interaction between myself and my texts.

At first I made notes in the text just to be more efficient—but breaking the rules was electric. The more I wrote in the margins the more I wanted to write all over the pages. Now, my annotations blossom: I circle emphatically, draw arrows across the text, link concepts in boxes, trace patterns across pages, draw pictures in the margins. With each new method of annotation, I further discover that writing in books is, for me, a truer form of reading. My annotations fill the spaces left on the page, inflate the ideas with my reactions to them, record the movement of my mind through the text. If an archeologist were to find my books, they wouldn't find just artifacts: they would find me in them.

Writing in books makes the collision between myself and language tangible and visible. In the same way that arrows, boxes, and circles fill the spaces between words, I flesh out the hidden corners of an idea. When the Reader's voice is held on the same level as that of the Author, knowledge and ideas can expand in many directions at once, rather than along one line. Every text is infinitely interpretable, and its meaning changes every time it is read.

When I read, I change the text: I bring to it all that is inimitable, unique, and particular about me, and through it I am uncovering my truth. And when I read, the text also changes me: it makes a

mark in my thoughts. Reading strategies that honor the Reader's voice destabilize the hierarchy built into our conventional approach to reading and allow for individual truths to replace the ideal of Truth. Annotation breaks into a text so that we are not isolated from its ideas. It opens books up to reveal everything hidden inside them, the everything that can only emerge through us.