Five close reading strategies

(Adapted from an original blog post by Court Allam)

I walked in to my first college class, Political Science 101, eager to learn. For my inaugural college assignment, my professor asked the class to read the first three chapters of the textbook for the next class period.

That night, I returned to my dorm room, determined to learn everything I could in those three chapters. I pulled out my textbook and highlighter. Growing up, that is what I always saw the “older kids” using when they read a textbook. In my naïve 18-year-old mind, I believed that highlighters must have some magical power that transports the words on the page directly to your brain. I assumed that if I just figured out the right words to highlight, then it would be easy for me to remember what I read.

However, when I opened my textbook it was unlike anything I had read in high school. Where were the pictures? Where were the definitions for words in the margins? Where was the chapter summary at the end of each chapter? All of the things I relied on in high school to get me through a text were missing.

I shrugged, pulled out my highlighter and started highlighting. That is what college kids did to study… right? But, what was I supposed to highlight? The bold words? The headings? “Important” information? I wasn’t sure. I started highlighting everything that looked important on the page. Before long, the page looked something like this:
I quickly realized that I had no real game plan for reading this complicated textbook. I didn’t know what to highlight or how to find the important information to study. The text simply overwhelmed me.

Flash forward to my first few years of teaching. I taught senior English, and I was determined to provide my students help when it came to annotating texts. We practiced annotations throughout the year, and my instructions went something like: “Mark it up! Underline important information! Write in the margins!”

While this method may have been slightly more effective than what I used that first day of college, it was still too vague and ambiguous for my students. They had no direction for reading, especially when it was a complicated text they did not understand.

Last fall, I attended an AVID workshop about critical reading strategies. To be honest, it completely changed the way I teach reading. I learned many simple strategies to help my students attack a text. After the conference, our department began adapting the strategies to all of the types of texts that we teach. Here are five simple strategies to help teach students how to critically read complex texts. The best part? Highlighters are not required.

1. **Number the paragraphs**
   You want to be able to cite and refer to the text. One simple way to do this is by numbering each paragraph, section or stanza in the left hand margin.
2. **Chunk the text.**
When faced with a full page of text, reading it can quickly become overwhelming. Breaking up the text into smaller sections (or chunks) makes the page much more manageable. Do this by drawing a horizontal line between paragraphs to divide the page into smaller sections. For example, the first three paragraphs may be the hook and thesis statement, while paragraphs 6-8 may be the where the author addresses the opposition. It is important to understand that there is no right or wrong way to chunk the text, as long as you can rationally group certain paragraphs together.

3. **Underline and circle… with a purpose.**
To simply underline “the important stuff” is too vague. You are looking to underline and circle very specific things. Think about what information you need to take from the text.

For example, when studying an argument, underline “claims.” We identify claims as belief statements that the author is making. You’ll quickly discover that the author makes multiple claims throughout the argument.

When studying poetry, underline the imagery you find throughout the poem.

Circling specific items is also an effective close reading strategy. I often have my students circle “Key terms” in the text.
I define key terms as words that: 1. Are defined. 2. Are repeated throughout the text. 3. If you only circled five key terms in the entire text, you would have a pretty good idea about what the entire text is about.

I have also asked students to circle the names of sources, power verbs, or figurative language. Providing students with a specific thing you want them to underline or circle will focus their attention on that area much better than “underlining important information”.

4. **Left margin: What is the author SAYING?**
It isn’t enough to “write in the margins”. We must be very specific and give students a game plan for what they will write. This is where the chunking comes into play.

In the left margin, **summarize** each chunk. Do this in 10-words or less. The chunking allows you to look at the text in smaller segments, and summarize what the author is saying in just that small, specific chunk.

5. **Right margin: Dig deeper into the text**
In the right-hand margin, complete a specific task for each chunk. This may include:

- **Use a power verb to describe what the author is DOING.** (For example: Describing, illustrating, arguing, etc..) Note: It isn’t enough to write “Comparing” and be done. What is
the author comparing? A better answer might be: “Comparing the character of Montag to Captain Beatty”.

- **Ask questions.** Dig. When modeled, students can begin to learn how to ask questions that dig deeper into the text. I often use these questions as the conversation driver in Socratic Seminar.

There are many other things you can write in the margins.

Here is what a completed Article of the Week might look like after a student has performed a close read of it:
Interrogating a text requires critical reading strategies. You must learn how to own a text, rather than letting the text own you. After following these steps, you have read the text at least five times and you are actively interacting with the text. This is a much different experience than skimming through a text one time with a highlighter in hand.