

Highlighting and Annotating

As you read and reread, be sure to record your reactions in writing. These notations will help you understand the writer's ideas and your own thoughts about these ideas. Every reader develops a different system of recording such responses, but many readers use a combination of *highlighting* and *annotating*.

When you **highlight**, you mark the text. You might, for example, underline important ideas, box key terms, number a series of related points, circle an unfamiliar word (or place a question mark beside it), draw vertical lines in the margin beside a particularly interesting passage, draw arrows to connect related points, or star discussions of the work's central issues or themes.

When you **annotate**, you carry on a conversation with the text in marginal notes. You might, among other things, ask questions, suggest possible parallels with other reading selections or with your own experiences, argue with the writer's points, comment on the writer's style, or define unfamiliar terms and concepts.

The following paragraph, excerpted from Maya Angelou's "Finishing School" (page 101), illustrates a student's highlighting and annotating of a text.

Date written? → Recently a white woman from Texas, who would quickly describe herself as a liberal, asked me about my hometown. When I told her that in Stamps my grandmother had owned the only Negro general merchandise store since the turn of the century, she exclaimed, "Why, you were a debutante." Ridiculous and even ludicrous. But Negro girls in small Southern towns, whether poverty-stricken or just munching along on a few of life's necessities, were given as extensive and irrelevant preparations for adulthood as rich white girls shown in magazines. Admittedly the training was not the same. While white girls learned to waltz and sit gracefully with a tea cup balanced on their knees, we were lagging behind, learning the mid-Victorian values with very little money to indulge them.

Why does she mention this? →

Serious or sarcastic?

Also true of boys? In North as well as South? True today? *

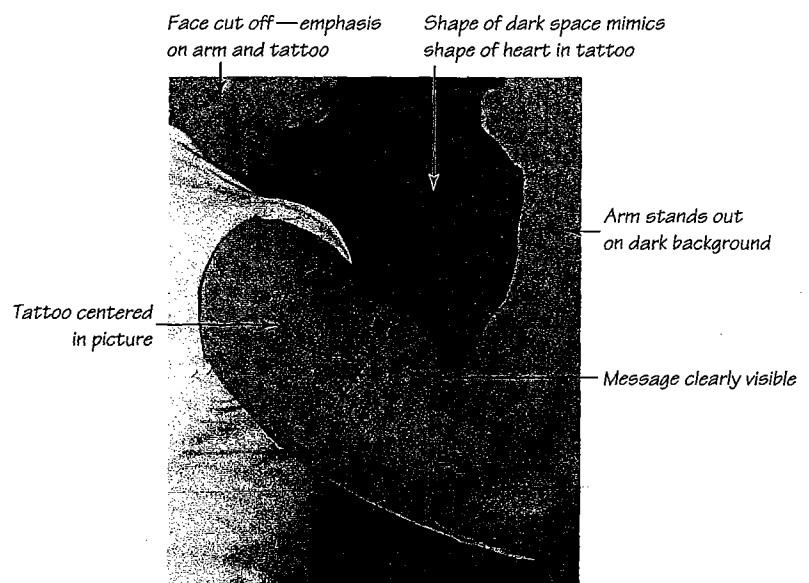
What are these values? →

Remember that this process of highlighting and annotating is not an end in itself but a step toward understanding what you have read. Annotations suggest questions; in your search for answers, you may ask your instructor for clarification, or you may raise particularly puzzling or provocative points during class discussion or in small study groups. After your questions have been answered, you will be able to discuss and write about what you have read with greater confidence, accuracy, and authority.

The process you use when you react to a **visual text**—a photograph; an advertisement; a diagram, graph, or chart; or a work of fine art, for example—is much the same as the one you use when you respond to a written text. Here too, your goal is to understand the text, and highlighting and annotating a visual text can help you interpret it.

With visual texts, however, instead of identifying elements like particular words and ideas, you identify visual elements. These might include the use of color; the arrangement of shapes; the contrast between large and small or light and dark; and, of course, the particular images the visual includes.

The following photograph, one of four included in “Four Tattoos” (page 218), illustrates a student’s highlighting and annotating of a visual text.



Alex Williams, “Lisa, Karen.”

Reading the Essays in This Book

The selection that follows, “What’s in a Name?” by Henry Louis Gates Jr., is typical of the essays in this text. It is preceded by a **headnote** that gives readers information about the author’s life and career. This headnote includes a **background** section that provides a social, historical, and cultural context for the essay. As you read the headnote and the essay, highlight and annotate them carefully.