

Annotating and Analyzing a Text

! Review Annotating a Text

You should have already read the Hunter College Reading and Writing Center handout “Invention: Annotating a Text.” Take another moment to review this handout and the sample annotated text provided in it.

What to Annotate in a Text

- Memorable statements or important points
- Key terms or concepts
- Central Issues or themes
- Examples that support a main point
- Unfamiliar words
- Questions you have about a point or passage
- Your responses to a specific point or passage

Now prepare to strike out on your own and to get more out of your reading.

! Analyzing: Asking Yourself Questions as You Read

As you read the essay a second time, probing for a deeper understanding of and appreciation for what the writer has done, focus your attention by asking yourself some basic questions about its content and its forms. Here are some questions you may find useful:

Questions to Ask Yourself as You Read

- 1) What does the writer want to say? What is the writer’s main point or thesis?
- 2) Why does the writer want to make this point? What is the writer’s purpose?
- 3) What pattern or patterns of development does the writer use? (Such as illustration, narration, description, process analysis, definition, division and classification, exemplification, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, argument, etc.)
- 4) How does the writer’s pattern of development suit his or her subject or purpose?
- 5) What, if anything, is noteworthy about the writer’s use of this pattern?
- 6) How effective is the essay? Does the writer make his or her points clearly?

--from *Models for Writers*, Rosa and Eschholz

These questions [once you make them more specific to the essay you are reading] help you analyze both the content of the essay and the writer’s craft. As you read the essay a second time, look for details that will support your answers to these questions, and then answer the questions as fully as you can.

!Practice: Reading and Annotating Rachel Carson’s “Fable for Tomorrow”

Before you read the following essay, think about its title and the biographical and rhetorical information in the headnote. Make some marginal notes of your expectations for the essay. Then, as you read the essay itself for the first time, try not to stop; take it all in as if in one breath. The second time, however, pause to annotate key points in the text, using the marginal boxes provided alongside each paragraph. As you read remember these six basic questions above. They have been reframed for you here to address the following selection.

- 1) What does Carson want to say? What is her main point or thesis?
- 2) Why does she want to make this point? What is her purpose?
- 3) What pattern or patterns of development does Carson use?
- 4) How does Carson’s pattern of development suit her subject and purpose?
- 5) What, if anything, is noteworthy about Carson’s use of this pattern?
- 6) How effective is Carson’s essay? Does Carson make her points clearly?

!!!A Quick Note on How to Answer Answering Questions

When answering questions, either in class, on tests, in your essays, or for your own edification you should get in the habit of silently including the question “And how do I know that” in your answer. This forces you to not only answer the question, but to justify your answer and provide textual support. You always, in critical thinking and writing, need create a bridge between your own understanding of a text and the text itself. So be sure to justify, explain and support your answers. You will need to go beyond a simple one or two sentence answer and uses evidence from the text (quotes, summary, paraphrases) to support your assertions. Though in informal assignments this may be informally included (no transitions or quote integration), you need to demonstrate how you come up with the answers you do.

You also need to develop your answer before inserting the textual evidence, and then continue to develop your idea after the evidence, with a beginning and an end to your discussion, with the textual evidence usually in the center, what we call a “sandwich.” This works very similarly to the way a paragraph works, so the sooner you get in the habit of posing all of your answers in this way, the closer you will be to writing well-developed body paragraphs using textual support. Start with a claim, explain it, support it, and then continue to develop your answer analytically. Having the evidence in the middle like this, means that you begin and end with your own thoughts, rather than the thoughts and words of the writer whose work you are analyzing.

Ok, let’s get to the text.... (but remember to read twice. While you can annotate during both passes, save the questions for the second time around.)

“Fable for Tomorrow”

By Rachel Carson

Naturalist Rachel Carson (1907-1964) majored in biology at the Pennsylvania College for Women (which later became Chatham College) in the mid-1920s and earned a master’s degree in marine zoology from Johns Hopkins University. Later she worked as an aquatic biologist for the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries in Washington D.C. She wrote Under the Sea Wind (1941), The Sea around Us (1951)—all sensitive investigations of marine life. But it was Silent Spring (1962), hers study of herbicides and insecticides, that made Carson a controversial figure. Once denounced as an alarmist, she is now regarded as an early prophet of the ecology movement.

In the following fable (a short story teaching a moral) taken from Silent Spring, Carson uses contrast to show readers the devastating effects of the indiscriminate use of pesticides.

Original Text

Your Annotations

There was once a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings. The town lay in the midst of a checkerboard of prosperous farms, with fields of grain and hillsides of orchards where, in spring, white clouds of bloom drifted above the green fields. In autumn, oak and maple and birch set up a blaze of color that flamed and flickered across a backdrop of pines. Then foxes barked in the hills and deer silently crossed the fields, half hidden in the mists of the fall mornings.

Along the roads, laurel, viburnum and alder, great ferns and wildflowers delighted the traveler's eye through much of the year. Even in winter the road- sides were places of beauty, where countless birds came to feed on the berries and on the seed heads of the dried weeds rising above the snow. The country- side was, in fact, famous for the abundance and variety of its bird life, and when the flood of migrants was pouring through in spring and fall people traveled from great distances to observe them. Others came to fish the streams, which flowed clear and cold out of the hills and contained shady pools where trout lay. So it had been from the days many years ago when the first settlers raised their houses, sank their wells, and built their barns.

Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community: mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens; the cattle and sheep sickened and died. Everywhere was a shadow of death. The farmers spoke of much illness among their families. In the town the doctors had become more and more puzzled by new kinds of

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sickness appearing among their patients. There had been several sudden and unexplained deaths, not only among adults but even among children, who would be stricken suddenly while at play and die within a few hours.

There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example where had they gone? Many people spoke of them, puzzled and disturbed. The feeding stations in the backyards were deserted. The few birds seen anywhere were moribund; they trembled violently and could not fly. It was a spring without voices. On the mornings that had once throbbed with the dawn chorus of robins, catbirds, doves, jays, wrens, and scores of other bird voices there was now no sound; only silence lay over the fields and woods and marsh.

On the farms the hens brooded, but no chicks hatched. The farmers complained that they were unable to raise any pigs the litters were small and the young survived only a few days. The apple trees were coming into bloom but no bees droned among the blossoms, so there was no pollination and there would be no fruit.

The roadsides, once so attractive, were now lined with browned and withered vegetation as though swept by fire. These, too, were silent, deserted by all living things. Even the streams were now lifeless. Anglers no longer Rachel Carson visited them, for all the fish had died.

In the gutters under the eaves and between the shingles of the roofs, a white granular powder still showed a few patches; some weeks before it had fallen like snow upon the roofs and the lawns, the fields and streams.

No witchcraft, no enemy action had silenced the rebirth of new life in this stricken world. The people had done it themselves.

This town does not actually exist, but it might easily have a thousand counterparts in America or elsewhere in the world. I know of no community that has experienced all the misfortunes I describe. Yet every one of these disasters has actually happened somewhere, and many real communities have already suffered a substantial number of them. A grim specter has crept upon us almost unnoticed, and this imagined tragedy may easily become a stark reality we all shall know.

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Example Responses for Rachel Carson’s “Fable for Tomorrow”

After you have answered the questions above, take a look at the responses of one student, which are included below. Notice in the following responses how the author goes beyond a simple one or two sentence answer and uses evidence from the text (quotes, summary, paraphrases) to support her assertions. Though this has been informally included (no transitions or quote integration), the writer has demonstrated how she has come up with the answers she has.

Notice also that the writer develops her answer before inserting the textual evidence, and then continues to develop her idea after the evidence. Much like a paragraph, she starts with a claim, explains it, supports it, and then continues to develop her answer analytically. Having the evidence in the middle like this, means that the writer begins and ends with her own thoughts, rather than the thoughts and words of the writer whose work she is analyzing.

Note that while in short answer questions like these, this method of including evidence is sufficient, while in formal essays especially in research papers, textual evidence must be properly integrated into the larger structure and into your own sentences and must be appropriately cited.

After you have carefully read the responses below, compare them to your answers and record your thoughts in a paragraph. What do you like about your answers? How effectively did you support your answer? How much actual textual evidence did you use? Of the textual evidence you used, how much did you rely on quotes? On paraphrases? On summary? Which do you think makes the best support?

1) What does Carson want to say? What is her main point or thesis?

Carson wants to tell her readers a fable, a short narrative that makes an edifying or cautionary point. Carson draws the moral of her fable in the final paragraph. She believes that we have in our power the ability to upset the balance of nature, to turn what is an idyllic countryside into a wasteland. As she states in Paragraph 8, “The people had done it [silenced the landscape] themselves.” Human beings need to take heed and understand their role in environmental stewardship.

2) Why does she want to make this point? What is her purpose?

Carson’s purpose is to alert us to the clear danger of pesticides (the “white granular powder,” paragraph 7) to the environment. Even though the composite environmental disaster she describes has not occurred yet, she feels compelled to inform her readers that each of the individual disasters has happened somewhere in a real community. Although Carson does not make specific recommendations for what each of us can do, her message is clear: To do nothing about pesticides is to invite environmental destruction.

3) What pattern or patterns of development does Carson use?

Carson’s dominant pattern of development is comparison and contrast. In paragraphs 1 and 2, she describes the mythical town before the blight (“all life seems to live in harmony with its

surroundings”); in paragraphs 3-7, she portrays the same town after the blight (“some evil spell had settled on the community”). Carson seems less interested in making specific contrasts than in drawing a total picture of the town before and after the blight. In this way, she makes the change dramatic and powerful. Carson enhances her contrast by using vivid descriptive details that appeal to our senses to paint her pictures of the town before and after the “strange blight.” The countryside before the blight is full of life; the countryside after, barren and silent.

4) *How does Carson’s pattern of development suit her subject and purpose?*

Carson selects comparison and contrast as her method of development because she wants to shock her readers into seeing what happens when humans use pesticides indiscriminately. By contrasting a mythical American town before the blight with the same town after the blight, Carson is able to show us the differences, not merely tell us about them. The descriptive details enhance this contrast: for example, “checkerboard of prosperous farms,” “white clouds of bloom,” “foxes barked,” “seed heads of the dried weeds,” “cattle and sheep sickened,” “they trembled violently,” “no bees droned,” and “browned and withered vegetation.” Perhaps the most striking detail is the “white granular powder” that “had fallen like snow upon the roofs and the lawns, the fields and streams” (7). The powder is the residue of the pervasive use of insecticides and herbicides in farming. Carson waits to introduce the powder for dramatic impact. Readers absorb the horror of the changing scene, wonder at its cause, and then suddenly realize it is not an unseen, uncontrollable force, but human beings who have caused the devastation.

5) *What, if anything, is noteworthy about Carson’s use of this pattern?*

In her final paragraph, Carson says, “A grim specter has crept upon us almost unnoticed.: And this is exactly what happens in her essay. By starting with a two-paragraph description of “a town in the heart of America where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings,” Carson lulls her readers into thinking that all is well. But then at the beginning of paragraph 3, she introduces a change: “a strange blight crept over the area.” By opting to describe the preblight town in its entirety first and then to contrast it with the blighted town, she makes the change more dramatic and thus enhances its impact on readers.

6) *How effective is Carson’s essay? Does Carson make her points clearly?*

Instead of writing a strident argument against the indiscriminate use of pesticides, Carson chooses to engage her readers in a fable with an educational message. In reading her story of this American town, we witness what happens when farmers blanket the landscape with pesticides. When we learn in the last paragraph that “this town does not actually exist,” we are given cause for hope. In spite of the fact that “every one of these disasters has actually happened somewhere,” we are led to believe that there is still time to act before “this imagined tragedy” becomes “a stark reality we all shall know.” Interestingly, Carson was considered an alarmist when she wrote *Silent Spring* in 1962, and now almost daily we read reports of water pollution, oil spills, hazardous waste removal, toxic waste dumps, and global warming. Her warning is as appropriate today as it was when she first wrote it more than four decades ago.

Source:

This has been only slightly altered from *Models for Writers: Short Essays for Composition*, Alfred Rosa and Paul Eschholz