**Writing Program Bulletin**

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Using Marginalia to Encourage Meta-Reading Strategies with Students

A Synopsis of the Workshop from September 21

While those of you interested in finance may immediately think of brokers when you hear the word “margin,” I know many others will pleasantly call to mind Samuel Taylor Coleridge instead. Indeed, it was Coleridge who inspired the title of my workshop, for he perfected the art of writing notes in the margins of the books he was reading. Coleridge’s marginalia embody the very opposition that makes them so fascinating: his were personal responses written for public consumption. When we write our own marginalia, however, we usually don’t do so with the expectations that others will be reading them. (Have you ever bought a used book and been intrigued by the marginal notes left by the previous owner?) The seemingly private nature of marginal notes was summed up by Edgar Allen Poe when he said that in our marginalia “we talk only to ourselves; we therefore talk freshly—boldly—originally—with *abandonment*—without conceit” (qtd. in Bath Lau, *Keats’s Paradise Lost,* Univ. Press of Florida, 1998). The genre is fitting for the Romantic era in which the personal, the individual, and the fragment were all highly valued.

This workshop, however, asks participants to share their marginalia openly, and then to analyze them. The idea for the activity grew out of my increasing sense that many (although certainly not all) problems in student writing result from misunderstandings of, and lack of critical engagement with, the assigned readings. In previous issues of the Bulletin, I’ve referenced strategies that focus on a variety of pre-reading activities (see, for example, <http://mason.gmu.edu/~ereid1/teachers/tchguidereading.htm>). This workshop was an attempt to go further and make the act of reading itself more explicit. In particular, I wanted to help students develop the kinds of critical reading habits that we ourselves routinely use but too infrequently verbalize or model except through the kinds of questions we ask in class.

Both times that I’ve done this workshop (once with 27 faculty members at a different institution, and once here at TCNJ with 5) I began by asking participants what they’re most dissatisfied with in their students’ reading habits. Here is a summary of the results:

* Seeing the text in “black and white” (they either completely accept or dismiss it, but can’t assess merits as well as faults)
* Believing the “author is always right”
* Too easily rejecting a text because it is “biased”
* Not letting new ideas challenge their values
* Unable to connect the text with other texts
* Unable to read two texts against each other
* Unable to critique the author’s views or read “against the grain”
* Can understand single sentences but can’t understand what the sentences do
* Sometimes can’t understand the text at all (most common with theoretical material)

I first pass out an article and ask participants to make copious marginal notes as they read. Where they might ordinarily be inclined to underline or asterisk or bracket a passage, I ask that they write out their thoughts and be ready to share them. The last time I ran this workshop we read Jean Howard’s “Crossdressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England” from the *Shakespeare Quarterly* 39.4(Winter 1988): 418-440.

I stop the group after 15 minutes, and ask each participant to read their marginalia in the order in which the notes appear on the pages. We go around the table, one person at a time, hearing only the marginalia, with no explanatory comments.

A brief discussion at this point reveals varying degrees of comprehension difficulty as well as very different forms of engagement based on the reader’s own disciplinary background. (The disciplines represented at the last workshop included special education, women’s and gender studies, psychology, religion, and communication studies.) And, yes, it yields lots of laughter, too! Most important, however, is the realization that if we have trouble reading outside of our own disciplines, imagine how challenging it is for college students—who as yet have no strong grounding in any discipline—to read what we assign. It reminds everyone how important it is to see our students as apprentices and to guide them through tasks that we too often take for granted.

The next step in the activity does just that. Participants pair up and use the checklist (below) to identify the function of their various marginal notes. This act of meta-reading makes plain the critical moves our students need to learn to become more attentive, critical readers.

It’s instructive, for example, that at both faculty workshops, the marginalia represented all four categories (comprehend, evaluate, extend, and rhetorically analyze). Students’ comments, however, tend to cluster in the first category. Ordinarily, students will too often see the text as “flat” and highlight or underline anything that seems important or interesting, but aren’t able to distinguish among major points, examples, or opposing views. Thus, asking them to make specific kinds of notations helps them see the structure of a text more clearly. And while the kinds of responses may vary based on the type of reading assigned, engaging in this activity with students helps to bring awareness to the kinds of critical interaction they need to be having with texts. They will be more prepared both for class discussion and writing assignments thanks to grappling with the material in more depth.

Below is the meta-reading checklist as I used it with faculty, and you are welcome to adjust it for use with students. I often put the labels at the top of each category, and hand it out to students with an assigned reading, requiring that they make marginal comments from all four categories.

**Marginalia: A Meta-Reading Checklist**

Examine each of your marginal notes and identify what function it is performing.

Does it identify:

* the main argument/thesis
* a new point
* an example
* evidence being used to support a point or sub-point
* why the passage is important
* a contradiction

Does it comment on (praise/criticize/question, agree/disagree with, or otherwise evaluate):

* the author’s idea(s)
* the author’s logic, examples, evidence
* the author’s analysis
* the author’s assumptions
* the author’s methodology

Does it:

* offer an alternative explanation
* offer additional or contradictory evidence
* pose new questions
* react emotionally to the author’s style, tone, or substance?
* make a connection with your extra-textual knowledge (or experience)

Does it in some way comment on or address:

* how the author attends to, or fails to attend to, readers’ needs (for data, for acknowledgement of differing perspectives, etc.)
* the effectiveness of how the author responds to other scholars in the field
* the scope of the author’s knowledge of the debate that he/she has entered
* the author’s mastery of relevant scholarship
* how the author establishes or undermines his/her own credibility
* the author’s implied political stance and/or ideological grounding