



READ MORE BOOKS NOW

Lesson #8

Mark Up Your Books

Zombie reading.

That's what I call it. And I'm guessing you've experienced it. It works like this:

You're reading a book, trying to get into it. But over time, your mind drifts and your eyes droop. You start losing focus, until after a while something snaps you back to attention. When you refocus on the page, you realize you have no idea what you just read. For the last several minutes your eyes mindlessly rolled over the words but your attention was long gone.

That's zombie reading. You know what I'm talking about, right? It's really common, but it's also really problematic because it dramatically slows down your reading and keeps you from absorbing what you read.

But how do we avoid it? One way is to make sure you're reading in a comfortable (but not too comfortable) chair. We need to find an environment conducive to reading, not sleep or distraction. This is why it's hard to do serious reading before going to bed—that's a better time for light fiction.

But a more powerful antidote to zombie reading, the focus of this lesson, is to mark up our books. Now, let me first deal with an immediate objection. "Mark up my



books?!” you might be thinking, “Are you crazy? I would write in my books! That’s like writing on the wall!” Now, setting aside the fact that for millions of years, that’s precisely how people shared stories and ideas—by writing on walls—we must remember one thing:

Books are tools, not museum pieces. Let me say that again: books are tools, not museum pieces.

Sure, *some* books are rare and collectible, like illuminated manuscripts from ancient monks, and others have great nostalgic value—maybe a friend or family member gifted a special book to you, for example. But most books are disposable. They are valuable primarily for the ideas and stories they can convey to you. That’s it.

People have known this for thousands of years. Examine texts from almost any century and you’ll find them loaded with notes, comments, and marginalia. The earliest Bibles, for instance, had extra margin space because the makers assumed people would add extra commentary and liturgical notes.

The main reason we typically recoil from writing in our books is because our parents and teachers discouraged it—and often punished it—when we were kids. That’s understandable. Little kids destroy books by scribbling pictures and ripping out pages. Trust me, as the father of six children, I’ve seen my fair share of book destruction. But as we mature into adults, writing in books becomes the sign of a healthy reader, not a rebellious one. Nobody is going to send you to detention for marking up your books.

But that raises the question of *why*. Why should we mark up our books? Well, there are three main reasons. **First, writing keeps us attentive.** Mortimer Adler observed that note-taking “keeps you awake—not merely conscious, but wide awake.” Reading is usually a passive activity, but taking notes makes it active.

Active reading also makes you a *clearer* thinker. You’ll better understand the text and you’re more likely to remember it. Another way writing keeps you attentive, especially when it involves underlining or highlighting, is that it forces you to review passages twice, once when you discover them and a second time while underlining or highlighting them. This keeps you doubly alert to the book’s most important content. So that’s the first reason to mark up your books: it keeps you attentive.

A second reason to write in your books is to create a legacy. Notes allow you to pass your thoughts down through generations. Many times when visiting a used bookstore, I'll open an old book and discover it's covered in notes. Now, most people would put it back on the shelf, but not me. I love books like that. A marked-up book includes the voices of two thinkers—the author and the notetaker—and it grows your internal book discussion from a pair—just you and the author—into a trio—you, the author, and the notetaker.

That's partly why I write in my own books, too. When my kids get older and browse my library, I want them to discover not just my favorite books, but I want them to see what their father thought about those books. When friends borrow books from my library, they often get my notes, too. Book marking allows you to share thoughts with distant people—even from beyond the grave. Think of it like creating a book discussion club not limited by time or space.

A third reason to write in books is for reference. And this is perhaps the most important reason. When I write in my books, I aim to capture two things: the book's main ideas, and what I thought of them. That's why you should write in books: to capture the book's main ideas, and what you think of them.

So, I mark passages that stand out, note key people and terms, mark inspiring quotes I'd like to share with friends, summaries of the main points, or questions I have for the author. All of those notations help me think through the book, to understand it at a deep and personal level.

So, those are all the reasons *why* we should write in our books, but that raises the next question: *how* should we do it? Well, there are as many methods as there are readers. Each reader takes notes in his or her own way. But here are a handful of common strategies:

First, box key terms. Whenever you spot an important term, name, place, or event, draw a box around it. Most of the time, the author summarizes the term, or explains its significance, the first time he mentions it. So, take advantage of that by boxing it so you can easily find it later. Note that this usually requires you to turn back a page or two to find the term, because you rarely grasp its importance until later in the book. But if it appears several times, you know it's worth flipping back and drawing a box around the first mention.

Second, underline powerful sentences. Draw a line under short, memorable sentences. These could be powerful quotes, important insights, or just elegantly crafted sentences. Whatever the case, underlining them makes it easier for you to find them when revisiting your books. (I sometimes add a “Q” in the margins to reference a quote, or a happy face to suggest a beautiful sentence.)

Third, mark key paragraphs. For passages longer than a couple lines, many readers bracket them in the margin. Others draw a straight, vertical line down the margin alongside the paragraphs (and some draw a *double* vertical line for *really* important passages.) In addition to marking favorite paragraphs, try to capture those that summarize main points in the book. That way when you return to the book and flip through it, you can immediately spot the most important passages.

Fourth, trace an argument. This applies mainly to non-fiction. If you’re reading an unusually complex book, especially one with multiple points and sub-points, it may help to trace the argument in the margins. For example, each time the author says “First..”, “Second...”, or “Third...”, write a “1”, “2”, or “3” in the margin. Likewise, consider drawing a schematic or flow-diagram that shows how the book’s main points relate to each other. I sometimes add an outline to the beginning of a chapter to highlight its main structure.

Fifth, record questions and objections. Reading is conversational. It should spark an inner monologue within yourself, as well as a dialogue between you and the author. Put this dialogue on paper. Record your immediate emotions and reactions. You’ll appreciate revisiting them later, years down the line, and reviewing what you thought of the book. Also, jot down questions you have for the author, or points you disagree with. We’ll go over this more in the next chapter.

Finally, summarize important passages. As you finish each chapter, flip back to the beginning and record a one-sentence summary of it. This is especially helpful for books with enigmatic chapter titles. It will allow you come back later, even years later, and quickly grasp what each chapter was about. It also provides a concise book summary for you—for a ten chapter book, you’ll have a ten sentence summary.

One final, practical suggestion when it comes to marking up your books: I recommend using pencils, particularly a mechanical pencil. Other readers prefer pens and highlighters, but in my mind, they aren’t ideal. First, they make it harder to correct mistakes. Pens and highlighters are permanent, but pencils have erasers.

Second, they are messier. Most times I use pens and highlighters, I get ink all over my hands, or highlighter smudges. There's no such danger with pencils. They're clean, they're easy, they're cheap, and they work great on almost any type of paper.

In the end, what matters is not *how* you write in books or what writing instrument you use. What matters is *that you* write in your books.

Good reading is fueled by good note-taking. So next time you decide to read a book deeply, find a pencil, too. That pencil will be your main weapon to fight against zombie reading.

In the next lesson, we'll move from taking general notes, to actually engaging with an author and his main points. So look forward to that, and I'll see you there!