How Margin Notes are Better than the Yellow Highlighter
January 17th, 2009 | Mark Pennington, MA Reading Specialist

We all remember the joys of highlighting articles and college textbooks with our favorite yellow marker. Aw, the smell! It is true that note-taking on the text is superior to note-taking on paper or on a computer. However, is yellow highlighting the best form of note-taking to improve reading comprehension and retention? In a word: no.

Highlighting text may even be counterproductive. Let's face it. Highlighting takes time away from reading. It also interrupts the flow of what should be an internal dialogue between reader and author. If you stopped an important conversation every minute or so with an unconnected activity, you would certainly decrease your understanding of that dialogue. No doubt, you would also irritate your conversational partner!

Also, *highlighting can't be erased*. Ever highlight what you thought was a main idea and find in a paragraph later that you were mistaken? Some even use white-out to un-do their highlighting errors!

Finally, highlighting limits effective re-reading and study review. When reviewing a highlighted text the night before an exam, your eyes are drawn only to the highlighting. You miss out on the possibility of revising your understanding of the text or seeing the author's train of thought from another angle.

Now that I've de-bunked the cherished highlighter, is there a better reading and note-taking option to improve reading comprehension? Yes. **Try using marginal annotations.**

Marginal annotations are ***simple pencil notes** in the blank spaces of the text that promote interactive reading*. Reading comprehension research is clear that internal dialogue with the text improves understanding and retention. "Talking to the text" makes reading comprehensible and memorable. Try using the following marginal annotation tips with your next article or text. Who knows, you might just save a few dollars on yellow highlighters!

- Write out definitions
- List examples
- Write a question mark for confusing passages or sections to review.
- Write comments. Personalize your reading with criticisms, praises, and insights.
- Write out questions. Reader-generated questions significantly increase reading comprehension.
- Summarize reading sections.
- Write down predictions as to where the author will go next or what conclusions will be drawn.
- Draw arrows in the margin to connect related ideas.
- Number key details that the author provides.
- Write a check mark in the margin when a key new term is introduced.