Active Reading: What? Why? How?
An informational guide for Middle and Upper School students at Parker School

What is Active Reading?

The term “Active Reading” refers to a method of highlighting or underlining passages and details in the text and annotating (making notes) in the margins.

What is the Value or Purpose of Active Reading?

Active Reading is useful in several ways:

1. **Engagement with the text.** When you are reading actively, you don’t just let the story “wash over you.” You pay attention to details, descriptions, and techniques used by the author. This offers the potential for a deeper understanding of the text.
2. **Creation of a resource for discussion.** You will be discussing the assigned text in class. If you have marked up your text well, you should be able to more readily find places in the text being discussed so that you can review them or share them aloud to examine the author’s words more closely.
3. **Creation of a resource for writing.** At Parker School, we normally write essays or book reports on all of the texts we read. These essays require evidence in the form of quotations from the text. If you have marked your book well during Active Reading, you should be able to find quotations you can use as evidence more readily. When you are being introduced to writing about literature in the sixth and seventh grade, it might be unclear at first what types of quotations will make good evidence for a paper. However, as you become more comfortable writing literary analysis essays, finding good evidence becomes more natural.

Can I read actively if I’m using an eBook?

Yes! Both iBooks purchased from the iTunes store and Kindle/publisher eBooks have highlighting and note-taking functions. In fact, many have hypertext functionality which allows you to look up unfamiliar words immediately while reading. Also, notes taken in an eBook are often grouped together on one page and are easily searchable.

How do I read actively?

There are several steps to Active Reading.
1. You may begin reading actively on your initial read of the book, or you may read the book or assigned chapter first for pleasure and then again, actively.
   
   There are several benefits to reading the material twice:
   
   a. Some students feel that active reading is less enjoyable than reading for pleasure. Reading the text twice allows you to read it first for pleasure.
b. Reading the text twice helps you to notice things more. If you already know what’s coming, when you go back and actively reread a section of the book, you will be amazed at the details that jump out. The author’s techniques for creating the story become more readily apparent.
c. You get to know the material very well. This makes you more adept at discussing and writing about it.

2. **Highlight or underline** significant sentences, quotations, details or passages. You may wonder what “significant” means. Here are some guidelines of things to look for:
   - **Plot developments,** especially where something changes or where you can sense that an important change will result from a character’s actions
   - **Symbolism:** Does an object seem to have greater importance beyond its use or existence? Does it appear to represent an idea?
   - **Foreshadowing:** Does it seem like the author might be dropping a hint about something to come?
   - **Character development:** Is a character changing in some way? Are character relationships with one another changing?
   - **Characters’ physical descriptions**
   - **Allusion:** are there references to widely known texts such as the Bible, Greek mythology or the works of Shakespeare? If something in the story sounds like a Greek myth you read in fifth grade, you can bet it’s deliberate.
   - **Theme:** What are the ideas behind the story? What is the lesson the author wants the reader to take away?
   - **Motifs:** Is an idea such as a metaphor repeated throughout the text? Have you noticed certain wording used again and again? Mark it; you can bet it was deliberate.
   - **Vocabulary:** Be sure to note unfamiliar words and look them up. It will aid your understanding of the text and help you to enlarge your vocabulary.

3. **Annotate.** Take notes in the margin:
   a. **Engage with the text.** Write questions that you would like to ask in class. If you’re not sure if something is a literary device, write “symbol?” or “metaphor?”
   b. **Briefly summarize** what you’ve underlined so that when you are flipping through the book, you can quickly find the passage you are looking for. For instance, if you are trying to find the description of a character named Joe, “Joe descriptive” in the margin will lead you right to it. You can also summarize character feelings and actions such as: “the uncle is always angry” or “helps others” or “Doesn’t speak up for himself.” (Full sentences are not required in Active Reading annotations.)
   c. **Note quotations** that reveal aspects of a character or his/her attitudes and how the character either changes or does not change over time.
   d. **Direct yourself to other pages** that relate to something you’ve read. For instance, if you think you’ve noticed a motif or recurrent language, write the numbers of other pages where that language or idea appears.
   e. **Note issues that would be worthy of exploring** further in an essay. Jot down ideas
for an essay thesis or research topic. Step back from the work periodically and ask what this piece suggests about literature itself, or society, or human nature. Note your own reactions to the author’s style. What other works of art or events in history are triggered in your mind by this piece?

**Will my Active Reading be checked and graded?**

1. *Expect your Active Reading to be checked on the day the assignment is due.* For summer assignments, this will be the first day of school. If you enrolled right before the beginning of school, the teacher will likely offer you an extension. You will not be expected to read an entire book in a single night.

2. *Each teacher has his or her own way of grading active reading.* If you are new to the school or have never been taught Active Reading, the teacher will certainly take the circumstances into consideration before issuing a grade for the assignment. It may be assessed on the basis of effort. If you appear to have made a concerted effort to do the Active Reading, then you should do just fine for your first assignment, even if you made mistakes or were unsure if you were doing it correctly. If you made no effort to do the Active Reading, you will receive a zero. Please note: You may have read the text and have a lot to say about it in class, but if you did not do the actual highlighting and annotations in your book, you will not receive credit for “active” reading.
**Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet**  
Looking for Themes

**Directions:** After you’ve finished active reading the book, read over the quotes for each of the chapters listed here. Think about what each quote means. Then decide what theme (a universal lesson or idea that the author is trying to communicate) this quote represents. Theme should always be more than one word—it should be a sentence with a verb in it (“Love” is not a theme—it is a topic. A theme might be “love leads to loss”). State the theme in a complete sentence, and then provide an explanation of your idea. Please email me at asmith@parkerschoolhawaii.org if you have questions now or during the summer.

**The Panama Hotel**

- “The more Henry thought about the shabby old knickknacks, the forgotten treasures, the more he wondered if his own broken heart might be found in there, hidden among the unclaimed possessions of another time. Boarded up in the basement of a condemned hotel. Lost, but never forgotten.” (14)

**Theme:**

**Explanation:**

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**Speak Your American**

- “Why do you like jazz so much?” Keiko asked.  
  “I don’t know,” Henry said. And he didn’t, really. “Maybe because it’s so different, but people everywhere still like it, they just accept musicians, no matter what color they are. Plus, my father hates it.”  
  “Why does he hate it?”  
  “Because it’s too different, I guess.” (70)

**Theme:**

**Explanation:**

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Sketchbook

- Henry breathed a sigh of quiet relief and sat down on an old milk crate. Like so many things Henry had wanted in life - like his father, his marriage, his life - it had arrived a little damaged. Imperfect. But he didn't care, this was all he'd wanted. Something to hope for, and he'd found it. It didn't matter what condition it was in. (199)

Theme: ____________________________________________

Explanation: _______________________________________

Steps

- Henry handed the sketchbook back to his son.
  "You don't want it?" Marty asked.
  Henry shrugged his shoulders. "I have the record. That's enough." A broken record, he thought. Two halves that will never play again. (249)

Theme: ____________________________________________

Explanation: _______________________________________

Sheldon's Record

- "She was born here. Her family was born here. You weren't even born here," Henry whispered to his father, who looked away, oblivious to his son's words. (258)

Theme: ____________________________________________

Explanation: _______________________________________

Explanation: