

Annotations in the Margins

Priya slid her copy of the novel across the table, pages thick with sticky notes. "You wrote on every page," said Devon, flipping through. "I asked questions. Why does the narrator keep mentioning the river? What's the author actually saying about her father?" Devon frowned. "I just read it once and got the plot." "Plot's not the point. Look at the tone here — it's bitter, almost mocking. That tells you what the author thinks is right and wrong." They argued about a character's choice for ten minutes, each pulling quotes to prove a point. Priya tapped a note in the margin. "See, the controlling idea is that guilt distorts memory. Every time the river shows up, it's a supporting detail pointing back to that — the father's silence, the mother's lie, even the bitter tone. They're all doing the same job." Devon paused. "So did it work? Did the author actually make you feel that guilt distorts things, or just tell you?" "Both," Priya said. "The details built it up slowly enough that I believed it before I could name it. That's how you know the purpose landed." Their teacher stopped by. "Good. Don't just summarize. Ask what the writer wanted you to feel, whether the details actually support that, and whether it worked." Priya grinned. "Told you the sticky notes were worth it."

Words to know

- **controlling idea:** The central point or main message that a text develops and supports throughout
- **tone:** The attitude a text creator expresses toward the subject or audience, shown through word choice and style
- **annotation:** Notes or questions written directly on a text to record thinking during close reading

Try it

1. Identify one supporting detail Priya mentions and explain how it connects to the controlling idea she names.
2. Devon and Priya read the same novel differently. What questions does Priya ask that Devon does not, and how do those questions change her understanding?
3. Explain, in your own words, how Priya decides whether the author's purpose was achieved.
4. Choose a short passage from a text you are currently reading. Write two annotation-style questions you could add in the margin, one about tone and one about the controlling idea.

Answer key

1. Details such as the father's silence, the mother's lie, and the river's repeated appearance all support the controlling idea that guilt distorts memory.
2. Priya asks why the narrator mentions the river and what the author is saying about the father; these questions push her past plot summary toward analyzing tone, controlling idea, and authorial intent.
3. Priya judges the purpose achieved because the supporting details built the feeling of guilt gradually, so she believed it before naming it, rather than simply being told.
4. Answers will vary; look for one question probing tone (attitude, word choice) and one probing controlling idea (main message and supporting details).

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