

# Should you be highlighting that paper you're reading?

*The chances are at some point you have looked at a text you have been highlighting, digitally, or in the traditional fashion with a highlighter, and thought, what do these blocks of fluorescent colour actually mean? In this cross post, Pat Thomson discusses effective highlighting practices and how they can contribute to learning.*

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The short answer to the question is... maybe, it depends. Not a yes or a no. That's because *should you highlight* is not a simple question. Unless you are a marker addict of course, in which case the answer is an unequivocal yes.

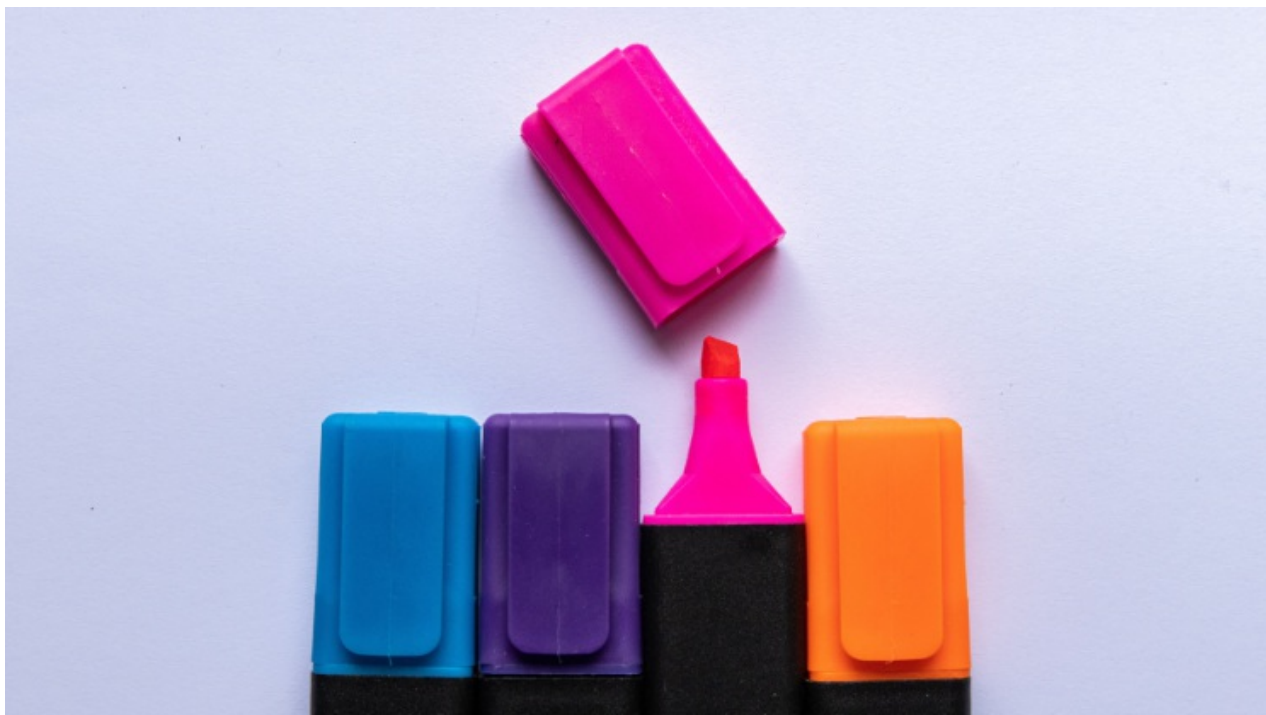
Highlighting is a form of engaging with writing. It's a particular kind of [annotation](#). We read a text and mark out the things that we think are important. And highlighting what we think is important is only half of what we have to do. Highlighting a text is usually understood by [those who research it](#) as three steps:

- Selecting text to highlight
- Organising the highlights into some kind of mental or material schema and
- Integrating what is highlighted into what is already known about the topic.

And here's the rub. Unless you make it to step three then highlighting [doesn't actually help your comprehension](#) of a topic. Simply having a lot of pretty colours on a page isn't in itself particularly useful. It might look like you've engaged with the text, but unless you spend time with those highlights, thinking about what they mean and how they add to what you know, then they aren't really worth the ink they are made with. So you do need to do more than make marks on your pages.

It seems that [adding a complementary learning strategy](#) – making notes, writing memos, making a diagram or mind map – can really help you to work with highlights, can help you to get to stages two and three. Rather than simply relying on thinking about what you've coloured in, it's good to find some tools that [support you to sort out what you've selected and make it into something meaningful](#).

But don't assume that even with the addition of a complementary tool or two, that highlighting is all you need to do with your paper reading. [Researchers are generally sceptical about the value of highlighting](#). They say that school students in particular really aren't very good at turning their highlighting into actual learning – they don't get much past the first step of making marks. That's not only because they stop at marking, but also because **they often don't know what they are actually looking for and they highlight things that aren't significant**. Anyone who has been a school teacher can attest to the reams of meaningless copying that can go on in a class, with very little gain in comprehension. You have to put a firm stop to mindless colour work. Random highlighting and copying is just busy work, not learning.



The [literature on highlighting](#) suggests that university students are better at selecting useful points in a text, presumably because they know more and they are more used to using highlighting as a learning strategy. And maybe doctoral researchers are better still. Or maybe not.



The problem for doctoral researchers, in fact for all scholars, is that we very often read a text in an area that is new to us. We read in order to get to know something we don't already know. Yes, of course we have areas that we know well and our reading is very much part of an incremental process of building knowledge. But we are often in the situation where we need to get on top of literatures about something we haven't got much of a clue about.

So, just like the inexperienced school student, we are faced with the challenge of selection. How do we know, when we start to read in the new area, what is important and what is not? Just like the school student, it is pretty tempting for us to start on a new topic, marker in hand. How do we know what to mark? It could well be very helpful to have a bit of a think about what we are looking for before we start reading, and certainly before reaching for the yellow marker.

A focus on selection means considering what we are trying to get from this paper. We might formulate a few questions for ourselves that help us clarify what we are looking for. We want to see the key point the paper makes about the topic, yes, but is that all? We might also want to do other things – such as

- Identify key terms used to discuss the topic and clarify how they have been understood
- See what assumptions appear to underpin research in this area to this topic
- Establish connections with things that we already know a lot about.

Each of these – key point, key terms and definitions, assumptions, histories of the field and connections with our existing work – can become a focus for highlighting. There are of course other possible things we might read for – for instance, how this topic is usually researched, with whom and where. The important thing about beginning to read is to work out what you are looking for.

Once you have an idea about what you want from a paper, then – and only then   – is it time to pick up the marker. Or markers. You might be one of those people who like to have different colours for different questions. But do be careful that each colour really does have a purpose and helps rather than skews the next step of sorting out the stuff that you've highlighted.

Once you have made your highlights you can then go on to the very necessary next steps of making sense with and of what you've marked – the organising and connecting. And do remember sometimes it make sense to skim the paper first before you do anything. Get the big point and then go back for the detail that you want.

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*This post originally appeared on [Pat Thomson's](#) blog, Patter, as: [should you highlight the paper you're reading?](#)*

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