

## **Manuscript Annotation Sample**

*A preface from Ross Browne, Director of Client Services*

The manuscript annotation is our single most popular approach to providing developmental feedback for everything from short stories and novellas to book proposals and complete fiction and nonfiction manuscripts.

The margin notes provide an up-close, “trees” view, while the summary provides the bigger-picture context and “forest” view. The result is a comprehensive assessment of your manuscript’s strengths and weaknesses, with coaching and explanation on points of craft, and concrete suggestions for improvement. It’s like two rounds of feedback in one, and serves as a detailed guide for revision as you take your work to the next level.

The pages that follow are excerpts from an actual annotation provided by an actual TED editor for an actual TED client (whose permission we have) on an actual book.

Please note that this sample contains only a few representative pages of the manuscript with the editor’s annotative comments, and that the editor’s summary has been significantly abbreviated for the sake of simplicity – this is just a piece of both sections. Also be aware that while we have stringent internal guidelines regarding the depth and type of feedback that’s appropriate and useful, and that we do our best to always behave in a professional manner, we encourage all our staff to let their own personalities shine through in the work they do because we want them to engage authentically with our clients. So while this sample is properly representative of the spirit of this service, every annotation will be a little bit different, depending on the needs of the manuscript and the editor’s personality.

## Excerpt from annotative notes

### 1

When I execute my job with precision, someone always dies. Like a Boy Scout who gathers merit badges as a measure of his accomplishments, I'm a Collector of damaged souls, recruited by Satan to inspire people to commit an unspeakable act: suicide. My assignments are most often teenagers who have decided that the best course for their life is death. All they need is a little nudge from me to release their last delicate grip on humanity. They actually put their lives in my hands. Like a tree blowing in a heavy wind, I push them until they snap. Fools. They have no idea what eternal torment awaits them in Hell. That isn't my concern. I've been trained to be cold and detached. Collecting corrupt souls is my unholy legacy, my contribution to an already defiled human world. All I know is cruelty and violence. I guess that makes me a monster...a wretched beast. I have no love for what I've become. My destiny was

**Commented [PG1]:** This intriguing first line will grab reader attention. It also sets up a mystery.

**Commented [PG2]:** Unfortunately, this chunk of exposition immediately dispels the mystery by explaining what that first line means.

In the spirit of *show, don't tell*, consider skipping the exposition here and just let readers follow him through the Derek job. This will also build in a good twist: readers will at first likely think his job is to help Derek, especially since Wake seems to sympathize with the poor slob.

It will also accomplish another very important task: build reader empathy with Wake. They will like this lost soul who helps others—and then, when they find he's really a serial killer, they'll be put in a wonderful position of being torn by conflicting emotions about him. Whereas if you begin by saying he's a killer, readers maybe too easily cast him as the villain; at the very least, they'll miss out on the emotional twist.

**Commented [PG3]:** Oddly archaic phrase from this kid.

In general, whether in dialogue or interior monologue, characters should use language that's natural and fitting for them.

sealed the moment I traded my soul to Satan. I have no recollection why I would treat my soul as a trinket, bargained away at a garage sale. No matter how detestable my actions are, I do as I'm told, without hesitation. Reluctance isn't a character trait tolerated in Hell.

I arrive in Phoenix. I plan to spend much of my time trolling for withered souls at South High School. High schools ooze fear and insecurity. I had a productive trip to Phoenix last year—four souls in three days. I was hesitant to return so soon. It's possible those tragic deaths encouraged parents to hold their children a little longer, a little tighter, or offer unconditional love, instead of the cold, measured affection they ration out as a reward for "good" behavior. Deep down, I know parents will never get past the matured despair of their own lives to understand how much damage they can cause a child with one hateful statement. I'm not complaining, but collecting souls shouldn't be this easy.

I take the appearance of a seventeen year old boy. It's my natural form, the way I looked when I was human, at least that's what I was told during my training. My memory was scorched, ripped from me after I accepted this fate. They told me it was for my own good. They told me, and then they smiled, all of them, every last demon assigned to destroy the humanity. My pain was their amusement. When I'm alone, and the world around me is quiet, I can almost recall my life before becoming a demon. But I can never quite grasp the details. It's like reaching for something on the top shelf. No matter how much I stretch, it remains inches away. Now, I'm left with the empty frame of a stranger who stares back at me in the mirror. It's who I am. A teenage boy with eyes that sink deep, shadowing any noticeable eye color, and dark hair that falls heavily, almost brushing the tops of his shoulders. I wear him as a disguise, ready to blend, to move close to my unsuspecting, innocent prey.

After entering the school, I lean against a row of lockers and observe as a crowd of students parade past me like a herd of cattle waiting to get picked for slaughter. So many good choices. There's a girl standing alone, her head down, hiding from everyone. She wears long sleeves on a hot spring day—

**Commented [PG4]:** Seventeen-year-old. I won't bug you often about punctuation and so on, but it should be impeccable before the manuscript goes to market.

**Commented [PG5]:** Again, I urge you to hold off on all this exposition until after we see him deal with Derek. Surprise and shock us first, shred our emotional stability. Then—slowly, in tantalizing bits and pieces—begin to answer our questions about him and how he got this way.

Do readers need to know this background information to get into the story? Not at all. In fact wanting to find out about it is an incentive to keep reading.

**Commented [PG6]:** This may miss an opportunity for some interesting action. These days, most schools are guarded, aren't they? You can't just walk in. So how does Wake elude security? We might see a first hint of his power here, maybe just an ability to temporarily fog up a guard's mind.

probably a cutter. Another boy has green hair and five or six piercings studded in a row across his upper lip—it looks like a torture we do in Hell, except there, we rip them out, one at a time, over and over again. Both kids have potential, but then I see Derek. He has short raven black hair with the top gelled into a stiff crown of spikes. His hair alone doesn't make him stand out. It's his black clothes that pique my interest. Wearing black in warm weather doesn't always mean a kid is depressed, but some wear it to reflect the deep pain that gnaws away at their sense of belonging. For me, it's often a white flag of surrender.

In the hall between classes, Derek talks with Sarah, his cheerleader girlfriend. She's blond and hot, easily three or four numbers higher than him on the beauty scale. She can have any guy in the school, and by the way his shoulders slump around her, Derek knows it too. Girlfriends can be my greatest ally. They speak with a sweet, syrupy voice, even when they're angry. Manipulating and controlling. Boys are suckers for it, too. Like a cat mauling a freshly caught mouse, they repeatedly tear away at a boy's spirit until it lies in shredded ribbons of self-worth.

Sarah leads Derek to a bench directly across from the cafeteria. She picks nervously at the hem of her cheerleading uniform. He shakes his leg nervously and bites at his nails. The tension multiplies within the heavy quiet, but nothing happened between them. I'm about to move on to a different target when Sarah breaks the silence with a bombshell of a statement.

"You scared me last night. I thought you were going to hurt yourself with that razor," Sarah says.

That arouses my excitement. Derek explains that he would have cut himself if she wasn't with him, and that she gives him a reason to live. He probably wants her to know how much she means to him, but it just seemed to make her more upset. Then, as if his threat to cut never happened, he invites her to his house after school. His parents will be working so they can be alone. I can tell she doesn't want to be with him. She hesitates, until reluctantly she agrees.

**Commented [PG7]:** This should appeal to young readers.

**Commented [PG8]:** Here, readers may assume that Wake will help this kid...

**Commented [PG9]:** ...and now, the first ambiguous note would start the twist.

Derek definitely fits the formula for a successful suicide—low self esteem, self pity, and, if I'm lucky, a chemical imbalance that depresses him even when he doesn't know why. And Derek loves Sarah, in a grippy, *I need you to fill my emptiness* kind of way. I'll possess Sarah's body, and with her unknowing help, he'll be easy to push over the edge. There is zero chance he'll fight back. I hope this job is over quickly. I have to meet Nevin, my demon mentor and trainer, later this afternoon. I can't afford to get behind schedule. Always pressure to collect more souls. Pressure, pressure, pressure. I need a vacation, but apparently that isn't in my contract.

When the school day is finished, I have to follow Sarah to Derek's house. Not a problem. Her bouncing blond ponytail and red cheerleading uniform is hard to miss even in the bright light of the afternoon sun.

## Excerpt from overview memo

██████████ is a promising novel. The premise—the reluctant collector of souls who specializes in teen suicide—is a good one. Wake is an engaging and relatable protagonist. The story has plenty of interesting and exciting demon fights. The writing is generally strong. But the novel could be much better, and needs to be to be successful.

I won't repeat all my lectures from the margin notes. Instead, I'll list out the main areas for improvement, more or less in descending order of importance.

1. Plot/character. Wake needs to engage with his quest and start to work on it much sooner, for until he does, we don't have much of a plot. Grousing about being a demon isn't enough. He needs to work at escaping it.
2. Plot. Luck, coincidence, happenstance, and deus ex machina need to be replaced with hard work and determination by Wake. Reader involvement and excitement stem primarily

**Commented [PG10]:** Self-esteem, self-pity. I won't keep nagging on hyphenation.

**Commented [PG11]:** Don't *tell* readers what he will do; just *show* him doing it.

from the hero's *struggles*—not his suffering or angst or misfortunes or timeline, or from divine special effects, but from his active, strenuous participation in solving the novel's central problem.

3. Character, Nevin. He's a bit inconsistent and not very bright or tricky—Wake easily foils his every move. He needs to be a more exciting and challenging villain.

4. Exposition. I made a number of notes. You want to build mystery, suspense, and surprise. This involves keeping readers ignorant about a lot of things. So don't inform and explain, especially in advance. Just tell your story, and let readers remain curious.

5. Voice. Don't talk down to your readers. This includes telling after you have already shown, repetition, for-dummies explanations, turning evocative subtext into explicit text, and so on. If you assume your readers are smart, they'll see you as a genius.

6. Prose. It's generally quite strong but has a few stylistic problems. Some I've already touched on. These include:

- a. Show, don't tell.
- b. Repetition.
- c. Explanation.
- d. Typos and so on.

Finally—and this is a summary point rather than the least important one—remember that readers are reading this book primarily because it conveys a thrilling, spellbinding story. So with every scene, every character, and every line of dialogue, do your best to entertain and thrill your readers. If a good scene can be made great, do it; if it can't be, cut it. You are up against very strong competition. Every word must count.

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