

Evidence Detective

Teacher Guide

A scaffolded annotation, analysis, and prewriting routine for grades 4–12

About This Resource

Evidence Detective is a scaffolded thinking routine designed to help students make their thinking visible as they encounter and interpret information. Students begin with three simple prompts:

- ? I Wonder... What questions does this give me?
- ★ I Think... What ideas am I forming?
- ! That's Important Because... What caught my attention, and why does it matter?

The included activities introduce these skills separately before bringing them together in a reusable response organizer. Students repeatedly return to the source, record their thinking, and identify the information that contributed to their interpretation.

Although the introductory activities use a literary text, the routine can be used with fiction, nonfiction, poetry, images, videos, music, speeches, presentations, primary sources, articles, and other classroom materials.

The Goal: Scaffold the Process, Not the Thinking

Students are still responsible for questioning, interpreting, analyzing, and supporting their ideas. The scaffold simply makes the process more visible while those skills are developing.

Notice → Wonder → Think → Determine Importance → Find Evidence → Explain

As students become familiar with the routine, supports should gradually be reduced. Scaffolds are supports, not destinations. The goal is not for students to become experts at completing an Evidence Detective worksheet; the goal is for them to eventually approach an unfamiliar source and independently know what to do next.

Suggested Two-Day Introduction

Day 1 — I Wonder

Introduce annotation as a way of recording the thinking that happens while we encounter a source. Read the included passage together, in partners, or independently. Students do not need to understand or remember everything during the first encounter.

1. Read the source.

2. Place a ? beside something that makes them wonder.
3. Mark the words that generated their question.
4. Complete the “I Wonder...” response.

Teachers may model one example before students work independently.

Day 2 — I Think → That's Important Because

Students reread the source and move from questioning toward interpretation. During “I Think,” students identify something that gives them an idea, mark the language that contributed to that idea, and record their interpretation.

During “That's Important Because,” students decide what they find interesting or significant and explain why it matters. The activity intentionally treats students' interests and reactions as possible entry points into deeper analysis rather than prescribing what they should consider important.

There does not need to be one teacher-selected “correct” annotation. Students should develop their own interpretations while learning to connect those interpretations to information from the source.

Why the Symbols Matter

The ? → ★ → ! symbols are more than decoration. They provide consistent visual retrieval cues for a thinking process:

- ? Question
- ★ Interpret
- ! Analyze and explain significance

For students who have difficulty holding a multistep process in working memory, a small set of familiar visual cues can reduce the amount of verbal information they need to recall at once. As students gain independence, teachers can remove written directions, sentence stems, modeling, and structured pages without necessarily removing the symbols.

Students can eventually reproduce ? → ★ → ! in the margin of a text, on notebook paper, or wherever they need a quick reminder. Independence does not require the absence of tools; a student who can recreate and use a strategy without being prompted has begun to take ownership of that strategy.

Moving Toward Independence

Pages 4–5 combine the three skills into a reusable organizer. Students first record informal observations, then respond to broader questions and locate evidence that supports their thinking. Repeated use should gradually make the process more familiar.

The ultimate goal is transfer: students should be able to encounter something unfamiliar, organize their thoughts, develop an interpretation, identify supporting information, and explain their reasoning.

Suggested Use Across a Unit

Evidence Detective works especially well with a shared novel, article series, media collection, or other sustained unit of study. After explicitly teaching the routine, use it after meaningful sections of the material students are already studying.

Resource 1 — Model the Process: Use substantial teacher support. Read or view the source together, discuss possible observations, and model one annotation.

Resource 2 — Practice Together: Reduce the modeling. Students generate more of their own questions and interpretations while discussion and teacher support remain available.

Resource 3 — Supported Independence: Students complete the process themselves, using the ? → ★ → ! sequence and reference materials as needed.

Resource 4 — Independence Check: Give students a new section or source and ask them to complete Pages 4–5 independently. Use the work to identify which part of the process still needs support.

During the independence check, look for where the process begins to break down. A student may generate questions but struggle to develop an interpretation, state an opinion without locating support, find evidence without explaining why it matters, or explain an idea orally but struggle to record it in writing. Return only the scaffold that is still needed.

This four-resource progression is not a required timeline. Some students may be ready sooner; others may need substantially more repetition. Use student work—not the number of completed worksheets—to determine when supports should change or fade.

Adapt It for Your Students

Evidence Detective is meant to be edited and adapted. Not every student needs every scaffold.

- Read the source aloud or provide independent/partner reading.
- Model one annotation before independent practice.
- Allow oral, dictated, drawn, typed, or written responses when appropriate.
- Complete one section at a time.
- Provide or remove sentence stems.
- Change the number of required responses.
- Replace the included text with another source.
- Use the routine with visual or auditory sources.

- Remove earlier pages when students demonstrate the corresponding skills independently.

Students who already understand claims and supporting evidence may not need the full introductory sequence. For example, a teacher can move the guiding questions into the headers and relabel response areas “My Thinking” and “My Evidence.” The structure should reflect what students still need to learn rather than requiring supports for skills they already possess.

Beyond Annotation: Notes and Prewriting

Pages 4–5 can also function as an informal note-taking and compact prewriting system. Students collect wonders, developing ideas, and observations about importance, then connect those ideas to evidence. With small changes to the headings, the same organizer can support informational/expository, analytical, or argumentative writing.

Evidence Detective Thinking	Possible Writing Function
What questions do you have?	Topic, question, claim, or point to explore
Evidence	Supporting detail or source evidence
What ideas are you forming?	Explanation and elaboration
Evidence	Support for the developing interpretation
What caught your attention?	Additional point, complication, or counterclaim
Evidence	Support for that point
Why does it matter?	Significance and movement toward a conclusion

Teachers can duplicate or modify the reusable organizer, number the sections, and relabel them as paragraphs. Each cluster of idea + evidence + explanation can become the foundation for a body paragraph. The routine can therefore progress from:

Annotation → Notes → Interpretation → Evidence → Prewriting → Paragraphs → Essay

About the Included Text: *Treasure Island*

The introductory activities use an excerpt from Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883). The text is available through Project Gutenberg as eBook #120 and is identified there as public domain in the United States.

Project Gutenberg: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/120>

Why This Passage?

The passage was selected because it offers an authentic literary text with a concrete situation, suspense, unfamiliar vocabulary, and several details that invite interpretation. The captain's

silence, interest in passing sailors, efforts to avoid them, and request that Jim watch for a one-legged seaman give students multiple possible entry points for questioning and inference without requiring one predetermined interpretation.

This makes the passage useful for introducing the difference between comprehending what a text says and interpreting what its details might mean. Students may reach different conclusions; the emphasis should remain on identifying what prompted their thinking and supporting that interpretation with information from the text.

Continuing with *Treasure Island*

Teachers who wish to continue with the novel can apply the same ? → ★ → ! routine to later chapters or selected excerpts. The adventure structure provides repeated opportunities to question motives, make predictions, interpret suspicious behavior, reconsider earlier assumptions, and determine which details become significant as new information is revealed.

Teachers are not required to continue with *Treasure Island* to use this resource. The included passage provides a common starting point before the routine is transferred to the novel, article series, videos, primary sources, or other materials already being used in class.

A Final Note

The goal of Evidence Detective is not to make difficult thinking easier by doing it for students. It is to make the process of difficult thinking easier to access. Use the scaffolds students need, modify those that do not fit, and remove them as students become more independent.

The worksheet is temporary. The thinking belongs to the student.