



Notemaking from reading

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Why make notes?

During your time as a student, you will read a wide assortment of texts for many different purposes. These texts may include books, journal articles, reports, manuals, information booklets and material from the Internet. For much of your reading you will find it useful to make notes as a permanent record of what you have read—you can revisit your notes for assignments or revision for an exam.

It is important, before you begin to make your notes, that you are really clear about why you are making them and what you will use them for. What do you want to get from your notes? How much, and just what, you note will be very much determined by your purpose.

Some purposes for noting include:

- getting the main point the author is making
- forming an overview of the main ideas and how they are organised and supported
- finding a specific piece of information or the answer to a particular question
- gaining background information on a certain topic
- gathering information for something you need to produce: a presentation, essay, report
- studying for an exam
- trying to better understand some concept that you are struggling with or need to know more about.

All these different purposes will require different forms of notemaking, so be clear just what your purpose is before you begin noting.

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What to note

Bibliographic details

It is important to get into the habit of recording the bibliographic details of the text or other resource you are consulting. This includes information like author(s); date of publication; title (of book, article, journal); publisher, volume, number and pages of journal article, URL of online resource, and medium (eg. audio, video, CD-ROM).

You may want to use what you are noting as a reference for an assignment. Having the bibliographic details saves backtracking to identify sources.

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Noting for a specific purpose

Exactly what you make note of will be determined by your purpose. If you are seeking a particular piece of information or the answer to a specific question, then that is all you need to record.

Summarising

If your purpose is summarising the article, chapter or whatever, structure your notes in accordance with the structure of

what you are reading. Use the same headings and sub-headings as the text and then record as much detail as you need for your purpose.

Ask yourself first 'What is the main point the author is trying to make?'. Then, for each of the headings, either turn the heading into a question and note the answer to that question *or* consider for each heading and sub-heading 'What is the author saying about this point?'.

If you need to include more detail, consider for each paragraph 'What point is being made in this paragraph?'. Finally, if you require more still, ask yourself 'What further information has the author provided in relation to this point? What evidence? What explanation? What examples?'.

Notemaking for your writing or speaking

If your purpose is to gather notes to inform your own writing or speaking, it is probably better to structure your notes in accordance with the structure of what you are going to produce. Look at the plan of your essay or presentation. What information do you need, what questions do you need to find the answers to in order to complete the assignment? Be really clear on exactly what you need to find out and locate and record that and no more. You may find it helpful to make notes for each section on a separate piece of paper, appropriately headed. Many students spend a great deal of time recording copious notes that they end up not using.

Be very focused in your notemaking, keeping your purpose in mind and ignoring irrelevant material. Record the full bibliographic information somewhere, but as well, record the author, date and page with each section you note.

Notemaking for general information or exam preparation

Be clear what it is that you want to find out and note as much as you need to in order to have a good understanding of the particular concept you are researching. Look at your detailed course outline, lecture notes and past exam questions to guide your choices about the amount and depth of detail.

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How to make notes

Distinguishing between quotes and other notes

Sometimes you will want to quote the exact words that someone used. This may be because it is a particularly significant statement or because you think the message may be changed or weakened through paraphrasing. Other times you may decide to record the ideas, not the exact words. Make sure that you distinguish between direct quotes and ideas, summaries or outlines that you construct. One way of doing this is to always put quotation marks around sections that you copy directly from the text. Recording the author, date and page number aids later referencing.

Forms of notes

Use whatever systems are most meaningful and useful to you. You may construct your own summary of the book or article you are noting from using headings and sub-headings from the text. Alternatively you may choose to structure your notes as a table, chart, pictorial diagram, as a branching tree, a star, boxes or spokes. You may choose to use colour, symbols, arrows. You may find different structures of notes suit different structures of ideas.

Consider how best you might represent questions and answers, causes and effects, sequences of steps or events, main points and details, arguments from different perspectives. You may like to experiment with different ways of constructing notes for different purposes.

You may choose not to construct a separate set of notes at all, but to mark or write on your own copy of the book or article itself. Instead of writing out, you may choose to highlight the key points. You may note significant words, or summarise ideas or write questions or your responses to what you are reading in the margin.

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What to do when you don't understand

This depends on how significant the information is that you are trying to understand. Do not be too discouraged if you find readings difficult early in the course; your knowledge and understanding will grow as you proceed and the concepts and vocabulary will become more familiar. It is hardly ever necessary to understand every word in anything you are reading. What to do about it is determined by your purpose in reading. It might help to try the following strategies:

- even though you don't understand every word, see if you can get the main point(s) the author is making
- focus on key sections—introduction, conclusion, topic sentences
- if you are unfamiliar with specialised words to do with the topic, make a list of frequently-occurring words and try to find their meaning elsewhere (eg in a subject dictionary)
- if the problem words are not specialist words but just unfamiliar language, substitute words that would make sense
- compile a list of questions to find the answers to elsewhere: other students, lecturers; a simpler text on the same topic

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Sources

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Taylor, G. 1992 'Interpretation: reading and taking notes'. Ch. 3 in *The student's writing guide: for the Arts and Social Sciences* Cambridge Uni. Press, Cambridge.

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