

enhance your understanding of a text, help you retain information, or provide you with useful ideas or information you can access easily later. While there is a place for this kind of note-taking (for example for weekly tute reading), at tertiary level you mostly need to be more active and interactive.

Try the other note-making approaches outlined below.

Reconstructive Approach

Taking a **reconstructive** approach, you might construct a concept map or chart from the text. In doing this you are manipulating the ideas and information, ensuring that you have a real grasp of the material. This is useful for reviewing material or for gaining an overview of a topic. Concept maps work best when you use colours and images, with the aim of revealing the relationships between concepts by proximity and connections.

Interactive Approaches

In an **interactive** approach, you select what to note, or paraphrase and summarise the text.

- A **paraphrase** is saying the same thing as the author but in your own words. It is preferable to a direct quote, as rewording shows that you have understood what has been said. Of course if you are using this in an essay it will need to be referenced in the same way as a direct quote.

- **Summarising** is an essential condensation, in your own words, of the author's argument, where you need to distinguish between the author's thesis, supporting reasons and evidence. There is a difference between summarising the content of an article or chapter and summarising the main points of an argument.

Your summary should answer the question, "What is the author really saying?" and involves a careful 'listening' to the author. Your summary should remain faithful to the

author's emphasis and interpretation and contain none of your own opinions or comments. It should read like a coherent, unified paragraph in its own right, and maintain a neutral, impartial tone.

Summarising is a useful note-making technique because it can be understood *independently* of the original and yet should be an accurate representation of the author's argument/point of view/position. If you have made a good summary you do not need to return to the original text, saving time if you wish to use the author's argument in an essay, exam or tute at a later date.

- **Outlining** involves writing down an author's main ideas, supporting ideas and evidence, but in point form. This can also be a useful note-making technique, particularly when taking notes from a text for exam study.

Analytic Approach

Finally, taking an **analytic** approach involves making a note of questions you have about the text, making comparisons and contrasts between texts/concepts, evaluating ideas in the text, and synthesising ideas from texts and your own opinions. This note-making approach is essential when you need to critique what you are reading

(see flyer **Critical Reading in the Humanities**).

Of course you can combine the note-making approaches discussed above. For example, you may be working from a photocopy and begin by judiciously highlighting key points. You may then annotate the photocopy by making comments in the margin that include both outlines of the material and also some analytic questions or comments. Some of these could also be written on a separate sheet of paper, which you can attach to the

photocopy, along with a written summary or outline of the author's argument.

Develop a system that works for you

Once you have decided on the appropriate note-making approach for your purpose, you need to decide on a system both of recording information and of taking notes, so that the information is accessible to you. Will you use a loose-leaf folder, notebook, file cards, or store your notes on your computer?

It is up to you to develop a system that works for you, although how you organise your notes depends largely on what use you intend to make of them.

Essential information to note

Whether you are working from a photocopy or a book, you need to make sure you have copied down all the correct bibliographic information—full details of author(s), title, publication, edition etc. It is also useful to copy down the call number, as you may need to locate the book or article again.

There is nothing worse than having to chase these details up later because you do not have the full information you need.

You should always note definitions and key words or jargon words.

When beginning to take notes:

- On each page of notes, write the title or author and list the page numbers of the book or article in the margin. This habit is essential for quoting exactly, referencing assignments, and checking the content of an idea you want to paraphrase.

- use quotation marks to clearly indicate the beginning and end of material you have copied exactly.

- clearly identify the beginning and end of material you have paraphrased.

- note any numerical information accurately.

While you need to develop a system that works for you, a split page can be a useful way to distinguish the notes you have taken from a text and your own responses to the text, whether these are questions, your own thoughts, or links to other authors' ideas. Remember to use headings and sub-headings to provide a framework for your information. These can help you to distinguish the thesis from the supporting premises or the main points from the supporting points.

While principles, concepts or steps in an argument are important to note, examples, illustrations and supporting evidence may help you remember or understand concepts, and may also be worth summarising. Different coloured pens can be used to distinguish information.

If taking notes for an essay, link them to your essay plan or tag how you will use them e.g. supporting evidence, definition, contrasting point of view. Use abbreviations if it makes it quicker to take notes. Leave plenty of space and use wide margins in your notes, in case you have to add information later or you wish to add your own comments (distinguished by a different font or coloured pen) about what you have read.

With complex texts you may need to take more notes than with other texts, but avoid taking copious notes as a way of avoiding understanding the material. You should not have to copy slabs of material. If you do need every word, then photocopy the material.

Review

After you have completed making notes from a text, it is important to review your notes. This is particularly important if you want to remember material for an essay or exam.

Reference:

Lorraine Marshall and Frances Rowland
1998 *A Guide to Independent Learning*, 3rd
edition, Longman.

How?

Ask questions:

- Do your notes answer the questions you asked?
- Are there any concepts you don't understand?
- How does your material relate to your other knowledge on the topic?
- Have you included all bibliographic details?

You may also need to edit your notes or summarise them further. If your handwriting is difficult to read, make sure your notes are clear enough to read at a later date.

Good note-making is an art and may take time and practice. However, it is skill worth developing because it is so central to your tertiary study.



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