Wolfson Study Skills

Note Making

Your notes should not just restate or describe the content of a text or lecture. Instead they should interpret it in the context of everything else that you have read. If you paraphrase as you go along, you will be writing sections of text that you can incorporate directly into your essays. Use this guide to ensure that your notes are a valuable resource.

Approaches

Your notes will be most effective if they don’t just describe what you are reading or copy it verbatim. You need to analyse the meaning in your own words, only copying sections that you anticipate directly citing in your written work.

There are several different approaches to help you structure your work. In each case you need to clearly record all sources and direct quotes.

Linear

This continuous form of writing is popular but more passive, so to make your notes as useful as possible:

- Add structure with headings and highlight key points by underlining and using capitals
- Keep it brief using symbols, abbreviations and bullet points
- Prioritise sections by adding numbers
- Leave good margins so you can add additional notes and reflections later
- Separate direct quotes and your own ideas using square brackets or a different colour.

Pattern

If you prefer to learn visually, this approach organises keywords and concepts around a main theme in the centre of the page. It is easy to make links to new and existing knowledge and add extra thoughts later on. It is interesting to look and with the use of colours or images it can help you remember points. Try not to fill up the page, but leave space for questions that arise.

You will probably need to revisit these notes when you’ve finished to add a hierarchy to your ideas.

Column

This format organises your page into three areas and is particularly useful for lecture notes:

- Write key points on one side
- Put your own comments and questions on the other
- Include a summary section at the foot of the page to help you quickly remember the main arguments made by the text/talk.
Multiple stages
However you decide to make notes, try to approach it in several stages:

- Scan – record bibliographic information and the structure of the text or talk by looking at headings or an introductory slide
- Skim – record keywords, citations and ask questions of what you have read
- In-depth – ensure that you don’t skip this crucial stage. Make critical comments and evaluate ideas in your own words.

Tools

Analogue
Paper and pen works well for many people, but ensure you keep these notes well organised so that you can find things again quickly. Use different sections or notebooks for each topic, tabs and colour to break up your writing and clearly date everything. As they are unique, it is very important to back up your notes by photographing or scanning pages.

Digital
There are lots of online tools that can help you structure and search your notes across multiple devices. These notes are easier to rearrange and safer too, as you can easily back them up.

For meetings, conferences and general thoughts you should try Evernote or OneNote. These work in a notebook format and are available online for multiple devices and your desktop. You can set reminders and create to-do lists as well.

For notes on readings, try Mendeley or Zotero. Store your notes with your bibliographic references and search them easily. Zotero has a more advanced text editor, including a clear function for direct quotes, while Mendeley has advanced features for annotating pdfs with sticky notes and a highlighter pen. This software also enables you to cite texts easily in written work (see our guide on Referencing).

If you use Word or another text editor to create documents, clearly name the files to retrieve them or attach them to a bibliographic record in Mendeley or Zotero.

Tips

- Make sure that you are reading effectively before you start making notes (see our guide on Critical Reading). Try reading without your pen in your hand so that you’re not tempted to make notes too soon. Read a paragraph and then decide if there is anything you need to record.
- Record all bibliographic details first so that you can track down a text again or cite it in written work.
- Don’t copy huge chunks of text. You won’t be able to cite it all; summarise instead.
- If something is unclear, highlight it and make a note to follow it up after you have finished.
- Don’t plough on with note making for long periods. Just like reading, monitor your understanding every few paragraphs. Assess whether you need to continue or if you have all the information you need.
- If you have trouble drawing out the main ideas, re-draft your notes into a more condensed format after you’ve written them. Alternatively, read a paragraph and draw out 10 keywords, using these to form a summary sentence. However, there is no need to rewrite your notes just to make them look neater.