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 not a burden.

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 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

Also known as mind-mapping, this approach organises keywords and concepts around a main theme in the centre of the page. It can help if you prefer to learn visually, but it is useful for everyone as it is easy to make links to new and existing knowledge and add extra thoughts later on. It is interesting to look at 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 bibliographic details at the top and a summary section at the foot of the page. This is really helpful when you need to revisit your notes if revising or writing up.
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 or heard
- **In-depth** – ensure that you don’t skip this crucial stage. Go back over your notes to 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. Again, think about how to organise these digital files so that you can find what you want, and quickly.

**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 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 notes, clearly name the files and organise them in a meaningful way so that you can easily retrieve them, or attach them to a bibliographic record in Mendeley or Zotero.

Tips

- Record all bibliographic details first so that you can track down a text again or cite it in written work. Write down page numbers so that you can cite ideas or quotes.
- 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.
- 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. The column method can provide a useful ‘cover sheet’ for more lengthy notes. 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.