

Effective note taking



Note taking

As with reading, effective note taking is an active process.

It is not an active process to copy words from a book onto paper

- this would not result in a good set of notes. Active note taking means

asking yourself, what or who are the notes for? What is the text about? What are the main ideas?

Why take notes

You might want to take notes for a variety of reasons: to focus concentration; to aid memory and understanding; to summarise texts for revision; so you can use the ideas in essays or written assignments; or perhaps so that somebody else can use them. Recognising that there are different reasons makes it easier to see why there is no single way of making notes.

Main ideas

Good notes should pick out the 'bones' of an argument or key ideas in a text, especially those which are relevant to your studies. Often the main idea in a single paragraph will be contained in the first or second sentence. The supporting sentences may clarify the idea for you but you probably don't need to record those once you have understood the main idea.

If you find it difficult to find the 'main idea' in a paragraph or series of paragraphs, you could use a procedure based on the following text analysis:

- what is the topic of the paragraph or paragraphs?
- what is special about the topic?

If you can answer these 2 questions you have identified the main idea.

Signposts

As you read, keep a look out for words and phrases in the text which signal key ideas such as, 'The most important...', 'Essentially...', 'In conclusion...', 'The main point is...' and so on. You may even find it helpful to read an author's conclusion first so you know in advance where an author is leading.

Style of notes

Broadly speaking there are two styles of notes, linear and diagrammatic. It is perfectly acceptable to adopt one style exclusively, alternate styles, or use different styles at different times. Unless you are making them for someone else, notes are your personal record and as long they are meaningful and useful to you it doesn't matter what they look like. There may be times when you need lots of detail and others when you just need an outline.

Linear notes are most effective when used with wide margins so comments, questions and ideas can be added subsequently with sub-headings which will give your notes structure. Other annotations such as circles, arrows, underlines and use of colour can help to highlight themes and show the relationship between two ideas. You may also find using abbreviations for common words or words that occur frequently help you to speed up the process.

Review your approach

If you spend time making notes, then it is important that they serve their purpose.

Keep checking that your notes make sense and are useful to you.