Notemaking

Why take notes?

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Why take notes?

The notes you make whilst studying at university are a valuable way of learning. They also form a record of knowledge encountered and of your thinking as you encounter this new knowledge. They should help you to explore and map what you are learning, and then to recall and understand it later. You will depend upon your notes for exam revision, as well as for preparation of essays and other coursework assignments. It is therefore important to develop efficient and effective skills for both creating notes and keeping study records. This guide suggests ways in which you can use the note-making process to engage with your subject as well as ensuring that your records are easy to use and contain all the information you need.

Note-*making* or note-*taking*

Note-*taking* can mean you write down what you hear or read without thinking about the material, perhaps by copying from the original source and re-written in a similar format. Notes are often non-selective, covering most or all of the information given. Note-*taking* is a passive study technique, where note-*making* is active. When *making* notes, be selective, find one or two 'learning points' rather than noting everything the speaker or writer says (Levin, 2009). Remember that the introductions and conclusions usually summarise the key ideas. Note-making requires concentration as you have to select, analyse and summarise what you hear or read. If you have never thought about how you make notes, ask yourself:

- What sort of notes do I make?
- What do I do with my notes after I have made them?
- Are my notes effective for revising or assignments?

(After Burns and Sinfield, 2004)

Note-making techniques

Sequential or linear notes usually follow the same order as the speaker or writer. Good sequential notes include key words, headings and sub-headings to express the connections between key concepts, accompanied by extra information in brief. It helps if you leave wide margins and write on every other line as this provides space for comments or the addition of further notes at a later date; the inclusion of diagrams and flow charts enhance sequential notes and usually reduce the number of words you need to write. Underlining and highlighting will focus your attention and enable you to find the important points quickly. Both annotating (making brief notes in the margins) and abbreviating speed up your note-making. Summarising, which involves writing a much shorter version, may save time and reduce the risk of plagiarism (using others' words or ideas and representing them as your own).

When making sequential notes, you are following the sense of what is being said/read and creating a set of notes for review that can be quickly scanned for the main points. You should also be helping yourself to think creatively by focusing on concepts and ideas, rather than becoming immersed in the detail.

Visual notes Some learners prefer to make visual notes organised around particular concepts or ideas. Pattern notes, spider-diagrams and mind maps use lines, arrows and circles to link key ideas. Pattern note-making reduces the impulse to make notes in the order the information was presented– you have to re-process and organise it at the point when you receive it.

When using visual note-making, you are expressing your understanding of the information by thinking through where each aspect fits in relation to all other aspects. You are also creating a unique visual image which may be easy to recall. These techniques can take many forms but may look something like the example below in figure 1.

There are a number of other methods of visually, or graphically, representing what you have heard or read. These include:

- *flowchart/series of events chain* – to express stages or sequencing of an event or process
- *continuum scale* – to rank items from one end of a spectrum to another e.g.: time line or low to high
- *compare and contrast matrix* – table or chart which is good for showing similarities and differences
- *fishbone map* – shows the causal interaction in a complex setting
- *cycle/process* – with an emphasis on circularity, a cycle stresses patterns of repetition

Figure 1. Notetaking versus notemaking

Note**taking**	Note**making**
	.obinson (2010)*
1. Record keeping 2. Relatively passive - not always easy to maintain concentration 3. Easy to try to include too much 4. Hard to write fast enough 5. Many identical pages to look through/recall 6. Neat, tidy and manageable 7. Seems safe 8. Familiar	1. Record keeping + understanding + consigning to memory 2. Active – forces engagement and aids criticality, thinking on your feet and learning as you go; physical creativity stimulates creative mental activity and vice versa 3. Forces focus and selection 4. Illustrate connections quickly - 'say' more, more quickly and more memorably than in text 5. Offers varied multisensory memory triggers 6. Can get/seem chaotic 7. Generally more challenging (that's why it's effective!), especially at first 8. Creative and fun

Essentially, any note-making technique that supports quick, easy and informative review is good. Experiment and choose the approach which best suits your needs.

Record keeping

Plan how you are going to keep and store your notes before you begin to make them:

Paper notes:

- Ensure you have the necessary notebooks to meet your needs – avoid merging all your notes together on consecutive pages, especially when you are working on more than one module at the same time.
- Keep lecture notes separate from your own research notes for assignments so you can navigate your files quickly and easily.
- Label and store handouts, photocopies and notes in folders.
- Consider having a colour code to represent specific topics.

Electronic notes:

- Organise your work folders in a clear and logical way.
- Use comment boxes to annotate documents and colour (text and highlighter) to indicate key ideas and themes.
- Keep video and audio files within your electronic storage system.

Important: When making notes from books, journals and web sources remember to record the bibliographic or reference information. This includes: name(s) of author(s), year of

publishing, title of book/journal and the specific chapter/article title, place of publishing pend publisher (in the case of a book) and volume number and issue number (in the case of an article) and the exact page(s) that your notes come from (Pears & Shields, 2008). If the book or journal you accessed is an e-version, include the exact URL and the date you accessed the material. The university library has Metalib and Voyager which can track your resource searches. For further information contact the library. For other electronic resources copy the exact link with your notes. If you do not do this, you may have difficulty finding the page again later.

Note-making tips

You will make your best notes when you are well-prepared. Consider what you already know about the topic, how it fits in with the whole course and what you now need to find out.

Do not be intimidated by academic language. You may not be familiar with all the terms you hear and read or the way in which language is used, but you will get used to it. Note any terms you do not understand and check their meanings later.

Be aware that some sources are more valid than others – many websites, magazines and newspapers base their content on opinion rather than research-based evidence. Remember this if you are considering referencing them in your academic work. If you understand why the source exists – to inform, advertise, entertain etc – this will help you to select according to your need.

Regard your notes as part of a learning cycle. Any activity which takes you back to your notes later will contribute to your learning. So set yourself regular review tasks based on your notes.

References

Burns, T. and Sinfield, S. (2004) *Teaching Learning and Study Skills.* Sage: London.

Levin, P. (2009) *Write great essays.* Open University Press: Maidenhead.

Pears, R. and Shields, G. (2008) *Cite them right: the essential referencing guide.* Newcastle upon Tyne: Pear Tree Books.