

Effective note-taking techniques (while researching)

In the course of your writing, you will have to support your arguments and ideas with quotations from secondary sources, making sure that you reference all sources that you use. Note-taking can often take too much time, so consider some of these strategies for being more efficient when taking notes.

Getting started

When you start your research, the amount of information and the volume of secondary reading available to you might make you feel overwhelmed. Note-taking is very important to help you focus and organise the points you are reading about. However, it should be a time saving skill, so you need to know what you are looking for.

Are you reading for general information?

If you still haven't formed the main argument, but are reading for general information, let your reading be general: do not spend too much time thinking which particular quotation you might use, or looking for specific information. Rather, try to get an overview: look at the contents page of the book (or summary/ abstract of an essay or a chapter), read the introduction, write down what seems to be the main premise of the essay/ chapter and the main evidence that the writer is using to support it. At this stage focus on understanding the main idea, and not on writing it down, because you are likely to take too many notes.

Do you know what you want to argue?

If you know what you want to argue, your reading will be much more directed and now it's time to take notes of the main ideas of specific pages or paragraphs, and to start reading for detail and for specific examples. Keep your thesis statement in mind and do not waste time collecting information that is not relevant to what you are going to argue. Be critical and selective when taking notes and only take what you will need later on.

Is making notes better than just highlighting/underlining?

Highlighting and underlining can be time wasters: if you don't make notes, but tend to underline, you will have to go through all the underlined material again and decide what you want to do with it. If you do not make comments next to the highlighted material, you might forget why you highlighted it. The best way to take notes is to put the information in your own words - thus you are taking an active part, thinking about what you are reading and will understand and remember it more easily. Record your thoughts and ideas in the separate margin - what ideas do you have after reading specific information and how do you think you might use this information in your own writing? Leave room in the margin for any additional thoughts, questions, ideas.

Additional thoughts and tips on note-taking:

- As you read, have a pencil in your hand – reading is an active process, and writing comments and questions in the margins will force you to think.
- Taking notes will stop your mind from wandering and losing focus.
- Reread your notes within the next 24 hours - you can still remember the material, so if you don't understand or can't read your comments, you can follow up on it.
- Make sure your notes are clear and not confusing. However, notes should not be a copy of the text, but your own interpretation or summary of the main points.
- Choosing what to underline or comment on in the text forces you to think very carefully about the main ideas and their relevance for your essay/ research. This is a way of learning and managing time.
- Good note-taking reduces the risk of plagiarism - remember to always record bibliographic details (author, publisher, date of publication, page number etc.) of anything you plan to use in your writing.
- Once you are done taking notes, think more consciously about the notes you have made and organise them around a set of thematic headings or questions.
- Once you know which quotes you will use, think carefully about integrating them in your writing: they need to flow on from what you said before, and they need to add something to your own discussion, and not act as a substitute for your own words and ideas.