Effective Note-Taking

Throughout the course of your research, writing, and classes, you will have to use information and ideas that you have encountered in secondary sources and in lectures, tutorials, workshops, etc. (making sure that you cite and 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, hone in on key ideas, and organise the points you are reading about.
- ❖ Note-taking 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 have not formed the main argument or angle of your work and are reading for information purposes, let your reading be general: do not spend too much time thinking which particular quotation you might use, or looking for specific information.
- ❖ Instead, try to get an overview by:
  - ▪ Reading through the contents page of the text.
  - ▪ Reading a summary/ abstract of the text.
  - ▪ Reading the introduction.
  - ▪ Writing 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 is time to take notes of the main ideas and 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 think you will need later to convince your reader.
- ❖ Note any important points or ideas that provide a counter-argument to your thesis, and which may need to be addressed later. This helps you avoid confirmation bias.

Is making notes better than just highlighting/underlining?

- ❖ Highlighting and underlining can sometimes be time wasters.
- ❖ If you do not 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. By doing this, you are taking an active part, thinking about what you are reading, and categorising the information in a way that will enable you to understand and remember it more easily.
- ❖ Record your thoughts and ideas in the separate margin:
  - ▪ What ideas do you have after reading specific information?
  - ▪ How do you think you might use this information in your own writing?
  - ▪ Leave room in the margin for any additional thoughts, questions, ideas.

Quick Tips on Note-Taking

- ❖ As you read or listen to a lecture, have a pen or pencil in your hand. Reading and listening are active processes, and writing comments and questions will force you to think.
- ❖ Reread your notes within the next 24 hours. You can still remember the material, so if you do not understand or cannot read your comments, you can clarify what the original notation meant.
- ❖ Make sure your notes are clear and not confusing. Using all capital letters can avoid illegible handwriting. Also, using shorthand and bullet-point lists, rather than full sentences, is often easier (just be sure that you will know later what you meant).
- ❖ Notes should not be a copy of the text, but your own interpretation or summary of the main points.
- ❖ Compare your notes with others' notes, in case there are any important points you missed out on, or can share.
- ❖ 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, so remember to record bibliographic details (author, publisher, date of publication, page number etc.) of anything you plan to use in your writing.
- ❖ Once you are finished taking notes, think more consciously about the notes you have made and organise them around a set of thematic headings or questions. You can also use spider-diagrams to help you "visualise" the ideas. Colour-coding sections or ideas can also help you manage and process the information.
- ❖ Once you know which ideas you will use, think carefully about integrating them into 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.