

Note-making

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Note-making: a fundamental academic activity

Note-making is right at the heart of academic study. As a student, you will make notes when you:

- attend lectures or seminars
- read to support your writing of essays, reports, dissertations, and theses

Note-making is fundamental to these activities.

Note-making: a significant challenge!

There are many situations, however, in which note-making can be a real challenge, for example if:

- the content of the lecture is predominantly factual and you want to try to record all of the facts but the lecturer is going through it really quickly
- you make notes from masses of background reading, but are then stuck with how to use it all
- you make lots of notes for a piece of writing, but then worry about how to avoid accidentally plagiarising, as you can't remember which ideas were your own and which were from existing sources
- you find reading academic papers and books quite slow, and feel that you miss out on the overall sense of an article because you spend too much time writing detailed notes as you read through it

Differences between note-making in lectures and when reading

You may have a set of lecture slides in front of you, but you will still need to make your own notes in lectures. Extra slides may be added; and the lecturer will invariably offer more explanation and examples than appear on the slides. You will also want to record any ideas or queries of your own that you have during the lecture.

The big difference between note-making in lectures and note-making from reading is the lack of control that the student has over the process, because lectures happen in real time. This means that:

...when note-making in lectures:

- you can't pause the lecturer; rewind; then replay; to go over something you haven't understood
- if you are reminded of some information you want to look up, you have to make a note and remember to follow it up later
- you can't slow down the lecturer if you fall behind with

...but while note-making from reading:

- you can easily stop and read something again if you need to
- if you are reminded of some information you want to look up, you may be able to do it straightaway
- you can read and make notes at the best pace for you, to make sure your notes are complete

your note-making

A good way of appreciating the importance of good note-making is to spend five minutes trying to answer the following question:

If you tried to write an assignment or dissertation without doing any background reading and associated note-making, what might it be missing?

Try to build up a list of at least ten elements that could be missing from your writing if you did no background reading and note-making at all! Some suggested answers are given on page 7 of this Study Guide.

Note-making from reading

Risk-taking

You cannot avoid taking risks when you take notes! The risks tend to relate to note-making that is too detailed, and to note-making that is too brief. You need to decide where to place yourself along this continuum of risk.

Being too brief To avoid making masses of notes that you may not actually use, you decide to write down the minimum	The risk You fail to record crucial material, and have to go back to the source and read it again
Being too comprehensive To make sure you don't miss anything important, you decide to write down <i>every</i> piece of information that may possibly be relevant	The risk Your reading takes far too long; you end up with masses of notes; you still can't decide which are the most relevant; and you run out of time to do your writing

Managing the risk by being selective

Being selective is the key to successful note-making. There are two main levels at which you need to be selective:

- deciding what to read and what not to read
- deciding which specific material to make notes on

Deciding what to read and what not to read

Information that may help you decide is:

- the year of publication: how up to date is the information in relation to your specific topic?
- the contents page and index: are there specific sections devoted to your topic of interest?
- the abstract, introduction, or preface: they should help you to decide whether to read more
- beginnings and ends of promising sections: do they suggest that the content is worth reading in more detail?

Deciding which specific material to make notes on

Some useful questions are posed by Stella Cottrell (2003):

- *Do you really need this information? If so, which bits?*
- *Will you really use it? When, and how?*

- *Have you noted similar information already?*
- *What questions do you want to answer with this information?"*

Cottrell S. (2003 p.126) *The study skills handbook* 2nd edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Mantex has a website offering resources to support learning development, and has this advice:

Some people take so many notes that they don't know which to use when it's time to do the writing. They feel that they are drowning in a sea of information.

This problem is usually caused by two common weaknesses in note-taking technique:

- *transcribing too much of the original*
- *being unselective in the choice of topics*

There are two possible solution to this problem:

- *Select only those few words of the source material which will be of use. Avoid being descriptive. Think more, and write less. Be rigorously selective.*
- *Keep the project topic or the essay question more clearly in mind. Take notes only on those issues which are directly relevant to the subject in question.*

<http://www.mantex.co.uk/2009/09/15/how-to-take-notes/>

Don't be pushed along by the literature: approach it with a plan!

Take the analogy of visiting a supermarket to buy food for a party. If you simply wander in to see what there is, and buy anything that looks nice, you will probably end up back home wondering:

- why you bought far too many puddings and cakes
- how you will be able to make use of that huge quantity of fruit and vegetables, before they go bad
- why you bought masses of drinks of all kinds (although there are just 20 people coming), but you forgot to buy any extra coffee
- how much money you have just wasted on stuff you don't need
- when you'll be able to fit in another visit to the shops to buy the stuff you've forgotten
- how much better it would have been if you had started off with a list

Translating this image onto the academic practice of note-making, you will see that wandering into a text and simply writing down everything that looks interesting is neither an efficient nor an effective approach. A plan is needed.

This table gives some suggestions for how to begin your planning. It uses the idea of going food shopping for a party as an analogy for reading for an assignment.

Buying food for a party	Reading for an assignment
Start by deciding what the food theme will be, so that you can work out what you need	Start by taking a close and critical look at your assignment title , to see what is needed
Create a list of the all the kinds of food and drink you need to look for when you go to the supermarket	Create a list of the kinds of information, examples, ideas etc that you will be looking for in your reading
At the supermarket you may be distracted by all the other fantastic food and drink for sale. Keep referring to your list and be cautious! It is easy to waste money buying	As you begin to read you may be distracted by interesting material that you want to make notes on, but which is not relevant to the specific task at hand. Keep referring to your

drinks that look wonderful, but you know won't get used; or food that may be a good idea, if you had more time to prepare it, but you know that you don't.	assignment title and to your plan. Do not be tempted by interesting but irrelevant material
When you find food that is on your list, assess its quality and price, and buy the best specimens	Assess the relevance of those articles and books you choose to read, and make notes when you find material that is directly relevant to your assignment
Sometimes you can find an idea that is not on your list , but which would actually be perfect for your party . Yes, buy it!	Sometimes you come across material that you hadn't anticipated , but which would be great to include. Yes! Make notes on it, and revise your plan
Keeping to this plan should save you time and money, and give you a great party as well	Keeping to this plan should you time and effort, and should streamline the actual assignment writing process

Note-making templates

Using a note-making template can help you to:

- make notes in a clear and readable format
- remember the kind of information you want to record from each source
- standardise your notes so you can find particular elements again more easily when you come to use them.

When you have decided that a source is going to be useful and you are going to make notes on it, you need to **record the full referencing details**. After that there are various headings under which you may want to make notes. Here are some ideas of **the kinds of headings you might choose** to use.

main purpose of text	suggested future research	problem(s) encountered	study population	method(s) used
useful case study	useful example(s)	main argument(s)	useful material to quote	idea(s) you can use
supporting evidence for your argument	particular relevance to my assignment	limitation(s)	main finding(s)	geographical / political setting
writing style + examples	context	theory	useful statistics	justification for the research

This website gives you outlines of five designs of note-making system:

<http://www.sas.calpoly.edu/asc/ssl/notetakingsystems.html>

One or more of these systems may suit you. If not, you may be able to modify one of them, or combine two or more, into a personal system that works for you.

You can also devise your own template, using the kind of headings listed in the table above that are the most appropriate to your own discipline and topic, so that:

- instead of wandering into the literature and feeling overwhelmed by it, you
- take control before you engage with the literature, and go in with your 'shopping list' already prepared

Avoiding plagiarism

Plagiarism is using the words or ideas of someone else as if they were your own. Universities consider plagiarism to be a serious offence, and you need to take great care to avoid it. The Learning Development website has a range of interactive on-line tutorials on how to avoid plagiarism.

Unfortunately, it is relatively easy to find yourself in danger of plagiarising another's work, even though you have no intention of doing so. The two main **risks within the note-making process** are:

- paraphrasing too closely when you are making your initial notes; and
- copying some material verbatim, then being careless about using inverted commas (“..”) around the precise sections you have copied

When you find some detailed material that is highly relevant, **it can be a good idea to copy it verbatim, using inverted commas, and recording the page number**. You can then **make a decision** about how to use the material **at the point of writing**; by using the direct quote, or by paraphrasing it in your own words at that point.

Note-making in lectures

The particular challenges presented by trying to make notes in lectures are:

- you have no control over the speed at which the lecturer talks, so there may be some time pressure on your note-making
- you cannot pause and go over some information again, like you can when you are reading
- you may not be able to identify until later, which elements of the lecture were the most important to make notes about

You can keep more control over the situation if you devise ways of streamlining your note-making practice.

Streamlining your note-making in lectures

There are several ways in which you can increase the efficiency of your note-making. This has the benefits that:

- you can spend less time writing, and more time listening and thinking
- your notes will be easier to read when you come back to them
- your notes will already contain some structure for you when you come to use them for an assignment or for revision

A lot of the guidance on note-making in lectures seems to hold an **idealistic view** of what students can routinely manage to attain. The following suggestions are from the usually realistic and helpful Stella Cottrell (2003 p138).

“Before the lecture:

- Get a feel for the subject. Read (or just flick through) a book on the subject of the lecture. Look for themes, issues, topics and headings. Look up any technical words you don't understand.
- Write down questions you want answered. Leave space to write the answers under each question either during or after the lecture.
- Jot down your own opinion. Notice if it changes during the lecture.
- Glance through your notes for the previous lecture, and look for links with the next lecture.”

She also advises that, after the lecture, you:

- “Label and file your lecture notes and any handouts.
- Read through your notes. Fill in details from your reading or research.

- Discuss the lecture with others. Compare notes and fill in any gaps.”

Cottrell S. (2003 p. 138) *The study skills handbook* 2nd edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

If you can get into one or more of these work habits then great! However, if you find you cannot use this advice, don't feel a failure. The suggestions below can take you a long way towards efficient and effective note-making in lectures. They focus on **shortcuts to speed up your note writing**, so that you can keep up with understanding the lectures, and come out at the end with clear and informative notes.

Shortcuts for note-making in lectures

- Have pens of **different colours** available, so you can use them to underline notes for particular reasons e.g.: to denote:
 - something you need to follow up because you didn't fully understand it
 - a key criticism
 - the main explanation
 - a recommended reference
 - connected ideas
- Establish a collection of **abbreviations** so you can speed up your note-making e.g.:

'could' and 'would' become cd and wd theory becomes Θ
 evidence in support/against becomes ev+/ev- strength/weakness becomes Sg/Wk

- Create a collection of **codes** for yourself using symbols such as * ☀ † ‡ » **, and attach your own meaning to them. The idea is to use these symbols to refer to common concepts within your discipline, so that you just have to jot down the symbol rather than write out the full word or sentence. There is useful list of widely used codes in Cottrell (2003 p. 130)
- Leave plenty of **space** around your notes so you can read them more easily later, and so that you can add further thoughts, or extra information that comes later in the lecture
- It may be possible to anticipate the general content/format of a lecture, in which case you may be able to prepare a **table** in advance for some of your notes, into which you can add detail during the lecture e.g.: if you know your lecturer will be listing examples, case studies, or experiments and commenting on them, you could create the table below

Example given by lecturer	Rationale presented	Strengths and weaknesses
1.		
2.		

- Use plenty of headings and sub-headings, and numerical lists, to introduce structure into your notes
- Use key words in the margin, to summarise each section

Final comments

Note-making certainly presents challenges. It is better to be prepared, and to have strategies in place, than it is to wander casually into the literature, or into a lecture, and spend the rest of the time feeling left behind by the lecturer, or overwhelmed by all the reading.

For the best results, you need to design your own method of taking more control over your note-making, informed by the ideas of others, so that it fits well with your own working style.

The Appendices offer some lists that may help you to take more control over your note-making.

Appendix A

Examples of specific information you may want to collect when you are making notes

The question posed on page 2 of this Study Guide was:

If you tried to write an assignment or dissertation without doing any background reading and associated note-making, what might it be missing?

How did you get on with answering this question? Below is a list of suggested answers:

- comprehensive background information
- evidence-based justification for your research
- context e.g.: legal, social, geographical, historical, political, scientific, practice, research ...
- published statistics
- evidence to support your argument
- evidence to challenge your argument
- examples of disagreements in the field
- suggestions by others for further research
- the recommendations of others in your field
- useful references to follow up
- limitations in the arguments of others
- main findings from the research of others
- limitations of previous research methods
- weaknesses in others' interpretations
- useful case studies
- useful literatures reviews
- examples of translating theory into practice
- interesting links to the practical work of others
- how effectively different methods have been employed elsewhere
- how ethical issues have been considered and handled by others
- the populations and samples used by other researchers in this field
- problems encountered by others, and how they handled them

... add your own ideas ...

By thinking about what precisely you are looking for when you read and make notes, you can become more efficient and effective at that process.

Appendix B

Recording your own thought about what you are reading

As well as making notes of what others have said and done, you will have your own ideas as you read. Sometimes these ideas can flash quickly into your mind, then disappear just as quickly. If you don't write them down when you think of them, you may lose them.

It can be useful, therefore, to build some space into your note-making templates, where you can make a note of your own reactions and ideas as you read.

Examples of the kinds of thoughts and ideas you may want to record are:

- a query about something, that you want to check out
- an idea about a possible link
- a different interpretation from the one you have just read
- an additional example you have thought of to illustrate an idea
- a useful order in which you could incorporate some material into your argument
- a reference to follow up
- an idea for some research to suggest
- some limitations that you want to point out
- some questions that your reading is raising in your mind
- particular statistics that you need to look up
- an idea about how to structure your writing

... add your own further ideas ...

This study guide is one of a series produced by Student Learning Development at the University of Leicester. As part of our services we provide a range of resources for students wishing to develop their academic and transferable skills.

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