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Essay

What you need to know and how to do it

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M ost courses provide recommended reading lists. They'll probably include textbooks, journal articles and web-based materials. Sometimes you'll get specific references to topics covered in these texts but at other times it'll be up to you to find the relevant material for yourself. When you do, you'll want to make a note of it in a form that's easy to create and just as easy to find and understand when you have an essay to write or want to revise for exams. In this chapter, we'll look at both general and specific aspects of making notes.

The need for notes

With lectures, tutorials and your own reading bombarding you with information, there's just too much of it for you to retain. So you need either ways to compress it or maps which take you to the particular topic you're looking for. Notes fulfil both these functions.

Develop good habits and you'll save lots of time both with making notes and consulting them later. So right from the start, remember two techniques:

● Before you do anything else, make a note of the full details of the source. That means the author's name and initials, the title, the publisher and the date and place it was published. Don't forget to add the chapter and pages these particular notes refer to. This is crucial if you're going to be quoting any of it in your written work.

● Make your notes personal by using underlining, highlighting, colour coding, numbered lists, bullet points, mnemonics or anything else which helps you to find your way around them. Choose a distinctive layout, perhaps using boxes for important points. If you're consistent with this, it'll make the different aspects of your notes instantly recognisable.

What should be in them?

When you're writing an assignment, you'll probably be looking for information from a variety of sources. In some of them, you'll just be selecting single isolated points; in others your reading will be more intensive. So the first thing for you to decide is why you're actually making the notes. There are many possible reasons. You may want to:

● create an overview of the subject

● record a sequence or process

● analyse a problem

● isolate the logical steps of an argument

- compare different viewpoints
- borrow quotes to support a point you're making
- add your own ideas to the text or comment on the points it's making
- link something in the text with points that have cropped up in a lecture or tutorial.

As you can see, these reasons can be very varied and their style, detail and depth will alter according to their purpose.

The majority of people probably start with a sheet of paper in front of them and a pen clutched in their hand. They open the book, start reading and begin jotting down 'important' points as they go along. If you're one of these, the problem is that you end up writing out whole chunks of the text and it doesn't encourage you to think much about what you're reading; it goes from the page to your notebook without dwelling long in your head. So, instead, once you've decided why you're making notes, get used to following a routine.

- Look at your assignment again and decide what you need.
- Scan the section you'll be reading.
- Establish what the writer's trying to do. Is it a narrative of events or a process, a statement of facts, an explanation, a presentation of a logical argument, an analysis of a problem, a critique of an argument?
- Work out the writer's approach and viewpoint and decide how it relates to what you're looking for.
- Decide what style and layout are best for that particular task.

Finally, don't just copy the author's words, use your own. It's his meaning you want, not his words. But if you do want to copy something directly from the text, put it in quote marks and note carefully the page on which you found it.

Note-making formats

When you think about making notes, it's perhaps automatic to assume that you start on line one and add notes as you work down the page. This is fine, but there are different formats for different purposes. If you wanted, for example, to stress the two sides of a particular argument, it might be more helpful to have two columns side by side, one carrying points for, the other points against. Or if you were brainstorming and just jotting down disparate ideas, they wouldn't necessarily follow a connected, linear sequence. In that case, it might make sense to use what's called a mind map or spider diagram, where you write ideas and concepts down as they occur, placing ideas and concepts near ones which are similar or in a separate area and using lines to connect notes that may belong together.

In fact, we can identify seven basic note-making formats, although there are variations on all of them.

Key word notes

This is a fairly obvious and common format. You identify each topic by a key word which you jot down on the left, maybe in the margin. Then you write all the points relating to that topic opposite it. It means that you can quickly find a specific part of the argument and all its aspects are gathered conveniently together. But this does depend on the source text having a systematic structure. If it doesn't, you may find you've moved on to other topics and then there's a reference back to a previous one, so you have to jump back in your notes – as a result, you might lose the thread of your reading, there may not be enough space left on the page, and so on.

Linear notes

Another obvious format. Once again, it helps if the text is presented logically. This time, instead of key words, you

use numbers. But not just 1, 2, 3 and so on. Think of 1 as a keyword and 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 1.4 as the various points relating to it. Again, it's a good way to gather and organise material but, as before, if you come across something that you want to add under an earlier number, it may be hard to find room for it in the sequence.

Timelines

This has limited use as a format. It consists of setting a timeline on the left and noting events or the stages in a process opposite the appropriate times and/or dates. Once again, it's difficult to go back and insert material at an earlier time. On the other hand, it does give a strong visual aid if the reason for making the notes is to help you remember sequences.

Flowcharts

This is another way of making a relatively simple visual representation of what may be a complex process. You might, for example, be reading about the development of a piece of equipment from its original conception (and the conditions in which it was conceived) to its production. A flowchart would allow you to break the whole process down into, for example, preliminary discussions, research phase, various forms of testing, final trials, production, operational application. Arrows leading from one phase to the next would trace a clear path through the process. It's a format that's useful in specific circumstances but it does need a lot of space and it may also have circuitous little flows weaving around the main one.

Concept maps/mind maps

In a way, these are a sort of 'crash-bang-wallop' style of note-making. The paper is usually set in landscape rather than the usual portrait format and ideas, concepts and statements are

spread all over it with lines connecting those which might be linked together in terms of meaning or impact. The advantage is that they hold all the information on a single page, but they can get very messy as the information multiplies and there are sometimes so many points and lines that they're hard to follow.

Matrix notes/grid notes

Creating a table or matrix is obviously useful if your notes are recording different viewpoints, approaches, applications. It would, for example, be perfect if you were dealing with a problem that consisted of different elements and involved several contrasting viewpoints on those elements. An article on traffic problems might have separate columns for the views of the government, the police, local businesses, the local community. The various rows in the grid could then be labelled to test their attitudes to pedestrianisation, parking fees and fines, congestion charges, commercial access, car-sharing schemes. It gives a quick, easy-to-use overview of the issues and how they combine or contrast but doesn't allow much space to develop notes or add extra information.

Herringbone maps

This may sound a strange label but it's the perfect image for a format that lets you lay out opposing sides of an argument. Imagine the usual cartoon version of a fishbone, with a spine down the middle and bones sticking out on either side. On one side, the 'bones' carry statements for an argument, on the other are the statements against. It's simple and effective. But it's also limited. There's no obvious place for statements that are ambiguous or refer to things other than the arguments for and against. And you might find you need a very long herring as you read more and more of the text and make more and more notes.