Taking notes from texts

Why take notes?

Given the use of reading packs in many courses, the availability of photocopiers and the possibility of downloading material from computers, it may seem unnecessary to take your own notes from reading material.

The fundamental reason for doing it is to enhance your comprehension and retention of the content of the text (even if you don't think you'll use the notes later). The act of taking notes can help you concentrate on your reading, and ensure that you are reading actively.

Other reasons for taking notes are:

- to note down a statement that you wish to quote in an essay

- to summarise an argument in a text for future use in an essay, exam or tutorial

It is important to be clear about your reason for taking notes. The amount of underlining you do, or the quantity of notes you take, will depend on **why** you are reading and whether you have easy access to the material again.

Having a clear idea of the purpose of your reading and note taking prevents you from accumulating masses of notes that you have no idea how to organise or use. This is a common problem in the research phase of essay writing and can be a waste of valuable time.

Your reason for taking notes will determine the note-making behaviours you employ.

Marking up (annotating) a text

One approach to note-making is to **underline** or **highlight** keywords or sections of a text, to use colour or page stickers to distinguish ideas, and/or to make brief **notes** in the margins or between the lines of the text. Done with care, this can help you to concentrate and focus on what you are reading, and it may help you to identify the important points of a text when you are re-reading it later for an exam or an essay.

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There can be problems with this approach:

- Highlighting and ink are very difficult to remove without spoiling the text, so such notes are hard to change if you get them wrong. Soft pencils (coloured if you like) and an eraser may be more useful, especially in the early stages.

- The use of highlighters can be indiscriminate: some students highlight whole paragraphs and pages. The more highlighting there is, the less use it is for revising (and, usually, the less thinking has gone on during the reading).

- You can only do this with <u>your own</u> books and photocopies. **DO NOT** mark up a book you have to return to the library.

Diagrammatic approaches

- When you don't have your own copy of a text, a diagrammatic approach – creating an outline or a map of the contents – can provide a useful record of your reading.

- **Outlining** involves writing down an author's main ideas, supporting ideas and evidence, in point form. Copy down the headings and subheadings of the text to use as the framework for your outline, and add more detail in dot-point form as you read.
NB: MS Word® includes an outlining function which is very useful both for note taking while reading, and for planning your own writing (see the <<u>View</u>> menu, and look up "About Outline View" in the MS Word® <u>Help</u> file).

- After you've read a text, you might want to construct a **mind-map**, **concept map** or **chart** from it. This is useful for reviewing material or for gaining an overview of a topic. It involves manipulating the ideas and information, which is likely to improve your understanding of the material. Concept maps work best when you use colours and images, revealing the relationships between concepts by proximity and connections.

Transformative approaches

Transformative approaches involve reproducing the <u>content</u> of a text <u>in different words</u>.

- A **paraphrase** is saying the same thing as the author but in your own words. Much of your essay writing will involve paraphrasing ideas from the sources you have read. (Note that a paraphrase can be longer than the original text.)

- A **summary** is a restatement of the main points of a text in (much) shorter form.

  A summary should answer the question, "What is the author really saying?" It should remain faithful to the author's emphasis and interpretation, and should not contain your own opinions or comments. It should maintain a neutral, impartial tone, and read like a coherent, unified text in its own right.

  If you have made a good summary you may not need to return to the original text when you wish to use the author's argument in an essay, exam or tute at a later date.

Analytic approach

An **analytic** approach involves making note of questions you have about the text, making **comparisons** and **contrasts** between texts/concepts, **evaluating** ideas in the text, and **synthesising** ideas from texts with your own opinions. This note-making approach is essential when you need to critique what you are reading (see the LLSU flyer on **Critical reading**).

Develop a system that works for you

You can combine the note-making approaches discussed above. For example, you may be working from a photocopy and begin by judiciously highlighting key points. You may then annotate the photocopy by making comments in the margin that include both outlines of the material and also some analytic questions or comments. Some of these could also be written on a separate sheet of paper, which you can attach to the photocopy along with a written summary or outline of the author's argument.

Once you have decided on the appropriate note-making approach for your purpose, you need to decide on a system both of recording information and of taking notes, so that the information is accessible to you. Will you use a **loose-leaf folder**, **notebook**, **file cards**, or store your notes on your **computer**?

Develop a system that works for you. How you organise your notes will depend largely on how you intend to use them.

Essential information to note

Whether you are working from a photocopy or a book, you need to make sure you have copied down all the necessary **bibliographic information** – full details of author(s), title, publication, edition, etc. It is also useful to copy down the library **call number**, as you may need to locate the book or article again. There is nothing more frustrating or time consuming than having to chase these details up later because you do not have the full information you need.

You should always note **definitions, key words** and **technical terms**.

When beginning to take notes:

- On each page of notes, write the title or author and list the page numbers of the book or article in the margin. This is essential for exact quotations, referencing assignments, and checking the content of an idea you want to paraphrase.

- Use quotation marks to clearly indicate the beginning and end of material you have copied word-for-word, and make a note of the **page number(s)** in the original text: you will need them if you use the quotation in your own writing.

- Clearly identify the beginning and end of material you have paraphrased.

- Note any numerical information accurately.

It is very important to clearly distinguish the notes you have taken from a text from your own responses to the text, whether these are questions, your own thoughts, or links to other authors' ideas. One way to do this is to use a **split page**: notes from the text on the left, your own comments on the right.

Use **headings** and **sub-headings** to provide a framework for your information. These can help you to distinguish the thesis from the supporting premises or the main points from the supporting points.

It is important to note principles, concepts or steps in an argument; but examples, illustrations and supporting evidence can help you remember or understand concepts, and may also be worth summarising. **Different coloured pens** can be used to distinguish different types of information.

If you are taking notes for an essay, link them to your essay plan or tag how you will use them, e.g. supporting evidence, definition, contrasting point of view. Use abbreviations if it makes it quicker to take notes. Leave plenty of space and use **wide margins** in your notes, in case you have to add information later or you wish to add your own comments (distinguished by a different font or coloured pen) about what you have read.

With complex texts you may need to take more notes than with other texts, but avoid taking copious notes as a substitute for comprehending the material. You should not have to copy long sections of a text. If you do need every word, it may be more time effective to photocopy the material.

Review

After you have completed taking notes from a text, it is important to review your notes, particularly notes you expect to use later for an essay or exam.

- Are they readable?

- Are they accurate?

- Are they complete enough for your purposes?

- Are there any concepts you don't understand?

- Have you included all bibliographic details?

- Can you clearly distinguish between direct quotes, paraphrases and your own ideas?

Good note taking is an art and takes time and practice. It is a skill worth developing because it is central to success in your tertiary study.

Reference:

De Fazio, T. (2002) *Studying part time without stress*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Marshall, L., & Rowland, F. (1998). *A guide to learning independently* (3rd ed.), Melbourne: Addison Wesley Longman.