

Taking notes

The ability to make clear and concise notes is one of the most important skills you will need throughout your studies. As you make notes, you start to gain a deeper understanding of the subject and capture the essential points of the topic.

During your course, you will make notes from a variety of information sources including books, journal articles, video and computerised databases. You will also make notes in your lectures and other teaching sessions such as tutorials and seminars.

The following suggestions will help you to make notes more efficiently by helping you reduce the amount of notes that you take, and encouraging you to make and store them in a useful fashion for later reference and revision.

Active reading

The mistake we often make when taking notes is that we write *everything* down because we don't really know what we are looking for.

You can improve your note-taking efficiency by taking some time to consider what you are looking for **before** you dive into the library.

Setting goals for your searching can point you in the right direction, restricting the amount of material that you need to read.

You can set reading goals by asking yourself questions about your topic. For instance, for an essay on the death of John Lennon:

- Why was John Lennon murdered?
- Who murdered him?
- Who were his friends?
- Who were his enemies?

Further information can be found in another study advice sheet in this series, **Reading Efficiently**.

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Why take notes?

It will help you if you reflect on why you take notes in lectures. Consideration of these reasons will help you to decide if it is important for you to take notes in a particular situation at a particular time.

Notes are:

- a memory aid for revision
- a reminder of the main points of a lecture, tutorial or seminar
- an important source of material for an essay or seminar

Note-taking:

- aids concentration
- builds up an understanding of the topic
- promotes questions and debate

Prioritising information

You can begin to cut down on the amount of notes that you take by staying focused. Read with a clear purpose and only answer the questions you have set yourself. Be wary:

Don't

- ask questions that are too vague
- be side-tracked by irrelevant information – stick to your questions

You should

- be thorough, search properly and consider every angle

One further question to consider when you are prioritising information is to analyse what restrictions will be placed on your final product. If you are making a ten minute presentation you will need less information than you would for a 5000 word essay. It is important to only make notes according to your needs. **Don't make notes for the sake of it.**

Different ways of taking notes

There are different ways of taking notes and what works well for one person might not suit another. **Your** notes must be useful to **you**. You should use a method that suits you and that you will be able to interpret later on.

Here are some ideas which will help you to decide which note-taking style is best for you.

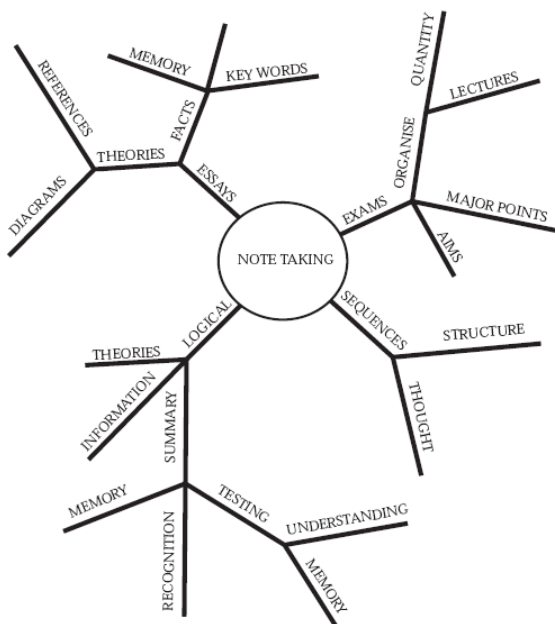
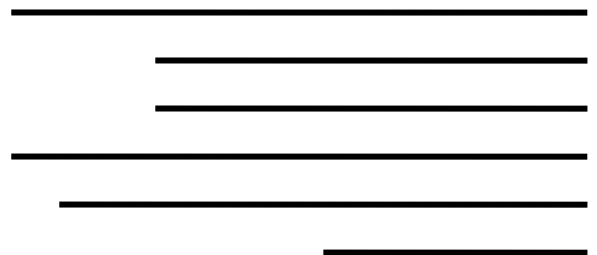
What's best for you?

- Short prose summary
- Numbered points or a structured list
- Linear notes – underline main ideas, indent subheadings
- Mind maps – pattern notes – spider diagrams
- Diagrams to help your understanding (diagrams can be clearer than words in showing the relationship between two theories etc.)
- Your own versions of shorthand (commonly used words etc.)
- Sharing note taking with another student
- Taking down key points – avoiding writing everything

Structured lists

Main headings with supporting material collected underneath. Use highlighter pens and capitals to make important information stand out.

By using a wide left hand margin (to the right) you can add key words for quick reference when using your notes for revision.



Mind maps/Pattern notes/Spider Diagrams

The main topic is written in the centre of the page and the key ideas of the lecture or topic are linked in branches around it. The lines show links between ideas. This type of note works best if you turn your paper round to landscape view. You can add in small drawings or different coloured lines to intensify the visual image. Many people find this type of image easier to recall than written notes.

Note-taking in lectures

Some of the following techniques may be helpful to you:

- Read up on the topic beforehand
- Sit where you can see and hear properly
- Write the date, title of lecture, name of lecturer at the top of the first page
- Space your notes to allow for questions and additions you may need to make later on
- Don't try to write down everything that is said
- Select the main points - keep asking yourself which are the main ideas
- Use your own form of shorthand
- Make important points stand out in your notes
- Write in your own ideas
- Make sure your notes are legible
- Number the pages
- Read through your notes after the lecture and add to them from recommended reading lists
- Compare your notes with those of a colleague to add in any missing points or points you were unsure of

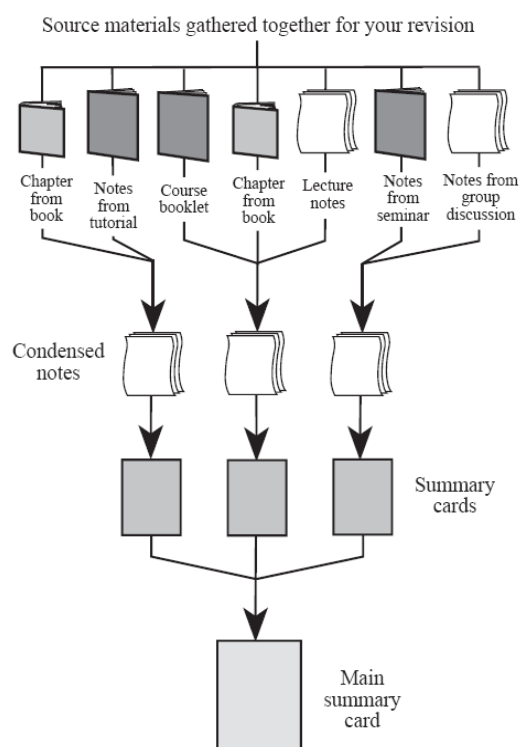
Note-taking from written sources

Some of the following techniques may be helpful to you when assimilating information from written sources:

- Make a note of the information source used, including all the details you need for referencing further on – this will save you time when you write up!
- Survey, skim and scan
 - Survey** - look at the title, introduction and chapter heading in the contents
 - Skim** - look at headings and subheadings, first paragraphs, and/or first sentences of each paragraph in each chapter
 - Scan** - use book indexes for the broad topic then look through the chapter for the specific topic in context
- Summarise information in your own words – don't copy out long passages
- Look out for the main points
- Use 'post-its' to mark important information which you will return to later
- Use a style of note-taking that suits you – linear or pattern-notes
- Use quotation marks to indicate direct quotes from the text; this will help you to avoid plagiarism through unacknowledged quotes

Condensing your notes

Condensing your notes on to cards can be a useful way of summarising the main points of your learning. Index cards are small enough to carry round with you if you have a few spare moments to revise. Notes from a variety of sources can be gathered together and summarised onto a simple card system. You may wish to have one main summary card for each topic. The diagram to the right illustrates the way in which you could condense your notes onto a card system.



Storing your notes

Once you have made your notes it is essential that you begin to keep them in a structured format. The way you do this will depend upon the format that you have chosen, but remember the basic techniques of dividing up large topics into smaller ones. Don't simply divide your notes into modules, but break them down further.

Developing an effective filing technique will help you transfer information from one module to another and at the end of your module for exam revision. Whilst there is no real need to go to the time and effort of cross-referencing your files, it will prove to be invaluable if you know where to find things.

Note Taking Checklist

- **Why are you taking notes?**
For a presentation, for an essay, for reference in a tutorial?
- **What amount of information do you need?**
Does your presentation last ten minutes or twenty?
- **What precise detail are you looking for?**
A date, a theory, a diagram, a name?
- **Find a note taking style that suits you**
Pictorial or numerical – try a few out. You might find that one style suits one need whilst another works for something else.
- **Start actively reading**
with a pen in your hand
- **Answer your questions as you go along**
be systematic
- **Don't get side-tracked by irrelevant information**
- **Only take down that which you really need**

You could organise your notes in a number of ways. Here are a few examples:

- set up a card index system
- use a colour-coded system with different coloured labels or files for each topic
- use a numerical-code system. Assign numerical codes to different topics – this system is useful for cross-referencing from topic to topic.

You might also find it useful to:

- keep all handouts labelled and in sequential order for each module
- keep a card index or an electronic record of the books and journals which you have used, to make it easy for you to locate them.

RefWorks

(<http://www.lboro.ac.uk/library/dbase/refworks.html>) can create an electronic record for you, and help you create an impressive bibliography of your work!

All study advice sheets are also available to view and download on the following website:

<http://www.lboro.ac.uk/library/skills/>



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