

# 8 Making notes

## In this section:

- identify different ways of making notes
- use different note-taking styles in your work
- reduce the amount of notes you take
- make more useful notes
- organize your notes to aid understanding and long-term use

## Why make notes?

The ability to make clear and concise notes is one of the most important skills you will need to develop. The actual process of making notes helps you to gain a deeper understanding of the subject and capture the essential points of a topic.

This section shows you several different ways of making notes. The following suggestions will help you to make notes more effectively.

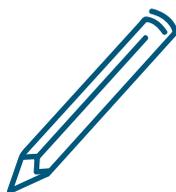
We make notes for a number of reasons.

### Notes are:

- a memory-aid for revision;
- a reminder of the main points of a topic; and
- an important source of material for an assignment.

### Note-taking:

- aids concentration;
- builds up an understanding of the topic;
- prompts questions; and
- reinforces knowledge.



## Active reading

A common mistake when making notes is to write down too much as you are unsure about what you will need later. You can improve your note-taking efficiency by taking some time to consider precisely what you are looking for before you start to write your notes.

## Prioritizing information

Setting goals for your reading and note-taking can point you in the right direction, allowing you to restrict the amount of material about which you make notes.

You can set such goals by asking yourself questions.

For example:

- What are the sanitation options for a rural, low-income community?
- What needs to be considered before a decision about improving sanitary conditions is made?
- Who should be involved in the decision-making?
- What are the possible problems that may be encountered if a particular option is chosen?

Further advice on reading styles and the setting of reading goals can be found in Section 7: Reading efficiently.

**You can cut down on the amount of notes you make by simply answering the questions you pose. If you are focused on the information you are looking for, you are halfway to producing focused notes.**

However, there are a few things on which you should take care:

### Do:

- be thorough and search properly; and
- consider the amount of information you need.

It is important to make notes only according to your needs. Do not make notes for the sake of it!

### Don't:

- ask questions that are too vague — this will only leave you where you started off; or
- be side-tracked by irrelevant information — stick to your questions.





## Note-taking styles

The reason for taking notes may affect the way in which you record them. Whatever the reason or the method that you use, your notes should:

- include the source of the material (author, date, title, publication, page number etc.); the importance of quoting references is discussed later in Section 10;
- be in your own words, as this will aid your understanding of the material; and
- only include relevant material.

When making notes from a piece of written work it may be helpful to mark the text with a highlighter pen or similar. Of course, you must only do this with books or journals that you own or on personal photocopies of material. Library books and other material that you have borrowed should be treated with respect and left unmarked. In electronic documents you can also highlight text using colours.

If you adopt this method of taking notes, you should not mark the text as you read it. Rather, you should read through a section first, make sure you understand it and then go back and highlight the key points. Marking text on the first read-through often results in too much material being highlighted. Once you have an overview of the complete section, it is usually much easier to identify the important issues. In this way, you are more likely to mark only the relevant details. Using different colours to highlight different sub-topics of interest to you can help you at a later stage to identify relevant information in your notes.

There are different styles of note-taking and you should experiment with different methods, choosing whichever approach suits you best. You may find that one style is better for certain circumstances and another one for other situations. Two very different styles in common use are described below.

A linear format, with headings and sub-headings arranged in a logical order, is shown right. However, in order to develop a logical sequence to the notes, it is necessary to have a reasonable overview of the subject under consideration. This may only come after you have read a significant amount.

Some people are happier with a visual method of recording information, such as 'mind maps' where they can actually see the diagram or structure in their mind.

A 'mind map' is an annotated diagram sometimes known as a 'spider diagram'. It starts with the central idea and branches out. This allows you to add subsequent ideas, where appropriate, and enables you to show links between different themes. In addition to using this technique for making notes, it can be very useful for planning the structure of a document



### Options for urban sanitation

#### On-plot

Pit latrines — low cost, low water use.

Simple pit latrines — problems with flies and odours.

Ventilated improved pit latrines (VIP) — reduces problems.

Pour flush latrines — water seal reduces problems.

Twin pits — use where not possible to dig deep pit.

Septic Tank — higher cost, used with flush toilet, high water use, requires household connection.

#### Off-plot

Sewerage — expensive, requires networked infrastructure.

Reduce costs by reducing number of access chambers, gradients and pipe diameters (simplified sewerage), using interceptor tanks, or condominial sewerage.

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and the sections it contains. You can find out more about using mind maps at <http://www.mind-mapping.co.uk>. You can draw these maps electronically using such software as that freely available at <http://cmap.ihmc.us/> where they are referred to as 'concept maps'.

Whatever method of note-taking you adopt, it is far better to write your notes in your own words than copy the source word for word. In the process you will develop a greater understanding of the material and will be able to recall much more. However, sometimes you may also want to keep photocopies or cut portions from important sections of the documents you read. Microsoft's 'Snipping Tool' is a useful for this.

Ensure that you write down the full details of any literature that you are studying when you first start to use it to make notes. Then, at a later stage, you will not have to hunt for these details to provide the information required in the list of references (see Section 10).

As you make notes, use page numbers alongside sources you are likely to want to find again or refer to in your assignment answer or document. The essence of good note-taking is that it breaks up the subject and the page into small sections. This allows you to clearly group notes under topics, rather than treating the page as a solid piece of text with a beginning and an end.

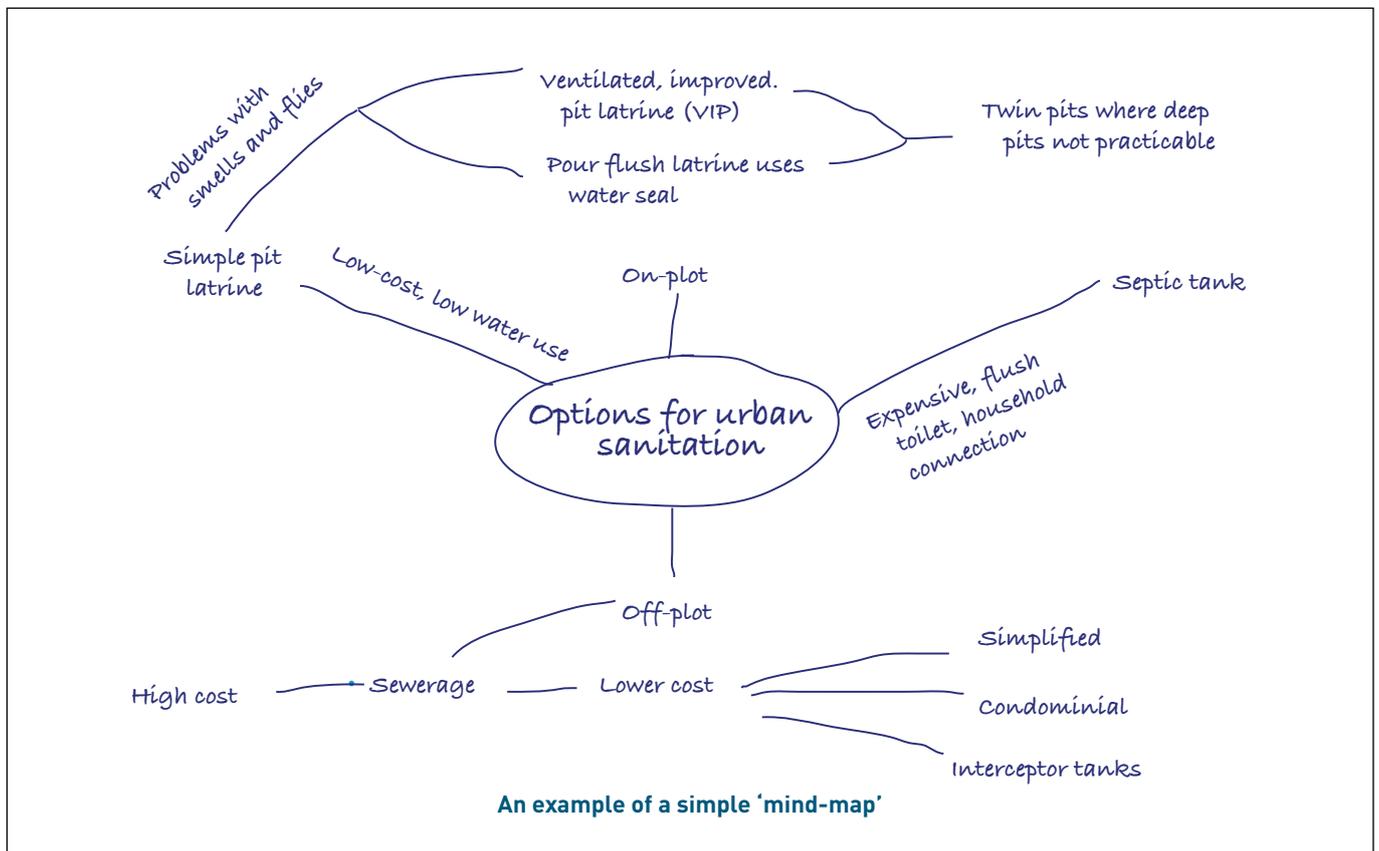
## Storing your notes

Although the very act of taking notes has its own benefits, as discussed above, there are also benefits from being able to refer back to those notes later. To this end, your notes must be both legible and accessible. The storage and retrieval systems that you adopt are therefore important.

Suitable formats that enable you to do this are:

- loose leaf paper that can be stored in one or more ring binders, together with coloured subject dividers;
- a card index system that may be stored either alphabetically in a card index box, or using a colour-coded system of arrangement; and
- on a computer that will allow you to input a keyword into the search feature, available in most word processing packages, to find the relevant notes.

One method of grouping your notes is to file them under keywords related to subject matter. This requires more thought at the time when you are making the notes, which has the added benefit of aiding understanding and recall. Remember the basic techniques of dividing large topics into smaller ones. Try cross-referencing: e.g. 'sewerage' might be stored under 'sanitation' with another reference under 'environmental health'.





Another way to group your notes is to file them under the author's name; this can make life easier when compiling references. Whichever approach you adopt, the source of the material should be included on the card or computer record so that the necessary information can be found again.

If you type your notes into documents stored on a computer, make sure that you back up your files. The advantage of making electronic notes is that you can at some later stage use the search feature on your word processor to locate notes that include specific words of interest.

As mentioned above, using a text colour or coloured highlighting to identify different themes in your notes may also be useful.

Remember that the notes you take are for your benefit alone, so use whatever systems suits you best. There is no right or wrong way of storing your notes.

## Summary

Brief, well-structured notes will be very helpful throughout your studies, giving you more immediate access to the key themes and issues that you have been working with.

## Checklist



- Why are you taking notes?
- What amount of information do you need?
- What precise detail are you looking for?
- Find a note-taking style that suits you.
- Start actively reading with a pen in your hand or ready to type up notes on a computer.
- Answer your questions as you go along — be systematic.
- Only take down notes that you really need.
- Photocopy or cut and paste relevant sections.

