Taking notes from texts

Effective, transformative note taking is a key step in assignment writing & exam preparation

Why take notes?

A fundamental reason for taking notes is to enhance your comprehension and retention of the content of a text. The ability to put another's ideas and explanations into your own words as a summary and/or paraphrase, or to transform a written text into a flow chart or mind map, demonstrates whether you have understood the material you have been reading.

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

- to register questions and comments that you have while reading, which may be forgotten or overlooked later.

When taking notes, you are not simply copying out information neatly. Rather, you are transforming that information into knowledge according to your needs.

The notes you take make while reading and researching may well end up in the final draft of an assignment. Those you make when studying, ideally, can become the foundation for exam revision at the end of semester.

Nevertheless, there is no one correct way to take notes.

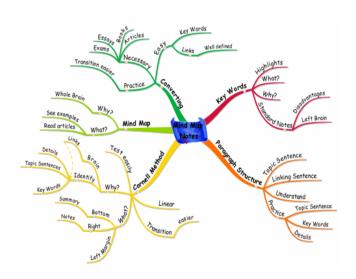### Marking up (annotating) a text

One approach to note-making is to **underline** or **highlight** keywords or sections of a text, to use post-it notes 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 key points of a text when you are re-reading it later for an exam or an essay. However, it is not a particularly *transformative* approach to note-taking.

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 be 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 View menu, and look up 'About Outline View' in the MS Word Help file).

After you've read a text, you might want to construct a **mind-map**, **concept map** or **chart** from it.
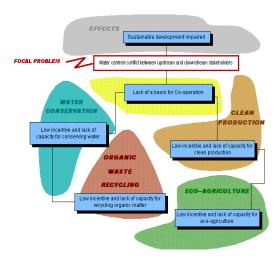

Source: Using Mind Maps (2012) www.usingmindmaps.com

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.

Source: International Institute for Sustainable Development (2012) http://www.iisd.org/sdcn
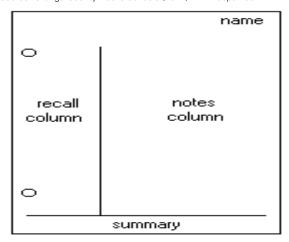
Transformative approaches

Transformative approaches involve reproducing the **content** of a text **in different words**.

- A **paraphrase** involves 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 basically saying?" It should remain faithful to the author's emphasis and interpretation, and should not contain your own opinions or comments.

Cornell approach

A Cornell approach divides your page into two columns and a horizontal space along the bottom.

Source: Orange County Public Schools (2012) www.ocps.net

This system emphasizes the 5R's of note-taking: **record**, **reduce**, **recite**, **reflect** and **review**.

First, **record** ideas while reading in the notes column. Then **reduce** these notes to basic concepts and details; possibly turn answers into questions, in the recall column. Next, cover the main notes column and attempt to **recite** the details from the basic concepts and the questions in the recall column. It is important to **reflect** on ideas or connections that emerge. Take note of such reflections in a separate document. Finally, spend 10 minutes or so regularly **reviewing** these notes while researching an assignment or revising. Further reflections that emerge should be recorded.

Source: Orange County Public Schools (2012) www.ocps.net

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?

Works Cited

Using Mind Maps. (2012). Retrieved from www.usingmindmaps.com

International Institute for Sustainable Development. (2012) Retrieved from http://www.iisd.org/sdcn

Orange County Public Schools. (2012). Retrieved from www.ocps.net

Further Resources

For the Cornell system iPad app, see: http://www.applgasm-apps.com/cornell_notes.html

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.