Making effective notes

While you are at university, you will read a wide assortment of books, journal articles, reports, manuals, information booklets and materials from the Internet for many different purposes. For most of your reading you will find it useful to make notes as a permanent record of what you have read so that you can revisit them for assignments or revision for an exam.

You need to be really clear about why you are making notes and what you will use them for. The information you choose to note will be determined by your *purpose* so think about this carefully before you begin making notes.

Purposes for taking notes

Summarising for general information
If you want to summarise an article, chapter or paper, structure your notes so that they match the structure of what you are reading. Use the same headings and sub-headings as your source and then record as much detail as you need for your purpose such as:

- understanding the point the author is making
- developing an overview of the main ideas
- gaining background information on the topic

Finding specific information
If you require more specific information for an assignment, or you need to better understand some concept, ask yourself *'What further information has the author provided in relation to this point? What evidence? What explanation? What examples?'* Be clear about why you need the specific detail and what it will be used for before making notes.

Studying for an exam
If you want to supplement your lecture notes or make notes for exams, think carefully about what you want to find out and only note as much as you need to in order to have a good understanding. For exams, look at your Course Outline, lecture notes and past exam questions to help you choose the amount and depth of detail you need.

Structuring your notes
It is probably better to structure your notes according to the structure of what you are going to produce. Look at the plan of your essay or presentation. What information do you need, and what questions do you need to answer in order to complete the assignment? To avoid wasting time, be clear about what you need to find out and record that and no more. You may find it helpful to make notes for each section on a separate piece of paper with an appropriate heading to help you keep the information sorted.

Note-taking styles

You should use whatever system of note-taking that is most meaningful and useful for you. You could structure your notes as a table, chart, diagram, branching tree, star, boxes or spokes. Sometimes you might add colour, symbols or arrows to emphasise relationships between items in your notes. You could decide to mark or write on your own copy of the book or article itself, or you may choose to use a highlighter to mark key points. A useful technique is to summarise ideas or write questions or your responses to what you are reading in the margin. You'll find different structures of notes suit different structures of ideas and some examples of different styles can be found at the websites provided below.

Keeping track of your readings for referencing

If you use the information you have noted, you will need to acknowledge where you got the information and ideas from by using references to avoid plagiarism. Therefore, to keep an accurate record, it's important to get into the habit of noting the bibliographic details of the resource you are reading. This includes information like author(s); date of publication; title (of book, article, journal); publisher, volume, number and pages of journal article and the URL of online resources. Recording these details as you read will save you having to search again for the sources when compiling your reference list.

Sometimes when you are making notes you paraphrase and other times you quote the exact words from the reading. Make sure that you distinguish between direct quotes and ideas, summaries or outlines - especially when you are making notes for assignments. One way of doing this is to always put quotation marks around sections that you copy directly from the text and make a note of the author, date and page number. This will help you avoid plagiarism.

Useful links *(all open in a new window)*

Visit the links below for:
- Examples of note-taking you can follow (Sussex)
- Information about different note-taking styles (Massey)
- Strategies for organising your notes (UNSW)

Visit the module Referencing for more information about:
- Referencing rules and styles (so you can reference while taking notes)

There may be resources that have been created with your lecturers, addressing assignment tasks and topics specific to your courses. Follow the links below to find out:

| Business | Education, Arts and Social Sciences | Health Sciences | IT, Engineering and the Environment |