

Taking Notes from Research Reading

For many students, taking notes for a research paper can be a daunting task, yet your notes are absolutely essential for writing a strong essay. Once you have decided on a topic, you have to confront hundreds (sometimes thousands) of pages of writing. In order to write your essay in a timely and organized manner, you need to summarize the ideas contained in your readings into a manageable number of pages. Otherwise, you will become lost, your ideas will scatter to the four winds, and your writing will suffer. Note taking is not difficult, if you follow these helpful tips.

1. Have a Clear Idea of Your Topic

- Before you begin reading, make a list of what you already know about your topic. This will save you a great deal of time by keeping you from rereading what you already know. Check your notes from class and from any relevant assigned readings before you embark on reading something that provides you with no new information.
- Once you have checked out a number of books pertaining to your topic, keep in mind that you do not need to read every book cover to cover. Instead, read the introduction and conclusion to every book, in order to ascertain its argument.
- Once you understand the book's general thesis, focus on the portions of the study that are relevant to your own topic. For example, if you are reading a book on the Thirty Years' War but your research topic focuses specifically on the Kingdom of Bavaria, then check the index to see where the kingdom receives discussion. There is no need for you to lose precious time reading about the finances of the Kingdom of Sweden, when your focus lies elsewhere.

2. Be Sparing with Your Notes

- The value of taking notes is that it allows you to condense major ideas and valuable quotations into a manageable length of space. If you insist on writing down entire large portions of what you read, your notes will spiral out of control, and you will be forced to reread entire paragraphs just to extract a single word, phrase, or sentence of importance.
- Instead, write down key words or points along with the corresponding page number and title of the resource. To that end, only record entire sentences if you plan to cite the author or if you think that the author has expressed herself or himself better than you could have done.
- Whether you prefer a pen and paper or your computer, always write down your notes. It might be easier to simply underline useful passages, dog-ear pages, or insert sticky notes. However, many students have received a terrible shock after

losing a book in which they had underlined certain passages, or the sticky notes they inserted fell out. In one instance, my dog actually ate a book I had been taking notes in, and I had to start over.

- In the end, writing out or typing your notes saves time. You might be in the middle of writing and as you stop to look up an important quote or passage in a book you underlined, you realize that you underlined approximately several pages and are uncertain of exactly where the specific passage is located. Be diligent and thorough with your note taking. It might be more time consuming to write out or type your notes, but in the words of the author J.R.R. Tolkien, “short cuts make long delays.”

3. Organize Your Notes as You Go

- As you organize your topic, you will develop your own system for note taking. Some people find it best to organize their notes by the book or article. Others might choose to organize their notes thematically or according to the section of the essay in which they will reference an author’s idea or quotation. Whatever your exact method of organization, be consistent.

- Also, remember that part of note taking is recording the title and author of resources as well as the page numbers from which you gathered your material. Research papers require you to be specific and to accurately cite the authors whose ideas and quotations you reference. As you take notes, keep this in mind and always know the author, book title, and page number associated with your individual notes. As you take notes, include your citations. It might seem more convenient to write the paper and then go back and incorporate the appropriate citations. However, speaking from personal experience, if you wait until your paper is complete to go back and include your source references, you will find this to be tedious and time consuming. Cite as you go.

- Finally, keep all of your notes together. If you write by hand, keep everything in one folder, organized with color coding, alphabetically by author or theme, or by another organizational method of your choosing. Do not let your notes scatter. If you type your notes, be sure to save frequently and to back up your notes on a separate hard drive. The last thing you want is for your laptop to crash or get stolen.

Note taking is an essential part of the researching and writing process. If you follow the tips I have written, you will get the most out of note taking and will be prepared, organized, and confident as you begin the process of writing your essay.