

How to develop effective note-taking skills

Note-taking is an essential part of being a successful student. This column looks at why note-taking is important and how you can hone your skills to improve your chances of achieving top exam grades



Notes are usually written records of information obtained from other written and oral sources. Such sources are likely to include books, articles, newspapers, various official and non-official documents, films, recordings and observed objects and events.

Why bother taking notes?

There are several reasons why note-taking is important.

- The records you create from notes provide the base from which revision, review and recall can occur.
- Notes are a way of summarising large amounts of information into 'bite-sized chunks.' You are more likely to remember and recall condensed information.
- Active note-taking is a useful tool in helping to clarify knowledge and understanding. By summarising in your own words you are more likely to show that you have got the gist of what you have read or heard.
- Note-taking is a skill that embraces three key learning styles (visual, auditory and kinaesthetic).
- Notes are a flexible way of storing material that has been broken down into a user-friendly format. It is easy to add to and subtract from notes. They can also be reorganised after new information is gathered and can be changed to reflect your thinking on a topic.

Handwritten or word-processed notes?

Handwritten and word-processed note-taking both have advantages. The approach you take depends on the context. Handwritten notes are likely to be quicker to take as they are a kind of short-hand written style that easily allows for the inclusion of a wide-range of abbreviations and symbols. They are relatively simple to make and fairly easy to carry around.

Word-processed notes have the advantage of built-in editing tools, meaning they can be carefully and clearly shortened, extended and adapted as required. They are relatively quick to take although much depends on how skilled you are in using a keyboard.

Word-processed note-taking lacks some of the flexibility and convenience of the handwritten approach. Also, it ideally requires a laptop. If possible, you should experiment with both methods, as they each offer a variety of ways to capture and develop your notes.

Some dos and don'ts of note-taking

In general, when taking notes, **do** the following:

- Read and/or listen to a chunk of information on a specific point before attempting to summarise it.
- Be consistent in how you take notes. Use similar tools and techniques for each note-taking task.

- Be methodical in recording and storing notes. Keep notes in order by ensuring they are correctly referenced to sources, specification topics and classes.

- Take the initiative with note-taking. Too many students wait to be told when to take notes. If in doubt about the importance of a piece of information, write a note about it. You can always discard it later if, on reflection, it appears irrelevant.

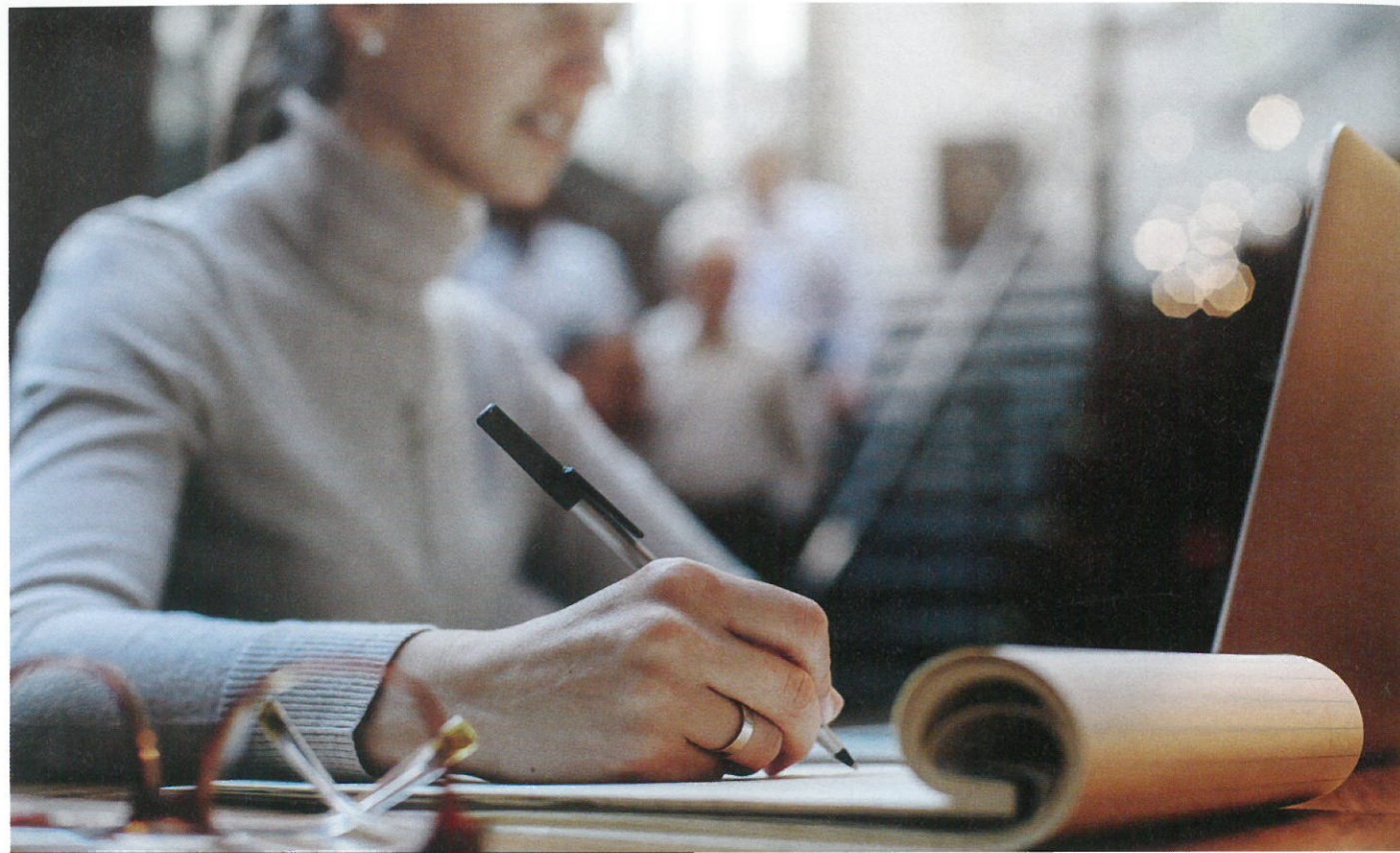
There is also some **don'ts** you should observe:

- Avoid producing notes in blocks of writing. Break written material down by using a variety of tools and techniques.
- Don't muddle notes up, between topics and even subjects, or by dumping them in one file (manual or electronic). Notes should always be dated and numbered, and kept in files that relate to strands of topics.



Table 1 Note-taking tools and techniques

Technique	Purpose
<p>Abbreviations An abbreviation is a shortened version of a word or phrase. Some abbreviations that might be useful in the study of history are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ govt. = government ■ pol. = political ■ econ. = economic ■ soc. =social ■ K/Q = king/queen <p>Abbreviations must be deployed consistently, and you need to make sure you can remember what your abbreviations stand for.</p>	Essential for shortening the amount of information to be collated. Make sure that you avoid drifting into the habit of using abbreviations in extended writing (essay-based) tasks.
<p>Symbols Symbols can be anything that signifies an event, person, place, group or institution in history. Some examples are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ numbers, letters, bullet points = to indicate a factor or list of factors ■ flags = to denote a country ■ crossed swords = to denote a battle ■ arrows = used to show increase/decrease, forwards/backwards, leads to ■ mathematical annotation such as '</>' symbols <p>Be creative in using symbols to add a bit of flair and individuality to your note-taking.</p>	As symbols are visual in nature, they can be effective in making key points stand out.
<p>Diagrams Experiment in using a variety of diagram formats, especially when it comes to recording points of analysis and evaluation. The obvious ones to consider are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> tables = such as this one spider diagrams = for showing how factors might be linked charts = including graphs (good for depicting change and continuity over time), timelines, pie charts, flow charts and any process 'pictures' 	Especially helpful in summarising examples of conceptual thinking (cause and consequence, similarity and difference, change and continuity).
<p>Mind maps When using mind maps, remember to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ use one key historical topic or issue per map and write this in a bubble in the centre of the map ■ use thick branches for key ideas and smaller branches and twigs for explanations and development of ideas ■ write on the branches and twigs (one or just a few words, abbreviations and/or symbols) ■ use a different colour for each branch ■ use the finished map to 'teach' someone else about the topic 	Helpful in charting historical events, people and places. A very good recall tool but maybe less effective in enabling detailed notes to be collated. Using the map as a teaching tool can greatly enhance understanding of the topic in question.
<p>Different formats Writing notes on index cards or even Post-it stickers is a way of varying the format. Such materials come in different shapes and sizes so that you can play around with them to decide which are the most useful.</p>	Notes taken using such formats become more portable and flexible in how they can be utilised. They also force the note-taker to be succinct.



Try experimenting with different note-taking approaches

■ Sticking too rigidly to the same note-taking approach might result in ineffectiveness and inefficiency. For example, linear notes are fine for keeping a record of historical narratives and chronology, but less helpful when trying to untangle the causes and consequences of an event or change and continuity over time.

Box 1 Notes on the Treaty of Versailles article (last section)

ToV failed for 3 reasons:

1 Establishment of L of N

- collective security v nat. sov.?
- lack of support from US Senate
- some success: e.g. IILB and HO

2 New borders given to 'successor states of defeated powers' = resentments

- esp. in Gr. (on L and R)
- Hungary? Lost chunk of pop.
- self-determination? Narrow view taken

3 Ignored imp. of need for econ. stability

- inflation
- debts
- new banking system needed
- reparations not esp. helpful

Probs. mounted = crisis in 1929 showed 'weaknesses and blindnesses (sic)' of ToV'

How to take effective notes

Effective note-taking is about creating records that achieve what the writer sets out to do. This might seem a rather obvious point to make but students often fall into the trap of simply regurgitating read or heard material without processing it and breaking it down.

Effective notes are a precis or summary of what has been accessed and written in the 'own words' of the person who has done the accessing. There are various tools and techniques that can be used to take notes (see Table 1) but what is utilised will depend on the note-taking task at hand. The following provides you with some well-tested note-taking ideas and the purposes for which they are best suited.

Note-taking tasks

Look at the notes in Box 1. They refer to the last section of the article on the Treaty of Versailles (pp. 18–22), and mainly use abbreviations. Read the article and take notes on the other sections using your choice of abbreviations and symbols. How do your notes vary from those in Box 1? How does combining abbreviations with symbols make the note-taking process more effective?

When you've looked at the Treaty of Versailles article, write notes on the other main articles in this issue of *MODERN HISTORY REVIEW* using your preferred method. It doesn't matter that you may not be studying the topics highlighted. The important thing is to experiment with different note-taking approaches to reveal which ones are best matched to making a record of the content and approaches featured in the articles.

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How to write a university personal statement

What are admissions tutors really looking for? Take a look at our practical guide

As an admissions tutor, I find personal statements to be an especially important part of the university applications process. They help to provide a window into who the applicant is, rather than just what the numbers say about them. Especially for a candidate who might be on the edge of being accepted or denied, a personal statement that shows real passion and preparation for a course can make the difference. I'm also always impressed when I can tell that a person has a strong understanding of what the course they are applying for entails and can show how they would be a good fit for it.

However, it's certainly not an easy task to encapsulate who you are and why you are interested in a course in a short statement that will go to multiple universities. Here are a few suggestions to help in writing a strong personal statement that will stand out.

Do your research

First, do your research on the courses and universities that you are applying to. If you are applying to a similar course at a number of universities, you could talk with current students, look over the modules offered, consider skills needed for the degree, and research what kind of jobs students with that degree go on to. Are there certain key skills or focuses that you see as important across multiple programmes?

Next, before you start writing, use the research you've compiled to make an outline or list of things you might want to include in the essay. I'd suggest brainstorming what has drawn you to that particular degree. Then, keeping in mind what you've found out about that degree, list the skills, qualities, classes and experiences you have had that might be relevant to the course. At the end, look over your list and consider what are the most important (and persuasive) points to include in your essay.

Structure

Next, consider how you want to structure your essay. Many essays begin with what first interested the student in that course and continue with a discussion of the experiences that have prepared them for the course. Other essays begin with a specific experience that is related to the course and then become more general. Whatever structure you choose, make sure that it is easy to follow for the reader and clearly gets across your points without rambling or going off topic.

What sets you apart?

While writing the essay, try to give us a sense of who you are as a person and why you think you would be a good fit for the course. What sets you apart from other students?

One of the key things that admissions tutors look for is someone who is passionate about the subject that they are applying to study. Tell us what drew you to the subject. What particularly interests you in this subject? It helps if you can point to relevant courses you have taken throughout your studies to show a longstanding interest in the subject. Was there a particular topic that you found especially interesting and perhaps pursued extra research or study into? If you're able to, I suggest also showing that you are interested in the course you are applying for beyond just your study of it in the classroom. Have you pursued your interest in it through a job or hobby, been to any interesting museum exhibits about it, read extra books about the subject, or learned about it in the news?

Draw on the research that you did to make it clear that you understand the requirements of your chosen course or courses and to show that you have the skills to do well in that course. In particular, make it clear how you have prepared yourself academically for the programme that you have applied for. How have you shaped your studies to prepare for this university course or courses? As you explain this, try to also show the admissions tutor that you have some understanding of what the degree entails.

Proofread

Finally, be sure to carefully proofread your essay for both spelling and grammar. An essay with spelling and grammatical errors doesn't make the impression you are working to achieve. Try to make sure that the structure of the essay is clear and that it flows clearly from one topic to another. If you're able to, finish your essay well before the deadline and then come back to it later to read and edit it with fresh eyes. It's always helpful as well to get feedback on an essay like this from others. Try to have one or more persons you trust (a parent, teacher, fellow student, etc.) read over your essay to see if there are any grammatical errors you missed or if any parts of it don't make sense.

Most of all, remember that rather than ticking particular boxes, the purpose of the essay is to give the admissions tutor a sense of who you are and why you want to study their course. The more passion and preparation that you show, the better.

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