

Effective note-taking

Good-quality notes can make the difference at A-level and beyond. Follow our guide to improve your note-taking skills

Note-taking is one of those skills you are often asked to perform as an A-level student. Yet it is rarely taught. I am sure many of you are given instructions to 'read and take notes' from a particular chapter of a book, or given photocopied information to create your own revision notes from. The ability to take effective, meaningful notes is crucial not only for your A-level studies but also for any future study you might undertake.

There are many different ways to take notes, so you need to find a system which suits you and which is most beneficial to your learning. See Box 1 for items you might need to purchase for really effective note-taking. Once you have your chosen paper and pens, an essential question to ask is *why* you are taking the notes in the first place. The chances are that you only need to focus on the most important elements of the reading material, so avoid the temptation to capture every aspect of the book, chapter, website or handout in front of you. Your teacher might give you subheadings to focus your note-taking, and this can be a good way to start.

What should I focus on?

Your focus when note-taking should be twofold. First, what is new to you? There's no point in writing down information that you already know. Second, what is relevant? What information will best help you to answer that exam question or to complete that assessment? Focus on the elements below.

Dates

Dates enable you to create a chronology of when an event happened and the context around it. For example, knowing that the Wannsee Conference took place in 1942 allows you to understand the Final Solution in the context of the Second World War.

Box 1 Essential shopping list for note-taking

- Lined A4 paper (best for outlining) or blank A4/A3 paper (best for mind mapping)
- A variety of different coloured pens (select different colours for different parts of the notes, for example writing any key terms in green)
- Highlighters



Names of people

Being able to link people to key ideas will help you to remember these ideas better when they come up again. This can be particularly important when dealing with sources. Being able to contextualise people mentioned within a source or its author can help to give you clues as to its meaning.

Definitions

Unless you already know the meaning of a key term, write the definition down. It is worth keeping a glossary in your folder of notes that you can add to each time you come across a new key term. This will prove to be an excellent revision tool come the exams.

Arguments and debates

Both sides of any argument or debate should be recorded in your notes, as well as strengths and weaknesses, successes and failures, or positive and negative points about a particular theme or idea. This is where lists or tables can come in handy. For example, it will be far more useful as a revision tool to have a table showing the successes and failures of Stalin's policy of collectivisation than it will to have a piece of continuous prose.

Your own questions

It is worth making a note of anything that you don't understand or questions that your reading raises, in order that you can ask your teacher.

How do I organise the notes?

There are many different ways to take notes and it is worth trying out different methods to see which one you prefer. Many of you might also prefer to highlight the key points within a piece of text before actually writing the notes. This can add to the revision process,

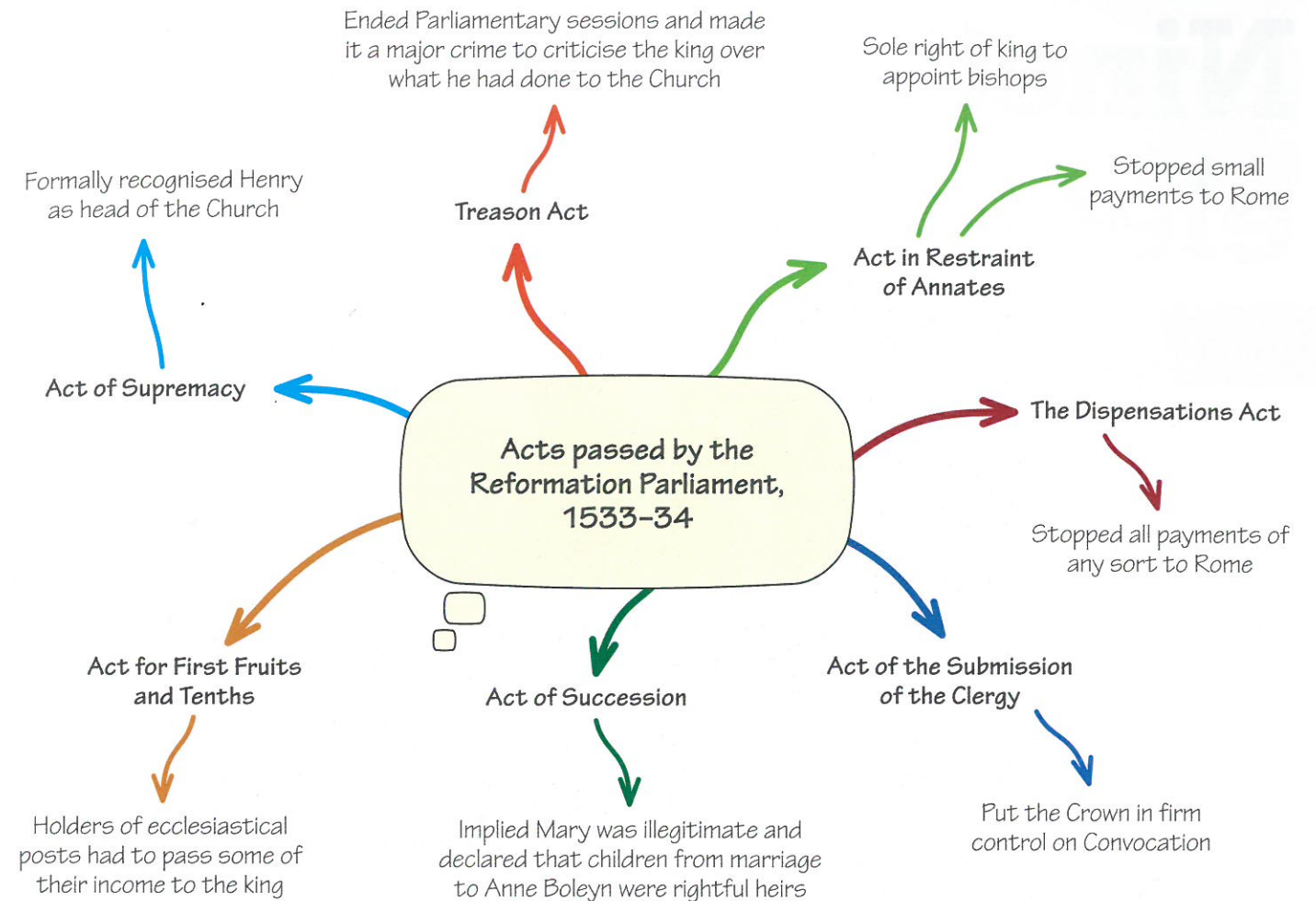


Figure 1 Example of a mind map

encouraging you to read things more than once and helping to focus your note-taking on what is important.

Outlining

Use subheadings and bullet points to summarise information from a longer piece of text.

Mind mapping

Write the title of your notes in the centre of a blank piece of paper, then use branches coming from the middle as subheadings. This is a particularly good method to use when taking notes on something which has a variety of different causes related to it, for example the

causes of the First World War. It is also especially useful for gaining an overview of a larger topic, such as the aims, methods, successes and failures of the suffragette movement. The most effective mind maps will combine text with pictures, symbols and colours. A simple example is shown in Figure 1.

Cards and notes

Notes taken by either outlining or mind mapping can then be condensed even further when it comes to revision. This is where I would suggest using sticky notes or flash cards to help to scale down the information you have. For example, you could use sticky notes as a way to test yourself on key terms, or flash cards as a way to summarise factors needed to answer a particular examination question.

See Box 2 for more handy tips on organising your notes.

Conclusion

Good notes help us to recall facts — and they also help us to commit things to memory in the first place, something particularly important to your history studies. They will provide an excellent tool for revision and help you to do well in your exams. Happy note-taking!

Box 2 Organising your note-taking

- Create a filing system in your A-level history folder in order to ensure your notes stay organised.
- Use file dividers to separate topics.
- Only write on one side of the paper. This will allow you to add to your notes at a later date if necessary.
- In your folder, place your assignments next to the relevant notes on the topic. This will help when it comes to revision.

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