**A guide to effective reading and note taking**

**Managing the risk by being selective**

Being selective is the key to successful note-making. There are two main levels at which you need to be selective:

* deciding what to read and what not to read
* deciding which specific material to make notes on

**Deciding what to read and what not to read**

Information that may help you decide is:

* the year of publication: how up to date is the information in relation to your specific topic?
* the contents page and index: are there specific sections devoted to your topic of interest?
* the abstract, introduction, or preface: they should help you to decide whether to read more
* beginnings and ends of promising sections: do they suggest that the content is worth reading in more detail?

**Deciding which specific material to make notes on**

Some useful questions are posed by Stella Cottrell (2003):

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| --- |
| * *Do you really need this information? If so, which bits?* * *Will you really use it? When, and how?* * *Have you noted similar information already?* * *What questions do you want to answer with this information?”*   Cottrell S. (2003 p.126) The study skills handbook 2nd edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan |

Mantex has a website offering resources to support learning development, and has this advice:

|  |
| --- |
| *Some people take so many notes that they don’t know which to use when it’s time to do the writing. They feel that they are drowning in a sea of information. This problem is usually caused by two common weaknesses in note-taking technique:*   * *transcribing too much of the original* * *being unselective in the choice of topics*   *There are two possible solution to this problem:*   * *Select only those few words of the source material which will be of use. Avoid being descriptive. Think more, and write less. Be rigorously selective.* * *Keep the project topic or the essay question more clearly in mind. Take notes only on those issues which are directly relevant to the subject in question.*   <http://www.mantex.co.uk/2009/09/15/how-to-take-notes/> |

**Don’t be pushed along by the literature: approach it with a plan!**

Take the analogy of visiting a supermarket to buy food for a party. If you simply wander in to see what there is, and buy anything that looks nice, you will probably end up back home wondering:

* why you bought far too many puddings and cakes
* how you will be able to make use of that huge quantity of fruit and vegetables, before they go bad
* why you bought masses of drinks of all kinds (although there are just 20 people coming), but you forgot to buy any extra coffee
* how much money you have just wasted on stuff you don’t need
* when you’ll be able to fit in another visit to the shops to buy the stuff you’ve forgotten
* how much better it would have been if you had started off with a list

Translating this image onto the academic practice of note-making, you will see that wandering into a text and simply writing down everything that looks interesting is neither an efficient nor an effective approach. A plan is needed.

This table gives some suggestions for how to begin your planning. It uses the idea of going food shopping for a party as an analogy for reading for an assignment.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Buying food for a party** | **Reading for an assignment** |
| Start by deciding what the **food theme** will be, so that you can work out what you need | Start by taking a **close and critical look at your assignment title**, to see what is needed |
| Create a **list of the all the kinds of food and drink you need to look for** when you go to the supermarket | Create a **list of the kinds of information, examples, ideas etc that you will be looking for** in your reading |
| At the supermarket **you may be distracted by all the other fantastic food and drink for sale. Keep referring to your list** and be cautious! It is easy to waste money buying drinks that look wonderful, but you know won’t get used; or food that may be a good idea, if you had more time to prepare it, but you know that you don’t. | As you begin to read **you may be distracted by interesting material** that you want to make notes on, but which is not relevant to the specific task at hand. **Keep referring to your assignment title and to your plan**. Do not be tempted by interesting but irrelevant material |
| When **you find food that is on your list, assess** its quality and price, and **buy the best specimens** | **Assess the relevance** of those articles and books you choose to read, and **make notes** when you find material that is **directly relevant** to your assignment |
| Sometimes you can find an idea that is **not on your list**, but which would actually be **perfect for your party**. Yes, **buy it!** | Sometimes you come across **material that you hadn’t anticipated**, but which would be great to include. Yes! Make notes on it, and **revise your plan** |
| Keeping to this plan should save you time and money, and give you a great party as well | Keeping to this plan should you time and effort, and should streamline the actual assignment writing process |

**Note-making templates**

Using a note-making template can help you to:

* make notes in a clear and readable format
* remember the kind of information you want to record from each source
* standardise your notes so you can find particular elements again more easily when you come to use them.

When you have decided that a source is going to be useful and you are going to make notes on it, you need to **record the full referencing details**. After that there are various headings under which you may want to make notes. Here are some ideas of **the kinds of headings you might choose to use**.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| context | suggested future research | useful statistics | theory | justification for the research |
| useful case study | useful example(s) | main argument(s) | useful material to quote | idea(s) you can use |
| supporting evidence for your argument | particular relevance to my assignment | limitation(s) | main finding(s) | geographical / political setting |
|  |  |  |  |  |

This website gives you outlines of five designs of note-making system: <http://www.sas.calpoly.edu/asc/ssl/notetakingsystems.html>

One or more of these systems may suit you. If not, you may be able to modify one of them, or combine two or more, into a personal system that works for you.

You can also devise your own template, using the kind of headings listed in the table above that are the most appropriate to your own discipline and topic, so that:

* instead of wandering into the literature and feeling overwhelmed by it, you
* take control before you engage with the literature, and go in with your ‘shopping list’ already prepared

**Avoiding plagiarism**

Plagiarism is using the words or ideas of someone else as if they were your own. Exam boards and universities consider plagiarism to be a serious offence, and you need to take great care to avoid it.

Unfortunately, it is relatively easy to find yourself in danger of plagiarising another’s work, even though you have no intention of doing so. The two main **risks within the note-making process** are:

* paraphrasing too closely when you are making your initial notes; and
* copying some material verbatim, then being careless about using inverted commas (“..”) around the precise sections you have copied

When you find some detailed material that is highly relevant, **it can be a good idea to copy it verbatim (in exactly the same words as used originally), using inverted commas, and recording the page number.** You can then make a decision about how to use the material **at the point of writing**; by using the direct quote, or by paraphrasing it in your own words at that point.