

How to Take Good Notes

“If you steal from one author, it's plagiarism. If you steal from two, it's research.”

—John Burke

Learning to take good notes is a skill with lifelong benefits. This guide provides helpful hints for writing better notes. The main point to keep in mind is that *less is more*. Take down only the most important information in a way you will understand later.

Taking Notes While Reading Literature – Sticky Notes

Using sticky notes or flags to jot down ideas, or mark special pages, is a good alternative to writing in the book margin, and the note or flag acts as a bookmark. Jot down unfamiliar vocabulary, or make note of literary techniques you find on the page, such as foreshadowing, or irony.

For Research

1. **Organize Notes.** Regardless of whether you use index cards or a notebook, keep all of your notes stored in one, easy-to-find location. Date each note, and name your source. Color coding notes for ideas or sections of your research, for example a blue title for any information on The Boston Tea Party, and a red title for the Battle of Lexington and Concord will help keep your ideas organized as well.
2. **Write one idea heading or quote on each note card or page.** This helps with organizing ideas or points you want to address in your research paper.
 - Is the quote important?
 - Does it help you understand the topic of research? Be sure the answer to both questions is *yes*. If not, don't use the quote.
3. **Write down all source information for citing.** This includes the title, the page numbers, the author and/or editor, the year of publication, the publisher, and the city of publication. This is essential information for bibliographies, and if you note it now, it will save you a lot of frustration and time hunting for this information.
4. **Always use quotation marks around direct quotes from a work, to keep from unintentionally plagiarizing.** ([link to plagiarism article](#)) Also mark the author of a quote, whether it's a researcher or a literary character. You don't want to be asking yourself “Did Jo or Meg say this?” when you should be writing your paper.

Taking Notes in a Lecture or in Class

1. **Stay Organized.** Keep separate notes for each other. It will be helpful when you review them.
2. **Sit as close to the front the classroom as possible.** It will be easier to hear the professor with fewer distractions, when you sit at the front of the room.



3. Listen Actively.

- Look at the speaker while s/he is speaking.
- Listen for cues in the lecture, such as changes in inflection, and key words like “therefore,” “furthermore,” “more importantly,” and “this is key...”
- Ask questions and be actively involved.

4. **Review notes five minutes before class, and as soon as possible after the class.** It keeps the information fresh in your mind and prepares you for future lectures and active listening. Use a highlighter to mark key points or questions.
5. **Leave spaces or lines in your notes, and write down any questions you have.** When you review your notes, the questions will give your review focus, and make you an active participant in studying. If you have comments for further insight, you can add these as well.
6. **Don't write everything you hear.** You can't be a student and a stenographer simultaneously. Few people can write as fast as a teacher is speaking. Jot down key words and relevant ideas instead.
7. **Practice with different styles of note taking, and use what works best for you.** Do you outline, or use bullets? Do you write brief sentences, just a string of words, or words and symbols? Play around with different styles of taking notes, and find what is the easiest and most effective for you.

From Notes to Outline

Some people find outlining tedious, while others find it an important way to organize ideas. Like any form of note-taking or organizing for school, it is up to you to determine if outlining is for you.

Tips to writing a good outline

1. Keep it simple. Capture the idea or point you want to make; that's it.
2. Write your thesis at the top of the outline, to maintain focus throughout your outline.
3. Use Roman numerals and letters. Each Roman numeral should be the beginning of a new paragraph or section, and the letters should be subjects addressed in that paragraph or section. (Ex. I. Main Topic)
4. Leave space for including questions and comments

An example of a good, basic outline:

- I. Introduction
 - A. Introduction to topic
 - B. Thesis statement
- II. Body Paragraph 1
 - A. Supporting Fact 1
 - B. Supporting Fact 2
 - C. Supporting Fact 3



1. Sub Fact

2. Sub Fact

III. Body Paragraph 2

- A. Supporting Fact 1

- B. Counter Argument

- C. Refuting Fact

IV. Conclusion

Idea Map Outline

Visual learners might prefer a pictorial or horizontal depiction of outlines, instead of a vertical, numerical view. Beginning with a main idea/theme at the center, then branching out of it with secondary words or phrases, can help with brainstorming and outlining a research project.

Visit <http://www.readwritethink.org/files/resources/interactives/essaymap/> to map your essay interactively or print out a blank idea map to fill out by hand.

