

## Effective Note Making

**Effective note making skills enable you to select the information you need from written sources, quickly and efficiently. This guide shows you how to make clear and well organised notes that are useful for every aspect of study.**

*Related guides: [‘Academic Literature’](#) and [‘Reading Effectively’](#).*

### Making effective notes

In order to make the maximum use of your time and effort you must be clear as to why you are taking notes. Having a clear focus cuts out unnecessary note taking time and enables you to produce well organised notes. The three main reasons for note taking are:

- to select
- to understand
- to remember.

This guide introduces the different note taking skills that can be used for each of these three purposes.

### Taking notes to select

When you are making notes for an essay, report or seminar paper, you will need to understand and select information. Use your essay title or question to provide the focus for your note taking. You can then select your information according to its direct relevance to this title or question.

Always make sure that a text is relevant to your needs. Do this by checking:

- the year of publication - how up to date is the information?
- the contents page and index - are there specific areas devoted to your topic?
- the introduction or preface - do they give an overview of the text?

- the beginnings and endings of promising chapters - are the chapters worth reading closely?

When you know the text has the information you need you can begin to make notes.

- Begin by recording the details you will need for your bibliography i.e. *author, date, place of publication, and publisher.*
- Use your own words to check you understand each point.
- Check that each point you record is relevant to the task in hand.
- Record the chapter and page number for use in referencing and so that you can easily retrace your steps should you need to check a point in your notes later on.
- Take down all quotations in inverted commas with full reference details. This will allow you to identify and acknowledge other writers' words in your essay or report.

### **Organising your information**

Organising your notes as you write will help you to digest the information quickly. You can also reorganise the notes later to make the information more meaningful to your task.

- Use main and sub headings and numerical lists to organise your notes.
- Use keywords to summarise each point in the margin. A quick keyword reference is good for taking an overview of your notes.
- Use colour to categorise points, make headings stand out and show links between points and ideas.

### **Taking notes to understand**

Taking notes whenever you read is a useful aid to understanding the material. Use the following techniques to improve your understanding.

#### **Underlining and highlighting**

Underlining or highlighting encourages you to identify the most important aspects of the text. This helps to keep you focused and helps to prevent the loss of concentration. It is rather a passive technique, and needs to be used with care in order to aid understanding.

- Use underlining or highlighting in your own copy of texts or on photocopies, never on borrowed books. Small post-it notes could be used in borrowed books instead.
- As you read, select what seem to you to be central words and phrases that convey the key meaning of the text. Do be selective; it is very easy to start using this technique without thinking, resulting in a page of indiscriminately highlighted text which selects more than it leaves out.

One of the first things you will find out about studying for your degree is that the focus is on you the learner rather than the member of staff who teaches you. You will be expected to work far more on your own than you may have done in the past. This gives you an opportunity to make the most of the University environment, which includes staff, students and academic services such as the Library and the Student Learning Centre, to extend your knowledge and skills.

Sample paragraph with key points underlined.

## **Using your own words**

Putting the information into your own words is a more active way to engage with the text and gives you a chance to check that you understand the material.

- Summarise a point in your own words.
- Use abbreviations when you can but be sure to still use your own words.
- Copy technical terms and data for accuracy.
- Add your own comments to any quotations you record to show their meaning and significance.

## **Taking notes to remember**

When preparing for exams, you will need to select, understand and remember information. In addition to the techniques described above you can use the following techniques to help you recall the content of your notes. Condensing information will help you commit it to memory.

## **Using keywords to aid recall**

The natural functions of the memory are hampered when we try to memorise information in the form of whole phrases or sentences. Use keywords in your notes to make the revision process more efficient and time effective.

- Select keywords to represent central concepts or crucial facts and commit these to memory.
- Work with your own personal associations to choose a keyword that will trigger your memory.
- Begin by using keywords with a few pages of text, choosing a keyword for each heading and then a keyword for each point under the headings.
- Test your recall of the information using the trigger of memorised keywords.
- Practise the method and build up the confidence to use keywords throughout your revision.

## Using colour and image

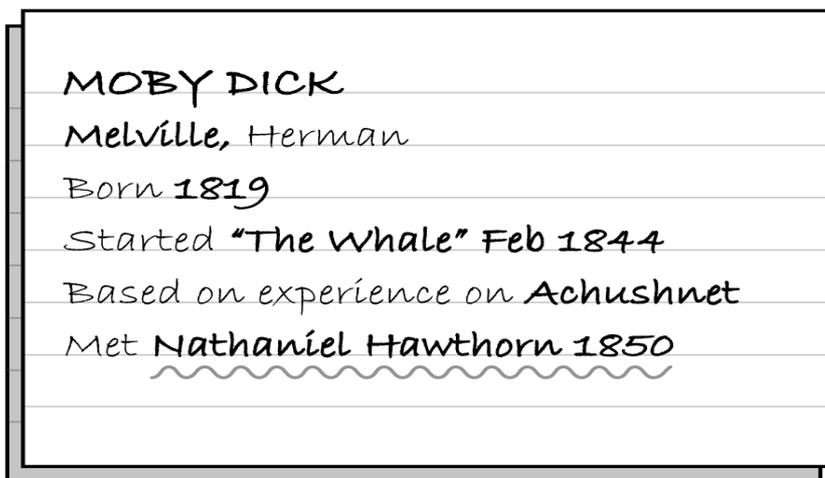
Use colour and image to create a strong visual trigger to help you recall information.

- Categorise and highlight information with colour. This will help you to visualise a page of notes in your mind. Colour could be used to represent different topics or themes.
- Use diagrams and pictures to represent information. Chose an image that is humorous or has personal associations as this will be even easier to remember.

## Using index cards

Notes are usually recorded on A4 paper and then stored in a ring binder where they can be easily removed and the pages reorganised. When making notes for revision you can also use index cards to organise key concepts and ideas.

- Use the cards to physically divide information into easy to handle bites, for example one key point to each card.
- Use keywords and colour to make the information as visually clear as possible.
- Use the cards to test your recall, putting to the back of the pile the cards you can easily remember. Repeat the cards that need more concentration.

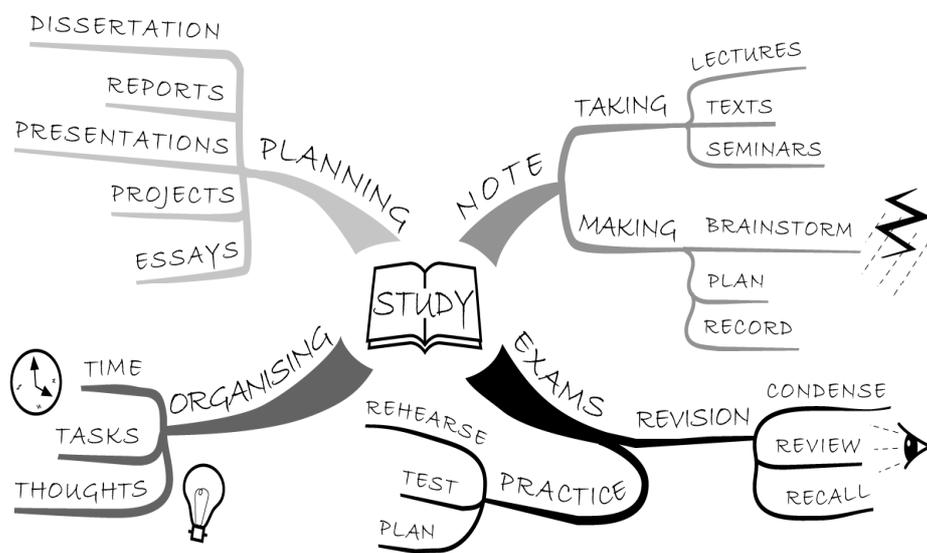


Sample index card showing key points

## Using diagrams

Using diagrams in your notes can:

- help you gather and hold large amounts of information on one page;
- enable you to create an overview of a large topic or subject area;
- help you see links and connections in your notes;
- provide a powerful aid to memory by using the association of word, image, number, colour and spatial awareness;
- attract and hold the interest of the eye/brain.



Sample diagrammatical note showing structure and interrelationships.

This method of note taking is also useful for planning essays and presentations.

## Summary

- Be clear as to why you are making notes.
- Adapt your note taking style to the task in hand.
- Be selective in your note taking and only include the information that is relevant to the current task.
- Use a simple form of note taking to aid your understanding when you read.
- Use your own words throughout your notes and comment on any quotations you record.
- Use a variety of methods to organise your notes as clearly as possible.
- Use a variety of association techniques throughout your notes for effective recall.
- Try different ways of presenting your notes such as index cards, diagrams or maps.
- Rework your notes in different formats, reordering or condensing the material.

## Want to know more?

If you have any further questions about this topic you can make an appointment to see a **Learning Enhancement Tutor** in the **Student Support Service**, as well as speaking to your lecturer or adviser.

 Call: 01603 592761  
 Ask: [ask.let@uea.ac.uk](mailto:ask.let@uea.ac.uk)  
 Click: <https://portal.uea.ac.uk/student-support-service/learning-enhancement>

There are many other resources to help you with your studies on our [website](#).

**Your comments or suggestions about our resources are very welcome.**

	<p>Scan the QR-code with a smartphone app for more resources.</p>	<p>This guide is based on a study guide produced by Student Learning Development at the University of Leicester.</p> 
--	---	---