Keeping track of what you read and hear

Keeping notes at university

At university, students get ideas from lectures and classes, textbooks and books, articles and webpages, and so on. The range of material can be overwhelming at first, but good notes will help you keep on top of all this information. However, new students sometimes feel their notes

- are too long or too short
- are not a trustworthy representation of the original ideas
- take up too much time to create.

This can make students reluctant to take notes. You may feel this way yourself about taking notes on your summer reading. However, it would be useful to have some record of your summer reading! As it will take time to develop strong note-taking skills, taking notes over the summer is a chance to figure out what works for you.

This guide

This guide looks at three key approaches to note-taking:

- Annotation
- Notes
- Mind maps

Some students use all of these approaches, or versions of them, to help at different stages of their reading and studies. Choose different items from your summer reading to try out the approaches below.
Annotation

Reading actively

Annotation is a way of reading actively. See this example of an annotated paragraph from a Geography textbook:


Annotation involves marking the text by highlighting, underlining, numbering, and writing on the text when we are reading. Annotation is useful when we first encounter a new text, because it helps us stay focused and engaged, especially if it is a challenging text.

Highlighting and underlining are not enough on their own, however, as they can be passive. Try out the different ways of annotating on the right, to make sure you are engaging actively with what you read.

Annotation can be done on paper or on electronic texts (see the Note-taking Online guide).

Approaches to annotating

Highlight or underline key points

Highlighting and underlining should mark the most relevant parts of the text (see the ‘Making the most of your summer reading’ guide). Afterwards, you can then re-read the key parts carefully.

- Read for the key points, and highlight or underline them, like the yellow highlighted text in the picture.
- It helps if you read a whole paragraph quickly before deciding what to mark. Don’t worry about the details yet.
- Notice if ideas repeat several times in a text. They are probably important, so mark them.

Don’t highlight or underline everything.

Add keywords or summaries

Putting keywords or summaries should show the different topics covered in different parts of the text.

- When you highlight or underline something, write in the margin to remind yourself of the topic or idea in this part of the text.
- Make your summary brief, like the blue words in the picture.

Number or order

When reading, we can use numbers and colours to organise the text and make it easier to follow.

- If there’s a list or a sequence in the text, add numbers.
- Use different colour highlighters or pens to mark the text. In the picture the summaries are blue and questions are green.

Always write why

Don’t highlight, underline, and number without an explanation.

- When you mark the text, write why in the margins.
- Write down ideas and questions that come to you when reading.

Highlighting and underlining can become passive if you don’t push yourself to consider why.
Note-taking

Keeping records for the future

One of the greatest challenges at university is keeping a useful record of ideas and information read and heard in individual study, lectures, and tutorials, and so on. See this example of notes from listening to a Chemistry lecture:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chemistry 1A Lecture 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr Amanda Brindley</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Introduction to Quantum Mechanics**

### History

*Pre-1900s: atoms & molecules = rebounding balls*

- Model works for ideal gas laws

*1900s: Planck on quanta = amount of energy that atoms & molecules could have

≠ Continuous energy

### Development of atomic models

Lecture available online: [http://ocw.uci.edu/lectures/chem_1a_lec_03_general_chemistry_introduction_to_quantum_mechanics.html](http://ocw.uci.edu/lectures/chem_1a_lec_03_general_chemistry_introduction_to_quantum_mechanics.html)

At first, note-taking might seem easy, if we assume we can write everything we see and hear. However, the volume and complexity of material at university makes this impossible. Instead, you need to learn how to think and write efficiently, make good decisions about what you need to record, and develop a clear and attractive way of writing and organizing your notes.

### Approaches to note-taking

#### Taking notes while reading

With reading texts, many students read and annotate the text first. Students then often re-read the text more carefully and take notes:

- Decide and note the key ideas.
- Use your own words.
- Write the book, author and the page number accurately.
- If you copy exact words from a book, use quote marks.

- Don’t copy and paste chunks of text.
- Don’t forget to write down where information came from.

#### Taking notes while listening

University demands a more advanced ability to listen, understand, and write simultaneously. Listen to a podcast or video and practice:

- Deciding and noting key ideas.
- Getting as much as you can first time.
- Being persistent. Don’t give up when you don’t understand.
- Listening and concentrating for 50-minute stretches.

- Don’t write everything you hear in long sentences.

#### Reviewing your notes

When your memory is fresh, revisit and review your notes by:

- Adding headings, numbers or highlights to organise them.
- Doing some background reading if you need to fill in gaps.
- Editing them down. Cross out repetitions and unnecessary details.
- Rewriting them if they are very messy.

- Don’t just abandon them if you think there are weaknesses. Take time to address those weaknesses so you can develop better strategies for next time.
Mind maps

Making connections between different materials

At university, you will often have lectures, readings, classwork, and classes which all tackle an idea or related ideas. Essays and problem sets often require understanding the connections between different readings, lectures, and ideas or techniques. A mind map is a form of note-taking that some students find helpful to see these connections:

A mind map of different readings on the effects of Covid-19 from https://discoversociety.org/category/covid-19/. For a transcription, see the final page of this document.

With a complex topic, a mind map is a helpful way to see lots of information at once. Students often look through all the notes on one topic to spot patterns and connections.

Mind maps are especially popular for planning essays and revising for exams.

Approaches to making mind maps

Your summer reading may have several items on one topic. After looking at all of them, experiment with making a mind map.

- Decide the main question or idea connecting different materials
- Group the ideas into topics (light blue)
- Explain the topics gathering examples from different lecture or reading notes (information on lines)
- Work out connections between ideas (lines)
- Summarise how or why you think these ideas connect (orange box)

Don’t forget to add the sources of information, like the author names in the picture above. This will help you find it in your notes.
Transcripts

Annotated text

Annotation: POWER: top-down to bottom-up
Text: Geographic information has traditionally been spread by governments or industries in a top-down manner, but its broadcast is much faster through social media than official agencies. The dramatic transition towards bottom-up digital dissemination has challenged these official or professional processes. Individuals can utilize the power of volunteered geographic information to minimize the difference and/or quality between experts and nonexperts in the context of generating a large collection of user-described features and numerous georeferenced citizen observations on social-economic phenomena. With social media platforms becoming increasingly location-enabled, users can share geo-tagged information about their own lives and, as a result, rich content about large populations can be aggregated for social and behavioural studies (Sui and Goodchild 2011).
Annotation: What does this mean for research in Geography?

For a transcript, see the final page of this guide.

Mind map

How has Covid-19 affected different people differently?
Topics:
- Health risks
- Space
- Economic effects. Expanded to reveal sub-topics:
  - Informal workers – Acosta & Nestor
  - Migrant workers – Butler-Warke & Hooke
  - Migrant women – Kangas & Omonillaeva
    - Summary: Worst affected not discussed in mainstream media
- Mutual aid and philanthropy