

Note taking: Six strategies

Here are some further note-taking strategies that you can try. Each strategy has a slightly different focus and purpose, for example: gathering the main points from a single reading; revising the main points raised in a class; or undertaking a critical analysis of a text.

Use and adapt these templates for **your own** purposes. You can use the templates by saving as Word documents, by printing them out, or simply use these strategies in your hand-written notebook. Explore and experiment to find out which strategy works best for you.

Below are descriptions of the **six strategies** and **five templates** ready for you to use.

Note-taking strategy 1: Keeping track of sources

When re-reading your notes, it can sometimes be difficult to remember not only which source your notes came from, but it can also be difficult to remember where you have **quoted** a source, **paraphrased** (re-worded a source), **summarised** a source in your own words, and where you have developed your own **original ideas and responses**. This will become very important to discern when it comes time to reference. Failure to do this properly can result in accidental plagiarism – something to avoid!

This strategy involves keeping a record of full bibliographic details of texts, as well as notes that clearly label the ideas and words that have been cited – summarised, paraphrased or quoted – as well as your own original ideas.

There are several advantages to this method: (1) not losing track of your sources of information; (2) ensuring that you have accurate bibliographic details for you to enter into your references; (3) it also provides a reminder to you that each time you include a source, it is an opportunity for you to respond critically (rather than simply restating what you have read or heard).

Note-taking template 1: Keeping track of sources

Bibliographic details of source		<i>* Details required will depend both on source and referencing style</i>
Author:	Year of publication:	
Title of chapter/article/webpage:		
Title of book/journal/website:		
Book edition/journal volume and issue:	Publisher and city (books):	
Page number span of chapter/article:	Date you accessed online source:	
URL (websites) or DOI (online articles):		
Name of database you used to access source:		
Why am I reading this text? How is it relevant to my assignment question?		
Page	Main points Is it a (Q)uote, (P)araphrase or (S)ummary?	My comments /questions/analysis

Note-taking strategy 2: Revising class notes

Often referred to as the 'Cornell method', this strategy involves dividing the page into three spaces for: taking notes, writing your own response or summary on the topic, and then creating cues that you can use later for revision. It is often used for taking notes during class (but it could also be used for taking notes from a reading).

There are several advantages to this method: (1) knowing which ideas and references have come from your classes; (2) reminding you to respond critically to your sources, including your classes and seminars; (3) and to check your recall and understanding of a topic – it's a ready made tool for exam revision!

Note-taking template 2: Revising class notes

Topic	
Cues	Notes
<p>2. <i>Create your own cues and questions here based on class notes.</i></p> <p>4. <i>Lastly, use the cue section for revision by covering your notes on the right-hand side and using cues on the left to test your recall.</i></p> <p><i>Revise and repeat in preparation for exams.</i></p>	<p>1. <i>Take notes during class in this section.</i> <i>Be concise – only write key ideas and concepts, important quotes.</i> <i>Include details of sources, where relevant e.g. (Singh 2008, p. 13).</i></p>
Summary	
<p>3. <i>Write your own summary of the topic here, or any further questions or responses you might have.</i></p>	

Note-taking strategy 3: Critical analysis

Deep critical analysis of a text is not something you will do for every reading – there simply isn't enough time! But you may want to consider critically analysing the main sources that you have selected to use in your assignment. You might:

- compare and contrast different writers' ideas, approaches or opinions
- assess differing pieces of evidence and which appears to be stronger
- find areas where different writers agree and disagree with each other, and come to your own conclusions
- highlight where a writer has failed to mention something important, or suggest where an improvement could be made
- identify reasons why a writer may have some to particular conclusion.

This method provides you with a number of prompt questions (you don't have to respond to all of them!) that can help you to analyse a text in more depth.

When using *Note-taking template 3*, you might then use this information to further develop your ideas in *Note-taking template 4: Synthesising sources*.

Note-taking template 3: Critical analysis

<p>Author: _____ Year: _____</p> <p>Title: _____</p> <p>Other bibliographic details: _____</p>	
Focus your analysis	<p>How does the topic of this text relate to my weekly classes, learning outcomes, assignment question?</p> <p>What specific argument/evidence/finding relates to my research?</p>
Clarify meanings	<p>Are there any discipline-specific words that need clarifying?</p> <p>Will these be important for future readings and classes? Keep a glossary of terms/concepts.</p>
Analyse the author's claims	<p>Does the author have another agenda? Is their purpose clear and unbiased?</p> <p>Which facts in are cited? Which are not cited?</p> <p>What is the evidence/examples given for these facts and where do they come from?</p> <p>Do you agree with the author's claims? Why? / Why not?</p>
Compare, contrast and evaluate	<p>Have you read another source that covers a similar topic? Also draw on classes and seminar discussion.</p> <p>What are the similarities and/or differences between the different sources on this topic?</p> <p>What conclusions can you draw after evaluating various sources?</p>
Identify what is lacking	<p>How would you investigate the issue differently?</p> <p>What questions would you ask on the topic?</p> <p>What other sources of information would you use?</p>
Your response	<p>Take into account your responses to the above questions. What is your overall response to this text?</p> <p>How would you summarise the text and the author's position in one sentence?</p>

Note-taking strategy 4: Synthesising sources

Summarising, paraphrasing and quoting sources are important aspects of academic writing. The next step is to synthesise your sources, that is, to create an original understanding of the topic by merging other writers' perspectives, theories and findings. This can be done comparing, contrasting and evaluating sources. By analysing the similarities and differences between sources, you can build upon existing ideas and add further examples to support your writing.

There are several advantages to this method: (1) to develop a deeper understanding of your topic and a more sophisticated writing style where you are critically analysing sources; (2) to avoid making the mistake of simply repeating information that have you have read or; (3) this method can also help you to develop a plan of how you might use these sources to answer an assignment question.

Note-taking template 4: Synthesising sources

Take brief notes of the key concepts/ arguments from several texts on the same topic, including the examples they provide and the research that they cite. Also include key terms/concepts you might need to explain in your writing. Keep track of referencing details too.

Reference details	Key arguments/theories/recommendations/findings	Further examples	Key terms
e.g. Marmot & Wilkinson (2005), <i>Social determinants of health</i> , 2nd edn.	e.g. The more time lived in adverse circumstances, even in affluent nations, the worse the health outcomes (16). Differences in health are not a given but 'important social injustice' (7)	e.g. See also Figure 3, p. 17	e.g. "Relative poverty" = 60% below median average income
Source 2...			
Source 3...			

Now compare and contrast the texts. Where do they agree or disagree, support or contradict each other? Based on this analysis, start to formulate some sentences, with citations, in your own words. State also how this analysis relates to your assignment question.

Topic/theme or assignment question:	Similarities	Smith (2016, p. 23) agrees with O'Brien's (2014) suggestion that ... Marmot and Wilkinson's (2005) findings are supported by Jones (2013, p. 89) who states that ...
	Differences	In contrast to Smith, Watts (2016) argues ...
	How do these sources sit in the context of class readings and discussions?	This view is supported by key writers in the field (Marmot & Wilkinson 2005; Jones 2013; Smith 2016; O'Brien 2014). However, it has also been suggested that there are serious errors in the methodology (Watts 2016; Mishriki 2014), for example, ...
	Are there any connections to ideas you are learning about in other related units?	

Note-taking strategy 5: Focusing on the task

Having a clear purpose when reading and note taking is essential to staying focused and engaged with your topic. Three things that should be guiding your reading and note taking are: the weekly topics of your classes and seminars, the learning outcomes of your unit, and the requirements of your assessments (as detailed in your unit guide and unit site).

This method can assist you in making sure that your notes are focused on the aims of your unit and /or task.

Note-taking template 5: Focusing on the task

1. Determine your purpose: are you taking notes for a weekly topic or an assignment?
2. Read the unit learning outcomes and assessment details in your unit guide.
3. Paraphrase or summarise the key points (with citations) as you read. Quote only if necessary – it is preferable to use your own words as much as possible.
4. Ask questions. Critically analyse the text. What are the arguments for and against? Which findings or recommendations contradict or support each other?
5. Think about the connections between what you read, your seminars, classes and the unit learning outcomes. What exactly is it you are expected to know and demonstrate in your assessments?
6. Use these notes to refine your assignment plan, and develop topic sentences and paragraphs that include critical analysis, correctly cited sources and work that directly addresses the assignment question and learning outcomes of the unit.

Topic/ theme or assignment question	What does the reading say? (Q)uote, (P)araphrase or (S)ummary?	My comments/ opinion/response Critical analysis	Links to learning outcomes, classes, other readings
e.g. Facilitating independent learning	e.g. McPherson 2010, p.7 A survey of students in three disciplines at Gondwana University found that 75% of first-year students felt pressured by the number of essays they had to complete. (P) Students transitioning from school to university are faced with various workload pressures (P)	e.g. Although true of school leavers, is it also true of mature-age learners? What about other cohorts/disciplines? Can we really extrapolate from this one study?	e.g. See Week 4 seminar on issues facing students in transition.
	Loney 2011, p. 173 The kind of pressures referred to by McPherson (2010) may differ between universities and countries (S)	Why are the results different? What factors contributed to the different results?	See Week 3 readings: Gartlan (2014) McPherson (2010). Factors contributing to student success.

Note-taking strategy 6: Visualising connections and processes

Many students learn more effectively when reading and producing information in a visual format. You might make these visual notes when: learning a new concept, planning for an assignment, when summarising or re-writing, or when revising. Taking your own visual notes can be useful for a number of purposes.

A template is *not* included for this strategy; however, consider how you might do the following:

- Draw a [mind map](#) showing the connections between concepts.
- Draw a process diagram demonstrating a sequence.
- Draw a flow chart showing stages in a logical process (or where logic has *not* been applied).
- Produce a graph based on statistics provided in text.

For information on online tools to support note taking and creating mind maps, see the [Deakin Study Support guide to digital study tools](#).