Chapter 10

Effective reading and note-making

Learning outcomes

This chapter offers you opportunities to:

- ✓ **fine-tune your skills in reading and note-making suitable for higher levels of study**
- ✓ **develop approaches that will help you manage heavy reading loads typical at this level**
- ✓ **consider how to adapt your reading and note-making for different types of study task**
- ✓ **develop effective reading and note-making strategies that save time and aid recall.**

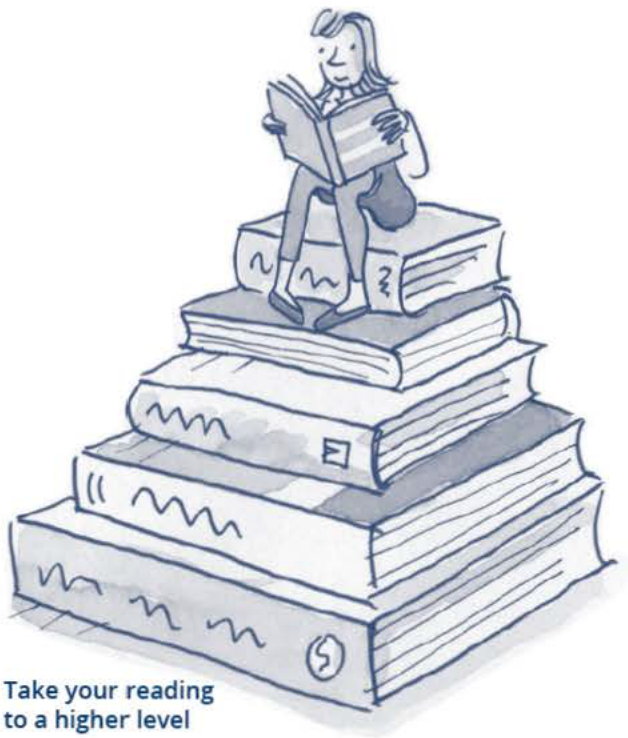
Traditionally, studying at university is referred to as 'reading for a degree', a testament to the centrality of reading to building knowledge and understanding. For almost any subject studied in Higher Education, reading and making notes are essential tasks. They usually take up a great proportion of independent study time.

Although most students have been reading since childhood, reading at such an advanced level still brings great challenges. Typically, these include:

- ★ Coping with the volume of reading
- ★ Selecting what to read
- ★ Deciding what to use from what they read
- ★ Getting reading done in time
- ★ Making sense of difficult material
- ★ Becoming familiar with the style and vocabulary of specialist academic texts – these can disrupt established reading patterns
- ★ Concerns about reading speed
- ★ Interpreting texts with sufficient criticality
- ★ Remembering or being able to find again the material they have read.

Similarly, most students are familiar with making notes. However, if they don't make their own notes, using effective strategies, they waste time, can't find material they have covered, and don't understand and remember well the material covered on the course. The way that you make notes can have a significant effect on your ability to find, recall and apply information in practical contexts, such as in exams, the workplace, the lab or studio.

This chapter considers these two essential skills of reading and note-making from the perspective of university-level study.



Take your reading to a higher level

Copyright © 2019. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. All rights reserved.

Cottrell, Stella. The Study Skills Handbook, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=6234945.
Created from trinity on 2022-10-10 08:51:20.

Identifying and selecting relevant material when reading

Read selectively

Use the reading list

Some courses provide long reading lists, and expect you to select items from these. Others provide a short list, expecting you to read everything on it and to supplement this through your own searches. If in doubt, ask what is expected.

Select the latest information

★ To keep up to date, google your subject to check for new titles or watch out for these in bookshops, the library and reviews in journal articles.

★ Check whether statistics and data in texts you are using are the latest – or whether more recent figures are available.

See pages 242–3.

Select the most relevant information

★ Look for the information that relates most exactly to your assignment.

★ Draw up an initial essay plan to help identify the information you need. Draw on themes covered in lectures and taught sessions.

★ Check the back cover of printed books that seem relevant, the contents list and the index to see what it covers. Alternatively, read the summaries provided by online suppliers.

★ Quickly scan the introduction or conclusion of the book: these may indicate whether the book is useful, and might provide all the information you need.

★ Browse through the headings to gain a feel for the book and where to find what you need.

Select by reliability

★ Is the source a well-known one in the field, such as a recommended academic journal?

★ Is the source likely to be biased? If so, does that affect the way you would use it?

★ Does the text have a good bibliography? Is it clear what evidence it uses?

★ Is the source from a publisher respected in your subject area? (Information in newspapers or from friends is not usually considered reliable.)

See also ***Critical analytical thinking***, Chapter 12, page 263.

Select by amount

★ Use your essay plan to work out a word limit for each major theme, and then for each topic or example that you will include in your assignment. You will find that you can allocate only a few words to write about any one item.

★ Use your word limits to guide you on how much to read and note. If you can only write a line or paragraph about something, you probably don't need to read or note much.

★ Consider whether an article goes into too much depth for your purposes: you may only need to read the abstract or a section.

★ Keep questioning whether material is relevant given the title of the project, essay or report and your assignment brief.

What do I actually need to read?

If you usually read books from cover to cover, have a go at the following exercise to see how little you could read and still find what you need.

Activity

How much do I need to read?

★ Read the back cover. Browse the contents page, section headings, and the last chapter. Make a few quick notes on what appear to be the main points of the book. Record just the gist, or key points, of what you read.

★ Read the introductory and concluding paragraphs of each chapter. When you finish reading, note any extra important information.

★ Read the first line of each paragraph of one chapter. Note any additional important information.

★ Now, read the whole book. How much really important *additional* information did you gain by reading the whole book? Which parts of the book were essential? How little could you have read to grasp the essentials?

Copyright © 2019. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. All rights reserved.

Cottrell, Stella. The Study Skills Handbook, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=6234945.
Created from trinity on 2022-10-10 08:51:20.

Am I a smart reader?

Do you use effective reading strategies? Which of the following do you use?

Know exactly what you are looking for

- ☐ Do I consider the questions I'm trying to answer?
- ☐ Do I consider what information I need?



Use reading lists selectively

- ☐ Do I use the recommended reading list?
- ☐ Do I know what I *need* to read?

RECOMMENDED READING — need to read

1 Jones, E. (1952). pp. 66-80
2 Smith, B. (1998). Chs 4-6
3 Atkins, J. (1952). intro

Examine sources for suitability



For each source, do I consider whether:

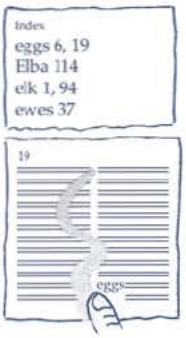
- ☐ it's on the reading list?
- ☐ it's up to date or fairly recent?
- ☐ it looks readable and manageable?
- ☐ it has the information I want?

Activity

Practise finding information quickly

Using an index (at the back of the book):

- ★ Select an item to look up.
- ★ Note the page numbers given.
- ★ Using these, find the item in the book as quickly as you can.



How long did this take you? Could you get faster? Did you notice that when you know what you're looking for, your eyes can pick out information on the page more quickly?

Select relevant parts of the book

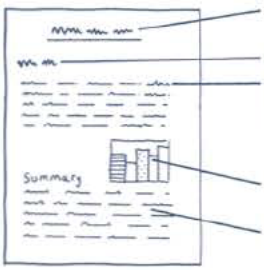
- ☐ Do I browse the book quickly?
- ☐ Do I use the contents page, the headings and the sub-headings for guidance?
- ☐ Do I flag, bookmark and/or highlight the sections I really need, for speed in locating this later?



Find information quickly

- ☐ Do I make good use of the index?
- ☐ Have I got faster with practice?

Select relevant parts of the page



- ☐ Do I read the chapter heading?
- ☐ Do I read any sub-headings?
- ☐ Do I read the first sentence of each paragraph (which should introduce the topic or idea)?
- ☐ Do I look at any diagrams, graphs or charts?
- ☐ Do I read any summaries or conclusions?

Copyright © 2019. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. All rights reserved.

Cottrell, Stella. The Study Skills Handbook, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=6234945.
Created from trinity on 2022-10-10 08:51:20.

Using my own copy

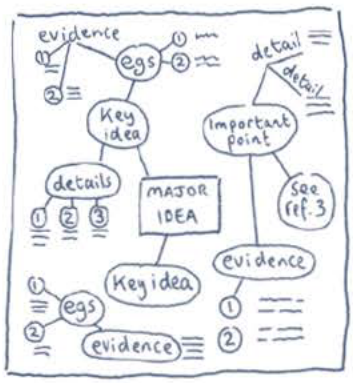
- ☐ Do I get my own copies of the most important texts (or pages within these)?
- ☐ Do I colour-code material on the same theme to help me find it again later?
- ☐ Do I restrict highlighting just to key words and phrases?
- ☐ Do I jot ideas and thoughts in the margins? (see page 221).
- ☐ Do I make notes about the points I highlighted, to help myself remember them?



Make posters to link information

- ★ As you read, make reduced copies of short key passages, maps and diagrams. Organise these out onto a poster or chart for your wall or workspace.
- ★ Link ideas using colour and arrows.
- ★ Annotate with your own notes.
- ★ These posters are very useful for revision.

Chart the main ideas



- ☐ Do I map out ideas so that I can see how everything fits together?

Practise prediction

- ☐ Am I active in anticipating what is coming next, or what the conclusions will be? This can speed reading and help understanding and recall.



Read interactively

- ☐ Do I think about what I'm reading?
- ☐ Do I question what I'm reading?
- ☐ Do I set questions to focus and guide my reading?
- ☐ Do I make notes of the important points and ideas triggered by what I read?
- ☐ Do I challenge the assumptions of the writer, the logic of the arguments, and the validity of the conclusions?



Vary reading speed and method

- ☐ Do I keep changing my pace, according to the needs of the text? (see page 214).
- ☐ Do I scan rapidly for specific information?
- ☐ Do I read quickly to get the general sense of a passage, and then read difficult or dense parts slowly?

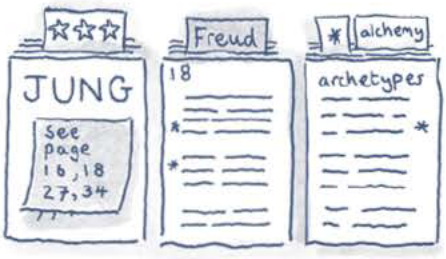


Engage with your reading

Be active in your reading. As you read, always have writing tools to hand.

Copyright © 2019. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. All rights reserved.

Cottrell, Stella. The Study Skills Handbook, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=6234945.
Created from trinity on 2022-10-10 08:51:20.



Using two recorders

If you have two recording devices, record your ideas into one as you listen to material on the other.

Use markers

- ☐ Do I label a corner of my own texts with a keyword summary?
- ☐ Do I insert labelled bookmarks so that I can find details easily, and need fewer notes?
- ☐ Do I use tabs and give star ratings to useful pages, to help me select material later?

Listen to yourself read

- ☐ Do I record myself reading important passages – so I hear material in my own voice?
- ☐ Do I listen to material as I travel, or work around the house?

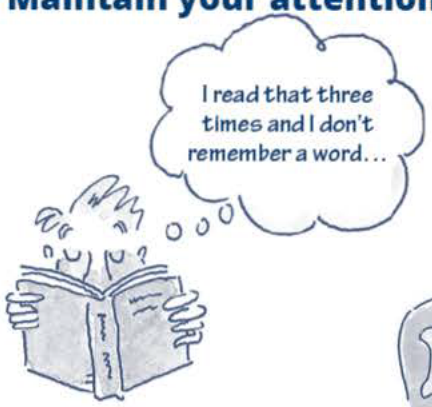


Create ideal conditions

- ☐ Do I read with the light from behind, sufficient to light the page but without glare?
- ☐ Do I sit with a relaxed, upright posture?
- ☐ I get my eyes tested regularly!



Maintain your attention

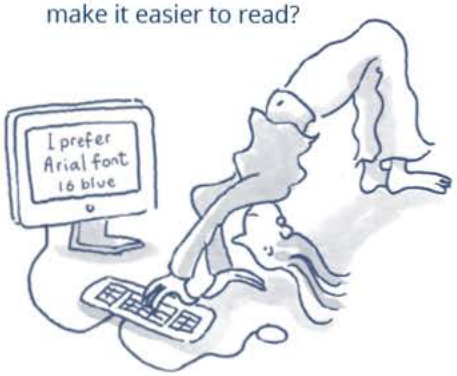


- ☐ Do I take in what I read?
- ☐ Do I make sure I'm doing so, by:
  - * summing up each section?
  - * taking regular breaks?
  - * reading interactively?
  - * moving on when material isn't relevant?



Reading off the computer screen

- ☐ Do I know whether I read best from screen or from paper?
- ☐ Do I re-format text on-screen to make it easier to read?



Consider time and place

- ☐ Do I read when I am sufficiently awake and alert?
- ☐ Is my study environment conducive to reading in a focused way?

Copyright © 2019. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. All rights reserved.

Cottrell, Stella. The Study Skills Handbook, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=6234945.
Created from trinity on 2022-10-10 08:51:20.

Increase your understanding of what you read

Check your understanding

Don't assume you understand just because you can follow the text when reading: check it out.

Could you also ...

- ☐ Remember it, broadly, without looking?
- ☐ State it in a few sentences, without looking?
- ☐ Explain it aloud (to real or imaginary persons)?
- ☐ Turn it into questions and answers? (You can then use these for flashcards for revision.)
- ☐ Reproduce it as a diagram or infographic (or through a demonstration if relevant to the material).

Aim to grasp the ideas

Read reasonably quickly so you can pick up the main ideas. Reading too slowly or pausing often to look up the meaning of new words can make it difficult to grasp the main message. If there are things you don't understand at first, flag these and return to them later. They may make more sense when you have read on. If not, you can then work through relevant sections more slowly, looking up words and concepts you aren't sure about.

Look for clues

Introductions and conclusions to texts, chapters or sections help in setting the scene. Headings and sub-headings can throw light on which are the key learning blocks and main ideas in the text.

Check its context

Material can make more sense if you know why it was written. Who wrote it? What was their intention in writing it? What argument were they trying to prove or which problems were they trying to resolve? Did they have particular objectives in mind?

Highlight selectively

If you underline or highlight everything, *nothing* will stand out as important. Identify a few key words or headings. Annotate with stars or comments to indicate just the most important points.

Colour-code information

Use different colours for different kinds of information – for example, one colour for reference names and dates, and one for each school of thought or major theory. That colour combination on the page can refresh recall later.

Look for published reviews of it

Check journals around the time the text was published to see if it was reviewed. If so, the review might summarise or clarify key points.

Apply the C·R·E·A·M learning strategy

Consider how you can apply the C·R·E·A·M strategy (Chapter 5) to your reading.

Don't ...

Don't pause at every difficult section at first view. Skim these and come back to them.

Don't just keep re-reading a passage in the same way. Vary your reading strategy.

Don't copy it out. It takes too long, exposes you to cheating, and doesn't help understanding.

Reflection



Reading with understanding

How do I approach reading tasks now?

How could I spend my reading time more effectively?

Copyright © 2019. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. All rights reserved.

© Stella Cottrell (2019) *The Study Skills Handbook*, 5th edition, Red Globe Press

Cottrell, Stella. The Study Skills Handbook, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=6234945.
Created from trinity on 2022-10-10 08:51:20.

Is it worth re-reading material you don't understand?

It may seem that if you can't understand material when you first read it, you never will – and then there would be no point in re-reading it. That isn't necessarily the case. Test that out for yourself.

It can be useful to re-read the same information because ...

1. You may have missed information the first time round, especially if the subject is new to you.
2. Complex material can be hard to grasp in one go. Sometimes it helps to go over small sections, thinking about them and working out what they mean.
3. Consider *why* you didn't understand and address that cause. You might need to learn some specialist terms or check details first.
4. Sometimes, sleeping on it can help.
5. Going over material, rehearsing it mentally, can help you make sense of it.
6. Repeated exposure to facts, formulae or processes helps reinforce these in memory.
7. Make a list of anything you didn't understand. Re-formulate this as a series of questions. See if you can answer these by re-reading, further thinking, or drawing on other materials. If not, ask for help.

Just re-reading many times isn't usually helpful because ...

1. The brain is conditioned to 'zone out' when it encounters situations or material it recognises as familiar. It switches off to information it finds less stimulating, or 'redundant'. Feed it a new angle.
2. You may get bored and find your attention wanders, which wastes your time and reduces your motivation, interest and mood.
3. It is easier to waste time when your attention drifts – you may not notice that you have lost concentration and focus.
4. When you read only one source, you have only a single point of reference. That makes it more difficult to find natural points of curiosity, such as why two texts seem to differ on key facts or statistics. You have to work harder to exercise critical thinking.

When re-reading, vary your reading strategy to avoid such problems.

Reading similar material in other texts can help because ...

1. Similar is not the same as 'identical'. Focus your attention to identify where differences lie. Draw out, clarify and note similarities, differences and inconsistencies in a chart or as lists.
2. Contrasting two or more texts draws attention to details you might miss otherwise. It helps you to notice subtle differences in interpretations, opinions, data or perspectives.
3. It shows you how various writers conceptualise and express the same issue in different ways. Your brain can draw upon, and synthesise, these variants to devise its own informed perspective.
4. You develop a richer mental schema of the topic or issues, building expertise and assisting recall.

Reading books of different levels of difficulty can help because ...

1. A basic text, such as one designed for younger students or the general public, provides a quick initial overview; it helps you see, later, where details fit into the big picture.
2. Advanced texts provide mental 'stretch'. Over time, you become familiar with greater levels of difficulty, raising your level of expertise.
3. Specialist texts can inspire new ideas.
4. Experts can benefit by seeing how complex issues are communicated to novices; this can help you clarify or simplify your thinking if it has become over complicated.
5. It is easy to forget the basics when operating at a high level: it is good to review them.

Copyright © 2019. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. All rights reserved.

Cottrell, Stella. The Study Skills Handbook, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=6234945.
Created from trinity on 2022-10-10 08:51:20.

Develop your expert 'reader voice'

What is the 'reader voice'

Students who do well tend to maintain a lively inner commentary on tasks they undertake and with texts they read. This can involve questions, re-questioning, suggestions, criticism, querying the wisdom of doing something, reasoning about what to do or not to do, humour, releasing frustration, instructions to the self and more.

How does this help?

A focused inner commentary helps maintain attention. It also helps you to direct your attention to finer points of an argument, to pursue an idea, or decide you have pursued an avenue as far as you need to take it.

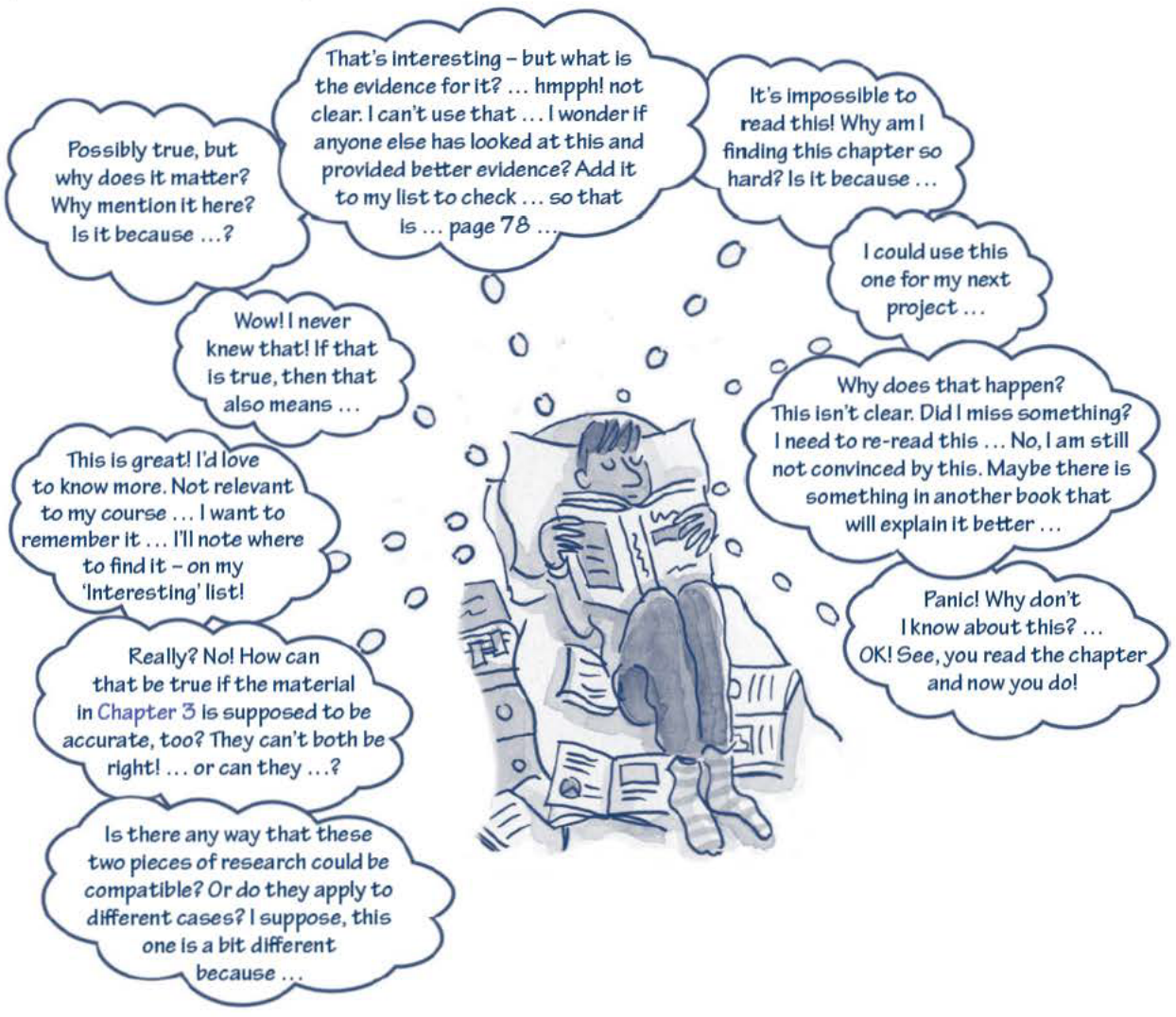
Reflection

Inner commentary

Notice your own running commentary as you work and read. Is it broadly similar to that below?

Does it remain focused on the task or does it drift onto other tasks?

Does it help you to go deeper into the topic and organise your thoughts and work? If not, re-train your commentary by devising a set of prompts to follow for a while and/or annotate texts as you read (page 221).



Copyright © 2019. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. All rights reserved.

Cottrell, Stella. The Study Skills Handbook, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=6234945.
Created from trinity on 2022-10-10 08:51:20.

Annotating texts when reading

What is 'annotation'?

Annotation is a form of note-making. It involves making comments and marks on the page of a text or document as you read it or work with it. What you note depends on what emerges in your thoughts as you work with the text – which you consider worth marking on it. You can annotate written material, diagrams, formulae, calculations, photographs, and drafts of your assignments – for any subject.

Why annotate?

If you own the text, this is a great way of engaging with it.

Maintaining attention Annotation helps you stay focused, so that you are more likely to take in what you read. You are less likely to drift off or copy out chunks mindlessly.

Capturing a thought It can provide a near complete record of your thought process, so you don't lose it.

Creating memory-joggers When you flick back over a text, annotations can remind you quickly of what you read.

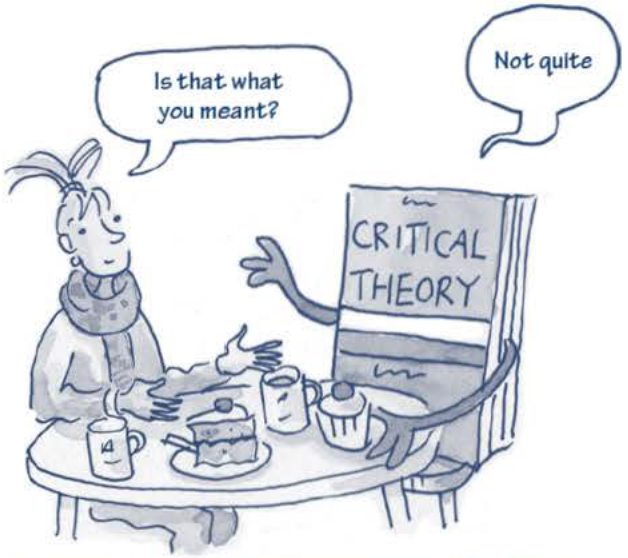
Making sense Interacting with the text can help you work out what it means – and aids recall.

Inspiring your creative interest It generates further thoughts and ideas.

Hooking yourself in It can help you engage emotionally with the material, making it meaningful and memorable.

Finding answers Jotting down questions can, in itself, stimulate your brain to find answers. If not, you have a reminder of things to look up later.

Appreciating, paraphrasing, summarising, reworking, questioning, challenging, checking, emoting ...



Annotation is like a 'conversation' with the text

How to annotate

Keep your thoughts 'live'. As you read, jot down your ideas and responses in the margins, header or footer.

Make material your own. Sum up sections in your own words; combine this with your thoughts, questions, reminders, etc. Highlight, colour code, number, or label sections to make the text work better for you.

Engage emotionally. Use exclamation marks, drawings, emoticons and notes to express your responses.

Stimulate your thinking. Jot down questions prompted by what you read, or connections to other aspects of your course. Write reminders of anything you want to check out further. Jot down why something you read inspired you or could be used in an assignment.

Say why. The 'why' is important if your annotation is to be useful. Otherwise, you may waste time later trying to work out why you marked the text.

Be selective. Some pages are worth annotating; others not. If you annotate and highlight everything, nothing will stand out.

Use your annotations. Return to them and think about those that look useful. Draw out relevant points into your main set of notes. Follow up your ideas, questions, queries, etc.

Copyright © 2019. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. All rights reserved.

Cottrell, Stella. The Study Skills Handbook, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=6234945.
Created from trinity on 2022-10-10 08:51:20.

Example of an annotated text

Page 32

③ *Benefits of mindfulness*

1 **Academic and work performance** There is a great deal of research that indicates that mindfulness improves abilities associated with good performance, such as attention and concentration. Continued practice changes the structure of the brain, helping to cement this advantage. It has been found that practised meditators have thicker cortical regions of the brain: these regions are associated with attention and intelligence (Lazar, 2005). See page 27.

2 **Empathy** Metta-style meditation (Chapter 21) increases neural activation in parts of the brain that pick up on emotional cues. This suggests a capacity for greater empathy and interpersonal skills (Lutz et al., 2008).

3 **Creativity and 'whole person' development** A report on the findings of over 40 years of research found that, as well as cognitive benefits, mindfulness practice enhanced a wide range of abilities and personal attributes, from increased creativity and self-compassion to empathy and interpersonal skills (Shapiro, 2008).

could benefit students! See pp34-5

do you really need practice? Check p?

Can anyone achieve this? With time?

☺

Metta: focuses on compassion (see Ch 21.)

meditation stimulates parts of brain assoc. w/ empathy

Read this report for essay!

Useful for my clinical practice !?

Examples of types of annotations

Your own headings and numbers, to help you draw out, list, label and organise the material you find most relevant, so it stands out from the rest

Comments: about why something is interesting/inspiring

Challenges: if something seems to you to warrant further checking out, or looks incorrect, contradictory, untrue, etc.

Questions that occur to you – and any answers these then prompt

Highlights, underlining and symbols linked to your written notes, to help relevant material stand out

Definitions and clarifications: of specialist terms or jargon that you may not have come across before

Summaries – paraphrase complex material, using your own words, to help tease out, and record its meaning

Flags to material you know you need – if particularly relevant to a work project or assignment title

Meaningful connections – draw out links to your experience in life or work, or to other reading

Source: Cottrell, S. (2018). *Mindfulness for Students*. London: Red Globe Press; p. 32.

Copyright © 2019. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. All rights reserved.

Cottrell, Stella. The Study Skills Handbook, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=6234945.
Created from trinity on 2022-10-10 08:51:20.

Good annotating

Annotation is most useful when ...	Not so useful when ...
✓ **... you capture your thoughts in writing** as you go, so you have a good record	✗ ... you are just highlighting or underlining ☺ drawing emoticons, making !!! – i.e. with less thoughtful interaction, less impression on the mind
✓ **... you engage your mind with the material** – interacting with it through questioning, challenging, appreciating, paraphrasing, interpreting, reflecting meaningfully, etc.	✗ ... you highlight or flag or annotate everything – as nothing then stands out as important. Be selective!
✓ **... you link and connect ideas** on the page with each other, with other course materials, with your experience, etc.	✗ ... you don't make further use of your annotations
✓ **... you clarify 'why'** you think something is interesting, useful, inspiring, questionable or incorrect, explaining your thoughts	
✓ **... you identify what is significant**: pick out the most significant material to highlight and annotate, so your thoughts about the issue stand out.	

Self-evaluation

Rate yourself for each of the following statements using a scale of 0–5, where 5 is very useful, and 0 not useful at all.

How useful is the way I annotate now?		Useful ... Not useful <- - - - - - - - - - - - - - ->					
1	It helps me to capture my thoughts when reading	5	4	3	2	1	0
2	It helps me think more carefully about what I read	5	4	3	2	1	0
3	It encourages me to ask questions about what I read	5	4	3	2	1	0
4	It helps me think more critically about what I read	5	4	3	2	1	0
5	It helps me to make sense of what I am reading	5	4	3	2	1	0
6	It helps me to recall the material later	5	4	3	2	1	0
7	My annotations are helpful in flagging the most significant material	5	4	3	2	1	0
8	It helps me find connections in the material	5	4	3	2	1	0
9	My annotations help me to make better course notes	5	4	3	2	1	0
10	My annotations encourage/remind me to check out further details	5	4	3	2	1	0
11	When I look back at my annotations, they still make sense to me	5	4	3	2	1	0
12	I annotate drafts of my assignments, to help me rework the next draft	5	4	3	2	1	0

Reflection

Annotation

If your ratings for any items are lower than you would like, consider how to improve those facets in the next few weeks.

Copyright © 2019. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. All rights reserved.

Cottrell, Stella. The Study Skills Handbook, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=6234945.
Created from trinity on 2022-10-10 08:51:20.

Increasing your reading speed

Understanding is the most important aspect of reading, but you may wish to improve your reading *speed* too.

Check your reading speed

- ★ Find something familiar to read.
- ★ Set the alarm for ten minutes' time.
- ★ Read for ten minutes at a speed that allows you to understand what you read.
- ★ Count how many words you read.
- ★ Divide this number by ten, to find out how many words you read in one minute.
- ★ Do this using different texts. If you average fewer than 200–250 words per minute, even with material that is clear and interesting, it is worth trying to increase your speed.

Vary your reading strategies

Inspect for usefulness

Check the title, the contents page, the index, the writing style, and the details on the back cover. Flick through to get the feel of the book. Do you *want* to read it? What exactly do you *need* to read in it?

Scan rapidly to locate

Scan the page. Which key words leap out at you? You may sense the 'pattern' of the argument or the general subject matter. This can help you locate what to read. Similarly, see what you can pick up from section headings, diagrams, the first lines of paragraphs, and conclusions to chapters.

Steer attention

Frame questions to help you identify exactly what you need from chapters or sections and to direct your attention to finding it. Keep asking: What am I trying to find out? What do I need to know? Exactly which parts do I need to read?

Use the tools

To find a specific piece of information quickly, don't forget to check the contents page and/or index.

Read at the right speed for the task

This may be rapidly for case studies, novels, familiar information and well-developed arguments, and slowly for material that is complex, unfamiliar, written in a condensed style or with specialist vocabulary. As you become more familiar with the ideas and vocabulary used, your speed will increase.

Recall and review

Pause to check that you understand what you read. What is the basic argument or idea? Does the text answer questions you have? Are you convinced by the evidence and the arguments offered? How does what you have read relate to what you already knew? Does it confirm or challenge your views? What else do you need to find out?

What is slowing down your reading?

Below are factors that slow reading. Do any apply to you? If so, apply relevant strategies from page 225.

- ☐ 1 Do you read advanced texts only rarely?
- ☐ 2 Do you track with your finger along the line?
- ☐ 3 Do you read aloud under your breath, or mouth the words?
- ☐ 4 Do you read books cover to cover?
- ☐ 5 Do you start reading before you have worked out what you need to know, or what you are looking for?
- ☐ 6 Do you read word by word?
- ☐ 7 Do you keep re-reading the line you have just read?
- ☐ 8 Do you get distracted a lot whilst reading?
- ☐ 9 Do you read difficult sections before you have worked out the general gist?
- ☐ 10 Do you find that the words seem to jump up off the page or that text moves or glares?

Copyright © 2019. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. All rights reserved.

© Stella Cottrell (2019) *The Study Skills Handbook*, 5th edition, Red Globe Press

Cottrell, Stella. The Study Skills Handbook, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=6234945.
Created from trinity on 2022-10-10 08:51:20.

Strategies for increasing your reading speed

For each of the problems noted on page 224, there is something you can do to improve matters.

1 Read more advanced texts

Let your brain get used to unfamiliar vocabulary and dealing with complex material. Also, look out for subjects that interest you and read more about these for pleasure.

2 Finger-tracking

Move your finger down the page from top to bottom, to train your eye to move more quickly down the text. (See page 215.)

3 Know when to read aloud

Some people read out loud from habit. Reading silently can speed up reading. If you read aloud because it helps you focus, understand or remember better, then have a go at recording yourself so you can re-read 'by ear'.

4, 5 and 10 Read selectively and actively

Use the active reading strategies suggested on pages 215–17. This saves time as you don't read unnecessary material. It also engages your mind better and provides breaks to rest the eyes.

6 Read larger chunks

Allow your eyes to take in larger chunks, either by resting them less frequently along a line, or by taking in larger sections of text as you browse. Experiment with holding the book further away, so that your eyes can take in more at once. This is also less tiring for the eyes, which allows you to read for longer periods.

7 Build up to difficult material

Background knowledge of a subject can increase reading speed. If a text looks difficult, start with easier sections or read something simpler first. Return to difficult material later. (See page 219.)

8 For distractibility

Remove whatever items most distract you and set a reading goal or challenge before starting to read. A few minutes of mindfulness meditation can help settle you to productive reading (Cottrell, 2018).

9 Keep your eyes moving forward

Which of these sentences is easier to read?

A Checking back over back over what what you have read makes understanding checking back makes understanding checking back over makes understanding difficult.

B Checking back over what you have read makes understanding more difficult.

Most people find **B** easier to read because they can take in a larger chunk of memorable 'sense'. Encourage your eyes to keep reading forward to the end of a sentence (to the next full stop). You will then be reading larger units of sense rather than just words and phrases. You can read the whole sentence again if necessary.

10 Jumping and glaring text

- ★ Coloured filters or plastic folders placed over the page can reduce or stop this. Experiment to find the colour that suits you best.
- ★ Consult an optometrist – you may benefit from spectacles with coloured lenses.
- ★ In your word-processing package, use the line-spacing function to double space text. This, enlarged font or altering the colour of the work-space can all ease reading.
- ★ If the problem is serious and you prefer to 'read by ear', text-to-speech software or audio material may suit you better: consult the disability adviser.

Put understanding first

In some cases, slow reading is preferable:

- ★ for texts with condensed information, such as many science and medical texts
- ★ for detailed instructions
- ★ for formulae and equations
- ★ for close analysis of texts, such as for law, literature and history.

Copyright © 2019. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. All rights reserved.

Cottrell, Stella. The Study Skills Handbook, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=6234945.
Created from trinity on 2022-10-10 08:51:20.

Making notes

Why make notes?

How many reasons can you find for making notes? After you have noted some, check the diagram on page 227. Are your reasons the same? Which of these reasons matter most to you?

Activity

Note-making

Select a passage from a book and make notes on the main points of what you read – or find some notes you have already made.

Compare your notes with the suggestions made below. Consider whether you could improve your note-making strategies.

Making notes for higher level study

- ★ Put writing materials aside – so you won't be tempted to copy out of the book.
- ★ If you are typing your notes, don't type as you read.
- ★ Jot down questions – then note the answers to these as you read.
- ★ Identify and sum up the main ideas of the passage. (Hear them in your own words.)
- ★ Jot down a summary or explanation of what you read in your own words. Write notes that help you understand and remember – rather than worrying about how well you have expressed the point compared with the original.
- ★ Write in brief. Keep summarising – either the whole book, a chapter, a page or a paragraph – all in just a few words. This helps you take in the information and helps prevent you copying out chunks from books to your notes and then into assignments.
- ★ Note *exactly* where information comes from – the source and the page number.
- ★ Note real names and quotations *exactly* as they are written.
- ★ If you do note anything directly from the text, use a different colour so you don't forget that it isn't your own work.
- ★ Leave space to add details later.

How to make notes

There is no one 'best method', but it is worth considering the following points.

What do you need to note?

Be selective: write just what you need. Consider:

- ★ Do I really need this information? If so, which bits exactly?
- ★ Will I really use it? When, and how?
- ★ Have I noted similar information already?
- ★ What questions do I want to answer with this information?

Organise your notes

- ★ See ***Reading, recording and using information*** (page 245).
- ★ See ***Organising information: planning your writing*** (page 287).
- ★ Use a separate folder for each subject.
- ★ Arrange points under headings or questions. (Notice how information is organised in this *Study Skills Handbook* to help you find topics quickly.)
- ★ Number and label pages so you can find them easily.
- ★ Keep an updated contents page at the front of each file or folder.

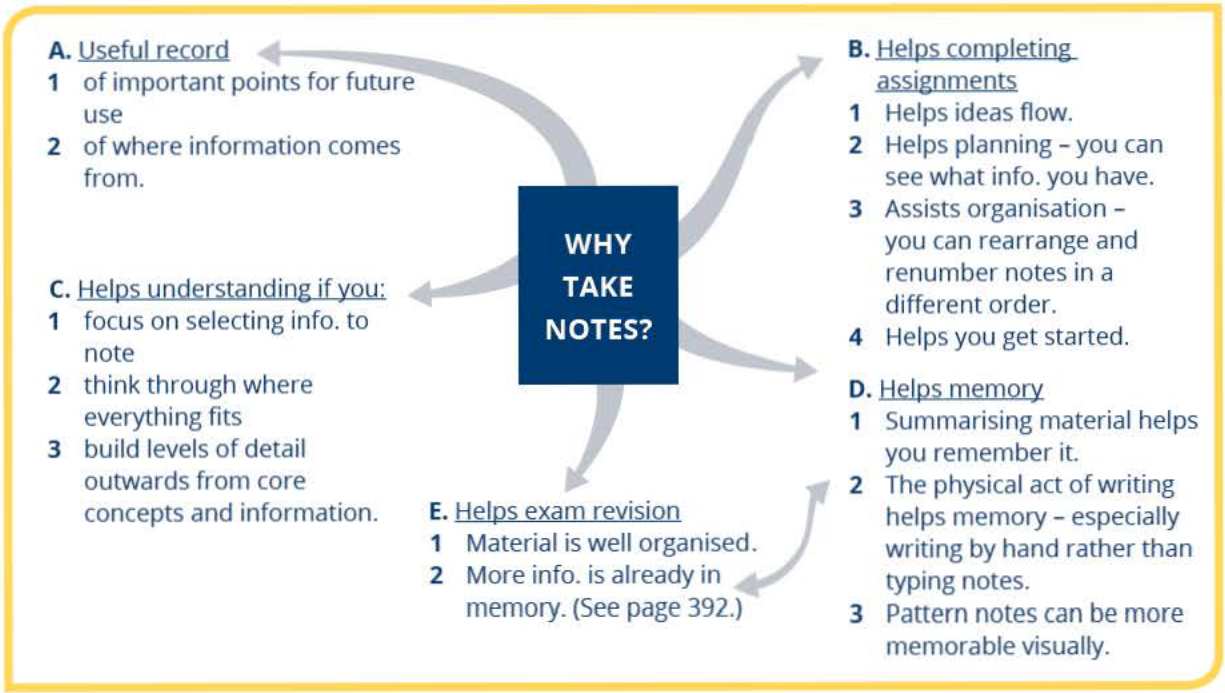
Copyright © 2019. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. All rights reserved.

Cottrell, Stella. The Study Skills Handbook, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=6234945.
Created from trinity on 2022-10-10 08:51:20.

Note-making styles

Nuclear note-taking style: why take notes?

Is making notes a useful activity? Why make notes at all?



Linear notes: strategies for making notes

1 Good note-making: general
1.1 Think before you write
1.2 Keep notes brief
1.3 Keep notes organised
1.4 Use your own words
1.5 Leave spaces – to add notes later

2 Useful strategies
2.1 Note keywords and main ideas
2.2 Write phrases – not sentences
2.3 Use abbreviations
2.4 Use headings
2.5 Number points
2.6 Make the page memorable – with colour, illustrations, and so on
2.7 Link up points – using arrows, dotted lines, colour, numbers, boxes
2.8 Note sources of info. exactly
2.9 Write quotations in a different colour

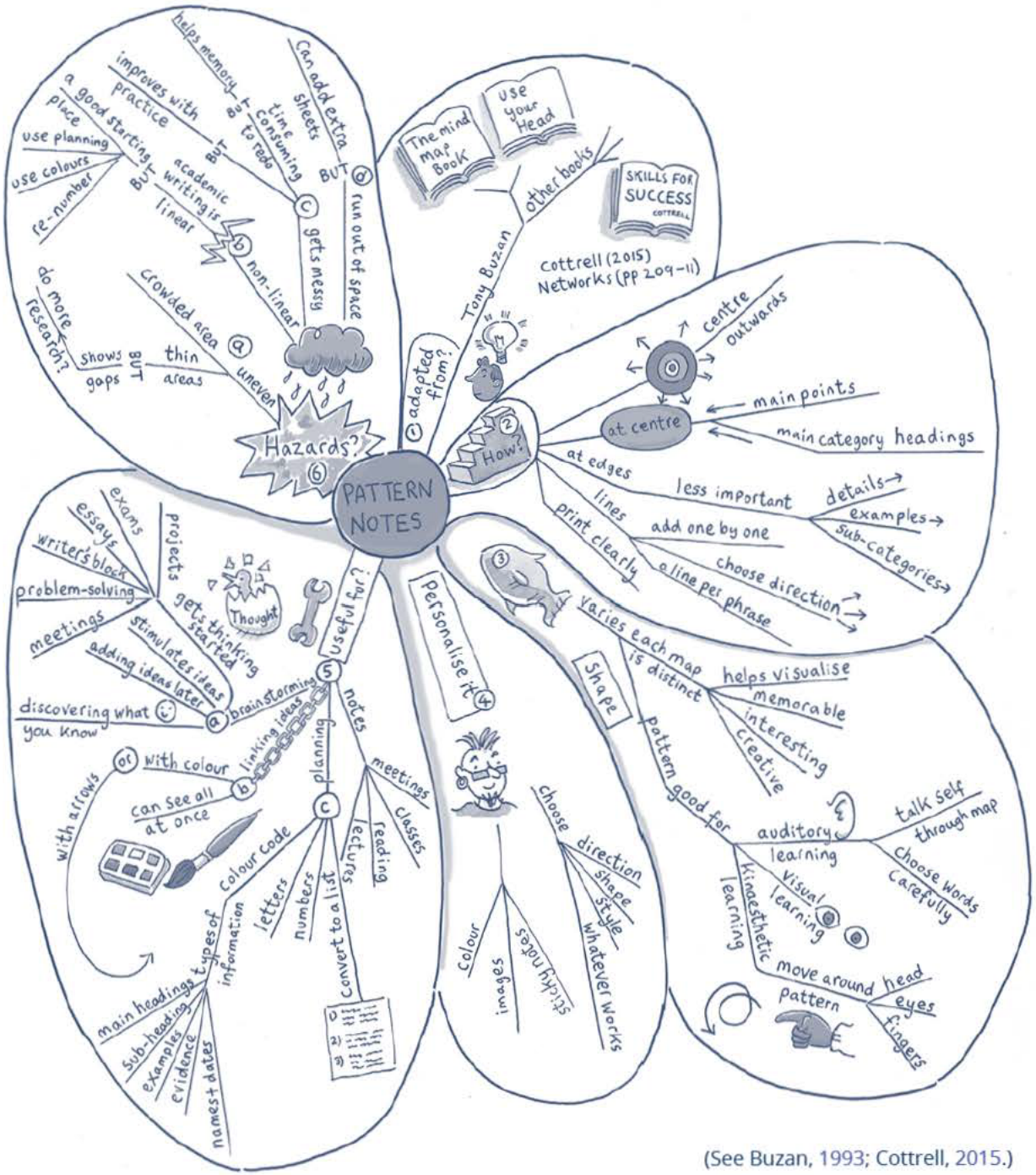
3 Unhelpful strategies
3.1 Copying chunks and phrases
3.2 Writing more notes than you can use again
3.3 Writing out notes several times to make them neater

4 Tidying messy notes
4.1 Shade, or draw a 'square' around, sections of notes in different colours to make them stand out
4.2 Use shading, changes of colour and headings to divide pages up into clearer sections and to make each page more memorable for revision
4.3 Link stray pieces of information by arrows or colour. Number the sequence in which to read them.

Copyright © 2019. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. All rights reserved.

Cottrell, Stella. The Study Skills Handbook, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=6234945.
Created from trinity on 2022-10-10 08:51:20.

Pattern notes: an example



(See Buzan, 1993; Cottrell, 2015.)

Copyright © 2019. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. All rights reserved.

Cottrell, Stella. The Study Skills Handbook, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=6234945.
Created from trinity on 2022-10-10 08:51:20.

Shortcuts in note-making

Plan for amendments

If writing notes by hand, leave space in your notes, and a wide margin, so that you can add new information and ideas later. (This is quicker than *rewriting* your notes to incorporate the new information.) If you type your notes, summarise, edit, highlight and rearrange them from time to time, to help your brain recall them.

Make just one set of notes

Aim to have just one set of notes. Visual familiarity will make it easier to find information later, and to recall information during exams.

Use sticky notes

Carry these with you and use to jot down ideas as they occur. Stick them into a plastic folder. You can add these to charts or posters, moving them around to organise ideas for assignments.

Number the pages

Label and number pages of handwritten notes. Cross-refer to information already noted elsewhere – for instance, 'see red file, page 24, Amphibians'. For electronic notes, number pages and keep a record of where to locate information (page 106).

Use abbreviations

Abbreviations save time. Use them in your notes, but not in assignments.

★ Work out a system you'll remember.

★ Stick to your system.

★ Introduce a few at a time, so that your notes make sense.

★ Keep a 'key' to your abbreviations to hand.

Useful common symbols

& (+)	and
+	plus, in addition to
>	greater/more than/better than
<	smaller/less than
=	is the same as/equal to
≠	is not the same as
\	therefore
[\]	because
w/	with
♀	woman/female
♂	man/male
→	this leads to/produces/causes

Useful common abbreviations

e.g.	for example
i.e.	that is, that means
etc.	and the rest
NB	important, notice this
p.	page (pp. = pages)
para.	paragraph
Ch.	chapter (Chs. = chapters)
edn.	edition
info.	information
cd	could
wd	would
Govt	Government
Educ.	Education
impt	important
devt	development
C19	nineteenth century

Which abbreviations are used in *your* subject areas?

Copyright © 2019. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. All rights reserved.

Cottrell, Stella. The Study Skills Handbook, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=6234945.
Created from trinity on 2022-10-10 08:51:20.

Making notes with confidence

Students' solutions

Sonja and Charlie are two students who used to have great difficulties making notes. Here are their accounts of how they tackled their difficulties, with help from a study-skills tutor.

Sonja

There are two things which I find difficult about making notes.

Firstly, I am not very confident about using my own words – the book always seems to say things better. It is very tempting to use nearly the same words as the book. I imagine that I will rewrite them in my own words later – but then I don't have the time, or I forget which bits are taken from the book, and end up with the words of the book in my essay without even realising.

The second thing I find difficult is working out what to take notes about, especially keeping to essentials. I worry in case I miss out information I will need in the future. I can end up with 10 sides of notes from reading only a few pages. It takes ages and there is too much to even look at a second time. When I came to revise for my first exams, I had too many notes to revise – there were simply too many to read, never mind learn.

Now I spend more time thinking and planning before I even touch a book. I try to work out what information I want. I draw a mind-map with everything I already know, and what I need to find out. If I have an essay title I do a rough plan really early, even before I start reading – just to get the shape in my head.

I always start with the easiest book – just to get a picture of what it is all about. With other books, I use the contents page and headings to work out where information is. At this stage I don't write much except something like 'gold – producer countries: p. 248 and pp. 265–9' – or I annotate the book.

When I have more idea of what I am looking for, and where that information is, I take more detailed notes. Sometimes, I do this by writing a question and putting the information as an answer. When I am not sure if I want some information, I just write a few lines onto an index card, saying where I can find that information later if I really need it.

Charlie

It's taking notes in lectures that I find hardest as I either day drift off and forget to note anything, or I type notes up as I go and make far more notes than I need. It's hard to keep track of what is being said and to select out important points at the same time.

I find it helps if I prepare before the lecture. I browse the topic online and look over the chapters quickly. If something looks complicated, I work out, if I can, what it is about before the lecture. I make notes in advance, or just make a list of the things I have information on already. I make a list of the questions I still need answers to. I don't need to make loads of notes in class then.

We sometimes get podcasts of lectures and I listen to the bits of these that I think will be most useful.

Reflection



Note-making strategy

These are just two approaches to dealing with note-making. Do any of their ideas appeal to you? Or do you have a better system?

Copyright © 2019. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. All rights reserved.

Cottrell, Stella. The Study Skills Handbook, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=6234945.
Created from trinity on 2022-10-10 08:51:20.

Self-evaluation How useful are your notes?

For each of these set of statements, indicate your rating along the line (..✓.....), depending on how far each is a good description of your own notes. You might find it helpful to have a folder of your notes to hand to check. Use this self-evaluation to consider ways you might improve your notes in future.

	Strengths	Rating	Weaknesses
1	Easy to take in at a glance	.....	Not easy to use at speed
2	Contain the information I need	.....	Don't contain what I need
3	Make sense when I come back to them after a few days/weeks	.....	Don't make much sense to me when I come back to them
4	Most of the information is relevant	.....	Contain lots of irrelevant material
5	All points are completed and followed up if needed	.....	Lots of points incomplete or not followed up
6	Everything is clear	.....	Notes are jumbled/confused
7	Inviting to look at and read again	.....	Messy or uninviting
8	Laid out in ways that assist recall	.....	No features to help recall
9	Selective, drawing out only key points, themes, issues, debates	.....	Not selective; I include material I don't need and won't use
10	Well-structured	.....	No apparent structure
11	Significant points stand out	.....	Not easy to spot important points
12	Succinct/concise	.....	Too wordy
13	Well-abbreviated	.....	Poor use of abbreviations
14	All written in my own words (apart from quotations/references)	.....	Chunks copied from books, articles, internet, class, etc.
15	My own words are clearly set apart from quotations	.....	Easy to confuse my words with quotations or copied text
16	Sources of information are given clearly, accurately, precisely	.....	Vague about where exactly I got the information
17	All pages are numbered or labelled systematically and helpfully	.....	Pages are not numbered systematically and helpfully
18	Sets of notes are labelled and stored so they are easy to find in future	.....	Sets of notes are poorly organised and labelled; hard to find
19	Good contents list or index helps me find information speedily	.....	I don't have a good contents list or index to help me
20	Easy for me to use them and learn from them	.....	Difficult for me to use them and learn from them

Reflection

Improving your notes

★ How you might improve your notes and your use of them?

★ What is the priority?

Copyright © 2019. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. All rights reserved.

Cottrell, Stella. The Study Skills Handbook, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=6234945.
Created from trinity on 2022-10-10 08:51:20.

Review

1. **Read selectively**
   Scale the amount of reading you undertake to fit the size of your assignment.

2. **Be a smart reader**
   Use effective, interactive strategies that help you to find relevant information more quickly and absorb it more easily, with enhanced recall.

3. **Check your understanding**
   Pause frequently to check what you are absorbing and what you really understand. Engage your brain rather than just get through the pages.

4. **Build reading speed**
   Build speed if your reading is slow. Consider the task as a whole, not just how quickly you can get through it. Focus on understanding rather than speed.

5. **Read widely**
   Don't just read one book on a topic. Reading a variety of sources will help build your expertise in the subject. It will also improve your vocabulary.

6. **Vary the reading level**
   Draw on books that are below your current level of study, to gain a rapid overview and clarity. Use more advanced texts to gain familiarity with cutting edge research and ideas, and enhance comprehension of complex material.

7. **Develop an 'expert reader' voice**
   Maintain a running commentary that helps you focus attention and go deeper into the material. Enter into a lively dialogue with the material and the task. Talk yourself through it.

8. **Annotate texts**
   If you own the text, make the material your own, too, by interacting with it in ways that give it more meaning for you.

9. **Make selective notes**
   Don't waste time on notes that you don't need and won't use. Sometimes less is more.

10. **Write notes by hand**
    For information you want to remember or understand better, writing your own selective notes by hand is more effective than typing them.

11. **Write notes that are really useful**
    Check over your notes as you write them to make sure they are laid out and organised in ways that will enable you to use them easily.

12. **Choose your own style**
    Your notes are for you. Don't worry if recommended styles don't suit you. Go with what works for you, not for other people.

Copyright © 2019. Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. All rights reserved.

Cottrell, Stella. The Study Skills Handbook, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/trinity/detail.action?docID=6234945.
Created from trinity on 2022-10-10 08:51:20.