

Making notes

Why make notes?

How many reasons can you find for making notes? After you have noted some, look at the diagram on page 172. Are your reasons the same? Which of these 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.

A method for making notes

- Put your pen down – so you won't be tempted to copy out of the book.
- If you are typing your notes, don't type as you read.
- Read – to answer your own questions.
- Identify and sum up the main ideas. (Hear them in your own words.)
- Jot down a few words to summarise these.
- Summarise points. This also helps ensure that the notes are in your own words and not accidentally copied from texts into assignments.
- Note *exactly* where information comes from.
- Note real names and quotations *exactly* as they are written.
- 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?

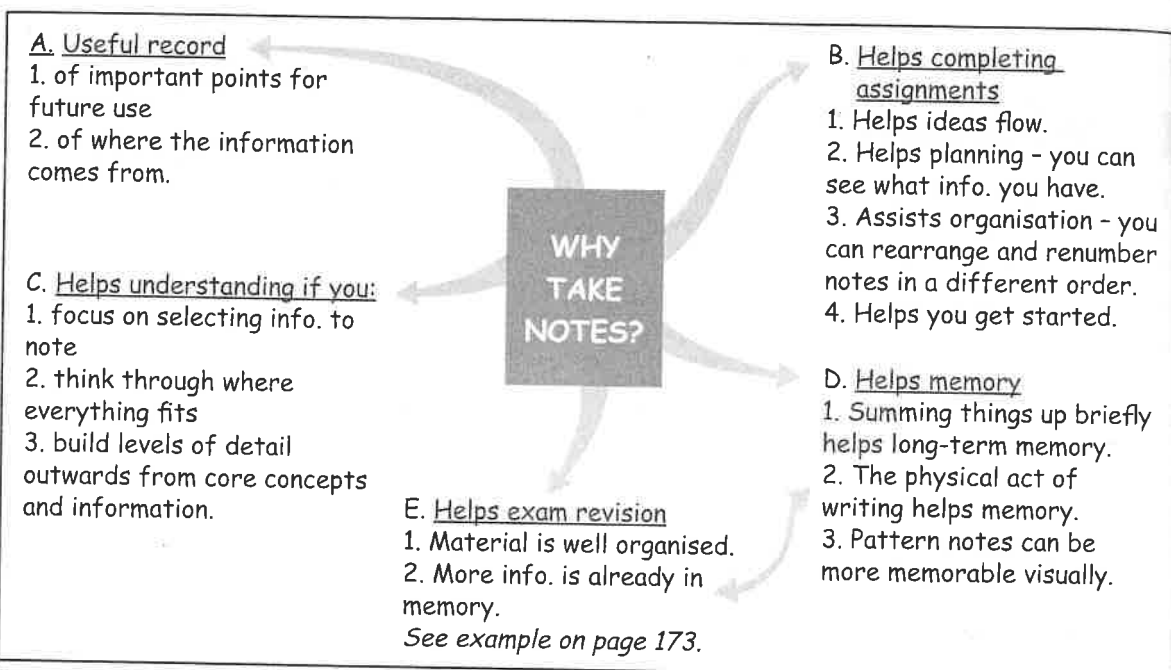
Organise your notes

- See *Recording and using information* (page 176).
- See *Organising information: planning your writing* (page 289).
- Use a separate file/folder for each subject area.
- For paper notes, use file dividers to separate topics.
- For electronic notes, use separate files for each topic.
- Arrange points under headings or questions. (Notice how information is organised in this *Handbook*.)
- Label everything clearly.
- Number and label pages so you can find them easily.
- Keep an updated contents page at the front of each file.

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

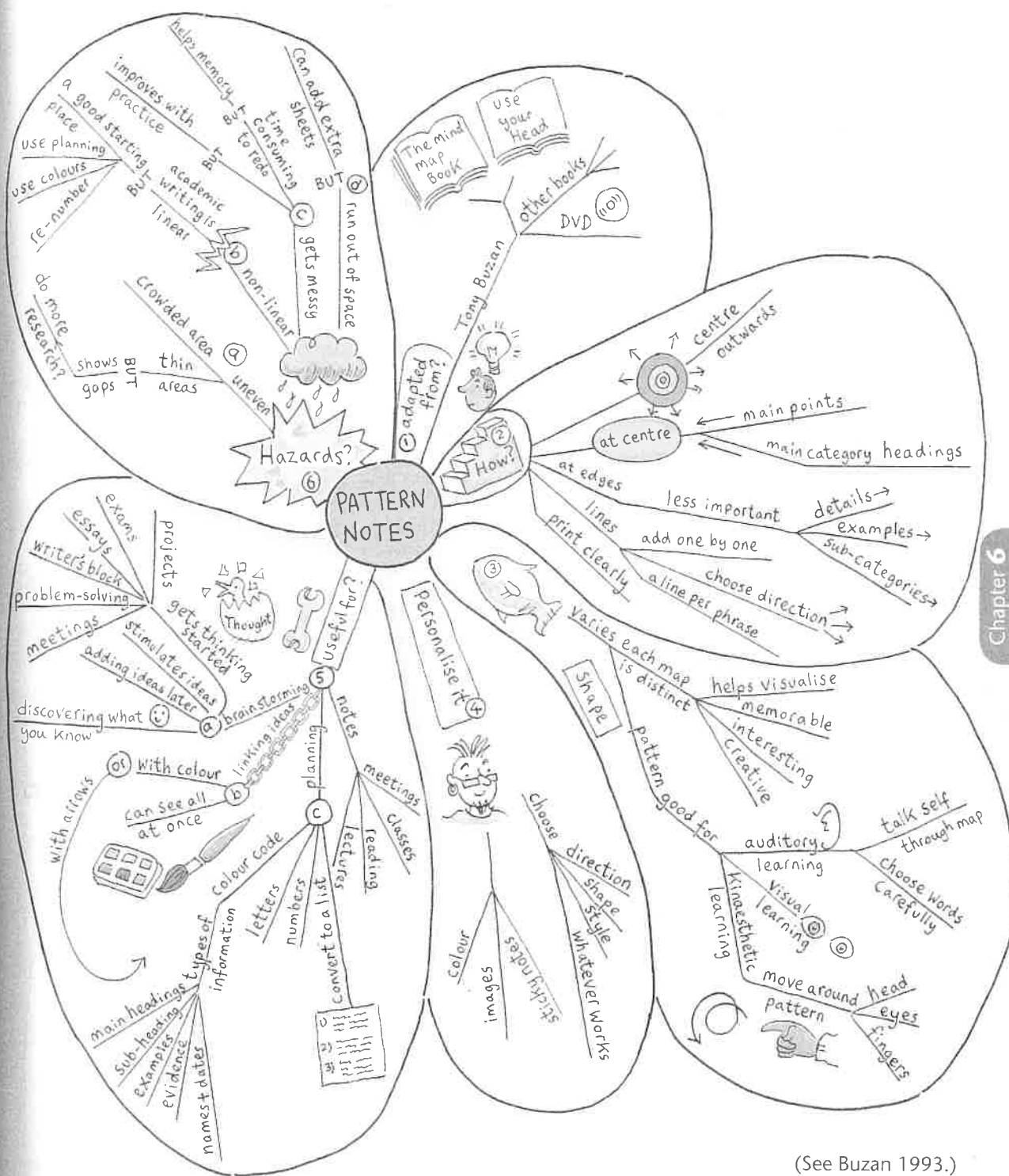
- ① Good note-making: general
- 1.1 Think before you write
 - 1.2 Keep notes brief
 - 1.3 Keep notes organised
 - 1.4 Use your own words
 - 1.5 Leave spaces - to add notes later

- 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.

Pattern notes: an example



(See Buzan 1993.)

Shortcuts in note-making

Plan for amendments

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.) Alternatively, word process your notes so that you can summarise, edit, highlight and rearrange them easily.

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. Cross-refer to information already noted elsewhere – for instance, 'see red file, page 24, Amphibians'.

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?

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'.

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?

Reading, recording and using information

