

Note-Taking Strategies

Advice from your friends and neighbors

< *I have come to decide that note-taking strategies differ according to personality; what works for one does not work for another. When I take notes for a writing/research project, I use loose-leaf college ruled paper and jot down copious notes and some quotes. I always make sure that I have the page numbers as the reference in the left hand margin. I distinguish between what I take from the text and my own reflections on the text by enclosing my own reflections in square brackets. I also have a list of personal abbreviations which makes things easier when I'm taking notes. Although many of them are standardized, I try to note the abbreviations that I am going to use at the top of the first page of the set of notes devoted to a particular text. That way, years later, I will know whether K stands for knowledge, Kant, or Kierkegaard. Later in the process I re-read my notes and highlight or mark the sections that I want to use.*

< *I take notes on 5x7 cards or half sheets of typing paper. In the upper right hand corner I note the author and date of the book or journal. That corresponds to a bibliography card which has the full citation information (author, full title, translator, editor, etc., series title [if applicable], place of publishing, publisher, and date). In the upper left hand column is the section of the outline or chapter of the book I am reading. I also assign a center heading as a topic. In the left margin is the page number. This can now be done on a computer rather than using the paper, but when I move from library to library, I still use paper notes.*

< *When doing a large research project, I have worked several ways in taking notes.*

1) I tag pages with post-it strips as I'm reading (I hate to make notes along the way since it disrupts the flow of the reading/argument for me). At the end I type the portions of the pages I have marked. I always include the page number. With a hard copy I sometimes cut apart the various notes so that I can arrange them topically. I use this method with sources that I do not think are necessarily pivotal to my project and thus can send the book or article back to its original place of repose.

2) With books and articles that are pivotal to my topic I never let these things go back to their place of original repose until I'm done. I use post-it strips to mark salient passages and (when I'm really good) I create a sheet of topics found in the reading that apply to my project with page numbers.

I have found the most important key to note taking and later retrieval is keeping my bibliographical information accurate and tied with the notes in some coded way. I do tend to treat projects like puzzles and want as much flexibility as possible in putting the pieces from various sources together into a coherent argument or basis for support.

< I have three note strategies, owing to my untimely birth at the decline of traditional technologies for words. I was taught on old note-taking methods until grad school when personal computers were just making it onto the school scene. So this is what I have done.

System 1 - The file card system: Create bibliographic card with proper information about the source you are using, then take notes on a stack of index cards to keep with it. Then, when preparing an outline for the paper, first organize the cards according to the sources, then internally organize them according to the outline so you know who said what on your topic. An alternate method would be to organize them all according to the outline.

System 2 - The notebook system: This is more helpful when reading rare books. On a loose leaf or spiral bound notebook, write a heading of the work with all bibliographic information in proper style. Then take notes as you read through the work. When I take notes, I have my own abbreviation system that is like short hand. But for quotations I want to cite, I write out the entire phrase for accuracy. Again, as I take notes, I copy page numbers in case I need to cite later. For large, unsystematic thinkers, you may need to develop your own subject indexing system.

System 3 - Computerized note-taking: You can easily do the notebook system on the computer. There are even programs that will make note-cards from the computer notes or that will sort and organize your notes. After organizing your notes, you can then split the monitor screen and bring up note files on one side and compose the text on the other. The only hitch with computerized note taking is that occasionally there's an archives that is not set up for electronic equipment. Then it's back to notes written by hand.

Final rule: there is no one right way to take research notes. You must develop the system that works for you.

< *I take all my notes on the computer, doing diagrams of the flow of the book's argument on sheets of paper. Using Nota Bene exclusively in my research, I first enter the book or article into their "library" field so that all the bibliographic information is there at hand. As I take notes, I take them in files organized according to authors or topics so I can keep track of what is where (I guess I don't fully trust my computer). Nota Bene has the capacity of recalling all the notes according to topic, author, you-name-it, as it has a "textbase" system that organizes all notes on an every word basis. When nearing the time to write, I print my notes out on note-cards to arrange in front of me in the flow of argument that I want for my paper. I need not do this step if I wanted to stack several windows in the computer with my text document on top and my sorted note documents in levels behind to bring forward as needed (or one could split the screen and have them alongside each other). I keep footnote citation information with every note so that as I write I can move the quotes as I wish and not lose its citation information. Using a computer with flexible text capacities and automatic footnoting is a must for me. I could never go back to counting spaces at the bottom of a line to see if I have enough room for the footnotes.*