



# THE DOCUMENTED ESSAY

## Notetaking

Note-taking is an indispensable part of writing a documented essay or research paper. Your notes record information from the sources that you will use in writing your paper. Therefore, it is necessary to critically evaluate the texts or articles you are reading and to make reasonable choices about **what will and will not be useful for your paper**. Otherwise, you will overload yourself with information and spend too much time sifting through notes. If there is an entire page in a book or article that you really need, it would be better to make a print copy of it.

Many e-books have note-taking functions, and digital notecard programs offer information-saving and sorting platforms similar to the hard-copy options below. Use the system that works most efficiently for you.

To take effective notes, you must do the following:

**Understand the information:** Before you can use information, you must understand it. Taking notes is a good way to develop your knowledge and comprehension of a subject; it is not just a mechanical process of recording data. Reading a source, making decisions about what is useful for your essay, and writing the notes on index cards or in a notebook will encourage you to think more deeply about what you are reading as well as how it relates to the subject of your research.

**Select the information:** The information to be used in a paper must be gathered from a variety of sources, which also, most likely, contain much information not necessarily relevant to your topic. Therefore, when you take notes, you must sort out the material you need from other information surrounding it in the text.

**Record the information:** To efficiently use the information in your sources, you must record it in such a way that it can be easily sorted, reorganized, and incorporated into your paper. This means that you should choose a style of recording that best suits you and that lists all necessary information—title, author, publisher, etc.—which you will need later for your bibliography.

## METHODS

Using your own words, take notes that briefly summarize (or **paraphrase**) the most important points of each source. Be as clear and concise as possible in your note-taking and try to omit details that are not relevant to your topic. Stick to main points rather than involved discussion or digressions. If you record a direct quotation, you can also write a brief explanation of how the quote will be useful for your topic, which can help you build an annotated bibliography and/or incorporate the quotation later into your paper. The following methods will enable you to read your sources with understanding and take good notes:

- A well-written article or book chapter usually makes a single main point and supports that point with a discussion of a series of subtopics related to it. Before you start writing notes, scan the complete piece of writing to determine what the main point is, what subtopics are discussed, and how each subtopic relates to the main point.

- An effective method of scanning is to read the first several paragraphs of a section, and then read the first (topic) sentence of each remaining paragraph. When you get to the concluding paragraph, read all of it. If your source is a book, the table of contents may help guide you to information that fits your topic.
- After scanning the entire chapter or article, write your understanding of the author's thesis (her/his main point), **in your own words**. In addition, it is a good idea to read the section in the text that contains the author's first subtopic. The length of this segment will vary, but in the average book or substantial article, it will usually be discussed for one to five pages. After reading, scan the section again to make sure you understand the most significant points in it. Now, write your understanding of the subtopics in that section **in your own words**. **Paraphrasing** rather than just mechanically copying the author's ideas will help you to better understand them.
- When you take notes, be as concise as possible, omitting unnecessary details and digressions. It is not always necessary to write complete sentences or even complete words—occasionally abbreviation saves time—as long as what you have written will be clear to you when you consult your notes later. If you consider that the author's words are necessary to clarify a point, **copy them exactly** and put them in quotation marks. (It is a good idea to make note of the author's last name as well.)
- Remember to record the page number(s) in the text or article that corresponds to your notes. In addition, make sure you have all bibliographical information recorded for each source either on one index card or in your notebook.
- Always try to review the chapter or article after note-taking to make sure your notes are accurate and complete.

## FORMATS

Record your notes so that you can easily locate all points relating to a particular subject and readily identify the source from which a piece of information is taken.

You can record notes either on index cards or in a notebook.

### Index-Card Style

In this method, you record each piece of information from a source on a separate card. After you are finished reviewing and recording all your sources, you can organize all your cards according to topic. This will also be helpful in organizing your paper.

For each source, copy the complete bibliographical information (author, title, publisher's name, date and place of publication, and medium) **on one card**, which becomes your **bibliography card**. This is not only necessary for accuracy and organization but also, technically, you are compiling the bibliography for your paper.

For multiple notes from the same source, in the upper right hand corner of each card, record a short

form of the title and the author's last name. In the lower right hand corner, record the page number(s) from which your summaries, ideas, paraphrases, or direct quotes have been taken.

Write subject or topic headings on the cards in pencil to facilitate organizing and reorganizing information.

### Examples of Index-Card Style

#### Topic of paper: New Ways of Learning Writing Skills in College

**Card A** shows a bibliography card. **Card B** shows a summary of the author's main focus in a chapter. **Card C** shows a paraphrase of a passage. **Card D** shows a direct quotation.

Card A

Card B

Murray, Expecting
Murray, Donald, <i>Expecting the Unexpected</i> , Portsmouth, NH:
Murray, Expecting
Sub-topic: Unlearning
In Chapter 10 / It is the responsibility of college teachers to de-program their students from safe but unstimulated writing that has been over-learned throughout their educations. This is no easy task for students or teachers, requiring far more patience and daring than a proscriptive traditional approach.
p.103

Murray, Expecting
Sub-topic: Learning through mistakes
Murray, Expecting
Sub-topic: The system of rules
In Chapter 18 / "Old rules become comforting to us all. Skills-- and the attitudes behind them--become beliefs raised to the power of Truth. I am used to unlearning, but most of my students have come to learn new truths, not to have old ones stripped away; they have come to construct a system of higher skills on the foundation of old ones, not have the cathedral of their learning razed so that the wondrous and essential mists of unknowing can take their place."
Note: Use this quote for part of paper on social conditioning and how it affects our ways of learning.
p.174

single

- Write the author, title, place of publication, publisher, year of publication, and medium at the top of the page for each source.
- Make notes in the middle of the page, leaving wide margins.
- In the right-hand margin, record the page numbers from the source that correspond to your notes.
- In the left-hand margin, note the specific topic to which each piece of information relates.
- Begin a new page for each source you consult, or if you have abundant information for each chapter from a text, list your notes per chapter. Another possibility is listing your notes according to topic—but this is more difficult since your notes will no longer follow the same sequence as the ideas in the article or book. Remember that if you do list your notes according to topic, it is very important to list page numbers from the source for each note since it can get very confusing to find the information you need otherwise.
- Basically, use the same methods as suggested for index style: bibliography card,

summary, paraphrase, and direct quotation.

## COMMON ERRORS TO AVOID

- The most common and most serious error students make in taking notes is to copy the wording of the source directly, either word-for-word or with minor changes. This not only prevents students from processing the information fully in their own minds, but also encourages plagiarism since the notes can find their way into the paper. The best way to avoid this is not to look at your source as you write your notes. That way you will **be sure to use your own words.**
- Including too much detail in notes slows you down. If you are doing this, you are not distinguishing between significant and insignificant information. Notes are meant to **be concise!**
- Direct quotations should be used only when you have a special purpose. If you use a direct quotation, **copy it accurately** and double check it.
- Remember to **include page numbers** in your notes. Otherwise, you will have to spend valuable time returning to the sources to find page numbers, and you will leave yourself open to error.