

Active note-making

Active learning helps you to make meaning from what you are researching.

Passive processing lets you record without really thinking. So you may feel as if you are working, but you will have to do all the thinking again later.

👉 Passive note-taking includes:

- Underlining and highlighting large sections of text
- Cutting and pasting from online documents
- Copying lots of direct quotes, rather than using your own words
- Writing down everything in case it is important
- Accepting everything without evaluating it

👍 Active note-making means:

- Thinking about your research questions before you start
- Looking for the main ideas, structure and evidence
- Writing notes of these in your own words
- Choosing direct quotes only when you need the **exact** words:
 - keep them as short as possible
 - check accuracy & record the page number
- Adding your own evaluation, questions, ideas and links to other work

For more information....

See **Lectures, seminars & group work 1: Getting the most from lectures**

See **Researching your assignment 1: Effective academic reading**

See **Researching your assignment 3: Using & evaluating websites**

For more on this and other aspects of academic study, see our website at www.reading.ac.uk/studyadvice

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Study Advice and Maths Support



Making useful notes



Researching your assignment 2

This guide covers approaches to note-making for your research. It includes:

- Why good note-making is important
- Features of useful notes
- Structuring linear notes
- Using spidergrams for revision & planning
- Taking notes in lectures or at conferences
- Active note-making

Note-making is more than creating a record. It is part of the research process, helping you to understand, consider and structure information.

Good note-making is important because it...

- Enables you to avoid unintentional plagiarism
- Helps you focus on the important and relevant information
- Helps you to understand and make connections with other material
- Helps you to find or create a structure
- Provides a personal record of what you have learned
- Enables you to add your own questions, ideas, and examples
- Gives you something to revise from later

Features of useful notes

For notes to be useful they need to:

- **Have the full reference** – do this first, so you don't forget
- Be clear, easy to read and accurate
- Be selective, well organised, and well-spaced
- Contain enough information to remind you of the main points
- Contain some examples / evidence (optional)
- Be brief – so you do not have to spend too much time re-reading them
- Be filed away within a simple and logical system for easy retrieval (e.g. a box file for each module)

The notes you make are personal to you, so they should be in a style and format that suits the way you learn. Some people prefer linear notes, and other people like spidergrams or pattern notes. Experiment with different styles and see which you find most effective.

Structuring linear notes

This style can be useful for notes from reading and for lecture notes:

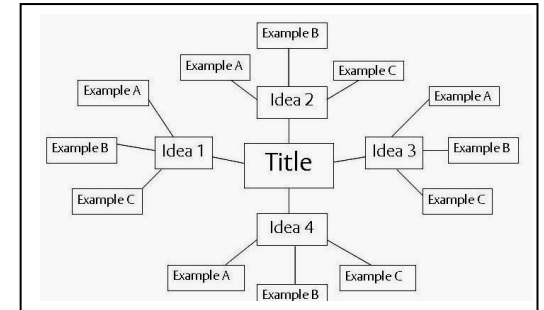
- Use plenty of HEADINGS for main ideas and concepts
- Use subheadings for points within those ideas
- Keep to one point per line
- Underline keywords
- Use bullet points or numbering to keep organised
- Use abbreviations and phrases – not full sentences
- Clearly indicate your own ideas [perhaps in square brackets] so that you know that you do not have to reference them
- Leave a lot of space for adding detail and for easy reading

Using spidergrams for revision and planning

Spidergrams are useful for revision as they summarise a lot of information on one page in a visual and memorable way. You can use

spidergrams to condense your notes and get an overview of each module when revising – use colour and pictures to make them even easier to remember.

Spidergrams are also useful for pulling together a lot of research and ideas when planning an assignment. You are not constrained by a linear structure so you can show connections, group similar ideas together, and see any gaps in your research or see which ideas are less relevant.



Put the main topic in the middle and add key words on the “arms” of the diagram – the key thing is to keep it brief.

Taking notes in lectures or at conferences

Before the lecture: Think about what you want to find out from the lecture. Read any handouts you have been given in advance so you know what to expect.

During the lecture: Listen for clues about the structure or lecture-plan. Be alert to the key words and main points and note these. Be an active listener - not a sponge: Is this new? Are you surprised? Is it consistent with what you already know or think? Put your pen down and only pick it up to make brief notes.

After the lecture: Read through your notes to check you understand them. Add in any details you may have missed.

If we've been given handouts, do I still need to take notes?

It depends on your own style of learning – some people prefer to listen, especially if the information is new or complex. However, it is unlikely that everything in a 2 hour lecture will be on the handout – the lecturer may add examples or explanations to illustrate their points. How useful will just the handout be when you come to revise?

Supplement your handout with your own notes – this will help your understanding. Have a system for linking your notes to the handout (e.g. numbered code, annotations).