



# Critical Note Taking

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## Transcript

**Introduction:** Welcome to this tutorial on doing critical note taking brought to you by Reading University's Study Advice team. It is designed for you to go through at your own pace and you can pause it at any time.

Note taking is at the heart of academic study but it is a skill that needs to be developed. We can all recall a time when we have so many notes for an assignment that we don't know what to do with them. Or found that note taking was too time-consuming, leaving us little time to write the assignment. Or perhaps worse still, when we come to write the assignment we realise our notes don't contain the information we need. This tutorial covers some key principles to taking notes to help some of these problems.

It includes:

- careful consideration of the purpose for which you need notes and the need to be selective in the notes you take;
- the need to take an organised approach to note taking;
- and finally the need to record your own thoughts as you make notes.

**Consider the purpose:** We take notes for different purposes but in general it helps with our understanding, as we put ideas into our own words, and it helps with memory recall. When it comes to assignments we are generally taking notes for two broad purposes:

- (1) to help us with a general understanding of a topic
- (2) to record specific information to support an argument.

Either way it helps to think of some questions you seek to answer beforehand.

Consider the analogy of going shopping for a particular purpose: a party. Without an idea of what you searching for, helped often by a list, everything on the shelves could look enticing, useful and relevant. You could be persuaded by the offers and before you know it you have a basket full of things you don't need such as tea bags, baked beans

and a pineapple. The same is true of note taking. Without an idea of your purpose you could end up irrelevant information and pages of notes you can't use.

**Gaining a general understanding:** You may be taking notes in order to gain a general understanding. This may be as part of your essential reading for your course or in the early stages of researching for your assignment. Remember you are just looking for some solid foundations on which to build your assignment not the specific details. So use skimming and scanning techniques to identify the main themes within your subject/ pull out the main arguments/ and use these to help to determine your focus.

**Keep the question in mind:** When taking notes for a specific assignment you will require more details. Identifying the key argument within a text and making a note of the supporting evidence is key, as is noting down how this helps to answer the question that you are trying to answer. Keep your main research questions at the front of your mind to stop you getting distracted by the information 'on offer'.

**Be Selective:** Before writing anything, think critically. Do you really need this information? What questions does it help you to answer? Have you already got something similar? Remember you don't want to end up with pages of notes all saying the same thing

**Keep notes organised:** Notes can take many forms; bullet points, spider diagrams or lists – consider what works best for your purpose. You do need to remember to add in bibliographic details and be able to distinguish between your own words and direct quotes – so as to avoid any unintentional plagiarism, Try using different colours or fonts to distinguish your own words from those copied directly.

You might also want to use a template like this one which ensures that you not only think about the purpose of your notes but that you record bibliographic details.

**Record your thoughts:** Finally remember note taking helps develop your understanding and as you are taking notes you will develop thoughts on; how you may use this information, how it relates to your previous knowledge and it might perhaps trigger some examples which help you to understand this ideas further. Record all this too within your notes, using a different format – as it will make more sense to you when you come back to review your notes later.

**Summary:** So in summary, note taking is a skill that we need to develop but following these four principles of critical note taking should help to alleviate many of the frustrations we face when writing our own assignments