

A Guide to Note Taking

Effective Reading and Note Taking

The study of history necessarily involves a substantial amount of reading of a variety of different materials. In a single module—sometimes over the course of a single week—you are likely to be expected to read and assimilate both primary sources (original documents such as letters, diaries, newspaper accounts, census or court records, etc.) and secondary materials (articles, monographs, i.e. an academic book devoted to a particular topic, chapters in textbooks) that interpret these original sources to craft an argument or a narrative about a particular series of events. Occasionally, you may also be asked to incorporate images or audio recordings into your study of the past. Whichever of these methods you may use in a particular module, it is essential that you develop an effective routine for reading and assimilating the material you will be asked to draw upon over the course of a semester.

As you read, have your specific assignment in mind. Know what you're looking for, and think about your assignment as you read (critically and selectively). It is a very good idea to read swiftly through the text first, without making any notes. If you take your notes when you re-read the text, you will find that you have a clearer idea of what you need to write down. Always try to engage with the material, rather than simply transcribing it. As you proceed, note your own queries and responses. In this way, you make the notes your own, and you render them more memorable to you. At the end of your notes, write a line or two to yourself on what seems to be the main point of the article or book, and its main relevance to you.

Your notes should be full enough to be useful, but concise enough to be manageable when you need to draw on them. Concentrate on what is most directly relevant to your main purpose (but don't just ignore the rest!). Your main purpose is to ensure that you will not have to return to the text itself when you write your essay or revise for your examination. So:

- Take full notes of the examples and quotations that you think will prove useful.
- Always use quotation marks when you are transcribing direct quotations (this is especially important in avoiding the danger of plagiarism).
- Take down all the relevant page numbers for later referencing.
- Give yourself enough to go on, but not so much that you'll find your notes daunting when you need to use them.

Taking Notes from Lectures

Note-taking in lectures is a very different exercise. When reading a book, you can look over a sentence or paragraph again and again if you wish; when listening to a lecture, however, the speaker's sentence, once uttered, is gone, living on only in your memory. Moreover, when you try to write it down, the lecturer is probably articulating his or her next thought. Taking useful notes from a lecture is therefore one of the most critical skills required of university students.

Decide what you want from the lecture. Is it of central importance for an essay or other assignment? Is it so interesting to you that you feel compelled to strain your fingers in order to get as much as possible down on paper? Or will it be adequate for you to note only the main points and key examples?

As far as possible, try to engage with the material rather than simply receiving it. If you can do this, you will make it your own, and render it more memorable. Of course, it isn't always easy to follow this advice when you are under pressure to 'get it down'. A good alternative is therefore to read through your notes carefully shortly after the lecture. You can then use this activity in order to engage more personally with the ideas and evidence that the lecturer provided. It is also useful to talk the lecture over with a fellow listener. Do you agree in your responses?

Think critically about the way in which the lecturer puts his/her material across. What works, and what does not? Use these thoughts when you come to make presentations of your own in tutorial.