

Taking Useful Notes From Texts

There are many techniques for taking notes from books. The one you select will vary with the type of book, the assignment, and the requirements of the instructor. What won't change, however, is the necessity for you to take some type of notes. You must make reading an active process, and note taking is a good way to ensure you get involved with what you're reading.

Being an Active Reader Is the Key to Good Notes

Ideas organized in a way that makes sense to you are easier to remember than isolated bits of information. Thus, your goal for note taking: identify information you need and organize it so you can use it to help you study efficiently and effectively.

Begin a reading/study session by previewing the entire assignment—read the titles, subtitles, introduction, conclusion, and chapter questions to get an overview of the content. Set your purpose for this assignment.

Based on your preview, list the main topics in the reading assignment. Then, jot down information you already know about the topics, plus questions you have about the topics and questions your instructor has given you. In other words, give yourself a reason to read—identify some ideas and information you need to discover.

Now you are ready to read and take notes. As an active reader—one with a reason to read—you will be able to distinguish information that is important to your purpose from interesting, but inconsequential, minor details. Two options for taking notes directly in the book:

Taking Notes in the Text

Annotate This means to write brief notes in the margins. It's a good strategy because it makes you an active, thinking participant. 1) Decide what level of information you need for this purpose. 2) After you read a section, write words and phrases in the margins that summarize the information you need to know; mark important information with abbreviations such as *def* for definition, *ex* for example, * for key point; and jot questions you have or challenges to the author's ideas. 3) After annotating a section, think about how what you've read and written are related to the questions you set out for yourself during your preview.

Underline or Highlight Although popular, this is a questionable strategy because the reader tends to randomly mark lines. 1) Decide what level of information you need. 2) Always read a section completely before you mark it. If you underline/highlight as you begin to read, you run the risk of marking information that is not important for your purpose. 3) Mark only the level of information you need such as main ideas and major details, terminology, etc.—if you underline/highlight almost everything on the page, it's no more helpful than if nothing is marked.

Taking Notes on Paper

Options for taking notes on paper include using graphic organizers such as information maps and informal outlines, writing a summary, or using a system you devise.

To take useful notes on paper, like taking notes in the text, you must set your purpose and read a section through at least once before you begin to take notes. Then write the ideas and information that fit your purpose in your own words. Organize it in a way that makes sense to you.

One advantage of taking notes on paper is that you can combine your lecture notes with your text notes to enhance your overall comprehension of the subject.

See the below for a sample of combined textbook/lecture notes.

Melissa has coordinated her textbook notes and her lecture notes on "How to take good notes from lectures." This made her think about all the information and organize the ideas and details she needed, which should make future study more effective.

