14.

NOTE-TAKING FOR RESEARCH

Learning Objectives

- Apply strategies for taking notes for a research project
- Avoid common problems when taking notes for a research project

Research and Taking Notes

One of the most important research skills you need to learn for your college classes is how to take notes. Good researchers develop systems to keep track of the information they're discovering and to record their thoughts about and reactions to that information. Many students make the mistake of thinking they can simply annotate their sources and look over them while writing their essays. Big mistake! You run the risk of unintentional plagiarism if you don't take good notes, and you're much more likely to produce an original and compelling research paper if you spend time taking good notes. Even better: taking lots of notes gives you plenty of content for your essay before you sit down to write an outline or draft.

What to Look for When Taking Notes

Many students view research writing as merely re-hashing what others have already discovered about an issue or topic. Their process for researching a topic is to find sources that support ideas or opinions they already have and to quote from those sources. As a result, their final paper ends up looking like an extended literature review rather than an original argument. While this approach may have worked well in high school, college-level writing entails a more thoughtful approach. Rarely do your college professors want you to regurgitate facts and opinions you've read; rather, they expect you to build upon the previous research conducted by other

scholars. When taking notes, you typically begin by looking for what others have said to determine what's already known about your topic and to narrow your focus. This is often called "preliminary research" because you're not yet sure what your focus for the essay is going to be. Preliminary research may not require as much note-taking; you may simply skim a lot of sources to refine your topic. Conducting preliminary research will help you discover or refine a good research question or tentative thesis for an original argument.

Once you have that original research question or tentative thesis, you educate yourself on the topic you've chosen by reading carefully and taking notes, and as you become more educated, you begin to refine the research question or tentative thesis. To educate yourself, you must do more than simply read the sources; you also need to engage with them by annotating and by recording specific passages. At first, the passages your record may simply present ideas or information that you find interesting or that you agree or disagree with. As you study more sources, though, your note-taking will focus on finding information needed to answer the research question or support the tentative thesis. Sources may provide good background information as well as compelling evidence that not only helps you understand your topic better but that will help your readers understand, too. You record that information using a system that ensures you can use the information later when writing the paper.

In many cases, you'll need to take notes so that you can write a literature review as part of a larger paper or as a stand-alone paper. The kind of research and note-taking you conduct for a literature review is supposed to help you narrow your focus further so you can discover an original research question or a tentative thesis worth researching. If your professor has assigned a literature review as a stand-alone essay, your notes should come from a variety of sources to show you've thoroughly investigated the topic. In addition, when you take notes for a literature review, you need to make connections among the sources to discover what is already known about your topic and to identify points of agreement and disagreement.

Even if you're not writing a literature review, your professors will want you to make connections among the sources you're reading, so look for connections as you read. For example, one source may present evidence showing that teachers are leaving the profession because of low pay, whereas another source may argue that working conditions are the main reason so many teachers have found work elsewhere. In your notes, you would record specific statements from each source so that you could put these two sources in conversation with each other in your essay. Maybe one of the sources will help you formulate a counterargument in your essay, or perhaps you'll use notes from both sources as part of your background information, to help readers understand the controversy you're going to weigh in on.

In most cases, you should take many more notes than you will use in an essay. Reading the sources and taking notes will help you continue to narrow your focus and identify important background information, sub-claims, evidence, and counterarguments.

Developing a Good System

Before computers and photocopy machines and the internet, researchers had to use pen and paper to keep track of the information they found in sources. They recorded source information on 4 X 6 notecards, or in a notebook, and they took steps to make sure they could use that information later when writing the paper. While it's understandable that most students today are not interested in keeping notes the old fashion way, they nonetheless need to develop a system that works as well as notecards or notebooks.

Different researchers use different approaches to taking notes, but all note-taking methods must include three features:

1. **A place to keep the notes**. You can use notecards, notebooks, a spread sheet, a Word document—any means of keeping all of your notes in one place. Don't make the mistake of thinking you can simply annotate your sources and refer to them while writing the essay. You need to extract specific passages from the sources and record them somewhere, with the information required to cite them correctly.

2. **All of the information needed to cite the passages you record**. If you have a working bibliography, you already have the information you'll need for the works cited page, but your notes will need to include page numbers or time stamps (for videos). Technically, HTML sources don't have page numbers because they exist on the Web, which is not paginated; however, some professors don't mind if you record the page numbers that appear when you print an html source, so be sure to ask. Any source that's available as a pdf will have page numbers, so you need to use the pdf version of the source and include the page numbers in your citation. Remember, even if you're not quoting from the source, you need to include the in-text citation. Many students will quote exclusively when taking notes, but you may need to condense a longer passage by summarizing, or you may want to translate a passage into your own voice by paraphrasing. *Don't forget the citation when you paraphrase and summarize!*

3. **Your own reactions**. Especially for longer research projects, you may not remember why you copied a passage from a source. Your notes should, therefore, include your own thinking. Your own thinking might be a connection you made with another source, a question you have about the validity of the statement, an example from your own experiences, a statement about what you'll do with the information when writing the essay—anything that will help you make use of the passage later. Don't count on yourself to remember why you wrote something; even those who have great memories are likely to forget. You should also make sure to keep your own thinking separate so that you don't confuse your own thoughts with the information from the source—something that could happen once you sit down to write the paper.

Transferring Notes to the Essay

Before you write your essay, you need to think about how to organize the information you've gathered from sources. If you're writing a literature review, you can organize the information around common ideas or points of conflict you've discovered through the research. You can list these common points and determine which notes should be grouped with which points. For an essay that goes on to make an original argument, you can list the reasons or sub-claims for your thesis and determine which notes go with which sub-claims.

When writing the essay, you should always introduce a quote, paraphrase, or summary by presenting the author's full name the first time, along with any other information that might be relevant, such as the author's credentials or the publication information. After you introduce the author the first time, you mention him or her by last name only.

Remember that you need to make it very clear when you're referencing a source. With quotations, the quotation marks will indicate when it begins and ends, but with paraphrases or summaries, you typically need to use a signal phrase. If your readers can't tell that you're presenting someone's ideas, you are not citing correctly, and you may be guilty of plagiarism.

How do you decide whether to quote or paraphrase? The guidelines are to quote when

- the author's words are especially poetic, powerful, compelling
- you need to interpret exactly what the author is saying
- you strongly agree with the author and will explain why
- you strongly disagree with the author and need to make sure you're not committing a straw man fallacy

Whether you quote, paraphrase, or summarize, you should always explain the relevance of the information from the source. In addition, keep the following in mind:

Don't dump quotes. A dumped or dropped quote is usually a complete sentence dropped in between two other sentences. Quotations need to be integrated smoothly into your own writing.

Avoid long quotes. Most readers (including, probably, you!) skip over long quotation, so unless you have a passage that readers really need to read in its entirety, you should summarize and paraphrase longer passages.

Don't use similar sentence structures when paraphrasing or summarizing. Many students fail an assignment or an entire class because they don't understand that they need to use their own sentences and word choices when paraphrasing and summarizing. Generally, any time you use three or more words from the source, you need quotation marks. Sometimes, you need quotation marks even when using only one word, if that word is something the author coined or is somehow distinctive.

Don't put the in-text citation in the wrong place. When combining paraphrases or summaries and quotes, place the in-text citation when you finish referencing the source, not necessarily after the quotation. The citation goes before the punctuation in a sentence, not after, if the entire sentence is information from a

source. You may mix your own ideas with information from a source in a sentence, in which case, you use the in-text citation to separate your thinking and source information.

Sample Notes

These are notes from Martha Nussbaum's "Education for Profit, Education for Freedom," a source you (most likely) have not read. The notes were taken for this research paper about Holocaust literature, and the writer's tentative thesis was "Read fictional accounts of the Holocaust teaches students important lessons about the Holocaust." Note that the reactions include comments about how to connect the information from this source with other source information, personal thoughts, and a definition of an unknown word. Your own notes should include similar reactions. While you don't have to format the notes exactly the same way, you should use a similar method for keeping track of your notes.

First Reference: "History might be essential, but enrichment educators will not want a history that focuses on injustices of class, caste, gender, and ethnoreligious membership, because that will prompt critical thinking about the present" (Nussbaum 9).

Reaction: I want to connect this point Brennan makes about how "the number of hate groups in the U. S. has increased by 20 percent over the past three years" Maybe reading Holocaust literature could help people be less hateful?

Ethnoreligious: a group who unified by their religion and ethnic background

Second Reference: Those who create literature "always ask the imagination to move beyond its usual confines to see the world in new ways" (Nussbaum 8).

Reaction: Yes, Holocaust fiction can definitely make one see the world in new ways, but those new ways can make people very uncomfortable. Example: *Sophie's Choice*.

Third Reference: "Narrative imagination," according to Nussbaum, "is the ability to think what it might be like to be in the shoes of a person different from oneself, to be an intelligent reader of the person's story, and to understand the emotions and wishes and desires that someone so placed might have" (12).

Reaction: This reminds me of reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* in 8th grade. Made me think about what it would be like to be in hiding, fearing for your life. Holocaust literature might make people more empathetic?

Key Takeaways

- Taking lots of notes, rather than just annotating sources, is crucial to writing a good essay

- Notes should consist of paraphrases, quotations, and summaries that help answer the research question or support the tentative thesis
- Good researchers always have a system for keeping track of the information they are gathering from sources