

Highlighting and annotating

Many students find that marking their course materials with highlighter pens or annotating the text by writing in the margins helps them to concentrate and enhances their understanding. Just deciding what to highlight, underline or annotate encourages you to think critically, make judgements and formulate your own response to the text.

To use this technique, first read quickly through the text to get an overview of what it's about. Then read it more closely, pausing at the end of each paragraph to identify the main points. In the page margins you might like to add brief comments and queries as annotations.

When you decide what you want to highlight or underline to help you to recognise key points and their significance. You may decide to emphasise

- a sentence or word that sums up an important idea
- quotations
- statistics
- specialised terms
- important or useful data
- examples or links to other ideas.

You could use different coloured pens to mark different kinds of information, but be careful not to highlight so much that it becomes distracting.

This example demonstrates the thinking behind the highlighting and annotating made on a Level 1 social sciences course book.

Highlighting and annotating are not a replacement for making your own notes, but may form the first stage in creating diagrammatic notes (such as mind maps) as well as preparing for essays.

Using tables

Using tables, or 'tabular note taking', is a particularly good technique if you need to summarise information that you want to compare, such as a debate with differing viewpoints. Summarising the points in a table helps you to evaluate them, improving your understanding of a topic and helping you prepare for an essay or exam.

Tabular notes can be useful in social learning, in tutorials, student support groups or more informal contexts – you may find it interesting and thought-provoking to work with other students to create a table comparing views on a topic.

Do bear in mind that tabular notes, like other forms of note taking, can be adapted to personal style. The two examples shown below are by no means definitive. So be creative – try experimenting with headings and categories. In relation to the examples given you might also consider, for example, how different approaches relate to the broader themes of the course, or how different policies have been interpreted or criticised by competing theorists.

Recording your notes

In certain situations you might find it easier or more helpful to record your notes. This can be useful when it comes to revision because it allows you to listen to the notes you've made without having to have access to all your books - while you're travelling, for example.

Recording devices

You can record your notes straight onto your computer or to an external device, such as a digital recorder, MP3 recorder, iPod or mobile phone. External devices will often allow you to transfer your files to your computer. Although some have built-in microphones, some may require a compatible microphone. You will also need a sound card on your computer. Some devices require you to install software on your computer to enable you to transfer your files.

Recording and editing software

Your computer will probably already has recording software installed, such as Windows Sound Recorder. Alternatively, there are free software packages available on the Internet. A good example is Audacity, which offers the tools for recording and editing your material.

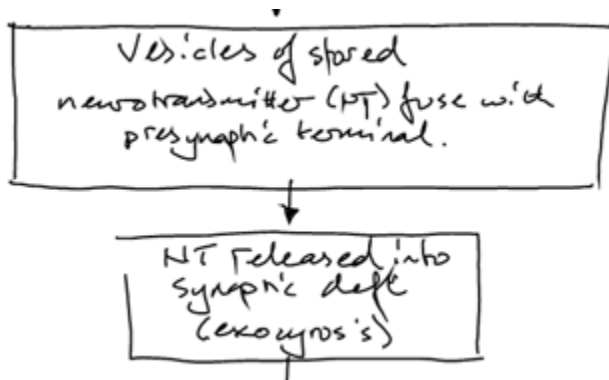
Tips for recording

- Before you start recording, check that your recording device works properly and that you have spare batteries if necessary.
- While recording, speak clearly into the microphone and make sure your recording levels are set correctly.
- Try to minimise any background sound. Do your recording in a quiet place. Turn off any noisy appliances and make sure that others in the house know what you're doing, so that they don't interrupt you.
- Record in short sound bites. You can record these in one go, as one larger file, but it would be helpful for you if you can edit your notes down to short clips of between 3 and 5 minutes. Smaller file sizes will make it easier for you to send your files electronically, if you want to share them with other students or use them as evidence for assignments or projects.
- Give each clip a meaningful file name so you can find it quickly at a later date.
- Set up folders to store your sound files. You could group your clips by topic or block, based on your study material.
- If you have recorded your clip on an external recorder, make sure you are able to transfer the files onto your computer.
- If you are worried about the files taking up memory on your computer, you could store them on CD or DVD.
- You should always make CD or DVD copies of your sound files, which you can keep as a back up.

Line diagrams and system maps

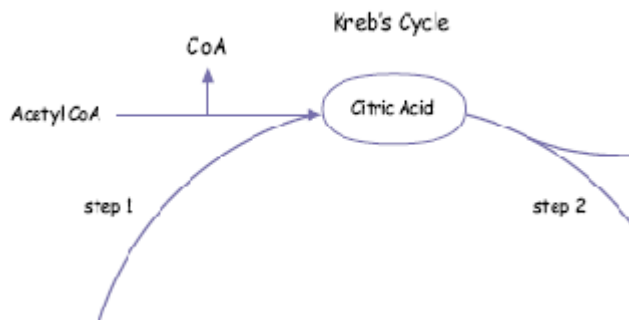
There are many visual methods you can use to help you take notes, and each has its particular strengths. The act of creating visual notes can help you think through and make sense of the material you're studying. Try a few methods and see which suit you.

Line diagrams (such as flow diagrams) are used to represent the steps in a process without showing the detail. Flow charts use shapes to depict different categories: oval shapes indicate the start or end of a process; diamond shapes show when the route through the flow chart is affected by a decision or choice; and square shapes depict when an instruction is given or an action occurs.



This hand-drawn flow chart uses boxes and links between them to demonstrate the sequence of events at a synapse.

The Krebs cycle (also known as the citric acid cycle) is often depicted as a line diagram and it can be useful to show it in this way in your notes. Each step in the process is linked to the next by lines.



This diagram is an example of how a line diagram can be used in note taking. Each item is linked to others by lines, in the Krebs cycle a circle is used to represent the process.

Systems maps capture the essence of a complex set of relationships. They help you see connections between things and are good for showing overlapping relationships. Try using colours and images or icons to depict things.



Index cards

You may prefer to make notes on index cards. These are sometimes referred to as summary cards or concept cards as they are often used to summarise the information you have collected on a certain topic. Or you can use them to note relevant keywords with brief explanations.

This example describes the kind of information you might include on your index card.

Front of card

Date:	Page 42 of core text and DVD
Attachment Relationships	
<p>Sometimes called 'close relationships' The relationship between an adult (carer) and a child formed in the early years of the child's life.</p>	

This side includes information such as the date, page from the text and the subject of the notes – attachment relations – with a very brief precis of the subject.

Back of card

Academic Research
Mostly US and European (where children are encouraged to learn by exploration and mother is usually the main carer)
Fosterers, childminder, daycare workers, etc.
Consistency and predictability are important
Affect relationships later in life Affects child's behaviour
Barriers to a good relationship
Lack of self confidence Poor relationship experience in childhood Not wanting to be a carer

Try these techniques to make your reading active



Underline or highlight key words and phrases of text as you read. When you return to the text to take notes, or to research an assignment question, you can easily see which points you identified as important at the first reading. Be selective, as too much highlighting on a page won't help you.



Make annotations in the margin to summarise points, raise questions, challenge what you've read, jot down examples and so on. You can do this in books or etexts. This takes more thought than highlighting, so you'll probably remember the content better.



Read critically by asking questions of the text. Who wrote it? When? Who is the intended audience? Does it link with other material you've studied in the course? Why do you think it was written? Is it an excerpt from a longer piece of text?



Use index cards and add points to them as you read. You can use them to cross reference parts of the course, to collect examples, or to keep track of course themes.



Try using sticky notes if you don't want to mark the text. Jot brief notes on one and add it to the page, partly sticking out so you can identify the page.



Test yourself by reading for half an hour, putting the text away and jotting down the key points from memory. Go back to the text to fill in gaps.



Look for 'signposts' that help you understand the text - words like 'most importantly', 'in contrast', 'on the other hand'.



Explain what you've read to someone else.



Record yourself reading the course material or your notes, and listen to the recording while you're travelling or doing household chores.

Fast reading techniques

Fast reading techniques help you to browse text and extract the key points. The skills require practice, but once you have got the hang of them you'll find you can get through a substantial amount of reading in quite a short time.

Scanning – a useful first step before reading more deeply.

Skimming – handy when you're looking for particular things within a text, or trying to find out whether a text will be useful.

Ways to develop your skimming and scanning skills

Scanning

Run your eye quickly over the text to locate specific words or phrases that are of interest. You can scan:

- headings and subheadings
- images and artwork
- the body text for authors' names
- the contents page itself
- the index for specific words.

This will help you decide whether you should read further, and how useful the document might be for your study.

Skimming

Read quickly to get an overview prior to in-depth reading. Although you may still need to read the entire text, by scanning first you can decide where you want to concentrate your time.

Skim the text quickly to:

- get an indication of the scope and content of the text
- read the first and last paragraphs to get the main points
- look at the first sentence of each paragraph to see where the content of the paragraph will lead
- note the key points in the summaries.