

Taking Notes: Written Texts

In contrast to real-time spoken texts like lectures and class discussions, with written texts you can return again and again to the source to recheck information. Save yourself some of that rechecking time by taking good notes.

You'll get more out of your reading if you think of reading as an *active* rather than *passive* process. Your goal isn't just to make sure your eyes have passed over every word on the page, but to think about and retain what you are reading.

Although we humans like to think of ourselves as outstanding multi-taskers, recent neurological studies have shown we perform better when we focus on one thing at a time.¹ Before you start reading, make sure you're in an environment where you can focus on the text. For most people, that means finding a quiet place or a place with low-level "white noise" (a random buzz of background noise).

Consider your purpose

Before you start, consider your instructor's purpose in assigning the reading or—if you chose the text yourself—your purpose in choosing it. Are there particular types of information you are searching for in the text, or is your goal simply to get a general overview? In what ways will you be held responsible for knowing the text? For example, will you need to summarize the text for others, highlight particular themes or topics, or write about the text? Can you anticipate what kinds of writing assignments you are likely to get? Keep these and other relevant questions in mind as you read, so that you can be on the lookout for answers.

Interact with the text

Take notes on a piece of paper or in a notebook. If you own the source or can make a copy for yourself, consider also making notes in the margins. Beware of simply underlining or highlighting text without also making annotations (critical or explanatory notes). Without written notes to jog your memory, you might find yourself reading and rereading passages that you have underlined. Remember, the goal is to *interact* with the text.

If you find yourself having trouble focusing on a text, try changing your mode of interaction. For example, rather than reading silently, try reading the words out loud. Or try "thinking aloud": try to articulate out loud what you feel are the text's primary claims and arguments. If you like what

¹ Jon Hamilton, "Think You're Multitasking? Think Again," NPR Morning Edition, Oct. 2, 2008. <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=95256794>, accessed 10/8/08. Additional information on MIT professor Earl Miller's research can be found at www.ekmiller.org.

you're saying, write it down! You can take this a step further by *freewriting*. To freewrite, take about five minutes and write about your responses to the text. Don't worry about style and grammar when expressing these immediate impressions of a piece: your goal is to get ideas down on paper.

As you take notes, try to *paraphrase* information: put it into your own words. This cognitive exercise not only forces you to process what you've read, but it also gives you text in your own words that you can use if you write a paper about what you've read. If you quote directly from the text, indicate so with quotation marks.

Always make note of page numbers so you can easily return to the source of information.

Taking notes on literary works

If you are reading a novel or other work of literature, consider how the text relates to your class and how it will be used in your class. If one of your goals is to be able to summarize the text, keep a running log. You might want to take notes as you go, creating a *reverse outline* of the text by writing a short summary of each paragraph. Alternatively, you might find it more helpful to read several paragraphs at once and then pause to summarize what you have just read.

Be as specific as possible. Consider the following two summaries of an episode from Homer's *The Odyssey*. Both reduce several pages of text to just a handful of words. Which would be more helpful for reviewing the story?

- Odysseus & co. get Cyclops Polyphemus drunk (p. 74); poke out P's eye when he's sleeping (75); tie themselves under P's sheep & escape when P lets sheep out in the morning (77).
- Odysseus escapes from Cyclops (pp. 74-77).

If one of your goals is to keep track of themes and motifs in the text, develop a running list of keywords and make note of where (page numbers) and how they recur in the text.

Taking notes on textbooks

Most textbooks are purposefully organized in ways that help guide note-taking. Before you start reading, skim the assigned pages to get a sense of how they are organized. Look for chapter summaries, headings, subheadings, definitions of key terms, words in **boldface** or *italics*, and other cues from the text.

Chapter titles, headings, and subheadings often provide you with an organizational framework, or outline, for your notes. As with Cornell and other hierarchical note-taking methods, arrange your notes so you can distinguish at a glance between large-scale organizational information and the more detailed notes that flesh it out.

You might want to include definitions of key terms in your notes, as the words arise in the text, but it can also be helpful to have an additional, separate page dedicated to crucial vocabulary and definitions.