

Taking Notes While Reading

Do you ever copy down pages of notes while reading but still struggle to remember what you read? Alternatively, do you read through texts without taking notes and while only half paying attention? Perhaps you highlight or underline your texts but feel like maybe you're not getting the most from your reading. If you fall into one of these categories, chances are good that you're not getting the most out of your reading. This handout discusses the importance of taking good notes while reading and provides several different strategies and formats you can try.

The importance of good notes

Taking good notes while reading is an important part of academic success in high school and beyond. Many courses require significant reading, and it can be difficult to understand and master the material and do well in class without solid note taking and reading skills.

Good notes from your reading can help you:

- organize your ideas and information from the text
- keep focused and stay engaged while reading
- keep a record of what you read so you can more easily locate it in the future
- think critically about what you read while you read
- draw conclusions and identify main ideas of the text
- be prepared for class and build a foundation for lecture
- have solid materials to use to study for exams or prepare for assignments

How to take good notes while reading

Good notes can take different forms and may vary from person to person—or even from text to text. One of the key ideas of good note taking is that it is not necessary to copy down loads of information from the text. Copying down information does not engage your brain and is not a strong strategy for learning and remembering content. It also takes a lot of time and energy. In contrast, simply highlighting loads of information is simpler but does not actively engage the brain. Instead of copying down tons of notes or over-highlighting, try some of the active and effective strategies and formats listed below. These will help you decrease the amount of time and energy you spend on notes and increase your comprehension and retention from reading.

Different formats/strategies for notes

There is no one right way to take notes while reading. The important thing is that you experiment with a few effective strategies, find some that work for you, and use them. You may find that different formats or strategies work better for different types of texts, too, and you may want to use different ones for different classes. Below are some examples to try:

Try taking notes from memory

- Students often miss the opportunity to digest the information from their texts because they're too busy worrying about taking good notes—instead of actually comprehending the content, they're thinking more about what they should write down.
- Try reading short sections of your reading (likely a paragraph or two or up to a page) and pausing to think about what you just read—then take notes from your memory of what you just read. This will help you focus on the main points instead of getting caught up in details.
- It's okay to not remember 100% of what you just read; focus on the main points, and then refer back to the text to fill in details as needed.
- This method may take slightly longer, but many students say it's worth it due to the increase in reading comprehension.

Mark directly on the text

- If you have a print version that allows it, simply use a pen or pencil. For online texts, some digital programs also allow annotating, highlighting, and commenting.
- Underline, circle, or highlight key words and phrases—this can be helpful for students who need to do something with their hands to help them stay focused.
- Annotate margins with symbols, abbreviations, or summaries of the text in your own words. See our annotating handout for more explanation.
- If you have an online text, you can still record your thoughts, key words, and summaries in this way. Just grab a plain sheet of paper, label it with the text and chapter/page number, and jot them down on the paper instead of in the book.

Cornell style notes

- Divide a piece of paper into three sections—approximately two inches blank at the bottom, and the top portion divided into a one-third section on the left and a two-third section on the right.
- Take notes on the right two-thirds of the page.
- List key words or questions in the left column.
- Summarize the entire page in the space at the bottom.
- Here's more detailed explanation of this popular style of notes. <http://lsc.cornell.edu/notes.html>

Create a graphic organizer or concept map

- This method is good for texts that have a lot of higher level concepts that require explanations or texts that have remember-level facts, dates, terms, etc.
- Organize information visually.
- Differentiate main ideas from support in an appropriate format: concept map, table, flow chart, hierarchy, timeline, or Venn diagram.
- Good for texts that have a lot of visuals, timelines, etc. like science or history.
- Generate Your Own Q&A or Study Guide.
- Formulate questions from headings and key words before you begin. Then seek answers as you read.

Helpful tips

- Write notes in your own words instead of copying down information from the book.
- Avoid over-highlighting. Highlighting doesn't actively engage the brain, so it's not the most useful strategy. Also, highlighting too much can keep you from focusing on the main ideas.
- Wait until the end of a page to take notes so that you can better focus on what you are reading and so that you can try to summarize in your own words rather than copy.
- You don't need to write pages of notes—keep them brief and focused.
- Preview the chapter before you start reading by looking at the text features to gain clues about the main ideas of the chapter.
- Focus on the main ideas and concepts.

Other resources

Related Learning Center handouts: Many of our handouts go into further detail about reading. Check out some of these for additional strategies:

- Annotating Texts
- Increasing Reading Comprehension
- Skimming
- Reading Textbooks

Works consulted

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