

# Writing a Research Paper

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## Research

### Note-take effectively

You already started the process of note-taking in the previous section, even before putting pen to paper. How? Well, to take notes, you need to know what to take notes on; by analyzing the text, you've likely already located the sections or chapters most useful to you.

- **What should my notes look like?**
- **What should I write down?**
- **Specific tips to avoid plagiarism**
- **Specific tips to facilitate comprehension later on**

#### **What should my notes look like?**

The point-form or sentences debate (on loose-leaf or on 3x5 index cards for easy shuffling) is simply a matter of preference. Some students are comfortable with points; others prefer summarizing and paraphrasing right into rough sentences to make drafting easier. Try both methods and see which one you prefer. Some students also prefer good ol' fashioned loose-leaf for note-taking while others religiously use index cards with one point on each card. Again, both techniques have their pros and cons so try them out and see which one is for you. Above all, note-taking involves writing. Highlighting can be an important first step, but used alone, it's simply too passive.

#### **So what should I write down?**

Anything and everything that will flesh out your thesis statement or research question.

Be succinct in whatever you write, but don't rely too heavily on mental notes because you're afraid of writing too much down. Even if it's just background data, boil it down to a short phrase on paper and save the taxing of your memory for exams, not research papers. Remember, notes are a bit like drafts: you will not end up using everything you write down. Luckily, the next step on [outlines](#) will help you to sift the gold from the debris.

Remember that it's fine to copy down duplicating facts. You may need them later on to defend your thesis. For major issues, having more than one person who agrees with you strengthens your point. Just make sure to record who said what each time.

It's also okay to copy down contradictory information. Analytical papers often include opposing views and even for argumentative papers, acknowledging an opposing viewpoint that is easily disproved by its counterpoint is always a good rhetorical tool.

Whatever you take notes on, be sure to take them from more than one or two key sources. Using a variety will lend weight to your argument, broaden your horizons on the topic when you need varying viewpoints anyway, and demonstrate to your professor the thoroughness of your research.

The final piece of data to record is a working bibliography of all the sources you consult. Begin jotting one down as soon as you begin researching so that you won't forget when it comes time to draft the paper (a common error and stress-inducer). Therefore, before you even take notes, neatly record all the pertinent bibliographical information you'll need for any [citation format](#) you decide to use (author, title, (editor, translator, and/or edition number if there is one), publisher, city of publication, year of publication, issue number, volume, and page numbers).

The call number of a book, the search terms you entered into any database, and any URLs (web site addresses) for online information come in handy for easy RE-access to a resource should something come in question later on. In short, throw out nothing! And date it all too. Again, it doesn't matter that you may not need all the info you write down. But, boy, will it come in handy if your professor ends up telling you later that he wants a Works Consulted as well as a Works Cited list at the end of the paper. With bibliography in hand, you can answer that challenge with a smile instead of a panic attack because you couldn't remember what you read.

### Specific tips to avoid [plagiarism](#)

- Paraphrase most of the time. That is, compress and write in your own words what you understand to be the basic meaning of a sentence or a block of text. As a composition teacher of mine always told our class, "always think of making notes instead of taking notes." Highlighting key passages or photocopying key pages can be good first steps towards extracting important

information, but before you start your draft, **translate** and **rewrite** your notable research findings now. Don't count on doing it later when the temptation of keeping beautifully-crafted sentences in the body of your paper (without acknowledgment) is even greater.

- Take care to distinguish between:
  - **background** or commonly known facts in the field that you can assume your audience already knows (e.g., "Radio has evolved into an incredibly portable and music-based medium"). Your own knowledge acquired from a course makes you a great source of such background data!
  - **other not-so-commonly-known facts** such as some unbelievable statistic you found that you'll have to cite at the point of discussion (e.g., "Research has shown that 95% of students listen to the radio while they study")
  - **opinions** which are usually the most contentious of all. If Dr. Z "believes" something is the case, then record that he believes it.
- Though you should limit this, if you absolutely must take a direct quotation, (1) change to a different coloured pen, (2) put huge quotation marks around it, and (3) don't forget the page number and source. Don't count on remembering later that it was copied down word for word; you might accidentally believe you paraphrased it in which case careless plagiarism will probably take place.

### **Specific tips to facilitate comprehension later on**

- Be wary of special short-hand you or someone else has developed. It can be a god-send as far as time-saving goes, but keep a legend of unusual abbreviations and symbols or else you might be confused come drafting time.
- Make sure you know where every note comes from. A good way to keep track is to number each entry in your working bibliography and then label each page with notes from a source with its corresponding number.
- Put a page number next to all notes just in case you need to know where it came from to come back to the source or to use the note in your paper.
- If you don't understand what a particular resource is saying, don't use it or you'll risk misinterpreting the information and undermining your argument. A good rule of thumb is that if a note doesn't make sense at the point of writing, it won't magically make sense later.
- If you find ideas or reactions coming to you while you're researching, make sure you keep your thoughts and insights separate from your other notes. Using different coloured pens or physically shifting from "me" to "others" sheets is a great way to maintain the distinction.
- Above all, keep everything as legible as possible; you'll thank yourself later. Neat notes especially count for bibliographic information and URLs.

- Be wary of photocopying because as the Student Services department from Charles Sturt University so aptly puts it, "[photocopying] often delays the hard work of reading and thinking; unhappily, it sometimes substitutes for them." How true. But if it's just a case of you not liking the environment of a library for reading, then make limited photocopies and do your analyzing and note-taking at home. Remember though not to cut off page numbers and always write the bibliographic information on the backside of the page for easy reference later on.