

Taking and Organizing Notes for Research Papers

Why take notes?

Note taking is the transcription of information using shortening techniques to create an outside memory source. Students take notes to record information and to aid in comprehension and reflection. Note taking is an essential part of writing any research paper because they give you a better understanding of course material.

While writing a research paper, you will need to gather and synthesize information from various sources. Knowing *what* kind of information to gather from sources and *how* to effectively gather information will in turn give you a clearer sense of how to start your paper, bridging the often intimidating gap between research and writing.

What to record?

A common mistake in notetaking is writing down too much. Before reading an article, have a clear purpose in mind and shape that purpose into a tentative, yet focused research question that will guide your inquiry. Ask yourself as you read: what facts, statistics, opinions, or other information in this article are related to my research question? Framing notetaking around a specific purpose will allow you to navigate between relevant and irrelevant material when conducting research and prevent you from being bogged down with too much information.

In the scenario below, the student wants to write an essay on Angela Duckworth’s book *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, in which they explore the pros and cons of her term “grit” in connection with American ideas of success. An example of a focused research question might look like this:

What are the positive and negative functions of “grit” in American cultural understandings of success?

How to record?

First, it’s important to record bibliography information like the author’s name, the source title, the year, and the page numbers with your notes to avoid having to reference the original source. Tip: get in the habit of writing down the entire citation while taking notes to ensure you have the necessary index information and to save you time creating a bibliography later in the process.

Next, condense the information gathered into your own words, and only copy exactly from the source when you might use that quote in your paper. Finding your own words will prompt you to develop your own ideas about a text and avoid the risk of plagiarism when you begin the

process of writing. Refrain from writing down too much or copying from the text exactly. Instead, use abbreviations, paraphrase, and summarize the text's main ideas.

In the scenario below, the student identified what they considered a useful quotation for their paper because it provides a definition of “grit.”

“It was this combination of passion and perseverance that made high achievers special. In a word, they had grit” (Duckworth 8).

The student doesn’t want to quote the passage in their actual paper, so for the purposes of notetaking they condensed the information into the following:

Grit = passion and perseverance (8)

Learning to organize notes in a useful manner will make forming your research paper easier. A useful form of organizing notes is creating index cards. In this method, you write pieces of information from a source on an index card. After recording all your sources, you can organize your notes by topic, which will in turn help you organize your paper. For the index card method, each source should have one bibliography card that includes the full citation. Every index card stemming from that source should also include the author’s last name and the relevant page numbers.

Example of index card method:

Bibliography card (front side)

Duckworth, Angela. *Grit : the Power of Passion and Perseverance*.
Scribner, 2018.

Summary of author’s main point (backside)

(Duckworth, 3-34)
Grit = passion and perseverance
Talent no guarantee of grit
Tests Grit Scale at West Point + Scripps Spelling Bee
Q.) What is value of grit outside of American ideas of success?

Tip: leave space in your notes to ask questions, write comments, and reflect. Including your own thoughts and ideas in your notes where necessary will not only help direct your thinking, but it will also help you form original ideas, too!

The main advantage of the index style method of notetaking is that it allows you to easily shuffle notes around and examine how different combinations of ideas and topics might take shape in your paper. However, a similar method can be adapted to a notebook or document. In this method, you record the bibliography information on the top of a page from each source. In the left-hand margin, you list the relevant topic name, and in the right-hand margin you record the page number corresponding with your notes. The middle of the page is where you record your abbreviated notes. Like in the index style method, you should begin a new page for each source.

Example of notebook or document style of notetaking:

	Duckworth, Angela. <i>Grit : the Power of Passion and Perseverance</i> . Scribner, 2018.	
Topic:	Notes:	PP.
	Grit = passion and perseverance	8
How does	Talent no guarantee of grit	9
grit factor	Tests Grit Scale at West Point + Scripps Spelling Bee	10-12
into		
success?		
	Q.) Relationship between grit and capitalism?	
	Q.) What is value of grit outside of the workplace?	

Conclusion

In this handout, I explained the importance of notetaking for research papers, provided tips for writing and arranging, and highlighted two common forms of notetaking: the index card method and the notebook method. Whichever way you prefer to take notes, having a system

that works lays the groundwork for successfully writing your research paper. Writing a paper can be a daunting task, but effective notetaking enables you to better prioritize and remember information, improve organization skills, and stay focused—making writing your paper that much easier!

Additional Resources for Reference:

“Label Your Notes: Summary, Paraphrase, or Quotation.” *Excelsior Online Writing Lab*, updated 2022, <https://owl.excelsior.edu/research/note-taking/note-taking-labeling-notes/>. Accessed 29 April 2022.

Pacheco-Vega, Raul. “Note-taking techniques I: The index card method.” *Wordpress and Carrington*, 2018, <http://www.raulpacheco.org/2018/11/note-taking-techniques-i-the-index-card-method/>. Accessed 29 April 2022.

Procter, Margaret. “Taking Notes from Research Reading.” *Writing Advice*, University of Toronto, <https://advice.writing.utoronto.ca/researching/notes-from-research/>. Accessed 29 April 2022.