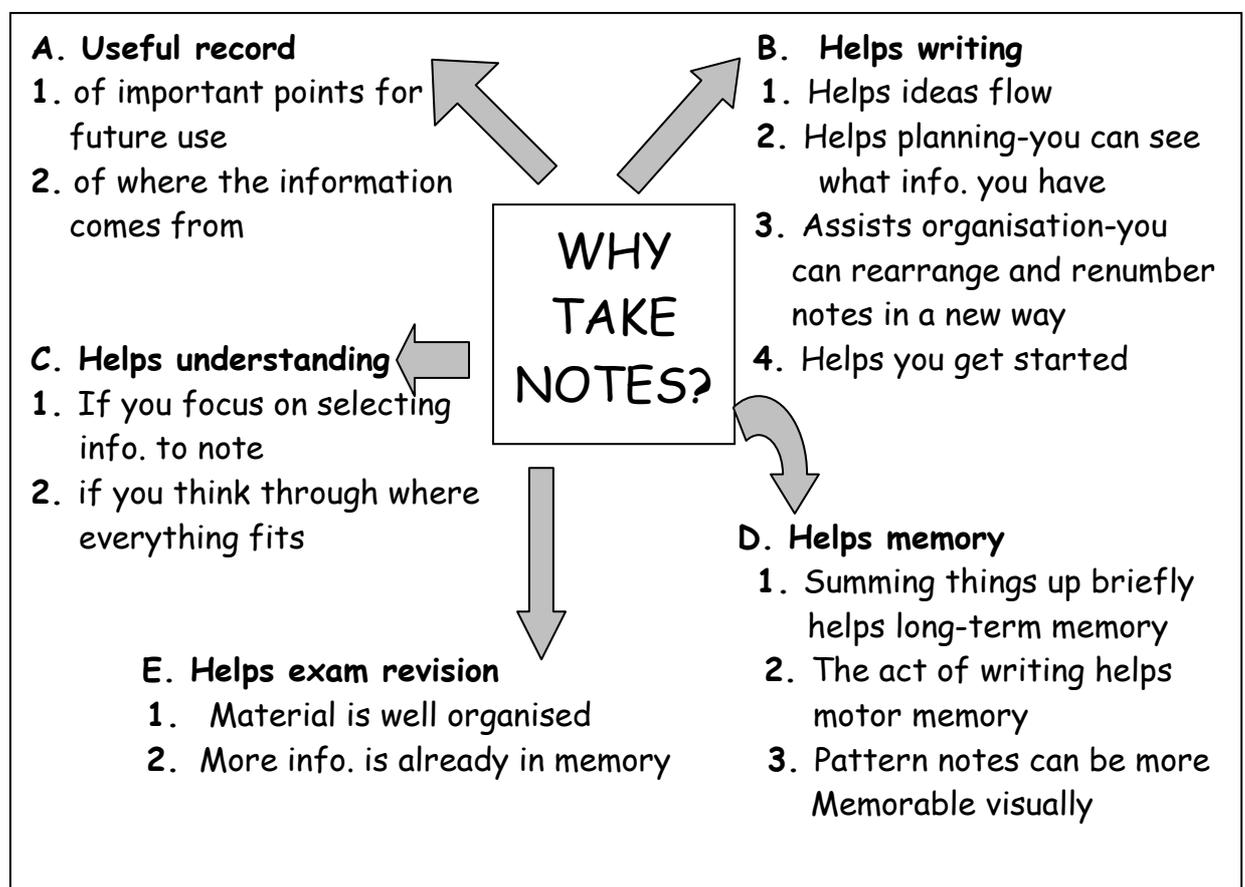**Making effective notes**

Why take notes?

Think about any reasons you might have for taking notes in everyday life, and any occasions when you do so. It's a skill we all use, to some extent, as part of organising daily life and routines, recording useful information, and identifying key points within it.

As a student, you will need to develop this skill for use in specific contexts, such as lectures and reading for assignments.
It's important to be pro-active about this – spend some time thinking about your reasons for taking notes as part of your studies. Why are notes useful?

This 'nuclear' or 'spider' plan sums up some general reasons for you as well.

A. Useful record
1. of important points for future use
2. of where the information comes from

C. Helps understanding
1. If you focus on selecting info. to note
2. if you think through where everything fits

WHY TAKE NOTES?

B. Helps writing
1. Helps ideas flow
2. Helps planning-you can see what info. you have
3. Assists organisation-you can rearrange and renumber notes in a new way
4. Helps you get started

D. Helps memory
1. Summing things up briefly helps long-term memory
2. The act of writing helps motor memory
3. Pattern notes can be more Memorable visually

E. Helps exam revision
1. Material is well organised
2. More info. is already in memory

General principles of note-taking

Good note-taking is based on a clear sense of why you are taking notes in the first place. Once you are clear about this, whether you are in a lecture or reading a text, you can make notes that will be useful, rather than jotted down randomly because everyone else seems to be doing this.

It's important to keep checking: 'Why am I taking notes on this? What kinds of points are useful to note? Why?'

Effective notes should be:

- In a format that suits you – try different methods – linear, nuclear, patterned –

- Be brief and clear – use underlining, colour, your own shorthand

- Should help make sense of the material, break it down

- Should link to previous knowledge and information on the subject – going over them after a lecture, say, and thinking about the links is important

- Should be useful – so in a format that will 'bring it all back' when you get them out ready for the next essay, or revision

- Be legible, but only for you – no-one else needs to read them

- Should contain any useful names, dates, statistics that you need to use again

- Be filed somewhere appropriate, even if it's just a cardboard box with a label on it

Strategies for note-taking

These strategies can apply to different note-taking situations – and the strategy you use depends on the situation and your own preferences. These are ideas that can start you off developing your own strategies

1. Good note-making: general
1.1 Think before you write
1.2 Keep notes brief
1.3 Keep notes organised
1.4 Use your own words
1.5 Leave a wide margin and spaces to add notes later

2. Useful strategies
2.1 Note key words and main ideas
2.2 Write phrases – not sentences
2.3 Use abbreviations
2.4 Use headings
2.5 Number points
2.6 Make the page memorable – with Colour, illustrations and so on
2.7 Link up points – using arrows, dotted lines, colour, numbers, boxes
2.8 Note sources of info. exactly
2.9 Write quotations in colour

3. Unhelpful strategies
3.1 Copying chunks or phrases
3.2 Writing more notes than you can use
3.3 Writing out notes several times to make them neater

4. Tidying messy notes
4.1 Draw a 'square' around sections of notes in different colours to make them stand out
4.2 Use a ruler to divide the page up between sections
4.3 Draw a ring around floating bits of information
4.4 Link stray information by colour-coding it

Taking notes in lectures

Think about the subject of the lecture beforehand, however briefly. It helps you have a sense of what might be covered, so you can grasp ideas quickly.

Develop good listening skills

- Concentrate on the 'big picture' in lectures - don't try to write everything down.

- Watch body language. You can usually tell when the lecturer is starting a new topic, or winding up the old one.

- Listen for speech cues for changes of topic or main ideas e.g.

  "The important point here is..."
  "I repeat that…"
  "It is important to note that…"
  "The next point is crucial…"
  "On the other hand, an alternative view is…"

Keep notes brief

- Making brief notes helps you concentrate on the lecture –long notes don't help your understanding of the lecture at all

- Use a format that suits you – keywords as headings, spider diagrams

- Don't write things down that you don't understand - if you do, put a big question mark next to them so you follow it up later

- Make key words stand out - underline, capitals

- Use your own abbreviations, but make sure you can de-code them afterwards

- Use handouts – highlight keywords etc

- If you are a natural 'doodler', turn doodles into 'mind maps' of things related to the lecture…go over them later and de-code them

Be pro-active

- Note anything you wish to query

- Ask yourself – was that clear? Do I agree with that?

- Make notes of anything you want to follow up

- Ask questions, if you can

- Ask for copies of any OHPs used

- Reflect on the style of the lecture – was it clear? Easy to follow?

- Demanding? Could you deal differently with this type of lecture next time?

- Exchange notes (not literally…) with other students. A twenty minute chat after a lecture can transform your understanding of what it was about. Try and find people to do this with – over a coffee?

Review and recall

Check over your notes as soon as you can after the lecture. You may need to add points, check you understand them, ask yourself questions to clarify your understanding, note anything you need to follow up.

File them – do this as soon as you can, in an appropriate file, folder, or whatever you use

A good aid to understanding is to turn your notes into a mindmap.
(see last section)

Taking notes from reading

Effective reading skills are linked to effective note-taking, so it's worth thinking about your reading skills at the same time (see Active Reading booklet).

Before you start

- Why are you reading something? Do you need a general summary of the reading? An overview for future reference?
- Identify the purpose of your notes and break down the note-taking task by asking specific questions.
- Specific information? References for an assignment? Names and dates?
- Are these notes for an assignment? Revision?
- Spend more time thinking, planning and focussing before you even start the reading and note-taking

Taking useful notes

- Decide how much to read/note at once
- Break the text down into 'chunks' to help concentration – know your limits
- Skim-read each section first-get an over-view
- Note key points, ideas…usually at the start of a section or paragraph
- Keep checking the purpose of the notes to stay 'on-track'
- Include references (page numbers, etc for finding/checking back)
- Keep notes brief – number, highlight, make them useful – leave space for adding other points later
- Use your own words where possible to help understanding
- If using a photocopy, highlight and underline key points
  Develop your own system

Make notes useful

- Check you can read/understand your notes
- Organise – use numbers, highlighter, headings to make notes more useful later on
- Note down queries, places where you disagree
- Think about how the information relates to previous knowledge/data you have-how could you use this? What else do you need? What was missing?
- File somewhere useful and easy to find

Mindmapping as a strategy for understanding

Some people find mindmaps invaluable as a way of exploring connections within subject areas, and as a useful tool for planning a task like writing an essay – but other people find them messy and inconclusive.

These are some 'note-taking' occasions when they can serve a useful purpose. It's worth finding out a bit about their uses and trying them out.

- After lectures, as a way of getting an overview of what was said, and expanding on your basic notes. They also help your understanding of the topic, as the connections with previous knowledge can be made

- After reading, for the same reasons. Try asking yourself what the reading was about, jotting down ideas and making the connections with other aspects of the topic

- Planning an assignment-a way of 'brainstorming' around a title and exploring aspects of the subject. A series of 'mini-mindmaps' can help break down a seemingly huge topic into manageable sections which you then organise and write up

- Exam revision – a way of recalling a subject and making connections – also, working out which aspects you need to look at more carefully

Exam essays – a quick way to plan an exam answer which gives a structure, however sketchy, for your writing

On the next page is a quick mindmap that represents the points above

For more on mindmapping, see:

Buzan, T. 2002 *How to Mindmap* London: HarperCollins

If you would like this leaflet in an alternative format, contact:

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Sample Mindmap

GROUP WORK

- Good for getting ideas
- Represents everyone's views
- Starting point for selection

AFTER LECTURES

- Expand on notes
- Get an overview
- Help understanding
- Connects with previous knowledge

EXAM ESSAYS

- Quick plan
- Get a structure for essay

USING MINDMAPS

AFTER READING

- Overview
- Own words
- Understanding
- Make connections

EXAM REVISION

- Helps memory
- Slot in names and dates
- Check gaps
- Make connections
- Recall on a topic

PLANNING, ASSIGNMENTS, ANY TASKS

- Prioritise tasks
- Make 'mini-mindmaps' around each aspect
- Explore the question
- Decide reading