

Note Taking For Geography Students

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Why Take Notes?

Unless you have a phenomenally good memory, it is important to make notes of what you read and hear, and to keep them accessible for essays and revision. Even if you never refer to your notes again, you are likely to remember more by taking notes at the time. Notes are essentially your record of diverse sources of information, written in your own words. Notes can aid the deep learning of concepts, theories and ideas, can paraphrase material for inclusion in essays and reports, can help in revision and as a general memory-jogger, can help in evaluating different points of view and opinions, and can help in formulating personal ideas.

Where and When Do You Take Notes?

Anywhere, any time. The library and the lecture theatre are not the only sources of material for note taking. Other fruitful sources of geographical information include radio and TV reports, specialized documentaries, videos, newspapers (see Vujakovic, 1998), as well as seminars, tutorials and discussion groups. Take notes whenever it is the cheapest and most efficient way of engaging with material. There will be times and places where photocopying, or some other form of recording, will be the best option. However, you will have to summarize the ideas contained in the copy at some point; this will almost inevitably involve taking notes over some description.

Taking Notes Over What You Read

With increasing pressure on library texts in many institutions, you may only have a book or journal for a limited period and need to get the most from it in a short time. Effective learning is about taking in new ideas, thinking through new ideas and expressing new ideas. Key questions are: What do I need to know now? (to prepare an essay or report), and what else do I need to know? (to aid wider learning and prepare for examination). Just because an article is in an academic journal, in the library or on a reading list does not make it a noteworthy item.

Many people launch straight into a piece of reading and immediately start to take notes. This leads to a lot of notes from the first few pages of an article or book, and little or nothing from the rest of the text. The important parts of most texts are often not in the first few, scene-setting pages. After careful consideration of the structure of the text, you may decide that you only need to make notes from the conclusion and discussion section. In some articles, the abstract alone may contain the key points for the required notes. Sometimes you will need detailed notes, while at other times sketchy jottings and summaries are fine.

Note taking is connected to effective reading and writing. Asking questions about why one is learning leads to more directed note taking. Rowntree (1988) describes an active reading method called SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recall, Review). The process involves:

- (1) Survey: look through the text to see how it is organized and identify the main headings.
- (2) Question: look again at notes already made, to examine the reasons why further reading might be needed and to ask what new information is required.
- (3) Read: and take notes that answer the questions raised in 2.

- (4) Recall: think about the issues again, check to see if you can recall and explain the ideas in appropriate detail. Do you need to repeat 2 and 3 again with new questions?
- (5) Review: all elements, the questions and your notes. Are you happy to return the book to the library shelf?

Following Rowntree's methodology, taking notes only after stage two, should cut down on excessive and diffuse notes and ensure you do not have to return needlessly to the text.

It is much easier to take notes from a written text than from an audio-visual presentation (lecture, video, news program) since you can work at your own pace. You can work through difficult passages a number of times. But these advantages carry the risk of writing too much. One of the purposes of taking notes is to discipline yourself to digest what you are reading and to extract the essential points (both for present needs and future contingencies such as examinations). Copying whole passages postpones the hard work of thinking through the issues, ultimately wastes time and paper, and is generally ineffectual as a means of learning. Try using Figure 1 when you take notes from an article.

FIGURE 1: Some questions to consider when reading a journal article

Read the article.

Write down the reference in full. (Author, date, title, journal title, volume and page numbers and the library shelf reference so you can find it again.)

- (1) Summarize in two sentences what it is about.
- (2) Summarize in one sentence the main conclusion.
- (3) What are the strong points of the article?
- (4) Is this an argument/case I can agree with?
- (5) How does this information fit with my current knowledge?
- (6) What do I need to read next to advance my understanding of this topic?

When you have decided that a text is worth taking notes on, always write out the reference in full (see Mills 1994) and note its location details (library reference number). This will allow you to provide a full reference in any essay or report. You should check the requirements of your course; some departments require you to provide comprehensive details including, for example, the publisher's name and city.

It is much easier to take down all the details while you're taking notes than to have to return to the library and hunt down the book again.

Taking Notes Over What You Hear

Geography lectures, tutorials, workshops and seminars provide an important source of ideas and information, so you are strongly advised to take notes over important points. Do not try to note everything otherwise you will be so busy writing there will be no time to involve yourself with the topic or to grasp the broader issues being discussed. Your primary goal is to participate actively, not to come away with a perfect transcript of the proceedings. Watch out for lecturers' pointers to key material, especially the introduction and summary. Try not to fall into the trap of only noting information from presentation slides; they are likely to give headings and factual examples such as tables or graphs, but not the linking arguments.

Some lecturers discourage note taking during their lectures. Sometimes it is better to listen and attempt to understand the key ideas being presented and make notes from readings.

When you take notes over what you hear, they may be scappily written, in some cases barely legible, and often cryptic. After some time, you might not be able to make sense of them. It is a good habit to summarize and clarify notes as soon as possible. This reinforces memory and understanding of the material and may stimulate further, productive thought. It will also give you an opportunity to clarify points with the lecturer at an early stage. You may find it more fun and efficient to consolidate notes with a friend, to brainstorm the key points and pool ideas.

How Long Should My Notes Be?

It is impossible to say how long notes should be, since so much depends on the nature and importance of the text, and the purpose for which you are reading. As a rule of thumb, if notes occupy more than 1%-5% of the length of the text, they are likely to be too long.

The academic content of articles and books will be relevant in different ways to different people. An article from *The Economist* on the refugee crisis in Africa may be a key source for an essay on refugees in Africa, noted and quoted in detail, but merely merit a one-line summary in a report on migration patterns in Africa. For an essay on refugees in Southeast Asia it is irrelevant, no notes are needed unless there is some general information on UN policy on refugees that could be useful. Note-taking methods depend on your objective. Look at Figure 2. What style of note taking would you adopt in each case? There are a few example answers in the right column. Think about where you will use the information. Unless you scan and categorize reading matter you may waste time on an irrelevant article or one which repeats the information you already have.

FIGURE 2: What style of notes is required?

Academic content	Appropriate note style
Key article that repeats the content of the lecture	None, it is in the lecture notes
Fundamental background theory, partly covered in the lecture	
An argument in favor of point x	
An argument that contradicts the main point	
An example from an odd situation where the general theory breaks down	Enough to write a 'YES BUT' paragraph
A critically important case study	
Just another case study	
Interesting but off-the-point article	
An unexpected insight from a different standpoint	
An example / argument you agree with	
An argument you think is unsound	(1) Brief notes of the alternative argument, refs and case example. (2) Comments on why it doesn't work so argument makes sense at revision.
A superficial consideration of a big topic	
A very detailed insight into a problem	

Stopping

One of the most difficult decisions in any form of research is deciding when to stop searching for materials, listening and asking questions, reading and making notes. It is important to identify why notes are being made, to spot where they are repetitious (there is no point making notes from a text when the material is in your lecture notes) and to realize when enough material has been covered for the purpose at hand. Further reading and note taking can give a warm feeling of productive work, but may reduce the time available for writing and revising an essay or report. Note taking is time consuming. It needs to be time well spent. Ask yourself: Is this making me think? Am I getting a better grasp of the subject material?

Remember:

- Notes should never copy the text. They should pick out the essential points relevant to your aims.
- Notes should grab your attention when used later.
- Notes should be written in your own language and make sense to you.
- Notes can be multipurpose: act as the foundation for a talk or essay, help synthesize a module, express personal ideas and opinions, help prepare for examination

The next section suggests some practical methods for efficient note taking. As you read this section think about what you do now and what you might try.

Some Ideas to Consider

Find a technique that suits you: everyone makes notes in different ways. There are people who draw flow charts, spider diagrams or mental maps (see Northedge, 1990; Saunders, 1994), who use colored pens, code and advocate different sizes and colors of paper. Keep it simple, otherwise you will need to carry a small stationery shop with you.

Taking notes on *cards* helps to condense material. Cards can be shuffled and re-sorted for different purposes. Loose-leaf paper lets you file pages at the relevant point in lecture notes. Try paper with different line spacing and try leaving spaces and margins to add notes later. Notebooks are preferred by those who lose paper, but you should index the notebook. You might try classifying your notes with an asterisk system:

- *** Essential
- ** Helpful
- ?* Possibly
- ↓ Off the point (but might be useful)

Multi-colored highlighting on your own books and photocopies is advocated by Saunders (1994). Saunders suggests yellow for key information and definitions, green for facts and figures worth learning, pink for key ideas and linking notes, blue for items you want to find out more about.

What is fact and what is opinion? In political or social geography identifying the opinions of writers can be relatively easy; it is less obvious sometimes in physical geography, but will still exist. Keep asking: What has the researcher proved? What is s/he suggesting or guessing? A color code for fact versus opinions may help. You might use another pen color for your own comments, to distinguish your own thoughts from the notes.

Abbreviations can speed up note taking. Try reducing word lengths, either by omitting vowels, or devising abbreviations and symbols, here are some suggestions:

&, +	and	=	is the same as
→	leads to	xxx ⁿ	xxxion (action=act ⁿ)
↑	increase	xxx ^g	xxxing (acting=act ^g)
↓	decrease	//	between
>	greater than	xpt	except
<	less than	←	before
?	question	∴	therefore, so, leads to
Δ	change	∞	time
Σ	total, all	\$	money
@	at	Λ	above, higher than
eg	for example	ie	in other words, meaning
#	number	0	none, gone

Leave space in notes. Writing on alternate lines and leaving wide margins are good ideas. Leave space to add later ideas, arrows to link ideas, insert headings, and to number or order lists. There will be room to cross-reference to notes from other geography lectures or even from other modules or courses. Take time to note connections between topics and to note where one piece of reading supports other topics.

Headers and bullets. The literary style of written work may disguise the logical structure and steps in an argument. By using headings and numbered points you should be able to identify the sequence of logical steps in an argument.

Paraphrasing and quotations. If you copy anything directly into your notes you run a risk of memorizing and repeating the material directly in an essay. This may leave you open to accusations of plagiarism. There are two ways to avoid this problem. First use paraphrasing; a paraphrased note puts it into your own words. The notes may be longer or shorter than the original text but are in your own language. Remember, simply swapping a couple of words is not enough. The second approach is to use direct quotations. These can be very useful, but must always be properly referenced (see Mills 1994). Use them when you are making an important point and it is the best way to explain an idea. Always ensure that you have recorded the page number(s) for any quotes, as you will usually be required to provide these as part of your reference. Searching for page numbers after the event is extremely time-consuming. You may also find it useful to note page numbers (relating to specific sections in a text) in the margin of your notes; this is useful if you need to return to a text at a later date (to clarify an issue, to expand on your notes).

Summary

Too many notes can seriously dampen your enthusiasm. Try to ensure that your notes:

- contain relevant, new knowledge
- focus on important elements
- contain your own ideas and comments

- make links to other notes
- are critical, in that they ask and answer questions such as: Is this what it means? Is this really the result? Is this conclusion justified? Do I agree?
- highlight what you need to do next

Correspondence: Pauline E Kneale, School of Geography, The University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT, UK.
Fax: 0113 2333308. Email: pauline@geog.leeds.ac.uk

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