Format notes in different ways

Introduction

Creating notes that work for you will help with assignment preparation and exam revision. There are a number of different ways that you can format your notes – outlined in this guide.

When to make notes

The following are occasions/activities when you should make notes:

- Lectures
- Seminars
- Personal tutorials
- When participating in group work
- Undertaking recommended reading
- Researching for an assignment
- Creating revision aids

What to include

Your notes should act as a prompt (i.e. there is enough information to remind you about what was covered and what were the main ideas). Writing down everything is not helpful. You might include:

- main points on the topic
- references to the sources these main points come from
- any other information, such as brief examples or links to further information
- your own ideas (questions, comments) about the subject

How to write notes

Whenever possible, make notes using your own words. This way you will test your understanding, as well as avoid risk of plagiarism by paraphrasing. This will also help you become a confident writer.

Things to consider

The following are things to consider when making notes (regardless of the format):

Be selective	Do not copy out large chunks of text and include these in your notes – this will not help you to learn. Likewise, it is not a good use of your time – you might as well just reread the original source.
Structure	Structuring your notes makes them easier to use in the future. Consider using headings and subheadings to breakdown which parts of your notes.
Highlight key areas	Highlighting key areas will help you focus your attention and potentially remember them better Do not use highlighting feature excessively because this will make it difficult to identify the highlighted parts that are most important.
Clear and legible	Notes that are unreadable are essentially useless. Therefore, when writing notes take your time and think about how you are formatting and laying them out.
Note down questions	This will enable you to identify gaps in your knowledge and structure future revision.

Format

There are a number of different ways that you can format notes. Certain methods are more appropriate for illustrating different things so you might want to use a mixture of formats in a single set of notes.

Lists

The most common note taking format is a list. This involves writing down the main points that you have read in a textbook / have been told in a lecture as a series of short sentences or bullet points. Things to include:

- Overview of key points
- Key references
    - Correct spelling of authors' surnames
    - Correct names of key models / theories
    - Correct date of key models / theories
- Whether a model / theory is well supported
- Lecturers' own opinions

PowerPoint hand-outs and making notes

When students are given a set of PowerPoint slides they commonly make their notes directly on to the hand-out. This can quickly become messy and make it very difficult to use the notes during your revision. An alternative endnote strategy is includes:

A) Number (1, 2, 3 etc) each slide where you want to make additional notes
B) On a piece of paper write the corresponding number and next to it write your additional notes
C) Staple the piece of paper with your hand written notes to the end of the hand-out

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Table notes

Table based notes are very useful when you want to make comparisons between different pieces of information (such as theories). The following example shows how table notes can be used to compare a number of theories about the same topic:

Author	Date	Theory	Description of Theory
Jones, L.	2000	Theory X	This theory suggests….
King, H.	2010	Theory Y	This theory suggests….

The size of your table will depend upon what you are revising. For instance, you could add additional columns such as: Who else has supported the theory? Was the author a prominent figure in a theoretical movement – if so, which one?
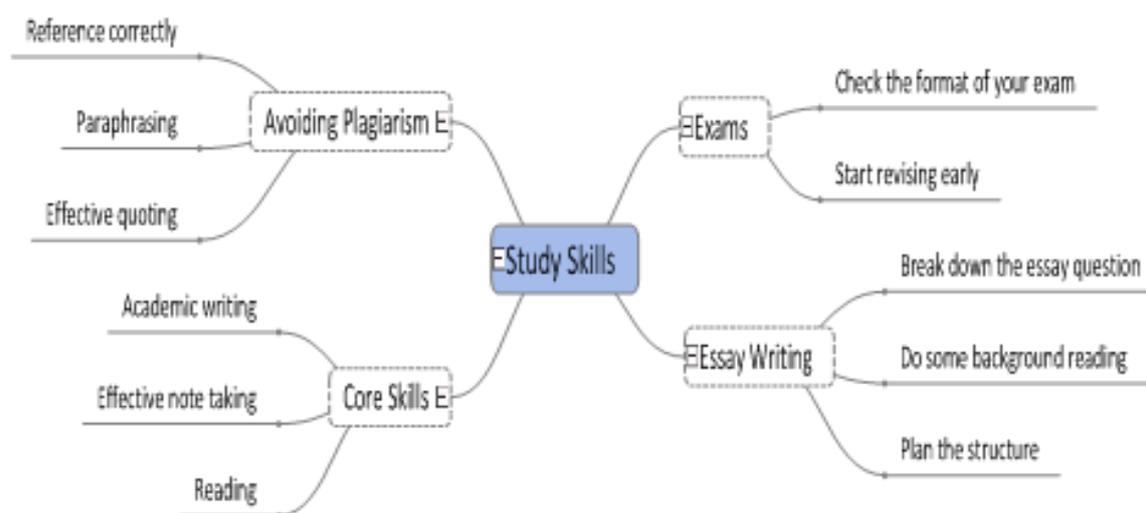
Mind maps

Mind maps are useful in terms of identifying connections between different sources of information. It is useful to create mind maps (or spider diagrams) to summarise each of your main revision topics. You can practice this technique by presenting each of your lecture topics as a mindmap. The process of thinking about and reorganising the material in this way increases memory and understanding of the information.

The following outlines how to create a mind map:

A) Write your main topic in the centre of your page
B) Write down key areas linked to the main topic (around the main topic) and join to the main topic using branches.
C) Write down factors relevant to key areas and use branches to expand these.

Example of a mind map:

There are software packages available **(as used in the above example)** on the computers in the University Learning Resource Centres and Libraries that you can use to create electronic mind maps.

Compiled notes

Compiling notes involves creating one new set of notes out of several other set of notes. When creating revision notes it can be useful to 'compile' information that you had originally made notes about on separate occasions. For instance, you could create compiled notes by linking together notes you created in a lecture and notes you made whilst undertaking additional reading. The process of compiling your notes can make it easier to see how information fits together.

Further information

The Learning Resources Study Hub provides a range of opportunities (such as workshops and drop-ins) for you to enhance your academic skills. For more information visit: **lrweb.beds.ac.uk/studyhub**