Reading and Note-taking for Later Research

Reading and note-taking for later research.

In later stages of research, our goals are to:

- Better understand our sources.
- Discover answers to our research question.
- Engage critically with the sources we are reading.

At this stage, we'll use the select and study strategies to get the most out of our reading.

Now imagine we have 12 different articles and reports saved in our research folders.

Do we have to read each one from start to finish?

Absolutely not!

Experienced researchers rarely read their sources from beginning to end unless every section of the source seems relevant.

The select technique is simple.

Based on the searching and skimming we've done so far, we return to our sources.

This time to identify the sections or pages we want to read more closely.

Make a list of these sections in your notes.

These become your to-do list for deeper reading.

Finally, we study the sections we've selected.

We use a variety of active reading strategies to understand and engage with our source.

First, we read to understand the text asking:

- What are the author's main ideas?
- Write one or two-word summaries of content in the margins.
- Underline keywords.
- Circle any words or phrases you don't understand. Look them up if necessary.

You know you've understood a text if you can summarize the content briefly in your own words.

Next, we read to engage with the source's ideas by asking questions:

- Does the author give you answers to your research questions?
- Does the information agree or contradict anything else you've read?
- What is unique about this author's perspective or research?

As you can see, annotation helps us study the text.

By circling keywords, highlighting passages, and making brief annotations, we engage with the source and improve our understanding.

Our next step will be to take notes.

Here are five essential tips for taking high-quality notes.

Tip 1: Keep your research questions and goals in mind.

This will help you to decide what to write down in your notes and in how much detail.

Adapt your note-taking strategies for your target audience, your writing objectives, and the kind of project you are working on.

For example, a campaign on social media will use a lot less detail than a research report on the same topic.

Tip 2: Record ideas in your own words.

While it's tempting to just cut and paste, you'll do better to use your own words in detailed point form.

This helps you to avoid plagiarism.

Include direct quotes sparingly in your notes only when the wording is unique or you want to capture a key term.

Tip 3: Record where the ideas come from.

Most sources have page numbers, but if not, jot down the paragraph number instead.

Recording this in your notes is absolutely essential for in-text citation.

Tip 4: Include your own ideas.

Think about ways you can talk back to the ideas you are recording.

Do you agree or disagree? Do you see connections or overlap with other readings? Do any new ideas or questions arise? Write these down.

Find a way to distinguish between your ideas and the sources in your notes.

Recording your own ideas helps create content you can use in your first draft.

Tip 5: Label and organize your notes.

Look for themes and patterns, color code your notes with highlighters or sticky tabs, choose whatever works best for you.

If you follow these steps you will make the most of your time, gain a better understanding of your sources, and come away with high-quality notes.

For one-on-one help with research and writing, visit the research help desk at the library, contact your librarian, or drop in to the Writing Center.