

HOW TO TAKE NOTES

A. Trevor Thrall, George Mason University

Revised February 6, 2019

You, the student, face the perpetual problem: how to read hundreds of pages per term and still keep track of who said what and what matters most. The solution is actually quite simple. In order to tame the information tide, you must take notes on what you read. Most students do not. Highlighting while you read doesn't do it. Taking notes in a structured way does. This brief memo will tell you why taking notes works, how to take high quality notes, and how to use them to study for exams. If you use this approach I guarantee you will get much better grades in all your classes.

Why Take Notes

There are several reasons why taking notes helps you do better in class:

- Taking notes forces you to pay more attention to what you're reading. When you know you are going to summarize the major points of the reading, however, you will make yourself work harder to understand it.
- Taking notes after you have read something is like reading the important parts twice but even better because writing activates a different part of your brain and helps lock in the knowledge at a deeper level.
- Taking notes allows you to study more effectively and efficiently. Instead of having to read everything over again the night before the exam you will have a handy set of notes that focuses on the information that matters most. Highlighting or scribbling in the margins is fine if you need something to do while you're reading, but that's not taking notes.

How to Take Notes

Taking great notes involves three steps:

- Reading the entire article or chapter carefully.
- Determining the most important themes of the reading.
- Summarizing those key themes in a way that helps you understand and remember them.

The following page gives an example of how to take great notes on an article about bias in the media. My commentary about the how's and why's of each section are in the *[brackets]*. Please note that

without my commentary the notes would fit on one page. I highly recommend you keep your notes to one page per reading. This forces you to analyze the reading more thoroughly up front and allows for more efficient studying later.

Making Flashcards to Ace Your Exams

Having taken great notes, you are already ahead of the curve, but if you really need to get an 'A' I recommend one final step: making flashcards (or as I prefer to do it: making "flash-slides" with PowerPoint). Yes, it sounds silly, but millions of people trying to learn everything from language to biology have discovered the effectiveness of flashcards for remembering critical facts and information. Flashcards are especially useful for courses where a midterm or final exam covers dozens of readings and when the professor has made clear that you need to be able to connect authors' names to their arguments.

The approach is very simple and has just three steps:

- For each reading, write the author's name and the title of the reading on the front of the card/slide.
- On the back of each card/slide, write a three or four bullet-point summary to include: 1) the main argument; 2) the most important data or example, and 3) your take on it or anything special you might want to remind yourself to use in an essay
- Study the slides from both sides (can you remember argument from author and vice versa)

Sample Flashcard (note that this flashcard is based on the sample notes page below!):

FRONT OF FLASHCARD:

Joe Blow, "Liberal Media Bias"

BACK OF FLASHCARD

- Main argument: TV has a liberal bias that has been getting worse for years
- Key data: His content analysis shows that the news calls conservatives stupid twice as often as liberals
- Key data: Every time the media calls a candidate stupid the candidates loses 2% of the vote
- For essay: Media helped Clinton beat Bush in 1992 because they kept calling Bush stupid

Sample Notes Page

Author and Title of Reading: Joe Blow, "Liberal Media Bias"

[Remember that professors care a lot about who said what and will often use author names on exams]

Summary

Joe Blow argues that American newspaper and tv news has a huge liberal bias that has been getting worse over the past two decades. He argues that this has given liberal candidates an unfair advantage in campaigns.

[Use your own words to summarize the main argument of the reading. This is the most important step in the note taking process because everything else in your notes flows from knowing what the main arguments or themes are. The abstract, introduction, and conclusion will be your main guides to what the author is trying to do. Remember, exam questions, especially essay exams, almost always focus on main themes, not small side issues.]

Methods

Blow makes his case by examining news content from 1980 through 2006 and coding how many times journalists call a candidate "stupid." He then correlates how many times they call a candidate stupid with what percentage of the vote that candidate got.

[Professors are in the business of making and criticizing arguments about the world. Once you have identified an author's main argument, you need to ask how he/she proves and illustrates the argument. Professors tend to care a lot more about methods than other people, so be ready by thinking about whether the author's methods actually prove their case or not.]

Data & Examples

- In 1980 the media called 5% of liberal candidates and 10% of conservative candidates stupid.
- By 2006 the percentages were 10% and 86%, respectively.
- Across the 1980-2006 period a candidate lost 2% of the vote for every time a journalist called them stupid.
- Blow uses the Clinton/Bush/Perot race in 1992 to illustrate the damning effects of being called stupid - Bush dropped 20 points in the poll after a big rise in the number of journalists calling him stupid.

[The data and examples are the proof in the pudding. They make great fodder for multiple-choice questions and they are also critical for using in essay exams – professors will usually ask first for you to explain the argument or concept and then to give an example.]

My thoughts

This is a very solid and convincing study. It supports the pieces we read by Windbag and Hoser, and directly calls into question the conclusions of Poser's article that we read last week. My one criticism is that he doesn't really prove that being called stupid is the only reason for candidates losing votes. There could be other things going on at the same time.

[The last section is for you to organize your own thoughts about the reading and how it compares to other readings and how it fits in to the course overall. Professors love asking questions that make you compare one author to another. Taking notes is what prepares you to answer those questions.]