

WRT 205

Note-taking Techniques

Remember that note-taking is part of the invention process. It allows you to develop your ideas and engage with your sources, which will better prepare you for the work of drafting that follows. Below is a quick sketch of some activist note-taking techniques. I would *strongly* encourage you to try these out and find what works for you.

Step #0—before anything else, *annotate*.

You need to make these texts useful for you, so be sure to annotate as you read.

- Mark the author's argument, taking careful note of the signposts they provide for you ("in this essay, I will argue." etc.)
- Take note of the key terms/phrases that recur throughout the piece (either exact repetitions or strands of synonyms). These give you important clues as to the core ideas, as well as the tone/attitudes of the piece.
- Note any places where you are confused or have questions. Be sure to revisit these.
- Note places that resonate with the points you're trying to build, and indicate *right on the text* how you think this might be useful to you. Remember that there are many ways that you can make use of sources in your writing: background information, definition, support, example, counter-claim/complicating idea, opportunity for analysis/ interpretation, etc.). Thinking about this as you read will make it much easier for you to return to the text and harvest the information and ideas that you need.
- Note any points that remind you of something else you've been reading—these are opportunities to get a conversation going.
- Note your reactions and responses *now*, before you forget what you were thinking.
- Before you move on, make sure that you are conversant with the text. Here's how to test yourself—without looking at the piece, jot down a couple of sentences in response to these questions. **This piece is about... and The main point or argument of this text is....** If you can do that, then you probably understand the text well enough to make use of it. If you can't, then you don't, and you had better give it another close look.

Some suggested note-taking techniques

Keep a writer's journal

To help you keep organized, I would strongly encourage you to make use of a writer's journal to record the thoughts you have about your project. Some suggestions:

- Naturally, you don't only think about your project when you're sitting down to write; random thoughts may well pop into your head at other times, and it's to your advantage to record these somehow so that you've got them to use later on. Use your technology to capture these right away (text or email yourself, record a quick audio file, etc.).
- Write regularly—if you're feeling stuck, remember that **we write to figure out what we have to say**. Take 5-10 minutes to freewrite, and see what happens. This is a good way to experiment with ideas, to see if a thought is worth following up on, or if it's a dead end.
- Just keep a file handy on your computer—"___ project stuff"—and use it.

Double-entry journal

In print or in a file on your computer, create two columns, like so:

Notes from the source	My responses
Record quotations, summaries, paraphrases of key moments from the text. This is a good time to do the work of summarizing and paraphrasing—this is when you're going to	What are my first thoughts? Then what? What does this make me think of? What strikes me most about this? How would I agree/disagree, challenge this

be most familiar with the nuances of the text, so you're going to be best equipped to do that. Be sure to record the page numbers for each nugget of information, so that you will have it handy when you're drafting.	idea? What else does this connect with? How do I feel about it? Here you're beginning to make ideas about what you can do with the source.
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Jimmy Fallon approach

Here you use note-taking to open up a conversation with your source in which, like Jimmy Fallon (or Jimmy Kimmel or Seth Meyers—pick your favorite late-night host), you always get the last word.

- Create a template document in Word with these features: source's bibliographic information, the date you're doing this, a section titled What Strikes Me Most, a section of Notes from the Source, and then The Source Reconsidered
- Then fill in these sections for each of your sources. Use the What Strikes Me Most section to do a fastwrite (5-10 minutes) addressing some or all of these questions: what do you believe? What are you most skeptical of? What surprised you? What do you most remember? What did you find most convincing? How has it changed your thinking? How does it compare to other sources? What new possibilities does this open up?
- Use the Source Notes section to record key nuggets of information or ideas from the source (i.e. what you found important enough to annotate as you read).
- Use The Source Reconsidered for another fastwrite—now what do you think of it? Before I read this, I thought... but now I understand that.... Now that I've taken a closer look, here's what I'm thinking about...

I was a student once upon a time (for a *loooooong* time), so I know how this often works: you start on a research project with every intention of being more organized and thorough than you were last time, and before you know it, you're sitting down the night before the paper is due with a stack of print-outs and a heap of links to articles and no idea of where to begin. The idea here is to develop a *process* that you will find useful, so that you will actually want to stick with it in the future.

I'm not going to suggest that any of these methods will work for anybody for any project. That would be foolhardy. What I will posit is that there are some basic principles at the root of these approaches that are pretty consistent and pretty predictably effective. Whether you ultimately fall in love with one of these approaches or cobble together something else that works for you, here's what you should be looking to your note-taking work to accomplish:

- To help you concentrate your reading on two major tasks: understanding the text for what it is, and appreciating what it might contribute to your own project.
- To help you see connections between texts—how it is that your sources are taking part in a larger conversation.
- To help you harvest ideas and information from a text for use in your own work.
- To further your thinking about your own ideas *as you read*, since we all build on the work of others.
- To help you identify gaps or holes in your research—points on which you might need additional material/sources.

Whatever methods you can develop or borrow that will help you to accomplish those goals are fine. Your process has to work for *you*, not for me. It will take some trial-and-error work to identify what techniques are most helpful to you. Start that work now, in this course, and you will have some portable skills to carry forward out of the class for application elsewhere.