

# Note-making: Principles and Practice

This guide examines the process of *making* notes rather than *taking* them. Note-making plays an important role in developing the skills involved in being critical – whether in thought or writing. In this guide, you will find an explanation of note-making, as well as some useful advice on how you might practise it.

## Note-making versus note-taking

What is the difference between note-making and note-taking?

### Note-taking

Note-taking, as its name suggests, is a passive process: it involves simply writing down as much as you hear from a tutor – or read in a textbook – without discriminating between useful and less useful information. The notes that are produced tend to be very descriptive and broadly focused. Since note-taking is passive in nature and involves less thought, it leads to surface-level, temporary learning.

### Note-making

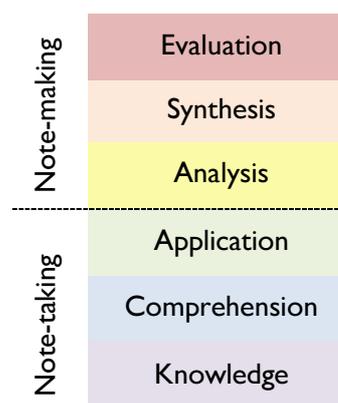
Note-making is a more active process that involves carefully selecting relevant pieces of information as you listen to your tutor or read a textbook or journal article. Therefore, the objective of note-making is not to write down everything you hear or read, but to keep note of anything relevant or that requires further investigation or clarification. Notes made in this way are more meaningful and purposive, as well as being better organised and of greater relevance. The active nature of note-making means that it requires the application of a range of skills related to criticality. It therefore allows you an opportunity to develop these skills as you learn.

Why is it better to practise note-making rather than note-taking? Consider what has been discussed above:

1. **Active process:** note-making is an active process that involves thought and the application of skills associated with criticality.
2. **Criticality:** note-making provides opportunities for practising the skills associated with criticality (for more on this, see below).

3. **Deep-level learning:** by implementing a more critical approach to making notes, your learning will be more in-depth and permanent. In other words, you will remember more for longer periods of time.
4. **Relevance and usefulness:** by selecting information according to its usefulness, you will inevitably produce notes that are more relevant, meaningful, and easier to use.
5. **Reflection:** as we will see, practising note-making also gives you the opportunity to reflect on the breadth of your knowledge. Just as you might make a note of relevant information, you can also keep a record of any ideas or concepts that require further investigation.

## Criticality and note-making



As this table demonstrates, note-making is closely associated with those higher order skills at the heart of criticality. Practising note-making will allow you to develop these skills and thereby enhance the critical edge of your work.

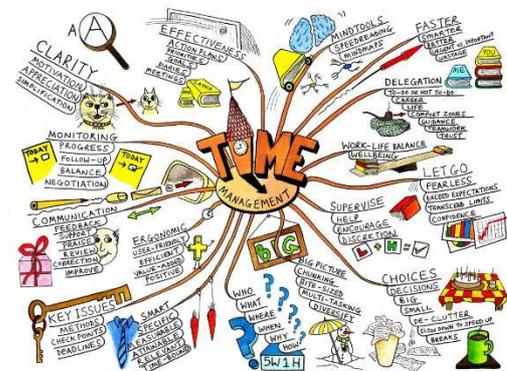
## Approaches to note-making

There are a number of ways to make notes. It's up to you which method you use – different people will have different ways of learning, and so one method is not necessarily better than another. Remember, you can adapt any of these approaches to suit your needs.

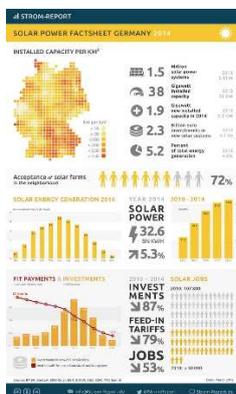
- a. **Mind-maps:** mind-maps aren't for everyone, but they do have two distinct benefits: (i) by including graphics or pictures, they offer the opportunity of learning visually, which for many students

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is a more effective way of remembering information; (ii) mind-maps allow you to get an overview of a topic and establish connections between points, which helps to foster critical thinking.



- b. **Post-it notes technique:** this approach requires a printout or photocopy of a textbook or journal article. You simply add post-it notes on the page at relevant points. The principal advantage to this method is that it encourages you to be selective; you can't cover an entire page with post-its because you won't be able to read it if you do so! (Adobe Reader allows to add post-its or annotations to pdf documents, a very useful alternative to using paper copies.)
- c. **Factsheets:** perhaps more useful for revision purposes, factsheets encourage selective reading of a range of sources in order to pick out key points related to a topic. These points are normally presented succinctly on one side of a piece of A4 or A3 paper. Similar to mind-maps, factsheets offer opportunities to learn visually; they therefore promote deep-level learning.



- d. **Summary technique:** summarising the content of a book chapter or journal article provides an effective way of practising those higher order critical thinking skills, as well as gaining an insight into how an argument is constructed, developed and expressed. You can do this by using post-it notes, index cards, or even a blank piece of lined paper. Simply note down the key points – often reflecting the subject of each paragraph – on a separate post-it note, card, or line of the page. The advantage of this approach is that it encourages you to think carefully about the content of the work as you are summarising it. Try to put as much of what you read into your own words as possible. By doing this, you will maximise the opportunity offered by this technique to develop those higher order skills.
- e. **Three-column approach:** perhaps the most useful of these techniques and the one you are most likely to use on a daily basis, the three-column approach offers a simple yet highly effective way of making notes. Divide up a piece of paper into three columns: (from L to R) major themes, notes on text, reflection. 'Notes on text' should be wider than the other two. Pick out key words related to the point you are making and add it in the left-hand column; provide supplementary notes in the middle column; and in the 'reflection' column, add any further notes or memos, such as reminders for you to look at a point again or compare it to another piece of information noted elsewhere.

Themes/ key words	Notes	Reflection

For more information, visit our Moodle site.

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