

Making Notes

Writing Centre Learning Guide

Making notes is an important skill that will enable you to summarise key information and focus your thoughts from both your lectures and your readings. It is more than just writing what has been said or written. It requires critical thinking and is an interactive activity.

Making notes from lectures

Students sometimes have difficulties when noting from lectures. The lecturer may speak very quickly, giving lots of new information, while some lecturers may have an accent that is difficult to understand. Others may have a lecturing style that does not seem to follow a logical order, or they may give many examples for a particular issue, making it hard to get down all of the details. However, there are many things you can do to help yourself become a more efficient and accurate note maker in lectures.

Before the lecture

- Many lecturers put outline notes on MyUni prior to the lecture. Make sure you access these if available, as they can give you an idea of the structure of the lecture and some of the key ideas.
- Do the set reading before the lecture, if there is any. Then you will already be familiar with the terms and concepts being discussed before the lecturer outlines them in the lecture.

During the lecture

- Sit in the lecture theatre where you are best able to hear and see the material.
- Put the date, name of the course and topic at the top of your notes so that they can be easily stored and retrieved at a future time. Number the pages of your notes.
- Do not try to copy exactly what the lecturer says. You will quickly miss the next few points while still trying to copy the first statement word for word.
- Not everything the lecturer says will be vital. Try to keep to the main ideas, concepts and terms. It is not necessary to write down all the examples the lecturer gives to explain an idea.
- Look for cues from the lecturer on what is important to note; the lecturer may write down something on the board; emphasise a point by raising their voice; or say something like, "This is important to know for the exam".
- Develop an abbreviation system that works for you. Use 'e.g.' for example; arrows to show connections between points; and shortened forms of high frequency words. Try to be consistent, so that you can make sense of your notes at a later date. A useful strategy is to make a list of your abbreviations that you add to over time and refer to when needed.
- Use quick diagrams or graphs to summarise information where possible.

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- Most lectures are recorded and the recordings can be found in MyUni to view later. Even so, it is more efficient to attend lectures and use effective noting skills at the time than to simply watch the lecture later.
- Engage critically with the lecture material. *Does the material match with your understanding of the subject? Are there contradictions presented? Are there any unclear aspects?* Write down any questions you have during the lecture. You may be able to ask the lecturer during the lecture about these, bring them up in a tutorial or follow up in your own reading.

After the lecture

- Review your notes. Make sure you understand them, correct any errors and fill in any missing parts.
- If you are unclear on a point, talk about it with your fellow students, do some reading around the topic or ask the tutor in your next tutorial.
- Store your notes in a clearly marked folder. This will help with revision for exams or when you need to locate specific information to do an assignment.

Making notes from your readings

There are a number of ways of effectively making notes. Some people make their notes on an A4 page or small index cards. Others prefer to highlight important parts of the text in relevant books or articles (or photocopies of these). People who are more visual might create a concept map of their notes, using colour and visual images as well as written words. You need to decide what will work best for you. Whichever method you use there are some important points to remember:

- Clearly head your notes with the course and topic.
- Ensure you have full bibliographic details (author, date, name of article/book website, publisher, where published etc) of the reading on your notes as you will need this later when constructing a reference or bibliography list.
- Try to write a one sentence thesis statement. What is the whole reading/chapter about? This can often be found in the introduction to the chapter/article and identifying it will focus your notes.
- Keep your notes to the main point. Do not just copy all of the text in the original.
- Try to write the points in your own words so that you understand the reading. Do not copy large slabs of the original, rather paraphrase or summarise the issues.
- Note any page numbers for direct quotes. Keep direct quotes to a minimum and ensure they are copied exactly. In your writing, quotes are used to support your argument, not to form the argument itself.
- Leave space for critical comment e.g. things that are unclear; contradictions; points of agreement/disagreement with other readings on the same issue; controversial statements/viewpoints presented; whether you agree with what is being stated.
- Store your notes in an orderly, easily accessible way.

In order to understand the readings in your course it will also be important to make clear, useful notes. The purpose of your note-making will determine how you approach this task. If you are required to get an overview of a topic before a lecture (e.g. pre-reading), your noting will not be as detailed as it will be if you are noting a journal article in order to summarise it for an assessment task.

You must be selective when making notes from your readings. There is not much point in noting if your pages of notes are longer than the original text or if you have highlighted whole slabs of reading!

Example of making notes

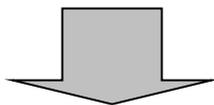
Below is an excerpt from a book, followed by notes, first in written form and then as a concept map.

Example of original text

Valastro Cotesta, P., Crosling, G.M., & Murphy, H.M., (1998) *Writing For Accounting Students*, Butterworths, NSW, p.86.

Critical thinking underpins your ability to read and write critically, and to produce a critical review. Critical thinking is based on understanding the nature of academic inquiry, wherein views published in articles are not absolute. Rather, they are part of the range of views about a topic or issue. Being able to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the views put forward in published work is the basis of critical thinking. Thus, it should be clear that critical reading and writing mean more than just summarising the view presented in an article. Summarising is based on accepting the given information and restating it in condensed form, whereas critical writing also involves analysis and evaluation. These approaches are integrated by the ability to have an overview of the topic as a whole, as we have explained in Chapter 3 on case studies.

In more detail, analytic thinking means dissecting the information presented in an article or text so that, for example, unstated assumption and steps which are not logical in the argument and the reasoning can be identified. It means discerning the issue and the purpose of an article which may not be explicitly stated. Evaluation is concerned with judging the value of the material for a particular purpose (Clabaugh et al. 1995: 26). Judgments need to be made on the basis of some criteria. These can be general in nature, relating to the often unstated values of what is considered quality in the discipline. They may be related to other criteria, such as the user's needs, the accounting standards, and the conceptual framework. The evaluation can consider the consistency of the logic in the view put forward, the validity of the conclusions, and so on.



Example of written notes

Communication course – critical thinking

Thesis statement: Critical thinking requires analysis and evaluation of the material, not just a condensed version of what has been given.

Critical thinking /reading/writing – strengths & weaknesses of articles – not presenting one absolute truth

Not just summarising – involves analysis and evaluation too - overview of whole reading

(* read Ch 3 as well for more detail)

Analytic thinking – “...dissecting the information presented” (p86) What is the reading actually saying? What is being assumed?

Evaluation – Evaluating against what? Can be all sorts of criteria depending on what you are judging against.

(* see Bailey 2001 for better examples)

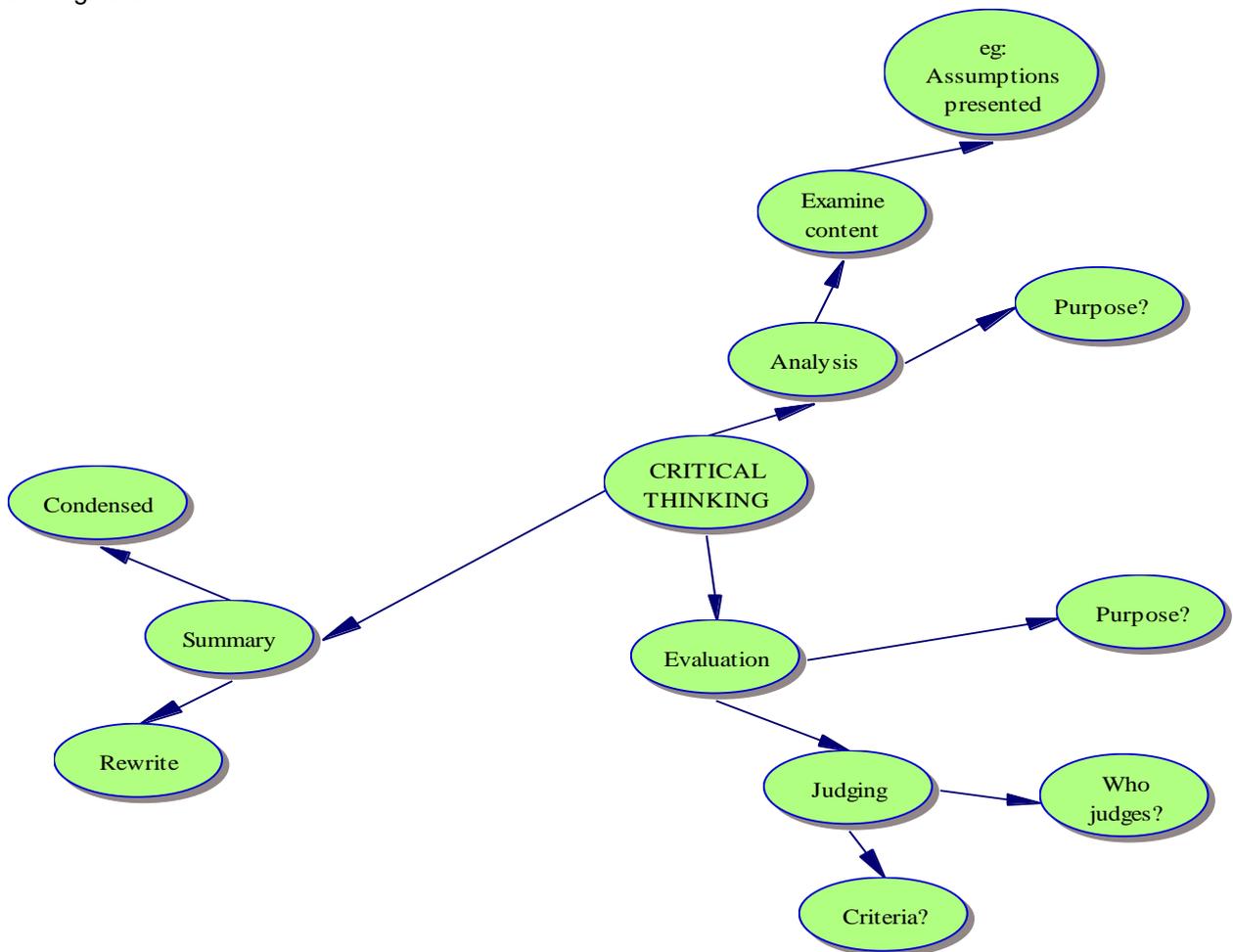
As seen above, the note-maker has started with a thesis statement and has only made notes on the main points. They have put little comments to themselves in brackets to make links to other readings. They have also asked some questions to prompt further thinking on this topic. The direct quote has quotation marks around it and a page number.

Example of concept map

Valastro Cotesta, P., Crosling, G.M., & Murphy, H.M. (1998). *Writing for Accounting Students*, Butterworths, NSW. p.86.

Thesis statement:

Critical thinking requires analysis and evaluation of the material, not just a condensed version of what has been given.



Other useful resources

http://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lisu/content/1_StudySkills/study_pdf/notetaking_reading.pdf

http://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lisu/content/1_StudySkills/study_pdf/notetaking_lecture.pdf

http://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lisu/content/1_StudySkills/study_pdf/notetaking_class.pdf

<http://www.lib.sfu.ca/slc/strategies/learning-studying/listening-note-taking>

See also the Writing Centre learning guide [Note-taking Abbreviations](#)