

## 5.3 What is the point of note taking?

What did you write down as the purposes of note taking in response to the question at the beginning of Section 5? I have already indicated some. I will now summarize what I see as the reasons you might have for taking notes.

### Focusing your attention

Making notes is one of the most effective ways of stopping your mind from wandering as you read. Michael (our fictitious student in Chapter 1) should have pitched into note taking and stopped worrying so much about what to write down. (Notes can come out in any old shape if necessary. Special techniques take time to develop.)

### 'Making' sense

As you write down notes, you are pressed into *finding* some sense in the words in the text. What is more, you have to formulate the ideas in the text in a way that makes sense to *you*, in terms of the way *you* understand things.

### A form of 'external' memory

The notes you make act, in effect, as a kind of *extension to the memory capacity of your mind* – enabling you to have ready access to a far wider range of knowledge.

### A symbol of progress

Notes provide you with evidence of the work you have done and so make an important contribution to your morale.

### Preparing an essay

Making notes which draw together ideas from what you have read is an essential part of constructing an essay (see Chapter 6).

### Pulling the course together

As you study a course and range over different topics and different texts, your mind becomes cluttered with disconnected bits and pieces. Making notes which summarize a section of the course (even in the form of a set of headings), helps you to create order, making the ideas less confused and more useable.

### ***Making notes on notes***

Sometimes it is very useful to bring together the notes you have already made (e.g. while you were reading) and make a new, very short, condensed version; that is, notes which summarize your earlier notes. This is a tremendous help to your learning, because it makes your mind create orderliness at a higher level in your thinking – not 'perfect' orderliness, not something you would like to show to other people, but a lot better than no order at all.

You would be particularly likely to make notes of this kind as part of your revision for an exam (see Chapter 7). But it is also very useful to try to pull things together at other stages of the course; for example, when you have finished one topic and are about to move on to another.

### **KEY POINTS**

- Taking notes helps you in many different ways. Learning when and how to take notes as you study is critical to your development as a student.

## **5.4 What will you do with your notes?**

If taking notes is a way of 'extending your memory', then clearly you need to work out some kind of *system* for storing them where you can find them. To make a start, get hold of some folders and find shelf space, or some boxes, for storing them. You will then have to develop a filing system. It is very easy to end up with large piles of notes which are so disorganized that you never can face trying to find what you want (for instance, you may know you took notes on an excellent discussion of political legitimation in Poland, but may not have a clue where to start looking for them). When you are starting on your studies, it is hard to believe that you could ever have a problem of having too many notes. But you will waste a lot of the time you invest in *making* your notes, if you don't also invest some time in working out a simple and effective system for *filing* them.

Having stored your notes, what *uses* are you likely to put them to? As you take your notes you might think, for instance, that one day you will sit down and read carefully through them all. Perhaps you will. On the other hand, there tends to be a shortage of suitable times for doing that. Your studies keep driving you forward into new areas. There is always a new book to read, or another essay to write. Going back over old notes is seldom as pressing, or as attractive, as going onwards to something new – unless, that is, you have a specific purpose, such as looking for material for an essay, or pulling together ideas for an exam. So the fate of notes is often to accumulate dust on a shelf.

This means that there is little point in creating acres of wordage which faithfully cover all the main content of the course. Your notes are much more likely to be useful for *reference* purposes rather than as a source of extensive reading. You need to make them with this in mind. You need pithy questions, comments and summaries, though not so cryptic that they do not make sense when you come back to them. It doesn't necessarily matter if you *never* go back to a particular set of notes. The process of writing them is valuable enough in itself. However, if *all* your notes are very lengthy and unstructured you will find it difficult to make *any* future use of them. Life, as they say, is too short.

## 6 Conclusion

Reading is one of the central activities in most courses of study. The purpose of it is to make you *learn*. But learning is not a *passive* process. You don't just let ideas wash over you. You have to *make* sense of ideas as you read and then *use* them to *think* with.

### KEY POINTS

Reading for study purposes is not simply a matter of passing your eyes across hundreds of words. It is a *set of practices* which *you develop* to enable you to *engage* with the ideas in the text. These include actively:

- *defining your task* as you set out to read (setting a target)
- *underlining or highlighting* as you read, as appropriate
- *taking notes*, as and when appropriate
- *stopping* to look ahead or back in the text when you lose the thread of the argument
- *checking* across to other sources as necessary
- *monitoring* your progress from time to time, and
- *changing* your approach as necessary.

As a beginner, it is worth *experimenting* with a range of different ways of doing things, so that you have a wider base of experience to work from in developing a robust, flexible, all-round style. To read effectively you have to be able to work out *what you are trying to achieve* and *how well you are progressing*. It isn't easy to make those judgements. *That* is what becoming a 'skilled' student is all about.