

## Tips for Note-Taking—From Marshall College (Marshall.edu)

Since you're consulting sources not simply to stockpile information but to develop your own ideas about a topic, it's helpful to think of the note-taking process as one that involves interaction. As you take notes, then, also keep track of your own ideas and interpretations. For every summary, paraphrase, and quotation you record, keep a list of the comments or questions it raises. Consider answering the following questions as part of your notes, for example: How does this change your thinking about the topic? How does it illuminate possible answers to your research questions? What is significant about the point(s)? What do you still need to learn about or understand in order to make sense of or refute the source's points?

Furthermore, keep in mind while recording your own thoughts that you will need to maintain clear distinctions between your own ideas and your sources. Depending on your method of notetaking, there are several strategies you can employ:

- If you're writing your summaries, paraphrases, and quotations on notecards, consider reserving the back sides of your cards for your own comments.
- If you're writing your summaries, paraphrases, and quotations in a notebook or word-processing program, consider using a double-entry format, in which you divide the page down the middle and reserve one side for source information and the other for your questions and comments.

Take a look again at the sample "bad" summary of Jennie Nelson's discussion of research assignments just below to see how it could have benefited from this approach to note-taking:

Many students groan at the mention of research papers, but teachers ignore these groans and continue to assign the meaningless projects anyway. They do so because they think students become better thinkers and communicators by conducting research and formulating their ideas about it. In reality, however, these goals are too optimistic since most students simply write research papers that are cut-n-paste jobs.

Notice how the summary changes in the double-entry note below once the writer distinguishes her own commentary and questions from the objective summary. You can also see how she relies on her own words in writing the summary, rather than using Nelson's language:

## Notes on Jennie Nelson's "The Scandalous Research Paper and Exorcising Ghosts"

### Summary

While students often bemoan having to produce research papers, college teachers continue to assign and value research projects. They do so because working on such projects gives students the opportunity to think critically and analytically about a topic and then to communicate that thinking through skillful writing. However, teachers also realize that the approaches students take to the research project do not always result in papers that reflect these goals.

### My comments and questions:

Nelson brings in convincing quotes from experts that helped me to understand why teachers value research: as they point out, it's only half about writing since it's also about thinking for one's self.

But the problems Nelson points out — especially students' complaints and shoddy efforts — make me wonder if there aren't better ways to teach students to think.

If the research essay isn't taught well or approached effectively, isn't it meaningless busy work?