23 Making notes and summaries

Making notes is central to the process of preparing to write. It links:

• generating ideas

• research

• planning

Why make notes?

• to remember

• to generate ideas

• to understand

• to organize

• to plan

Note-making formats

• freeform

• list

• table

• flowchart

• concept map

These can be:

• digital: using computer software, or online

• analogue: using pencil and paper

The last chapter suggested that the process of preparing to write consisted of a sequence:

Brief —> Generating ideas —> Research —> Planning

In the real world the process isn't quite so straightforward. The brief should certainly come first, but the other stages tend to interact with each other. You start off generating ideas, then do a bit of research; perhaps you begin to make a plan, which then suggests other research and ideas, and so on. The problem is: how do you keep track of what is going on? If you work in this non-linear way, there is a danger that everything goes spinning round in your mind so that you simply get confused, or bogged down in detail and never get to the writing stage.

The solution is to make notes: the notes you make as you go through the idea-generation/research/planning process will help to hold things together, and will provide an invaluable resource when you need to review the progress of your project.

Why make notes?

Like other kinds of writing, making notes can have a variety of purposes. Among these are:

- to remember
- to generate ideas
- to understand
- to organize
- to plan

To remember

Notes are an essential way of recording your ideas, things that are said, and things that you read. While you are thinking about a piece of writing, ideas can come and go with remarkable rapidity. It is all too easy to have what seems like a brilliant idea only to find later that it has disappeared and that you cannot bring it back into your mind. If you cultivate the habit of 'thinking on paper', this is much less likely to happen.

The same consideration applies when you are reading a text or listening to a lecture or presentation. While you may remember the broad outline of what you have read or heard, the detail may well escape you.

The skill of making notes lies in being able to see at the time which details are likely to be useful and which are not.

To generate ideas

We can use notes as a means of generating ideas. This is often done using a concept or mind map, a process that is described later in this chapter, and which can be described as 'brainstorming on paper'.

Brainstorming is sometimes thought of as a purely group activity. A small or large group work together to generate ideas for a project, generally with one member of the group nominated to record the ideas as they are thrown up. Often the 'rule' is made that all ideas should be given equal value, that no judgements should be made about the value of any idea. (Although this is a rule that groups find it as easy to break as to make.)

There is, however, a contrary view that solo brainstorming is of equal or greater value than the group version. The social situation of a group can be a distraction, and for many writing projects you are more likely to be working on your own. Even when working on your own, though, it is worth trying to follow the rule of inclusiveness: however odd an idea may seem at the time, when you return to it later you may see that in fact it has unsuspected merits.

To understand

You can also use notes to help you understand an idea, or a text. Sometimes it is difficult to see your way through complicated information. Jotting down what seem to be the main ideas, searching for links, similarities, and differences, and then indicating them graphically, is a helpful aid to understanding.

For example, you might begin by jotting down a few basic ideas, and then use each one as a hub from which new, more detailed ideas can be developed. Looking back at the notes later you may see new connections, which can be indicated by drawing linking lines on your notes.

To plan

Making notes is also an essential part of planning longer texts. The material in a brainstorming diagram almost certainly does not form a coherent plan for writing. It will need to be reordered into a hierarchy, or outline. This, too, is described in detail later in this chapter.

Note-making formats

There are no hard-and-fast rules about how to make notes—indeed, there are almost as many note-making systems as there are note-makers. What's more, individual note-makers employ a variety of styles within a single page of notes, as can be seen in the illustration on .

On the other hand, there are a number of well-known formats for notes, of which the commonest are:

- freeform
- list
- table
- flowchart
- concept map

To these we need to add the choice between:

- pencil and paper
- computer-based

The simplest form of note-making is simply to jot down items with no regard for pattern. While this 'back-of-an-envelope' approach may seem messy and undisciplined, it has its advantages. Most obviously, if you do not know what the pattern is, then a freeform approach can help you discover it. The following example illustrates this in action.

MAKING NOTES

Closer to 'pure' thought than writing
— immediate
— non-linear
— creative

Importance of paper rather than computer

Flexible
Visual

FORMATS

- tabular
- hierarchical
- flow/directional
- web/mind map
- free form / heap / diagram
- visual

a 'DUMP'
(like these notes)

It shows some organization—in the use of bulleted lists, for example. But other ideas are just jotted more or less at random. Lines, arrows, and circles are added to show connections and emphasis.

List

A list is a common form of note-making, and often that is all that is needed. There are two in the illustration above. But you can make lists as complicated as you like. It is often useful to develop a list into a hierarchy. There is more about lists and hierarchies later in the chapter.

Table

Another development of the list idea is to tabulate information, as in the following example:

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

| MEDIUM	IN-HOUSE	RESTRICTED	PUBLIC
Human	Colleagues, friends	Contacts in other organizations	Consultants
Analogue	Files, internal memos and reports	Academic research	Books, journals, newspapers
Digital	Company intranet	Subscription websites	Websites

Flowchart

If you are making notes on a sequence or process, then a flowchart is a useful format. The following example shows part of a simple set of notes about planning a new garden.
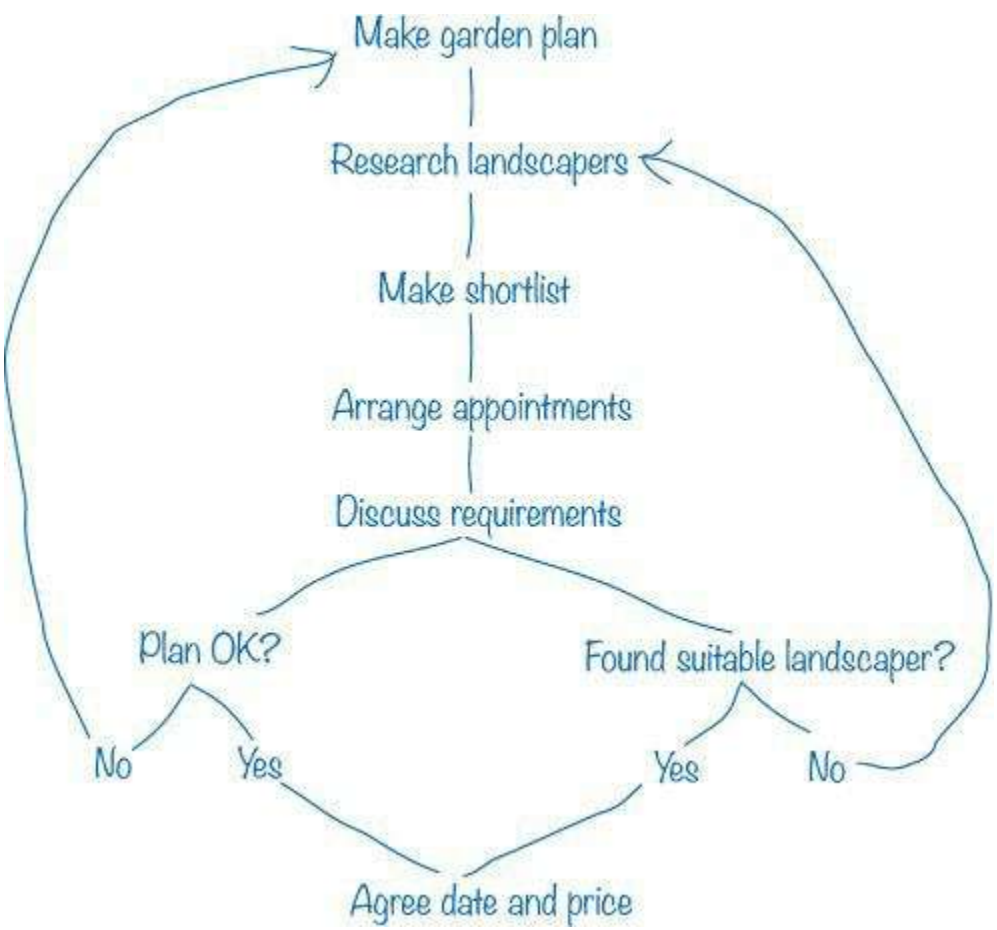
Concept map or mind map

One of the commonest and most recommended formats is a concept map or mind map. Mind maps generally only have one central starting point, while concept maps can have more than one, and allow easier 'cross-referencing' between different parts of the map. For practical purposes, however, the two are very similar and we are free to use whichever approach suits the job in hand. The example below shows the beginnings of a mind map analysing the opening scene of Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*.
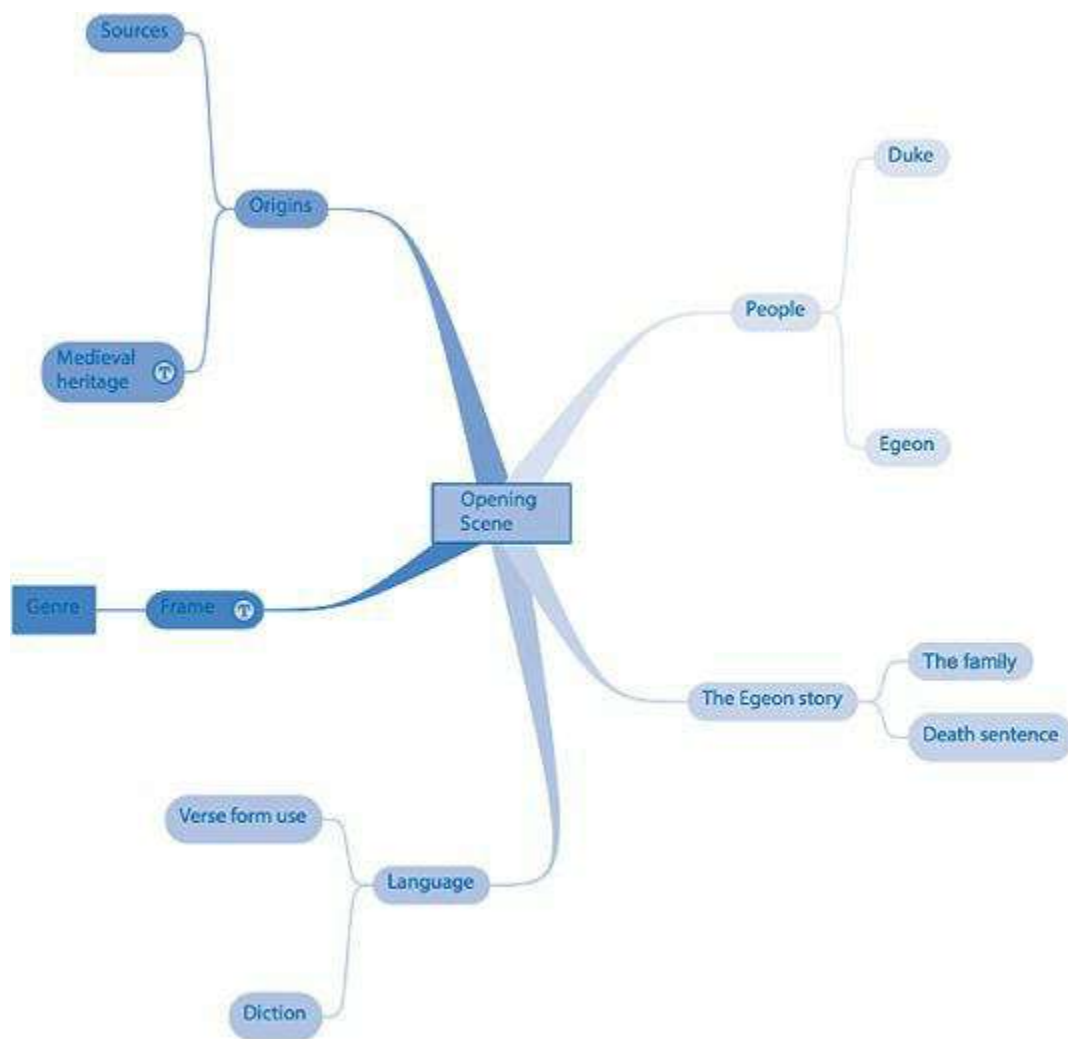
As you can see, the central idea ('Opening Scene') has spun off five main ideas, 'People', 'The Egeon story', and so on. Each of these has then led to other ideas. For example 'Origins' has been broken down into 'Sources' and 'Medieval heritage'. We can continue with this process more or less indefinitely. 'Sources' can lead to 'Plautus' and 'St Paul's Letter to the Ephesians', and so on.

Analogue or digital?

Whatever your reason for making notes, and whatever format you adopt, you have the choice between:

- digital (computer-based)
- analogue (or pencil and paper)

Digital

There is a wide range of software available for note-making. The programmes available can be roughly categorized like this:

- hierarchical
- concept-mapping
- database
- hybrid

What follows is not a survey of all the available software, but a brief analysis of what each approach to note-taking offers.

Hierarchical

Many word-processing programmes now include an outlining feature, which allows the user to order ideas in a hierarchy. This is usually promoted as an initial step in a writing project, but it can equally well be used for making notes. There are also standalone outliners which offer the user a much bigger set of features, so that they can be used for managing large-scale individual or collaborative projects.

Generally speaking, outliners are not well suited to the collection of large amounts of data, although they may offer the ability to attach text, images, and other files to a note. What they are good at is enabling the user to have a simple overview of a large subject and then to drill down into the details. So if, for example, we are planning to write about Morbihan in Southern Brittany, our notes can be collapsed to this:

- Towns
- Coast
- Tourist attractions
- Activities

At the click of a mouse they can be expanded to this:

- Towns
° Major ports
- Lorient
- Vannes
° Other coastal towns
- Port-Louis
- Carnac
- Locmariaquer
° Inland
- Le Faouët
- Pontivy
- Josselin
- Ploërmel

and so on.

Outlining applications are available for use on desktop computers, mobile devices, and online.

Concept maps and mind maps

Again, there is a large choice of software, with a wide range of features (and prices—from freeware to packages costing hundreds of pounds). All allow the user different degrees of freedom to format a mind map to reflect the thinking process behind it. The diagram below shows an example made using the application Novamind.
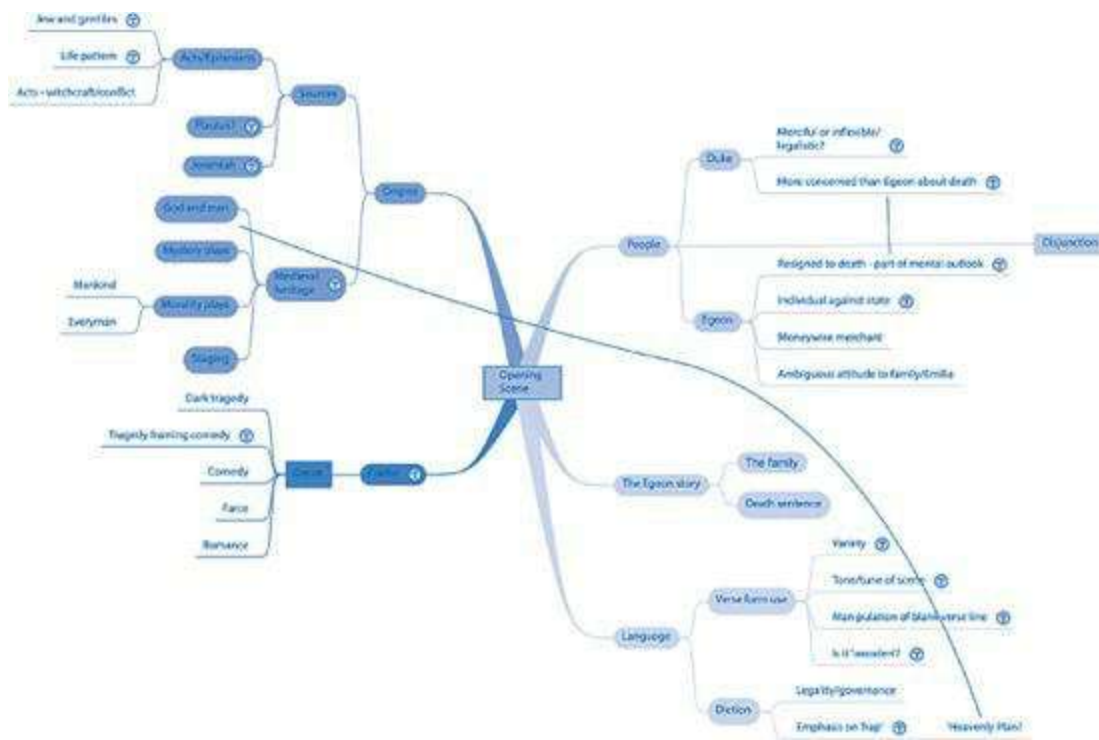
As you can see, it is an expansion of the previous mind map: many more ideas have been developed and the links between different ideas are being drawn in.

Database

Outliners and mind mapping programmes are highly suited to recording and generating ideas. What they are not so good at is storing quantities of material. When you are researching you need some way of collecting and storing a range of material: pages from the web, PDFs, images, text files, and so on. Having collected it, you then need to be able to organize, sort, and search this material. In addition, you need to keep track of the sources of all this material, so that it can be cited correctly when you refer to it.

There are a number of programmes available to cater for this group of needs. For Apple Mac users the best known is probably DevonThink, but this is not available on other platforms. Probably the most popular alternative is the web-based Evernote. Alternatively it is possible to use a bibliographic programme that allows you to attach files to individual references. Examples are EndNote and Bookends.

Hybrid

In addition to these three main types of software there are also hybrids, which combine two or more of the types, and some which approach note-making in a more individualistic way. Like many things which claim to be multifunctional, this 'Swiss Army Knife' approach fulfills no single function as well as the more specialist programmes. On the other hand, it is convenient to contain and control all your material inside one package. Two of the more interesting hybrids are Scrivener (Windows and Mac) and Curio (Mac only), and a highly complex one with a steep learning curve is Tinderbox (Mac only).

Scrivener is first and foremost a tool for writers. It enables the writer to draft non-fiction and fiction quickly and easily, keeping separate segments of a draft, and separate drafts … separate. It

then allows you to work visually, arranging and rearranging your material as much or as little as you like, before compiling it into a finished draft. It includes an outliner and the ability to work in full screen, thus avoiding distractions. Alongside this writing space, there is a research space into which you can import and arrange material from the web, movies, sound files, PDFs, text files, and images.

Curio is more obviously a storage, organization, and note-making environment. In a single 'idea space' you can combine text, outlines, tables, images, and mind maps and arrange them as you wish. Such a world of possibilities will intrigue some writers, while others will simply find it distracting.

Paper-based

Computer-based note-making is attractive to many and has these advantages:

- It makes it easy to store and organize large quantities of information in diverse formats.
- It facilitates quick searches of stored information and enables the user to perceive links and relationships that might otherwise go unnoticed.

However, it also has serious disadvantages:

- It inevitably limits freedom: you have to use it within the constraints set down by the programmer.
- The limitations of a particular piece of software can act as a set of blinkers, preventing the user from seeing other possibilities.
- It can be expensive.

By contrast, paper-based note-making and information storage is cheap and unconstricted. With just a sheet of paper and something to write and draw with, you are free to explore the working of your own mind (or that of the writer or speaker you are focusing on) in whatever way you like. You can write, draw doodle, and link disparate ideas, as you feel the need. Sheets of paper can be reordered, cut up and stuck together in different ways, fixed to the wall, or filed away in a ring binder. Hand-made notes have a personality and an immediacy that can never be matched by their digital counterparts. Admittedly it may take longer to sort them and to find what you are looking for, but in the very act of searching and sorting, you may well come across something unexpected and see connections that had not occurred to you before.

You try

Use one of the note-making formats to make notes of the text below. As you work, observe how the process of making notes affects the way you read the text.

Crime

People want to live in an orderly society in which they can go about their public and private lives without fear of being injured or having their property damaged or stolen by others. We wish to be free to do as we like without harming others and without interference from others. We also allow the state to stop us from doing things that harm ourselves. In addition we empower the state to protect us from threats from outside the country and to protect our security. Individual citizens have to be prevented from acting in a way that threatens national security. In order to achieve this

we empower the state to pass and enforce laws and to punish those who break them. This is the foundation on which the criminal law is built: to prevent individuals from behaving in ways which harm others or society as a whole.

How do we define a crime?

Lawyers use two Latin phrases when they are defining crimes: *actus reus* and *mens rea. Actus reus* means literally 'guilty act'. To find someone guilty of a crime it has to be proved that they committed an action defined by the law as a crime. So, for example, the law distinguishes between the crimes of assault and battery. Assault means acting in such a way towards someone that they are put in fear of personal injury. In other words you can assault someone without touching them. Battery, on the other hand, means deliberately making physical contact with someone without their consent.

The last sentence contained the word 'deliberately'. *Mens rea* is the second component of a crime and means 'guilty mind'. A crime is a criminal act done with a 'guilty mind'. The law distinguishes different degrees in this. For some crimes, like murder, it has to be proved that there was specific intent: when X raised the axe he specifically intended to kill Y. For other crimes, it is necessary to prove recklessness or negligence by the perpetrator. There is a fourth group of crimes in which the perpetrator's state of mind is of no importance. If you are caught by a police speed trap breaking the speed limit it makes no difference at all whether you intended to or not; the simple fact of exceeding the limit is sufficient. Crimes of this kind are referred to as absolute or strict liability offences.

Making a summary

When you are referring in some detail to a book or other source, you can either quote directly from it, or summarize what it says. The ability to write a clear and accurate summary is a valuable skill, useful not only when referring to a text produced by someone else, but also when you have to reduce the length of your own writing. This is one way of approaching it.

1 List the main points made in the text.

2 Make sure that they are in the most logical order (rearrange them if necessary), and under each one make a brief list of supporting arguments and data.

3 Without referring to the original text, make a first draft of the summary.

4 Check your draft for length and cut it if necessary.

5 Now check it against the original. Look for two things:

a important points you have missed out (if there are any, make sure they are included).

b any accidental direct quotations from the original (if there are any, reword them).

6 Write a final draft, keeping an eye on length.

Stages 1, 2, and 6 are illustrated in the example that follows.

Refugees & the Dispossessed

Kenya, being a relatively stable country with opportunities to make a living or at least work the tourists for hand-outs, is a natural magnet for refugees from strife-torn neighbouring countries. Nairobi and Mombasa and, to a lesser degree, the coastal resort towns, are the favoured destinations. You'll come across plenty of these people on your travels and it's relatively easy for them to remain anonymous if they can make enough money to stay off the streets.

There's nothing remarkable about this—it happens all over the world. What is remarkable in Kenya is the number of unattached teenage and early-20s mothers—many of them Kenyan but also quite a lot from Uganda, Sudan, Ethiopia, and even Rwanda. With the break-up of many traditional communities as a result of colonial policies that were designed to bring people into the money economy, and the continuation of this system under post-colonial regimes, there has been large-scale movement of people to urban areas. Most arrive with nothing and are forced to live in overcrowded shanty towns (some 60% of Nairobi's population lives in these places) with little hope of anything resembling a steady job with reasonable pay.

As a result, all the facets of urban alienation can be found in these places with drunkenness, theft, and rape (particularly of schoolgirls) being fairly commonplace. But this isn't confined to the major urban areas. It appears to be fairly widespread everywhere outside of traditional tribal areas.

As far as the girls are concerned, once they become pregnant they're expelled from school (in other words, it's the end of their educational prospects) and, as likely as not, rejected by their families, too. In 1986, the number of young girls who found themselves in this position (according to official figures) was 11,000, and it's been rising steadily ever since. The options for those to whom this happens are extremely limited. A few shelters do exist (usually run by Christian organizations), but it's only the lucky few who get in. For the rest, it's very poorly paid domestic work or the flesh market.

Main points

1. a lot of refugees in Kenya
2. many are young mothers
3. the poor gravitate to cities
4. leads to crime and degradation
5. the girls become outcasts
6. they can only become servants or prostitutes

Main points plus key details

1. a lot of refugees live in Kenya

    a. surrounded by countries where there are problems

    b. Kenya prosperous and it's easy to get a job or beg

2. the poor gravitate to cities

    a. breakdown of old communities

    b. development of cash economy

    c. not enough jobs

    d. development of shanty towns

    e. leads to crime and degradation

3. many of the poor are young mothers

    a. Kenyans, but also refugees from surrounding countries

4. the girls become outcasts

    a. pregnancy leads to expulsion from school and rejection by family

    b. increasing problem—numbered in 10,000s

5. they can only become servants or prostitutes

    a. no qualifications

    b. lack of work

Final draft of the summary

Kenya's relative prosperity means that it attracts refugees from the troubled states that surround it. They find it quite easy to get employment or to beg in the popular tourist resorts. The breakdown of old, tribal society and the growth of a cash economy have led many of the poor to move to the cities, but there are not enough jobs, so shanty towns have sprung up. Here people live surrounded by poverty, degradation, and crime. Many of the poor Kenyans and refugees are young mothers who have found that pregnancy has made them outcasts. Unable to continue their schooling, and often rejected by their families, they are left with little choice; they can either become servants or prostitutes.

Guidelines

Notes as a link

1 Use note-making as a link between

    a generating ideas

    b research

c planning

Purposes

2 Note-making is an important way of remembering

   a ideas you have

   b things you read

   c what you hear at lectures and presentations

3 Use note-making to generate ideas.

4 It is also a useful way of helping to understand complex texts.

5 Make notes when planning a piece of writing.

Formats

6 Freeform notes allow you to

   a collect ideas and information quickly

   b see the links between ideas

7 Hierarchical lists are particularly useful when generating a plan for a piece of writing.

8 Certain types of information are best recorded using a table.

9 Processes can be recorded using a flowchart.

10 Concept or mind maps are highly flexible and particularly valuable when brainstorming ideas.

11 Notes can be set down using computer software or old-fashioned pencil-and-paper methods.

Computer-based

12 Hierarchical lists can be compiled using a word processor or a specialist outlining programme.

13 A variety of mind-mapping programmes are available. Most allow you to generate hierarchical lists from your mind map.

14 If you have a lot of information to record, then you probably need a database programme.

15 There are also hybrid programmes that combine a number of these features.

16 Computer-based note-making has several advantages, especially in its ability to store and locate large quantities of information.

Pencil-and-paper

17 Paper-based note-making is cheap and has the advantage of allowing complete freedom.

Writing a summary

18 When you are referring to a text in detail, consider writing a summary rather than quoting at length.

19 When summarizing, it is better to use your own notes as an intermediate stage rather than working directly from the original text.

20 Check your final version against the original for errors and omissions.