

## **AN INTRODUCTION TO SELECTING MAIN IDEAS**

Selecting main ideas (SMI) is the ability to select the most important information from lectures or reading. SMI also involves the ability to recognize the difference between these main ideas and supportive information such as details or examples. Knowing what information is the main idea gives you a place to begin with your notes.

Low quiz and test scores may mean that a student is treating all information equally, trying to learn too much, and running out of time. SMI is a more efficient process in which the learner focuses on key words, phrases, transition statements, boldface sections, headings, charts, maps, summaries, and other clues in the written or spoken material.

Learning new methods of note taking such as the Cornell system or mapping are helpful in lecture situations, while certain reading methods and an understanding of organizational patterns have been proven to boost overall comprehension.

## **SELECTING THE MAIN IDEA**

### **Before you read...PREVIEW!**

I. Preview the front and back covers: be sure you know author, title, and date published.

II. Preview the table of contents:

- 1) What is the general organization of the book? Is it divided into chapters, divisions, subdivisions?
- 2) What do the headings reveal about the subject matter of the book? Are they useful? Are you familiar with any of the material?
- 3) What seems to be the basis for organization; chronological order; general to particular? Could the chapters be read in a different order or out of order, without ill effect?

III. Preview the preface:

- 1) To whom is the book directed?
- 2) What are the author's purposes and objectives? How does he/she propose to accomplish them?
- 3) Has the author indicated the scope and limitations of the book?
- 4) Has the author indicated his/her point of view toward the subject?

IV. Preview each chapter before reading:

- 1) Read the introduction to find out main concepts, manner of presentation, and definition of terms.
- 2) Go through the chapter, reading all headings and subheadings; look at the topic sentence of each paragraph.
- 3) Pay attention to all pictures, charts, and other aids.
- 4) Read the summary if there is one.
- 5) If questions are provided at the end of the chapter, read them first! This way you know what you are looking for as you read.

## HOW TO WRITE A SUMMARY OF YOUR READING

The best way to know whether you understand what you are reading is to try to explain it in your own words. To write a summary of what you are reading is one way of taking notes on what you read. A summary is valuable because, more than any other note taking method, it is the surest measure of your understanding. It is most useful when the reading is difficult. It also helps you remember by requiring you to pay careful attention to what you read, to write it out, to organize it, and to make it meaningful to you. Practically, a summary is necessary when you cannot mark in your book.

The following instructions teach you how to write a brief summary or *précis* (pray'-see) of a few paragraphs in a textbook. A summary is about  $\frac{1}{4}$  the length of the original passage. It is in your own words. It contains all the main ideas and key details, but omits unimportant details. A summary amounts to an outline in complete sentences.

### TO WRITE A SUMMARY:

1. Preview the passage; skim headings and first sentences and notice/check main points.
2. Read the passage carefully.
  - a. Locate all the main points. Ask yourself, "What is this mainly about? What point is the author trying to make?"
  - b. Identify as many details as you can. What facts or arguments does the author give to justify or illustrate the main points?
  - c. Decide which details are important to remember and which details are not important.
3. Write a paragraph which explains only the main ideas and important details.
  - a. Imagine that you are trying to explain these ideas in plain English to a friend.
  - b. Begin with one sentence which answers the question. "What is the main idea of this passage?"
  - c. Present the ideas in your paragraph in the same order in which they are presented in your textbook
  - d. Use your own words rather than the author's; use whole sentences.
  - e. Be economical; use no more words than necessary.

*EXAMPLE:* Here is a brief passage from a textbook. Main points and details are underlined.

**Advantages of a Public Debt.** There is a brighter side to the public debt. Indeed, in at least three respects the existence of a large debt can be desirable.

1. Because government bonds are highly liquid and virtually risk-free securities, they make an excellent purchase for small and conservative savers.
2. It should also be noted that a large debt can cushion a cyclical downswing. That which is potentially undesirable in a full-employment economy may be very desirable in a less-than-full-employment economy. A large public debt may prove to be a kind of built-in stabilizer insofar as recessions are concerned.
3. Finally, Chapter 18 will reveal the important role which government bonds play in effectuating monetary policy. The sale and purchase of government bonds by the economy's central banks influence the money supply, the level of spending, and hence the level of economic activity.

Here is an example of a summary of this passage:

A public debt may be valuable because (1) government bonds are a good investment, (2) the debt can serve as a stabilizing influence against inflation, and (3) government bonds can provide a means of controlling economic activity.

**Tip: Can you explain all three terms?**

If you were writing this summary, could you write in your own words a sentence that explains what a public debt is?

What does “liquid” mean?

Why are bonds a good investment?

How does the debt protect us against inflation?

What is inflation?

How do bonds control economic activity?

(Even though the passage above doesn’t answer these questions, the entire section of the textbook probably does—or you would want to ask these questions of someone who would know, like your professor.)

**Tip: Are you using your own words?**

What word would you use, if you were just talking, instead of “advantageous”? Would you say, “useful,” “good,” “valuable?” Put your summary in your own words, but choose one which is as close to the original meaning as you can make it.

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Now open one of your own textbooks and try this on some of your more difficult reading. Let a friend in the class or your APSS counselor read your summary to see if he/she understands and agrees with your interpretation of the text. Save your summary notes for test review.

## SOME NOTES ON TAKING READING NOTES

### INTRODUCTION

Let's begin with a warning. Never take notes on a reading until you have read the material and have some understanding of what it is about. Do NOT take reading notes the first time through! This is important because:

To take reading notes, you have to know what is important in the material. Face it – the first time through, everything seems important. Usually, if you take notes before you read, you end up with too many!

There are several different methods possible for taking reading notes. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. You will have to decide which method or combination works best for you – and for each piece of reading material.

### UNDERLINING/HIGHLIGHTING

By far the most common technique for taking reading notes is underlining or highlighting. Highlighting differs from underlining only in the type of pen used.

In either case, key words, phrases, and sentences are marked. The major advantage is that it is rather simple to do, and your eye is drawn to relatively few words when you are reviewing later. Underlining has two major disadvantages:

1. It's more time consuming than some other methods if you are trying to do it neatly.
2. The parallel lines you add to those already on the page make reading more difficult later on.

Highlighting seems to produce fewer problems due to parallel lines, but the extra time consumption is just as true for highlighting as for traditional underlining.

A special warning – *never use an ordinary felt tip pen* for highlighting! The ink becomes opaque so that the words you try to emphasize are soon hidden, and the ink also bleeds through the page.

### MARGINAL NOTES – WORD FORM

This technique involves jotting down key words or phrases in the margin of the page. It has the advantages of being easily seen and not interfering with future reading.

The major fault of marginal note taking is that it takes a great deal of thought to decide what words and phrases to write. The idea is to clearly convey the thought of the paragraph in the fewest possible words. If you goof and write too few, the meaning may be lost, but too many is just as bad – who wants to rewrite a textbook?

## **MARGINAL NOTATION – SYMBOL FORM**

This method uses a standard set of marks in the margin as follows:

1. | Important Material. This mark extends from the opening to the ending line of the material.
2. || Summary Material. The mark works the same as the first.
3. [ Beginning of an extended important passage and end of that extended important passage.
4. ex An example.
5. il An illustration

The advantages of this method are that it is fast and interferes very little with the written material. The symbols are easy to learn. The major fault is that reviewing requires rereading the entire marked passage when a single word or phrase might have made for quicker review.

## **MIX AND MATCH FOR RESULTS**

It is possible to incorporate some elements of the above methods to take advantage of the strengths of each and minimize their weaknesses. For example, there is no reason you can't use margin notes, symbols, and highlighting all on the same page. We recommend that if you do use such a mixture you should highlight or underline sparingly; don't underline long passages, just the key words or short phrases. Use the margins that draw your attention to the most important information on the page.

## **FOR MATERIALS OWNED BY SOMEONE ELSE**

If you don't own the reading material, but need to make notes, an outline form is usually the best way to do it. The outline need not be formally correct to be useful, but it is advisable to indent for smaller points than for larger topics.

Some of us even make margin notes on our outlines. These usually include specific pages where certain items appear.

Be sure to include bibliographic notes in case you need to go back to the source. If you are really thinking, you will include library call numbers to make it easier to find the material again.

There are three basic outline types: Cornell, mind mapping, and traditional outlining. Your APSS counselor has information on all three. If you are highly visual, you may want to mind map your chapters as you read them. Ask your APSS counselor for instruction to develop your outlining skills.

## READING FOR THE MAIN IDEA IN PARAGRAPHS

When reading a chapter, your job is to recognize the main ideas being stated. Without a method of identifying the main idea in the text, chapters can soon become a massive conglomeration of meaningless information. Fortunately, there is a way to make sense of those chapters that seem impossible to read.

The text in a chapter is divided into small points, or paragraphs. Each paragraph is an expression of a single idea or concept. Supporting that single idea of each paragraph are details and examples. It is essential to skim the paragraph for the main point before attempting to absorb the details that support it.

Since the main idea does not always appear at the beginning of every paragraph, searching is sometimes necessary. As you master identifying the main point, paragraphs will become increasingly easier to absorb, thus making the entire chapter easier to comprehend.

There are five different paragraph structures or patterns that commonly appear in textbooks. You can associate these patterns with five graphic shapes:

1. inverted triangle pattern

```
XXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXX
XXX
X
```

2. regular triangle pattern

```
      X
     XXX
    XXXXX
   XXXXXXX
  XXXXXXXXX
 XXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXX
```

3. hour glass pattern

```
XXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXX
      XXX
       X
      XXX
     XXXXXXX
    XXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXX
```

4. diamond

```
      X
     XXX
    XXXXXXX
   XXXXXXXXXXX
  XXXXXXX
   XXX
```

5. implied main point pattern

```
XXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXX
```

## **SAMPLE OF EACH PATTERN:**

### **1. Inverted Triangle Paragraphs**

The ECONOCAR paragraph is a classic example of an inverted (or upside-down) triangle because it begins with a general statement that can be represented by a broad line. The more specific supporting statements can be presented by the narrower width of the part of the triangle below the broad line. It is useful to have this basic pattern or structure in mind when reading for main points in paragraphs. Notice how the inverted triangle shape represents the order in which ideas are presented in the ECONOCAR paragraph.

ECONOCAR = economical

1. good gas mileage
  - a. 35 mpg - in town
  - b. 45 mpg – highway
2. low maint. costs
  - a. easy to work on
  - b. parts cheap/\$30 carb.
3. high resale value
  - \*90% purchase price 5 yrs.

The ECONOCAR is an economical car.

First, it gets good gas mileage. Mine gets 35 miles per gallon in town and 45 per gallon on the highway. Second, the maintenance costs are low. For example a new carburetor costs \$30 and is easy to install. Third, ECONOCARS have a high resale value. I expect mine to be worth 90% of its purchase price in 5 years.

### **2. REGULAR TRIANGLE PARAGRAPHS**

The regular (or non-inverted) triangle is the reverse of the previous example. In this type of paragraph, the author first presents several somewhat general statements that are closely related. The main point statement or conclusion is stated at the end of the paragraph. Regular triangle-pattern paragraphs are harder to read than inverted triangle paragraphs because instead of knowing at the start what the main point is, the reader has to constantly evaluate what all of the second level statements have in common. Notice how this feels as you read a regular triangle version of the ECONOCAR paragraph below.

1. ECONOCAR = good gas mileage
    - a. 35 mpg in town
    - b. 45 mpg highway
  2. maint. costs low
    - a. replace parts myself
    - b. carb - \$30
  3. ECONOCARS-high resale value
    - a. 90% purchase price in 5 yrs
- ECONOCAR = economical

My new ECONOCAR gets good gas mileage. It gets 35 miles per gallon in town and 45 on the road. Also, the maintenance costs are low. I replaced a worn carburetor myself last month, and the part only cost \$30. Furthermore, ECONOCARS are known to have high resale value. I expect my ECONOCAR to be worth 90% of its purchase price in five years. In conclusion, it's economical.

### **3. DIAMOND-SHAPED PARAGRAPHS**

With Diamond shaped paragraphs, you are led into the idea with a background or introductory sentence. The main point statement is in the middle of the paragraph, and the second and third level support sentences come at the end. Notice how this works.

Gas = \$20/gallon  
Rationed-5gal/erson/week  
ECONOCAR = good economy

1. good gas mileage
  - a. 35 mpg town
  - b. 45 mpg hwy
2. low maint. costs
  - a. replace parts myself
  - b. parts cheap/\$30 carb
3. high resale value-90% 5 yrs.

With gas prices approaching \$20 a gallon and with individual car owners being rationed just 5 gallons a week, having a car that offers good economy is important. To me, the ECONOCAR is the ideal solution. First, it gets good gas mileage; 35 miles per gallon in town and 45 on the highway. Second, maintenance costs are low. I replaced a worn carburetor myself, and the part only cost \$30. Third, ECONOCARS have high resale value. I expect mine to be worth 90% of its purchase price in five years.

#### 4. HOURGLASS PARAGRAPHS

This variation of the basic paragraph structure is one of the most helpful to the reader. In this type of paragraph, the author opens and closes the paragraph with main point statements. The supporting details of the paragraph are “framed” by the main point sentences. Usually, the final sentence is slightly different version of the introductory main point statement. Often an author uses this style for very long paragraphs as a way of reminding the reader what the main point was, which could have been forgotten after wading through all those details. Notice how this works with the ECONOCAR paragraph.

ECONOCAR = economical

1. good gas mileage
  - a. 35 mpg in town
  - b. 45 mpg hwy
2. low maint costs
  - a. parts cheap/\$30 carb
  - b. easy to work on
3. high resale value
  - a. 90% price 5 yrs.

Economy = ECONOCAR

The ECONOCAR is an economical car. First, it gets good gas mileage. Mine gets 35 miles per gallon in town and 45 miles per gallon on the highway. Second, the maintenance costs are low. For example, a new carburetor costs \$30 and is easily installed. Third, an ECONOCAR has a high resale value. I expect to get 90% of the purchase price in five years. Therefore, if it's economy you're looking for, consider buying an ECONOCAR.

#### 5. IMPLIED MAIN POINT PARAGRAPHS

This last variation of basic paragraph structure is often the most troublesome; authors also frequently use it. Since the author leaves the main point statement out, it is up to the reader to analyze exactly what the second level sentences have in common and decide what the main idea is. You have to work harder to get at the author's main point in these paragraphs, and they're harder to skim, but with some practice, you'll master these too. With implied point paragraphs, you have to infer what the main point is. Notice how this works with the last ECONOCAR example.

1. ECONOCAR – good gas mileage
  - a. 35 mpg town
  - b. 45 mpg hwy
2. ECONOCAR – low maint costs
  - a. replace carb self
  - b. carb \$30
3. ECONOCAR – high resale value
  - a. 90% purchase price  
in 5 yrs.

My new ECONOCAR gets good gas mileage. It gets 35 miles per gallon in town and 45 miles per gallon on the highway. Also, the maintenance costs are low. I replaced a worn out carburetor myself last week, and the part only cost \$30. Furthermore, ECONOCARS are known to have a high resale value. I expect my ECONOCAR to be worth 90% of what I paid for it in five years

Taken from: Bradley, Anne. Take Note of College Study Skills. Dallas, TX: Scott, Foresman & Co., 1983

## ACTIVE vs. PASSIVE LISTENING

The first step to taking successful notes during lecture is selecting the main ideas from the entire talk. Examine your style of listening. Do you sit relaxed barely paying attention or do you take an active role in the lecture?

**Active Listening** – This approach requires a student to pay close attention to the material at hand and think about the information to begin to process the ideas. Even though you may not have perfect understanding of the content immediately, you have a head start due to reading the material in the textbook and reviewing your notes.

**Passive Listening** – A student using passive listening is present in class but does not pay close attention to the lecture. They may hear the words, but they do not process them. These students find that they understand and remember very little of the information presented, perhaps made more difficult by not reading for class.

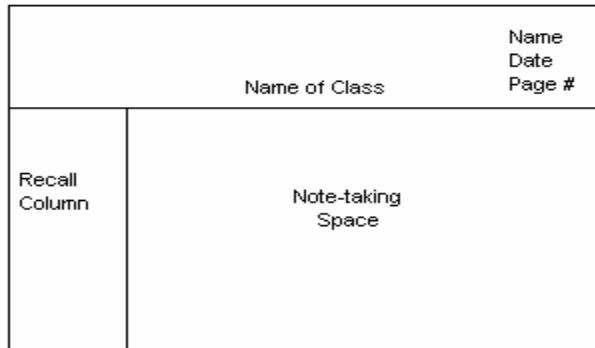
Realizing that active listening is the smart way to participate in a lecture, what can you do to improve your chances to really understand what is being covered?

- Sit toward the front of class and the middle of the row of seats. You're likely to be less distracted here.
- Think about the material as you listen and take notes.
- Formulate questions in your notes that the lecture material provides answers to – these could be possible test questions.
- Ask questions of the professor to clarify ideas or to dig deeper into the material.

In addition, you can prepare before class to be ready to listen actively. By reading the textbook material that will be discussed in advance, students will have a better idea of the main points and background information. This will allow you to pay attention and write down the highlights rather than trying to keep up with writing practically everything down. Second, stay positive about each of your classes. Having a good attitude will help you sustain the active listening mode through out the lecture.

## METHODS OF NOTE TAKING

An important aspect of note taking is organization. Students need to be able to return to their lecture and reading notes for review and quickly find the information they are looking for. One method of organization is the Cornell System of Note taking, developed by Walter Pauk of Cornell University. As illustrated by the diagram below, you leave space in order to go back later and either summarize or highlight your actual lecture notes. Your paper can be viewed as a large note card, with terms on the left and explanations on the right.



## THE 5 R'S OF NOTE TAKING

Now that we have a way to organize your notebooks, let's look at the actual steps of note taking.

1. **Record** – In the note taking space, write down your notes of the lecture. There are many styles you could use including paragraph, outline, or concept maps. How do you know what to include in your notes? Pay attention to the following things:

- Repeated information
- Information that is written on the board, in a presentation, or on an overhead
- Lists of information
- Information that is read directly from the presenter's notes
- Information following the statement "This is important" or "This will be on the test."
- Summaries of the lecture

2. **Reduce** – This step involves reviewing your notes (preferably within 24 hours of taking them) and generating questions on the material. Write these questions in the left hand column for recall. Read through your notes and highlight or underline the portions that answer these questions.

3. **Recite and Reflect** – Reciting and reflecting are part of the note review process. Reciting the information is simply to repeat it to your self multiple times. Reciting can help you remember the material, especially definitions or lists but it will not help you understand it. Reflecting involves reading your notes and re-wording them into your own words. Decipher which materials consists of the main points and which is supporting details. Relate the main points to each other for deeper understanding.

4. **Reviews** – Reciting and reflecting are the method of reviews but the amount and frequency of review are also important. The first review should occur within the first 24 hours of the lecture. In this review you complete step two above. Next students should aim for a weekly review of their notes to tie together the material of 2 or 3 lectures. Finally, students need to complete the final review the week before the exam. This review should be broken into multiple sessions for maximum understanding and retention.

### NOTE TAKING STYLES

Students probably already have a preferred method of note taking, use what works. If your style is not working for you, below are some advantages and disadvantages of new styles you could try. If you need specific instructions or guidance on how to put any of these into practice, see your APSS Academic Counselor.

**Paragraph** – The format for this style of note taking is quite obvious, a simple paragraph as if you were writing a paper.

Advantage – No time is spent on organizing the information, all effort is on getting the material down.

Disadvantage – There is no organization, and there is no differentiation between main points and supporting details.

**Sentence** – Each new idea or fact is placed on a new line which you can number as you go.

Advantage – Little time is spent on organizing information and each idea is separated out.

Disadvantage – Main points and details are again difficult to distinguish. Editing can be difficult without completely rewriting the material.

**Outline** – Structured form of note taking with main points as roman numerals, sub –topics indented and marked by capital letters, another indentation and numbers represent supporting details. This method is sometimes difficult to use during the actual class but is a great method to use when re-wording your notes and reviewing.

Advantage – Material is organized and relationships between main ideas and support topics are easily represented.

Disadvantage – Requires up front thinking as you sit in lecture about the organization of the material presented. This method is difficult to use if the lecture moves to quickly.

**Concept Maps** – This format is great for visual learners. Ideas are written in short format in boxes or circles and the relationships between them are illustrated through connecting lines and relational words.

Advantage – Students must be actively engaged in the lecture to use this type of note taking.

Disadvantage – Requires quick thinking during lecture, may be more useful for review and reworking of notes.

Practice the skills in this packet for reading and listening for the main ideas. Remember to keep your notes organized. Different styles of note taking can be used for different classes and it may be useful to mix and match your styles at various times for an individual class. If you need further help or specific examples of the styles of note-taking, contact your APSS Counselor.

*The material on pages 10-12 was adapted from:*

*Petrie, Trent A.; Landry, Lisa Pinkenburg; Edwards, Kimberly Bobinski, and Petrie, Hugh G. Achieving Personal & Academic Success. Denton, TX: RonJon Publishing, Inc., 1998.*