

Taking notes that make sense -- even a year from now ...

As you work through the reading assignments for this and the following exercises, do not just read the articles, or just underline important passages. For understanding and remembering the arguments it is even more important to take notes on what you read. Taking concise yet comprehensive notes is a big step in preparing for classes and exams and to recall something you read or heard about.

If you are experienced in taking good notes, proceed to do so as you read your assigned materials. If you feel you could use some guidance in how to improve on this skill, follow the steps outlined below.

Articles that are written well have at least:

- a descriptive and/or provocative **title**,
- a compelling or at least an internally consistent **argument**,
- an apparent, intuitively logical, and hierarchical **structure** (look for subtitles),
- an obvious **paragraph separation and sequence**, and
- a clear, understandable **language** (including correct grammar and spelling, clear sentences, explanation for new or unusual terms, avoidance of unnecessary jargon and verbiage, etc.)

1 Gather the most obvious clues!

Browse through the article and note on a piece of paper its structure by writing down the title and all the subtitles of individual sections in the sequence in which they appear in the text. Indent all the subtitles that belong to the same logical section (to the same level in the hierarchy of importance) by the same amount so you know they are of similar importance and logically belong together. If there are no subtitles, you need to look at the text a bit more closely: is there a sequence of themes that the author(s) go through in the course of the text? If you can discern them, list them in the sequence in which they appear. (You may also group them later into logical classes if you can make out any.)

Example:

Everybody's Favorite Monsters: Multinationals	Holding Hands
Back in Fashion	Global ambition, parochial ability
Big, but not that big	A fad?
Sovereignty as sideshow	A Global Game of Monopoly?
A village, but now global?	Subsidiary for trustbusters
Creatures of Imperfection	On Present Trends
Wanted: failures	Spot the next barriers to fall
Have imperfection, will travel	The danger of excessive expectations
The non-global firm	The danger of the long American View
Multinationalism begins at ome	Think global. Now be serious
Make mine multiregional?	
Think global, then think again	

2 Put your mind's antennae out!

Words in titles and subtitles, together with the logic behind the text's structure that becomes apparent when you take a little time to look over the outline just listed, tell you what to get your mind ready for. They are also the first hint as to what the author's main argument in the text is. These hints in effect are signals to your brain to activate all the pertinent knowledge you already have about a certain subject. The more conscious you become of these clues, the easier it will be for you to actually take in what someone writes. So looking back at the above example, what do you expect the text to be about? (Note that in this exercise we just make conscious, and more thoroughly so, what your brain does automatically whenever you get new information!).

3 Read the text (again)!

If you have not read the article yet, do so now. Stop once in a while and recall what you thought the text would be about. Are your expectations met? (If they are not, you will probably be quite frustrated and most likely bored!)

4 Note the main argument!

Having had an expectation of the text and an actual read or two through it, what would you say is the main argument of the text? In other words: how would you describe to a friend what the gist of the article is?

5 Concisely list the supporting arguments under each heading (or subtitle)!

Every argument needs supporting arguments, data, and other evidence to be convincing. As you go once more through the text -- paragraph by paragraph -- list in keyword style or short sentences what the author(s) have to offer for supporting evidence and arguments. If you can't decide what is important and what is not (and thus should be omitted from this listing), ask yourself whether you found it important to know or mention this particular item to understand the logic behind the argument. If not, leave it out! You are most likely to forget everything that is not essential to the argument anyway.

6 Check whether it makes sense!

Once you're through with Steps 1-5, look over your notes once again and see whether they make sense. (The best test is really three days after taking the notes, i.e., when you're already somewhat removed from having read the article. If they still make good sense, you took good notes!) If you feel as if you lost the thread of the argument somewhere, then fill in the blanks. Also compare the length of your notes with the length of the article: if your notes are as long as the original article, you simply paraphrased the text. By definition notes are short and never as prosaic as an essay.