

King's Online Bible School
Introductory Course

Taking Notes

One of the most effective ways to read a document or to listen to a speaker is to take notes. Here are some of the advantages:

- Taking notes forces you to pay close, thoughtful attention.
- It assists you in identifying the essential points.
- It helps you understand the path of thought and the relationship of the parts.
- It captures significant statements and quotes for your own later use.
- It gives you a way to keep a record of your own thinking and reactions.
- Organized notes provide you with a directory to a presentation, simplifying later review.
- Taking notes and seeing how others present ideas will improve your own communication techniques when you write or speak.

Note taking is one of the most important skills for efficient studying and effective learning. As it becomes a habit, you will be able to enhance your techniques for your personal use. You will become a more effective listener and a more understanding reader.

In this lecture we offer guidelines to help you in taking notes in three kinds of learning situations:

1. reading a book or article that belongs to you;
2. reading a book or article that does not belong to you;
3. listening to a speaker.

1. Making notes while reading a book or article that is your own

In one way this kind of note making is the easiest because you don't have to write much down. Mostly, all you have to do is mark the parts of the text you want to remember.

You may already do this when you read, either underlining or highlighting text. If this is all you do, there are four possible problems you may encounter:

- underlining too much;
- not underlining enough;
- having to go through all your underlining to find something again;
- owning a book with ugly pages.

Some people distinguish by using different coloured highlighters. If this is your preference, it will be important to have a system of using colors that works with all kinds of different written presentations. One way you could do this would be to use one color to mark main points and another color to mark supporting points.

But using markers is irreversible. It only gives you one opportunity to choose the main statements and supporting statements correctly. You may want to use erasable pencils to make allowance for changing your mind.

It is ideal to make marks in a way that does not make a mess of your book or article. If you underline, you may want to use a straight edge, unless you have a very steady hand.

What is simpler and allows you to include much more detail and to make many more distinctions is to make small marks in the left hand margin of each page. Here are some symbols you can use:

Arrow = an important idea

? = I don't understand this sentence.

! = This is good! I agree!

?! = I question this = I don't agree with this.

M = main idea

S = supporting idea or sub point

R = a reason that helps prove the point the author is making

E = an example

The first four are symbols that may be helpful to use sparingly in any document. The latter four may be useful if you need to sort out the argument of the text for a special assignment; but they are much too cumbersome for ordinary use, simply because you will have one of these letters in front of almost every sentence in the book. We want to look at a more conventional way to deal with the structure of sections of text.

No matter what you are reading, the author has an order to his thoughts and you are trying to find it. He may have already provided an outline or marked main ideas with section titles or bold print.

There are some standard marks used in outlines that are especially helpful in sorting thoughts in a presentation. Not only do they identify main points and supporting points, but they number them consecutively. Main points are often marked with capital letters (A, B, C, D). Supporting points are marked with Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3, 4).

If we were to outline the above paragraph it would look like this:

- A. Standard marks used in outlines help in sorting thoughts in a presentation.
 - 1. They identify the main points and supporting points
 - 2. They number them consecutively.
 - a. Main points are marked with capital letters (A, B, C, D).
 - b. Supporting points use Arabic numerals (1, 2, 3, 4).

What we have decided about the above paragraph (in outlining it as we did) is that the main idea of the paragraph is to indicate how "standard marks used in outlines are helpful." This is labeled "A".

The following sentence has two supporting points because it states two ways they are helpful: identifying main points and supporting points and numbering consecutively. These are marked with Arabic numerals.

The third and fourth sentences are sub points for the supporting points. They present the two different kinds of marks: the marks used for main points and the marks used for sub points. Since the Arabic numerals have already been used, standard outlining procedure assigns small cases letters to these (a. and b.).

Using this system reveals and maps out the thought pattern in the text. It is the easiest way to find things again and the best way to review what is being said in the article or chapter. You don't have to read everything again to identify the main points and the supporting points.

Important hint: One of the rules of writing is that an author should only put one main idea in each paragraph. Usually he states this toward the beginning of the paragraph. But you cannot always assume this is the case. Sometimes, especially in sermons, the main idea may be restated more than one time in different ways.

Not everyone uses the same marking system. Here are some examples of different outlines. We list them here because some authors and speakers have already numbered their main points and sub points. You may come across several variations of the following schemes:

Often, roman numerals are used to mark main ideas:

- I. Main point
 - A. first sub point
 - B. second sub point
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - a.
 - b.
 - i.
 - ii.
- II. Second main point

Using a decimal system has become popular in recent years. It looks like this:

- 1. first main idea
 - 1.1 its first supporting thought
 - 1.2 its second supporting thought
- 2. second main idea
 - 2.1 its first supporting thought
 - 2.1.1.
 - 2.1.2.
 - 2.2 its second supporting thought

The best way to mark what you need to remember without cluttering the margins of your text (especially if you are not sure of the main points and sub points) is to use > to mark a main point and "bullets" or even a dot to mark each sub point. You may want to do it in pencil. It is ideal to keep your text as clean and neat as possible, especially if it is your Bible or an important book.

If there are particular quotes you want to remember and may want to use again, you will save yourself a lot of time later by writing (typing) them out now. Or at least make a note to yourself about the nature of the quote and the page number where you can locate it again.

2. Making notes from a borrowed book or article

Because you cannot make any marks in the text, you will have to type or write out everything you want to recall. It will be easiest for reviewing your notes if you always only use one side of each piece of paper.

At the top of your notes write the bibliographical information. This includes the author's full name and the full title of the book. This will be enough information if the book is a reference book in a library that you can consult again whenever necessary. Otherwise you should also write down the city of publication, the name of the publisher, and the edition year. These are especially important if you will be using ideas from this book later in writing a report or giving a talk because in some instances you will be expected to list or have access to all this bibliographical information.

If you are reading an article, write down the author's name, the exact title of the article, and the name of the journal or reference work from which the article was taken. Include further information, such as the volume number of the journal and the date of publication.

As you prepare to make notes, see if the author has provided a clear outline (either at the beginning of the article (book) or at the beginning of each chapter or all along the way in the text.

Sometimes an author only does so occasionally when he is listing points. Wherever he does, do the same in your own notes. Also, using his chapter titles will help.

Write down the main points and the supporting points, preferably in an outline structure. If the author has not provided an outline, make your own decision about main points and supporting points in each paragraph and section you read. The easiest way to organize thoughts is to use an outline.

An author may have sub points to his sub points. If you think they are important or desirable to remember, jot them down as well as everything else you find helpful.

Keep all the information in the same order that it has been presented in the book. Every time you write down something from a page, write down its page number next to it. This is easy to forget to do. Using the left hand margin of your note for page numbers will help remind you to keep adding them and makes it easy to find your place in the notes later.

If there is a quote you want to keep, write it in its proper place in the outline (and add the page number). Be sure to write it out word for word exactly as it appears. Use opening and closing quotation marks whenever you write down the author's exact words. This is the only way to distinguish (when you are reading your notes later) whether you have copied the author's words exactly or whether you have just written down the general idea, using some of the author's words. You will need to know exactly what you did with quotations if you are presenting this material later, either in written form or in a talk.

When you are finished taking notes you may want to do a bit of final highlighting for yourself, underlining or making marks in the margin to guide you to the points you want to stand out for later reference.

3. Listening to a speaker

Taking notes while you listen to a speaker requires no more time than the time it takes to be there listening. If you learn to do it well you will not have to go through a recording again (unless you want to experience the impact of the presentation a second time). Taking notes also helps your attentiveness.

Always identify the presentation. Write the name of the speaker and the subject at the top of your notes as well as the date and the occasion (where a sermon is delivered) or the name of the course of which the lecture you are hearing is a part.

It is a great advantage whenever a speaker provides an outline for what he is saying. But even if he or she doesn't do so in a deliberate way, you can often tell what thoughts belong together.

Whenever you hear a definition or an illustration or an example or a reason you know that you are listening to a supporting point. None of these are included just for their own sake. They all are helping to strengthen or clarify some point the speaker is making. Usually the main point comes first and the supporting material follows. But none of this is strange or new to you. You have been sorting through conversations ever since you were a young child.

As you listen to a speaker there are times when you will automatically know what the main point and the supporting points are, even if he doesn't label them for you. As soon as you are aware this is happening you can take your notes in outline fashion, indenting the supporting points slightly so they are clustered under the main point.

If you are not sure, just write down each statement you want to remember, one beneath another without any indentation. You can use underlining or outline symbols later to cluster main thoughts and supporting thoughts together.

You do not have to write down everything a speaker says. Speakers usually repeat themselves as they emphasize a point. They say the same thing different ways. If you miss something you think is important, leave a blank in your notes. You can ask the speaker or someone else later.

There will often be surprises for you as you try to write things down in order. The speaker may lead you to expect one thing and then change it, or he may make a mistake which you write down before you realize it's wrong, etc. It is not at all unusual to want and to need to make changes in your notes. Don't expect or try to have a perfect set of notes. Use arrows or asterisks or notes in the margin to make corrections or to direct your attention to something that is out of place. If you get things in the wrong order, put numbers at the beginning of each statement to indicate in what order you want to read them.

At the same time, write legibly. You may have the best intentions of rewriting your notes later, but few listeners ever manage to find the time. It will be most helpful if you glance over your notes at some point afterwards (while the presentation is still fresh in your mind) and make whatever repairs or improvements are necessary. Don't forget to fill in the blanks you left.

Use abbreviations as much as possible. Use all the standard abbreviations you know and make up your own shorthand system. The more you do this, the more adept you will be at getting everything you want on paper while you are listening.