

Gathering Material from Outside Sources: Reading and Note-Taking

1. *Skim*

First of all, look at the table of contents to get a general idea of the book's contents. (If you are reading an article, check the Abstract, or the introductory and concluding paragraphs.) From this quick check, you may decide that only certain parts are applicable for your topic; alternatively, you may wish to read the entire work. In either case, skim the introduction, or introductory chapter, to ascertain the author's point of view and intention.

2. *Survey*

Next, survey the entire work, noting chapter headings and arrangement. It may be helpful to read each chapter's introduction and conclusion, particularly for the sections you expect to be most relevant to your topic.

3. *Record*

If the book or article looks promising, note down all the information you will need for your Works Cited or References list, preferably on a separate card. Record the title and the author's full name as they appear on the title page. If you cannot find all the publishing information (city, publisher, date, edition) on the title page, look on the page immediately following it. Include the library call number for easy retrieval. For articles, note the volume, year, and first and last page numbers, including the citations at the end.

Citation card for a book (MLA format):

Kilian, Crawford	LC 91.2
<i>School Wars: The Assault on B.C. Education</i>	B7 K54
Vancouver: New Star, 1985.	1985

Citation card for an article (MLA format):

Campbell, Robert.

"Blacks and the Coal Mines of Western Washington, 1888-1896."

Pacific Northwest Quarterly 73 (1982): 146-55

4. *Read and Take Notes*

Now that you have a good idea of the work's scope, its contents, and the author's argument and conclusions, focus on the parts that you need to read in detail. Read a paragraph or section at a time, and try to record the gist of each, resisting the urge to copy whole chunks of the text. If you are dealing with an academic book or article, recognizing the structure of its thought should be easy: each paragraph or section will consist of a main idea, often introduced near the beginning and sometimes reiterated at the end, and supporting details or explanation (which take up most of the space). Look for one of these common patterns, or various hybrids between them:

- Main idea -- supporting details, explanation, examples
- Link with last paragraph -- main idea -- supporting details
- First idea -- details -- contrasting idea -- details
- Main idea -- details -- restatement of main idea

Here is an example, drawn from the Campbell article on the coal miners of nineteenth-century Washington State:

link	<i>Another</i> disadvantage for mine workers was the tremendous
main idea	<i>power the operators had over them.</i> Most Washington mining communities were company towns. As an individual
restatement	a worker was <i>completely dominated by the overwhelming presence of the company.</i> After his 10-hour shift in the
details	pits, a man went home to his company boarding house, ate food from the company store, and later drank in the company saloon where he complained to his fellow workers about high prices, rapidly accumulating debts, and the "truck system" (wages paid in store credit rather than cash). If he worked for the Oregon Improvement Company (OIC)--the leading independent operator and owner of the mines at Newcastle or Franklin--and wanted to go to Seattle, he travelled on the company railroad, the Columbia & Puget Sound.

Streamline your notes by simply recording the main idea in a phrase or brief sentence, together with page number, author's last name, and short title if you are using more than one work by that author (the complete bibliographical information is on your citation card). Then you can return to the source later to pick up more details, if necessary.

Here is a brief summary note of the Campbell paragraph:

Campbell 146

Mining companies dominated every aspect of miners' lives.

If you think you may wish to quote this passage, you may choose to make a quotation note:

Campbell 146

The Washington mine worker was "completely dominated by the overwhelming presence of the company."

If you are dealing with a source like a newspaper report, which may consist wholly of details, you will have to supply your own summary statements. Ask yourself, "What does this add up to?" and use your own words. Careful notation of the source will allow you to check the details later if you wish.

5. *Guidelines for Effective Note-Taking*

- If you have compiled a citation card for each source, all you need on your content note is the author's last name (and short title if you are using more than one work by that author) and the page.
- Use OUTSIZE quotation marks if you copy two or more words in a row. Then you will protect yourself against involuntary plagiarism. Everything else on the note card is assumed to be paraphrase or summary--the source's ideas, but your words. If you quote, quote accurately!
- If you wish to add your comment on the idea, use square brackets [. . .] around it. Then you can distinguish between your ideas and your source's ideas when you come to write the paper.
- Try to limit yourself to one main idea in each note. This will give you flexibility: you can easily rearrange the note cards to fit the order of your paper.
- When you have finished your reading, check over your notes to make sure that they make sense to you. Will you be able to understand them later when you no longer have the original source to refer to? Do you have all the information you will need to document the source?