From Note-Taking to Outlining:

Beginning the Writing Process in Humanities Research Papers

When undertaking any large project—a seminar paper, article, or dissertation chapter—the writing process can be daunting. This tutorial offers strategies for 1) taking effective notes while researching, 2) organizing your notes into discrete themes and topics, 3) creating an outline from those notes, and 4) expanding your outline into written paragraphs for the body of the paper.

Note-taking Strategies

Goal: Create a written record of your reading and research. A good set of notes will turn the stack of books on your desk into easily digestible ideas, quotations, and summaries: the raw materials from which you will develop an outline. Good notes will also include enough bibliographic information to find the passage in the source text should you need to consult it again.

Read both generously and critically

- When you read, try to actively follow every step of an author's argument. Consider the argument's underlying assumptions, and its potential implications and applications.
- Questions to consider include: Is the main claim convincing? Does the evidence support the point the author is making? Are other possible explanations addressed? To what scholars in what field is the author responding, and how? How would you respond to those same scholars?

Develop a note-taking system.

- Connect each note to a page number in the source; you may need to cite it later.
    - Tip: Begin each line of notes with a page #, and note only one idea per line.
    - Note the bibliographic information for each source you consult
- Clearly distinguish between verbatim quotations, paraphrases, and summaries.
    - Not sure how these differ? Have a look at these videos.
    - Tip: Use asterisks (***), bold, all caps, etc. to mark important ideas
- Write at least a sentence about everything you read; don't rely on memory.
    - Tip: After reading a source, write a quick summary of its main ideas.
    - Even noting "nothing useful here" is still helpful to your process!
- Be strategic in your reading and selective in your note-taking.
    - Book reviews, lit reviews, and summaries of research often have everything you'll need about an important source.
    - Even the most important sources often appear in just a few sentences or a footnote in your final text. You may not use them at all.

Reading and writing is a circular process. Don't wait to start writing!

- If a sentence or phrase occurs to you while taking notes, write it down immediately.
    - Keep a file of rough ideas; you can put these in their proper place later.

Let technology help! Consider using software beyond just word processors. Many are free!

- Note-taking software: Evernote, Simplenote, Quip, Google Keep
- Reference management software: Zotero, EndNote, ReadCube, Sente, Mendeley

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Organizing Your Notes

***Goal*: Refine your collection of raw notes into more streamlined ideas, themes, and topics.** Group similar notes and ideas into more centralized, easy---to---find files. Your argument will emerge from this process: themes you consistently noticed, oft---cited primary sources, details you found problematic or thought---provoking—these are what you will build your original argument on.

Periodically re-read your files and annotate your notes.

- Assign keywords or develop a system for tagging main themes and topics.
    - Tip: Use colored highlighting or develop a set of symbols
    - Tip: Mix your media. Use pen and paper to diagram and draw connections.
- As your ideas develop, not everything you took notes on will still be relevant.
    - Duplicate your files so you can delete freely without losing data.
    - Develop a naming system for your note files (e.g., version 1.0, 1.1, 1.2, 2.0)

Write! Document your thoughts; you won't remember everything later.

- Note-taking, outlining, and writing don't have to be discrete stages.
- You may find that some ideas need more research. Back to step I!

Software can help. Consider outlining and drafting programs (some for purchase, some free): Scrivener, OmniOutliner, UVOutliner, Overleaf, Papers

Creating an Outline

Goal: Arrange the key ideas and themes you identified in the last step into a structure for your argument. Create a working outline that you can later expand into prose paragraphs. If you have ideas about what to include in your introduction or conclusion, jot them down.

Populate your outline using the topic-specific notes you have gathered.

- Each tag or keyword in your notes could become a section in your outline.
    - Tip: Copy & paste important ideas from your notes into your outline.
    - Include page #s from sources (payoff for writing them down earlier).

The more detail, the better!

- Outlines can begin as minimal as single words or phrases, but they can grow into sentence-by-sentence maps of individual paragraphs.

Create and main claim and organize your outline around it

- The claim is the most important part of your paper!
- A claim is a statement supported by *reasons* based on *evidence*. It acknowledges and responds to other views, and you can make a case for its significance. A main claim should be specific, substantive, relevant to the scholarly conversation, and contestable.
- The more contestable your main claim is, the higher the stakes your argument will have. But you never want to make a claim that is too big to be supported with the evidence you can supply within the scope of your paper.

Revise. Save multiple versions of your outline, so that you can expand without losing data.

Expanding Your Outline into Prose

Goal: From your outline, begin to produce chunks of text for your argument. This will eventually become the body of your finished paper.

Choose any section in your outline and begin to convert your notes into prose

- Tip: Begin with the ideas that are clearest in your head right now, or the source you know you want to discuss, regardless of where they fall in your overall outline.

Think in terms of paragraphs: each concrete idea requires one paragraph to explain it.

- Tip: The core of a paragraph is often a single source. Copy it, then add context and analysis of why that evidence is important until you have a full paragraph.
- Well-formed paragraphs can be moved around in the final structure later.

Imagine that you are explaining to a friend why the source or idea in question is important

- Tell the friend why you noticed that text in the first place. What does it show?
    - Tip: Use an actual friend. Describe your idea & record your conversation.
    - People often speak more clearly than they write. But good writing doesn't have to be complicated!

References

Booth, Wayne C., Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams. The Craft of Research. 3rd edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.