

How to Take Smart Notes: One Simple Technique to Boost Writing, Learning and Thinking – for Students, Academics and Nonfiction Book Writers

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Summary

1. Text explains the “slip-box” note taking technique to make connections in order to boost thinking, learning, writing.

Key Takeaways

1. Introduction

a. Interesting Takeaways

- i. Writing does not **follow** research, learning, or studying but is the **medium** in where this all takes place.
- ii. Writing is the best facilitator of thinking, reading, learning, understanding, and generating ideas we have.
- iii. If you want to remember something, write it down; if you want to understand something, write it in your own words.**

iv. The System

1. The goal should not be to "collect" notes, but to make connections to spark ideas and see what "bubbles up".
2. The system established a workflow to work **within** rather than imposing a rigid structure on yourself.

v. Literature Notes

1. the purpose is to summarize what you do not want to forget and what will be relevant for your own thinking and writing.
2. keep these notes short, selective, and in your own words.
3. be extra selective with quotes: take the time to understand what they mean.

vi. Permanent Notes

1. Look into your slip-box to determine what is relevant for your own research, thinking, writing, or interests.
2. Add to the slip-box by filing behind one or more related notes, add links to other notes, and link it to an index.
3. Write in full sentences while disclosing sources and making references.
 - a. Be as brief, precise, and clear as possible.
4. Don't collect notes; develop ideas, arguments and discussions.
 - a. Priming questions for Permanent notes include:
 - i. Does this new information contradict, correct, support, or add to what I already have?
 - ii. Can I combine two ideas to create something new?
 - iii. What questions are triggered by them?

2. The Four Underlying Principles

a. Interesting Takeaways

- i. To create something new, you need to elaborate on and think beyond the frames of what you read.
 - ii. Develop your thinking by writing.
 - iii. The brain is not a storage device but a network of connections.
- b. Distinguish between fleeting notes, permanent notes, and project notes.
 - i. Fleeting notes: help you remember an idea, but you need to elaborate on them to make them useful; a permanent note is not a fleeting note.
 - ii. Permanent notes are elaborations of fleeting and literature notes.
 - iii. On page 46, Project related notes are discussed and you should come back to that later.
- c. On page 54, the book talks about the benefits of reading with a pen in hand:
 - i. Allows you to get feedback on your ability to understand.
 - ii. Increases your ability to clearly and concisely express your understanding.

3. The Six Steps to Successful Writing

- a. Interesting Takeaways
 - i. Familiarity tends to be confused with both understanding and skill; reviewing is not an effective method for understanding and that is why you must take the time to state ideas in your own words.
 - ii. We have focused and sustained attention with modern day distractions taxing the latter.
 - iii. Read with an eye towards connections to the slip-box.
 - iv. The slip-box should help avoid confirmation bias because it only matters if notes are open to connections or that they connect.
 - v. Learning is about retrieval and connections, not storage.
 - vi. Mark differences or distinctions in thoughts or concepts.
 - vii. The slip-box allows you to make more connections which promotes better understanding and learning.
 - viii. To teach something, the key is to relate it to something someone already understands.
 - ix. Paradoxically, too much order can impede learning as it prevents connections.
 - x. Compare, differentiate, and connect notes.
 - xi. Abstracting away from problems is a way to generate insight.
 - xii. You can get insight not so much from trying new things, but by breaking old habits of thinking.
 - xiii. Develop the habit of seeing what is missing.
 - xiv. The slip-box is a medium we think in not about.
- b. The process for reading and taking literature notes should be flexible.
 - i. Certain texts should be skimmed and others read slowly and carefully.
 - ii. For literature notes, there are times to slowly work your way through a book and others where you can summarize a book in a single sentence.
 - iii. Take the time to translate what literature notes mean for the slip-box.
- c. What literature notes should do for you:
 - i. Helps you practice "getting the gist" which allows you to think critically, spot patterns, question frames, and make reading more efficient.
 - ii. give us feedback on our understanding.

- d. Page 69 discusses how the brain does not store but connects information; here are some questions that help make connections:
 - i. How does this fact fit into my idea of [x]?
 - ii. How can this phenomenon be explained by theory?
 - iii. Do these ideas contradict or complement one another?
 - iv. Is this argument similar to another?
 - v. Haven't I heard this before?
 - vi. What does [x] mean for [y]?
- e. Elaboration
 - i. Elaboration is the best method for learning: thinking about what we read and how it can inform questions, topics, and be combined with other knowledge.
 - 1. You need to think beyond the frame of a text and evaluate the argument.
 - 2. Elaboration Questions for the slip-box:
 - a. What does it mean?
 - b. How does it connect to?
 - c. What is the difference between?
 - d. What is it similar to?
- f. Permanent Notes
 - i. To give them notes context, write out the reasons why it is valuable for your own lines of thought.
 - ii. When adding a permanent note:
 - 1. Add sequentially or file behind an existing note it refers to.
 - 2. Add links to other notes.
 - 3. Add to an index.
 - 4. Notes should be written with reference to existing notes and the numbering sequence is what allows clusters and sub-clusters to build out (page 107).
 - 5. Keywords (page 111)
 - a. Keywords function as the entry point in the index and should be chosen carefully and sparsely.
 - b. When choosing a keyword do not add too many connecting notes.
 - c. Do not choose a keyword to store a note but rather to retrieve it.
 - 6. A slip-box allows for the following:
 - a. Understanding broader implications (elaboration).
 - b. Retrieve at different times (spacing).
 - c. In different contexts (variation).
 - d. With the help of cues (contextual inference).
 - e. Deliberate effort (retrieval).

What I got out of it

1. Understanding is enhanced by the consistent practices of rephrasing and elaboration.
2. Writing is the medium to develop our thinking, not mere note review.
3. Our brain is not a storage device and looks for connections.
4. The slip-box is about developing a system that pushes you forward and is not about imposing structure on yourself.

Note: I assume no responsibility or liability for any errors or omissions in the content of these notes. The information contained in these notes is provided on an "as is" basis with no guarantees of completeness, accuracy, usefulness or timeliness and are based on my own interpretations of the author's work.