

The Extended Essay: Successful Note-taking

Before beginning this process, please read the handout “Navigating the World of Research.”

A. Setting Up Your Process

No matter what your topic or subject, you will engage in note-taking to some degree. Successful note-taking allows students to find and pull out only information they feel is relevant to their essay. Using it in a consistent manner is essential to avoiding accidental plagiarism and minimizing backtracking that creates extra work.

We strongly recommend that you purchase at least one hundred to possibly two hundred 3x5 or 4x6 note cards rather than use a spiral notebook. Note cards can be arranged, reorganized and even thrown away when you realize that you have redundant or needless information. It is also much easier to label and attribute sources and separate information. You will save yourself a ton of time in comparison to having a notebook.

Some of your note cards will be bib(liography) cards. These bib cards will only have the source information on them (author, title, publishing company, date of publication, and city, for example). When you find a relevant source that you plan to draw information from for your essay, create a bib card for that source. Include only the information on the bib card for that your method of citation (MLA, APA, Chicago, CSE) requires. You will need to have out your manual guide or access to the appropriate online guide to do this. (Note: Links to all of the aforementioned methods of citation are on the uaisresearch.com website.) When the information on your bib card is complete, label your first bib card “A” since it is your first source. The second bib card will be “B” and so on. When you are done researching for the day, place all of your A1, A2, A3 note cards behind your “A” bib card, your B note cards behind your “B” bib card, and so on. Rubber band them together.

You not only have a strategy to keep organized, but also can tell by the thickness of your piles if you are weighting one source too heavily against others!

B. Creating Effective Note Cards

Now that we have a strategy, let’s talk about the actual note cards themselves. Imagine you are paging through source “A” and come across relevant information you may use for your draft. Label the bib card A1 in the upper-right hand corner. You will now need to decide the appropriate type of note you wish to take, depending on your need. Generally, there are three:

1. **direct quotation:** repeats the exactly words of the source exactly; uses quotation marks
2. **paraphrase:** states a single idea expressed in a source, but in different words
3. **summary:** like a paraphrase, but takes a much longer chunk of material (paragraph or page) and summarizes in different *and* fewer words

How do you choose?

Use direct quotations when:

You cannot better express or capture the author’s idea; you want to highlight an eloquent/powerful passage
It is important historically, legally, or as a matter of definition
You want to add the power of an author’s words
You are comparing or contrasting specific points of view
You want to add the power of an author’s words to support your argument
You want to note important research that precedes your own

Employ paraphrasing when:

- You plan to use information on your note cards in *any* manner or form and wish to avoid plagiarizing
- You want to avoid overusing quotations, which steals away from your personal voice in the paper
- You want to use your own voice to present information

Important note: Use this as your basic note form—your standard—unless you have a better reason to use one of the others

Summarize when:

- You want to establish or offer an overview of a topic
- You want to describe common knowledge (from several sources) about a topic
- You want to determine the main ideas of a single source
- You want to cite sources but a passage is too long to effectively quote or paraphrase

Blend quotation plus summary/paraphrase when:

You want to use a portion of the text desirable to have exactly stated in your paper but also require some explanation in order to clarify the quote.

Whatever your choice, never forget to include the *exact* location of your information. Copy down the following, depending on your source:

Book, novel: page number (34)

Newspaper or magazine: date of issue (day, month, year) and page (A12+, B4, 46-47)

Academic journal or other periodical: (volume number, issue number, and page numbers)¹

TV episode: episode title, show title

Play: act, scene, line numbers

Poetry: page and line numbers

Website: date of access

Interview: type (phone, in-person, email) and date of interview

As long as you always have the above information and the letter of the corresponding bib card, you will quickly be able to re-reference the material when you go to rewrite your paper. This will be necessary later when you forget the actual context of your note cards. Failing to keep page numbers will require you to search through all of your research again for your information, so take care in doing this every time.

Here is how a note card might look for a direct quote:

A12
According to critic Harry Bloom, “Frequently, the speech rhythms of Steinbeck’s chosen people echo the stately rhythms of the King James Version of the Old Testament. The result is a more formal—even parallel—pacing of dialogue that draws the reader’s attention to his important themes.” 45

¹ Please note that while I indicate that you should include all of this on the note card, your citation style may only ask for page numbers in the body of your paper. However, because I am unfamiliar with styles outside APA and MLA, I am suggesting that you include all three, as it is better to have more—not less—information than what you require.

Here is how a note card might look for a paraphrase:

B12
Peter Ciaccio argues that J.K. Rowling’s three unforgiveable curses—the <i>Imperius</i> , <i>Cruciatus</i> , and <i>Avada Kedavra</i> —are comparable to the most unforgiveable sin in the New Testament: blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. 41

A summary note card would take this paraphrase further:

B12
Peter Ciaccio argues that J.K. Rowling’s three unforgiveable curses—the <i>Imperius</i> , <i>Cruciatus</i> , and <i>Avada Kedavra</i> —are comparable to the most unforgiveable sin in the New Testament: blasphemy against the Holy Spirit; however, like using the Lord’s name in vain, Hermione points out that these curses are only deemed unforgiveable if they are meant. 41-42

Sometimes, you may find it necessary to combine. Here is how a note card might look for a paraphrase and quotation blended together:

A4
The Joads head to California with high hopes, but once there, they discover that for them, “California is not a Promised Land but a man-blighted Eden.” 195

C. Helpful Tips for the Note-taking Process

1. Always keep your research question and outline in mind. Do not record material unrelated to your topic.
2. Make sure summaries and paraphrases accurately express the ideas in your sources.
3. Be exact with direct quotations.
4. For history, science, and math EEs, double-check statistics carefully. A one-number or decimal-point error can decimate the argument for a section of or even the entire paper.
5. Distinguish fact and opinion in your sources by introducing correctly: “Dr. Graves thinks that...” or “According to Margaret Thompson....” Do not state opinions as facts or—worse yet—claim opinions as facts to support your argument.
6. Nonessential parts of a quotation can be cut if the overall meaning of the quotation is not changed. Indicate an omission of material from a quotation by using **ellipsis points**—a series of three spaced dots (...)—enclosed in brackets. Use only the three dots when cutting material within a sentence. Use a period before the dots when cutting a full sentence, a paragraph, or more than a paragraph. Use a period after the dots when cutting material from the end of a sentence.
7. Always double-check page references. It’s easy to copy these incorrectly.

D. Creating Effective Bib Cards

Once you have begun writing note cards on a particular source, it's time to complete a bib card for that source. What this essentially means is that you are collecting the relevant information from the source you will need (whether it's a website, novel, atlas, magazine article) according to your required documentation style (MLA, APA, Chicago).

It is essential that this information be recorded exactly and completely to avoid accidental plagiarism. Follow the steps below for each source you are pulling information from:

1. Take out a new note card and simply label it "A" or whatever letter is next in your progression of sources. Some students prefer to have their bib cards be colored so they are easily identifiable against their amassing note cards.
2. Decide on what source type you have. This may seem obvious, but often is ambiguous. What constitutes a "scholarly journal," especially if you don't read them in your extensive free time? Or, if you are printing an online version of a print article in today's *Detroit Free Press*, do you include the information as you would for a website or for the actual paper? According to MLA guidelines, at least, you are treating it as a website. But for APA? Chicago? When in doubt, check your procedural guide carefully or ask your supervisor.
3. Next, use your guide or online resource to find examples of what needs to be included on your bib card and the arrangement of those required pieces of information from the text. For example, in MLA format, for an article in a scholarly journal, you would see this:

A Piper, Andrew. "Rethinking the Print Object: Goethe and the Book of Everything." <i>Critical Inquiry</i> 34.2 (2006): 124-38. Print.

Take a closer look at that bib card. I'm betting you can figure out what everything on there is...except for one thing. Andrew Piper is clearly the author. The title of the article or essay is in quotations. The name of the scholarly journal is in italics. The year it was printed was 2006, and it's obvious the page numbers are 124-38. In MLA, we put "Print" at the end to show that's how we found the source. But the 34.2? What am I looking for there? This is where reading more carefully the website or the textbook with the documentation format will help you. In this case the 34 refers to the Volume number, and the 2 refers to the Issue number. Since *Critical Inquiry* is published every year and has multiple publications in one year, it's safe to say that 34 represents the 34th year of its publication and the 2 refers to the second publication in that year. But without those numbers, no one reading your essay could ever find the article. The lesson? Attention to detail is important, and when you are confused, it is your responsibility to ask questions!

4. So, now you know your documentation style. You know your source type. And you have a model to follow to write out your bib card. All you need to do is find the information in the source itself to complete your bib card. Most of this can be found in the opening pages of the source or at the back, unless it is a collection of different writer's works, in which case you will have to go to the start of that writer's essay or article in the middle of the text. Most of the time, if you have a reputable source, you will be able to locate all of the necessary information that you need.

5. Pay careful attention to punctuation. The minor details in this case matter greatly in your final scoring on the EE, and your supervisor cannot point these out to you.

6. At this point, you will probably have a number of questions that arise that you cannot answer: what do I do if I can't find "X"? What if there aren't any page numbers? Is this considered source X or source Y? It is very important

that you conduct your due diligence using the manual guides or websites provided to you **before** you ask your supervisor. After all, you are an IB learner and should recognize the importance of mastering these concepts for yourself. Once you have conducted your due diligence by going to place A and B and can say to your supervisor that you have conflicting information or that a text is unclear—that you are confused despite your efforts—then it would be appropriate to seeking guidance. You will find that all of these answers lie in the manuals you have been given or on the websites provided for you. It’s just a matter of persistence.

E. Preparing Note Cards for an Outline

Eventually, you will amass enough information from a variety of sources to begin formulating a preliminary outline. This point occurs at different times for each student; there is no magic number of note cards. When you have exhausted your current resources or have reached a threshold where you need to look at the big picture in order to see how to proceed, there is where you likely want to step back and begin looking at how your paper will look.

Your outline must be flexible. It will grow, shrink, and change. To lock yourself into a structure too early on is to hurt the opportunity for your paper to grow into its natural shape. At this point, be comfortable moving back and forth between your outline and your note cards. Generally, if you have done a thorough job of researching, your research should drive your outline, not the other way around.

Are you ready? You will likely need a big table, little noise, and lots of patience with yourself.

1. Place your piles of note cards on a large table. To this point, they have been organized by source. Begin creating piles for your note cards based on similarity of content. So, you’ll be mixing sources A, B, and C together, but by similar ideas or points. Do this for all of your note cards until you have a new set of piles.
2. Assess how many piles you have. Too few means you need to break the piles down further. Too many and you may need to combine similar ones or conduct more research on areas you are lacking information. Above all, be honest with yourself. Don’t push something into a pile just to make it fit.
3. Ideally, you just organized a ton of note cards. Feel free to take a “brain break” and come back later with a new perspective. When you’re ready, come up with a phrase to describe what is in each pile. Now, label each card at the top with that phrase. If the card doesn’t fit in that pile, place it elsewhere.
4. Re-examine your research question, where the verbs will hold an important clue as to how your paper should be structured. Frequently, history, science, and math research essays operate in a way that explains why something is so or why something occurred or occurs. If this is the case, then writers of such papers such use—or at least keep strongly in mind—cause-effect sequencing. This won’t be the case with English EE’s, though, because the literature is not cause-effect. English EE’s may be written chronologically, but only if the argument is allowed to build climactically. Regardless, all EE’s will have background information that emerges in the introduction or beginning of the body. Keep this in mind for the next two steps.
5. Sequence your piles as a whole. Look at the labels at the top of each pile. Decide which pile will likely come first for your paper, and so on, according to the spirit of your research question. Place the piles left to right or top to down.
6. Sequence each pile internally. Take your first pile and order the note cards based on what is likely to come first, second, third, and so on. As you go, make notes of what information you seem to be missing—where holes might appear, so that you can continue research later. Repeat this process with each pile under a master (rough!) order for your EE takes place.
7. You are now in a position to write an outline! Please see the handout on constructing an effective outline.