

Taking Purposeful Research Notes

When students are asked to complete a research project, there are 5 steps that a teacher needs to structure for his/her students before a single note should be taken:

1. Choose a topic
2. Narrow your focus
3. Find sources
4. Read, highlight, and margin note your sources
5. Brainstorm subtopics for your paper based on your sources

Once these steps have been followed, it is time to take notes. The note-taking stage is the most important step in writing a research paper; it is even more important than the actual writing of the paper. Why? Because having useful, organized notes makes writing your paper an automatic process. The more time you spend making your notes useful and organized, the less thought has to go into turning them into a well-written paper. However, it is easy to get frustrated with the note-taking step, and sometimes students even skip it all together. This is because the process of taking notes is time-consuming and arduous, and, especially for many students with learning disabilities, the idea of writing down a significant amount of information and mentally organizing it under subtopics is overwhelming. Therefore, if the teacher can make the note-taking process meaningful and relatively easy for the student, this most important step in preparing a research paper becomes less of a chore.

NOTE CARDS: Some teachers ask their students to use index cards to write down individual facts with the intention of categorizing them under broader subtopics when the notes are complete. Though note cards seem easy to manipulate and minimize a large amount of information into individual snippets (one piece of information per card), there are several problems that commonly arise when using note cards in research:

Problem #1: Students write too much information on a card

Problem #2: Students fill out cards just to meet teacher requirements (i.e. “you must have 50 note cards for your paper”) without considering the usefulness of the information or its relevance to the topic

Problem #3: Students have the added step of organizing their note cards into piles when they are done taking notes

Problem #4: When they sit down to organize their note cards under subtopics, many students realize that they took too many notes on one topic and not enough on another. Also, they may realize that they wrote the same fact on more than one card. This means either restructuring the paper or finding more sources to fill in the gaps in information.

Problem #5: In the organization process, many students find that they have some notes that don't fit under any relevant subtopic. This means that they spent time taking notes that will never get included.

The solution to these problems is simple: toss the note cards and use structured notes sheets instead, following the numbered steps on the next page ...

MAIN IDEA: 1. *Students have several notes sheets going at once with pre-determined main ideas on them*

| Order # | Information – one fact per space | Source Letter | Page # |
|---------|---|---------------|--------|
| 4. | 2. <i>As they find information in their highlighted sources that fits under a subtopic, they write it in a blank space on the sheet for that subtopic</i> | 3. | |
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When the student has completed all of his/her notes, it is time to put the pages in order as they would appear as paragraphs in the paper. Then, the individual facts on each page also need to be put in logical order by numbering them in the boxes provided in this column.

Students code their sources (Source A, B, C, etc.) and record the source letter and page number for each fact. This forces them to keep track of where the information came from and makes citations easier to insert as they write

Check out the following sample pages to see these notes sheets in action

The sample research paper topic is: “The American Flag”

MAIN IDEA: *US flag etiquette*

| Order # | Information – one fact per space | Source Letter | Page # |
|---------|---|---------------|------------|
| 2 | <i>don't let it drop towards any person or thing (exception: returning a salute from a foreign ship)</i> | <i>A</i> | <i>24</i> |
| 4 | <i>can never touch the ground</i> | <i>A</i> | <i>24</i> |
| 3 | <i>lights have to be shined on it if it is flown at night</i> | <i>A</i> | <i>28</i> |
| 6 | <i>repair or replace it if it gets worn and frayed</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>142</i> |
| 7 | <i>if it is worn beyond repair, it must be destroyed by burning (can never be thrown away)</i> | <i>C</i> | <i>3</i> |
| 8 | <i>Flag Day (June 14) = American Legion organized flag burning ceremonies for old flags</i> | <i>C</i> | <i>3</i> |
| 1 | <i>the flag code says that it cannot be used on "anything intended to be discarded after temporary use" (like napkins or boxes)</i> | <i>A</i> | <i>26</i> |
| 5 | <i>it is not true that a flag that touches the ground has to be burned</i> | <i>C</i> | <i>3</i> |
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Notice that information on this page is from 3 different sources, but all fits under the same main idea. Having **at least 6 spaces filled** on this 10-space page is an indicator that you have enough for a paragraph in your paper.

MAIN IDEA: *the first US flag*

| Order # | Information – one fact per space | Source Letter | Page # |
|---------|---|---------------|------------|
| 1 | <i>when the Declaration of Independence was signed, the US had no official flag</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>140</i> |
| 2 | <i>the Grand Union Flag is often given credit as the "First National Flag," but this is not official</i> | <i>C</i> | <i>5</i> |
| 3 | <i>the Grand Union Flag looked like the British East India Company flag</i> | <i>C</i> | <i>5</i> |
| 6 | <i>red and white stripes in the flag may have come from the Washington family coat of arms</i> | <i>A</i> | <i>31</i> |
| 4 | <i>the Grand Union Flag was used early in the Revolutionary War by George Washington</i> | <i>A</i> | <i>32</i> |
| 5 | <i>Flag Resolution passed on June 14, 1777: "Resolved, That the flag of the United States be thirteen stripes, alternate red and white; that the union be thirteen stars, white in a blue field, representing a new Constellation."</i> | <i>B</i> | <i>141</i> |
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How Notes Sheets eliminate possible note-taking problems:

Problem #1: Students write too much information on a card

😊 **Notes Sheet Solution:** Each space on the sheet is only big enough for one fact or quote.

Problem #2: Students fill out cards just to meet teacher requirements (i.e. “you must have 50 note cards for your paper”) without thinking about the usefulness of the information or its relevance to the topic

😊 **Notes Sheet Solution:** If students are properly putting information on a notes sheet to match the main idea at the top, then every note is different, meaningful, and useful.

Problem #3: Students have the added step of organizing their note cards into piles when they are done taking notes.

😊 **Notes Sheet Solution:** Students are organizing their notes under main ideas as they write them down, which eliminates one big step in the organizing process.

Problem #4: When they sit down to organize their note cards under subtopics, many students realize that they took too many notes on one topic and not enough on another. Also, they may realize that they wrote the same fact on more than one card. This means either restructuring the paper or finding more sources to fill in the gaps in information.

😊 **Notes Sheet Solution:** A student can tell right away if he doesn’t have enough information to make a paragraph and correct this problem as he takes notes instead of after he is done. If 6 spaces on a sheet are filled out, there is enough information for a solid paragraph. Also, as students write facts on their sheets, they are less likely to repeat information that is already written down on that page.

Problem #5: In the organization process, many students find that they have some notes that don’t fit under any relevant subtopic. This means that they spent time taking notes that will never get included.

😊 **Notes Sheet Solution:** Again, if students are properly putting information on a notes sheet to match the main idea at the top, then every note is meaningful and useful.

There’s a blank notes sheet on the following page for you to use!

MAIN IDEA:

| Order # | Information – one fact per space | Source Letter | Page # |
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