Writing in the Disciplines
to accompany

THE RINEHART HANDBOOK FOR WRITERS

Second Edition

Bonnie Carter · Craig Skates

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THE RINEHART HANDBOOK FOR WRITERS

[redacted]

University of Texas at El Paso

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TAKING NOTES: SOME GENERAL ADVICE

After you have selected useful sources for your paper you are ready to begin your concentrated reading and note taking, focusing only on those sections of a work that pertain to your topic. Before you begin reading any book or article, survey it, checking the headings and subheadings in the table of contents, and especially the index, for subjects you need to read carefully or to skim. As you read, underline and annotate sources whenever possible; then take notes on index cards. Concentrated reading helps you narrow your focus still further as you see connections among ideas and develop new perspectives on your topic. As you read and take notes, you will move toward a thesis. Later, you will use these notes to help you plan and write your paper.

Note-taking skills are essential in academic writing. Once you have mastered these skills, you can apply them to writing assignments in any discipline.

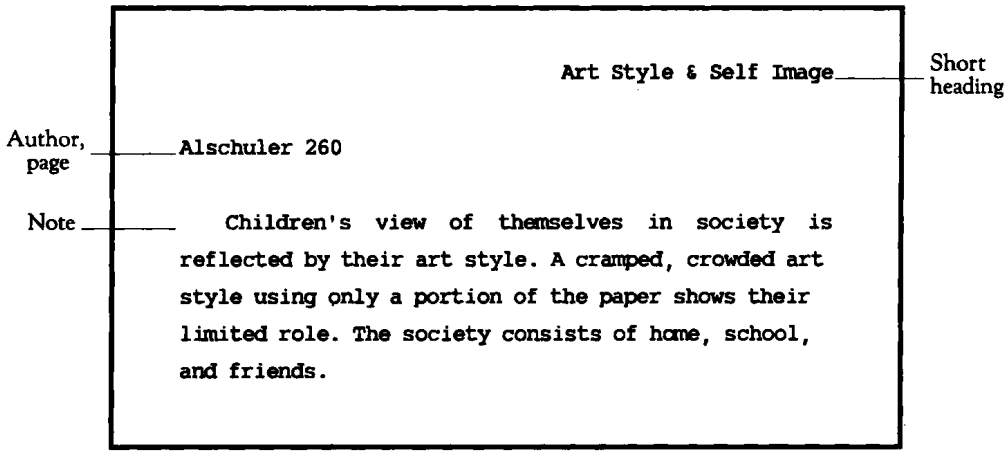
MAKING NOTE CARDS

Using index cards may seem cumbersome, but their advantages become obvious when you go about arranging and rearranging material. Often you do not know where you will use a particular piece of information or whether you will use it at all. You will be constantly rearranging ideas, and the flexibility of index cards makes adding and deleting information and experimenting with different sequences possible. Students who take notes in a notebook or on a tablet find that they spend as much time untangling their notes as they do writing their paper.

At the top of each card, *include a short heading* that relates the information on your card to your topic. Later, this heading will help you make your outline.

Each card should *accurately identify the source* of the information you are recording. You need not include the complete citation, but you must include enough information to identify your source. "Wilson 72," for example, would send you back to your bibliography card carrying the complete documentation for *Patriotic Gore* by Edmund Wilson. For a book with more than one author, or for two books by the same author, you need a more complete reference. "Glazer & Moynihan 132," would suffice for *Beyond the Melting Pot* by Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan. "Terkel, *Working* 135" would be necessary if you were using more than one book by Studs Terkel.

Here is one good note-card format.



As you take notes on note cards, you can do several things that will make the actual writing of your paper easier.

Put only one note on each card. If one card contains several different points, you will not be able to try out different ways of arranging those points.

Include everything now that you will need later to understand your note. You might think, for instance, that this makes sense:

```
Peyser—four important categories of new music
```

But in several weeks you will not remember what those four categories were. They should have been listed on your card.

Put an author's comments into your own words whenever possible. Word-for-word copying of information is probably the most inefficient way to take notes. Occasionally you will want to copy down a particularly memorable statement or the exact words of an expert on your topic, and such quotations can strengthen your paper. But in your final paper, for the most part, you will summarize and paraphrase your source material, adding your own observations and judgments. Putting information into your own words now keeps you from relying too heavily on the words of others or producing a paper that is a string of quotations rather than a thoughtful interpretation and analysis of ideas.

Remember to record your own observations and reactions. As you read your sources, get into the habit of writing down all the ideas—comments, questions, links with other sources, apparent contradictions, and so on—that occur to you. If you do not, you will probably forget them. But be sure to bracket your own reactions and observations so you will not confuse them with the author's material.

Indicate what kind of information is on your note card. If you copy an author's exact words, place them in quotation marks. If you use an author's ideas but not the exact words, do not use quotation marks. (Do not forget, however, to

identify your source.) Finally, if you write down your own ideas, enclose them in brackets ([ ]). This system helps you avoid confusion—and plagiarism.

The student who wrote this note card was exploring the way the press portrayed President Richard Nixon during the Watergate crisis. Note that he has included only one note on his card, that both his note and its source are as complete as possible, and that he has clearly identified the first sentence as a summary ("The authors say . . .") and the other comments as his own.

```
                                                    Watergate
Bernstein & Woodward 366

    The authors say that by the summer of 1973 both
Alexander Haig and Henry Kissinger urged Richard
Nixon to cut his ties with his aides. [Is there any
evidence of this? What sources support this? Seems
doubtful.]
```

QUOTATION NOTE CARD

You *quote* when you copy an author's remarks just as they appear in your source, word for word, including all punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. When recording quotations, enclose all words that are not your own within quotation marks and identify your source with appropriate documentation. Check carefully to make sure that you have not inadvertently left out quotation marks or miscopied material from your source.

```
                                          Matterhorn Accident
Whymper 393

    "Others may tread its summit-snows, but
none will ever know the feelings of those who first
gazed upon its marvelous panorama, and none, I
trust, will ever be compelled to tell of joy turned
into grief and of laughter into mourning."
```

PARAPHRASE NOTE CARD

A *paraphrase* is a detailed restatement, in your own words, of the *content* of a passage. In it you not only present the main points of your source, but retain their order and emphasis as well. A paraphrase will often include brief phrases quoted from the original to convey its tone or viewpoint. When you write a paraphrase, you should present only the author's ideas and keep your own interpretations, conclusions, and evaluations separate.

You paraphrase when you need detailed information from specific passages of a source but not the author's exact language. For this reason paraphrase is especially useful when you are presenting technical material to a general audience. It can also be helpful for reporting complex material or a particularly intricate discussion in easily understood terms. Although the author's concepts may be essential, the terms in which they are described could be far too difficult for your readers to follow. In such cases paraphrase enables you to give a complete sense of the author's ideas without using his or her words. Paraphrase is also useful when you want to convey the sense of a section of a work of literature or a segment of dialogue.

Original: Tyndall, Hours of Exercise (on the advantage of using a rope while mountain climbing):

Not to speak of the moral effect of its presence, an amount of help upon a dangerous slope that might be measured by the gravity of a few pounds is often of incalculable importance.

```
                                                    Ropes
Tyndall 289

   Aside from its psychological effect, a rope can
be extremely important when a slight steadying
pressure is necessary.
```

SUMMARY NOTE CARD

Unlike a paraphrase, which is a detailed restatement of a source, a *summary* is a general restatement, in your own words, of the *meaning* of a passage. Always much shorter than the original, a summary provides an overview of a piece of writing, focusing on the main idea. Because of its brevity, a summary usually eliminates the

illustrations, secondary details, and asides that characterize the original. Like a paraphrase, a summary contains only the essence of a passage, not your interpretations or conclusions.

You summarize when you want to convey a general sense of an author's ideas to your readers. Summary is a useful technique when you want to record the main idea, but not the specific points or the exact words, of something that you have read. Because it need not follow the order or emphasis of a source, summary enables you to relate an author's ideas to your topic in a way that paraphrase and quotation do not.

```
                                                    Ropes

Tyndall 289-90

    In the 1800s, climbers thought ropes would
help prevent falls by steadying mountain climbers
who had lost their balance. However, the rope
could be fatal to all tied to it if a climber
actually fell.
```

COMPUTER NOTE TAKING

More and more researchers are beginning to save their notes on computer files. Sometimes this is done in the course of preparing an annotated bibliography. This task simplifies the preparation of your final paper greatly as it is often possible to copy sections from your notes into the main body of your paper. When you enter your notes into a "notes file" on computer, try to visualize your screen as an index card. Be sure to enter the complete bibliographic citation in the proper format. If you do so, you can assemble all the citations from your notes to prepare the bibliography.

EXERCISES

1. In the government-publication section of the library you find a book called *The Navajo Nation: An American Colony* which the United States Commission on Civil Rights published in Washington, D.C., in 1975. Its library call number is CR 1.2:N22/2. As you write a paper on the Navajo school systems which the government operates, you find this paragraph (pages 126–127):

> Navajos, in fact, have been excluded from the decision-making process in these school systems. The result has been a variety of educational policies unrelated to the Navajo community. The Navajo language and culture have been largely ignored in the curriculum offered to Navajo students. Although an occasional course in the Navajo language is offered, there is little push to develop bilingual education and some schools still reprimand students and teachers for speaking Navajo. Nor has bicultural education had much support from non-Indian educational planners on the reservation. Insensitivity to Navajo culture is revealed dramatically in the preservation by many schools of a dress code requiring male students to keep their hair short, effectively preventing them from wearing the traditional "Navajo knot."

a. Prepare a note card quoting directly from the paragraph.
b. Prepare a three-line summary of the entire passage; use your own words.
c. Paraphrase the lines you quoted in Exercise 1a.

2. Use this passage from *Walden* by Henry David Thoreau for items a–c below.

> No man ever stood the lower in my estimation for having a patch in his clothes; yet I am sure that there is greater anxiety, commonly, to have fashionable, or at least clean and unpatched clothes, than to have a sound conscience. But even if the rent is not mended, perhaps the worst vice betrayed is improvidence. I sometimes try my acquaintances by such tests as this: Who could wear a patch, or two extra seams only, over the knee? Most behave as if they believed that their prospects for life would be ruined if they should do it. It would be easier for them to hobble to town with a broken leg than with a broken pantaloon.

a. Make a quotation note card using the last sentence from the selection above.
b. Make a paraphrase using the same sentence.
c. Make a brief summary card using the entire passage. You don't need to capture every idea—just what you consider important.

3. Here is another passage from *Walden*. Use it to answer items a and b below.

> But men labor under a mistake. The better part of the man is soon plowed into the soil for compost. By a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, they are employed, as it says in an old book, laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal. It is a fool's life, as they will find when they get to the end of it, if not before.

a. Make a quotation note card using the second sentence.
b. Make a brief summary card for the entire passage. Again, you do not need to capture every idea—just what you consider important.

Exercises adapted from *The Practical Writer*, 3rd ed. by Edward Bailey, Philip Powell, and Jack Shuttleworth (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1986).

ACADEMIC WRITING

FOCUSING ON A MAIN IDEA

The most important common factor in writing college papers in all the different subject areas is the need to focus on a main idea and to support that main idea with findings from your research. As you go through your notes, try to see if there is one single idea that occurs over and over again or one single point around which different ideas come together. Such a central focus should become the main idea of your paper. It is important as you choose what the main idea of your paper will be that you keep in mind whether it interests you or not and what you know about it. Your *interest* and *knowledge of the subject matter* should help to determine the central focus of your paper. The central focus of your paper, or your main idea, should be expressed in a single sentence at the beginning of your paper, preferably after your introduction. Topic sentences of subsequent sections should relate to that main idea.

SUPPORTING A MAIN IDEA WITH RESEARCH

All of the major subject areas you study in college require you to support your main idea with research, either the ideas of others that you have gathered from interviews or your research sources or original data that you have collected. Although library research is sometimes sufficient, particularly in the humanities, other subject areas often use methods of data collection like field research, case studies, analyses of statistics, and questionnaires.

Once you have located your sources, you must read and think critically about your material. Ask yourself how relevant, valid, and accurate your sources are. If your sources are not believable, your readers will question your credibility as a researcher and the point of view you develop in your thesis. Therefore, as you choose the research materials to support your thesis—and later, as you read and take notes—you need to make judgments about your sources.

ORGANIZING IDEAS

Once you have a main idea for your paper, you need to organize your information into smaller categories, each of which should be unified by a topic sentence that

relates to the thesis and expresses a related idea. Each topic sentence will be supported by specific details and examples culled from your research. For instance, a sociological description of the "working mother" might provide these particulars: aged 34, 81.6% employed with a household income of $40,500, interested in buying self-improvement, career guidance, jewelry and beauty aids. Such facts and figures that you collected in an interview can help to support a general point you might wish to make about the working mother.

Papers in all academic disciplines often include the following components.

1. An introduction in which you identify a focused topic and present your point of view, the thesis of the paper.
2. A short literature survey of other points of view on your topic—that is, background on the topic. This summary could be a narrative paragraph that shows how the research is pertinent to your thesis.
3. Evidence to support your thesis.
4. Acknowledgment of opposing points of view and their differences from your point of view.
5. A conclusion that restates your thesis.

This general arrangement covers a wide array of papers. Suppose, for instance, you were arguing the benefits to children of having a working mother. After using an interesting anecdote or example or statistic that had appeared in a newspaper, you could state the following specific thesis: "Children of working mothers often develop better social skills and greater financial responsibility as a result of their experiences in child care." This thesis could be followed by a narrative paragraph describing the available information on the development of children of working mothers. You would then go on to break down the thesis into its major parts. After supporting each aspect of your thesis with evidence, you can present opposing points of view and show their shortcomings. Then, restate your thesis in your conclusion. This general arrangement is appropriate for papers in all academic disciplines.

More specifically, all academic disciplines rely on certain familiar patterns of organizing material. *Comparison and contrast* is one such standard method of arranging ideas. In comparison and contrast you bring together the similarities and dissimilarities of the subjects you are writing about by focusing on a particular topic idea. Here, for instance, is a paragraph from a sociology textbook.

> Clearly Mexican-Americans have faced a great deal of prejudice and discrimination. Like blacks, Mexican-Americans were segregated in restaurants, housing, schools, public facilities, and so on. They were frequently the victims of violence, which included beatings by police and servicemen. Today, the effects of the prejudice and discrimination directed against Mexican-Americans can still be seen. For instance, they are more

likely than Anglos to hold blue-collar jobs with a large number in service jobs such as janitors. Their unemployment rate averages about 6 points more than that for Anglos. Their median family income is only about 74 percent of the income of Anglo families. Mexican-Americans are more likely than both blacks and Anglos to experience job layoffs and cutbacks in work time. About 36 percent of the teenagers drop out of school, which is more than twice the rate for Anglo teenagers and almost double the rate for black teenagers (from Daniel J. Curran and Claire H. Renzetti, *Social Problems: Society in Crisis*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1987).

Often information is organized in the order in which it occurs or in the order in which a procedure is carried out. For instance, a history paper might be organized *chronologically*, following the order in which certain historical battles were fought; a section of a scientific paper might be organized as a *process*, following the step-by-step procedure of a scientific experiment or describing a natural process such as digestion. Other familiar patterns of organizing ideas include *cause and effect* and *classification*.

ASSIGNMENTS IN ACADEMIC WRITING

All academic disciplines share certain assignments. For instance, in any discipline you may be required to write a literature survey, an abstract, or a proposal. In addition, each discipline has certain assignments—laboratory reports and case studies, for example—that are particular to it.

The most common assignments in college writing ask you to analyze a problem, a situation, or a work such as a literary text. The result is analytic papers in which you research a specific problem, gather data related to that problem, and propose specific solutions or applications of your solutions. These assignments usually require original thought, a clear statement of the problem, and suggested solutions. Most academic papers require research whether it is done in the library or the laboratory. Here is a research assignment from a marketing class.

Provide your classmates with a list of subsidiaries owned by a parent corporation. Example: General Electric owns RCA, RCA owns Avis Car Rentals and Random House Publishers, Random House owns Harlequin, and so on. Take a survey of the major companies with which your fellow students have had negative or positive experiences, including the number of times they have dealt with a company and what the results of their dealings have been. Can you make any generalizations about major conglomerates and their subsidiaries and how they affect the ordinary consumer? Should Congress pass laws that restrict the size of the companies? Write a research paper for your congressional representative explaining why he or she should support or reject such legislation.

Here is an English assignment that requires you to research dialects of English.

> Write or tell a story about the area in which you grew up. Analyze your story to see whether you have used localized idiomatic phrases. Do your classmates understand them? Are there phrases they have used that you cannot understand? Can you define the particular dialect you are using? After doing some library research, write a paper for an audience of foreign students about how English usage varies across the United States.

Other assignments may require you to gather information about an area and its culture. For instance, in history you may be asked to gather the story of the Tigua Indians; in political science you may be asked to talk to county officers or other local politicians. In these cases you will report on your findings. Writing a coherent report requires focusing on a single idea and gathering specifics and details.

RESEARCH RESOURCES

The reference section of any library is the best place to find general research sources. The reference section of the library contains sources as diverse as encyclopedias, atlases, quotation books, and bibliographies as well as information which indicates where you actually find other material. In addition to the card catalog of the library, the reference section contains indexes, bibliographies, and computerized materials that can tell you where to find material on the research topic of your choice. One way to start your research is to browse in the subject section of your card catalog. If you cannot find your topic in the subject section, search *The Library of Congress Subject Headings,* which usually list the various names under which a subject might be listed.

General Library Sources

The following list is a guide to some of the major sources—indexes, encyclopedias, bibliographies, and other library materials—that you can use to find general research information.

Indexes
Biography Index
Government Documents Index

Magazine Index
New York Times Index
Public Affairs Information Services Index
Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature
Wall Street Journal Index
Washington Post Index

Encyclopedias
Academic American Encyclopedia
Encyclopedia Americana
Encyclopaedia Britannica
Micropaedia
Propaedia
The New Columbia Encyclopedia
The Random House Encyclopedia

Bibliographies
Books in Print
The Bibliographic Index
The Subject Guide to Books in Print
Paperbound Books in Print

Other Sources
Dissertation Abstracts International
Editorials on File
Monthly Catalog of United States Government Publications
Historical Atlas
Encyclopedia Britannica World Atlas
Facts on File
Statistical Abstracts
World Almanac

General Databases for Computer Searches

In many cases computerized searching makes research much faster and provides the option of combining subject concepts (key words) with author and title information to find exact citations. For instance, you may know only that Fredric Jameson has written an article on Third World literature, but not where it has been published or the exact title or contents. Since the article is about literature, you decide to search a literature database such as a Bibliography, or the MLA, which yields various titles by Fredric Jameson. Matching the titles found with the subject "Third World Literature," you find the following: Jameson, Fredric, "World Literature in an Age of Multinational Capitalism," in *The Current in Criticism* edited by Clayton Koelb and Virgil Lokke.