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Note-taking *Rules*, So Please Teach It!

BY TONI S. WALTERS

When I wrote the 1990 MRJ article "Notetaking While Reading a Textbook," it was because of my belief then—as it is now—that as teachers we have a responsibility to systematically teach students how to take notes. Procedures in support of teachers teaching and students learning are reiterated and extended at this time with an emphasis on writing for learning, specifically *writing to help understanding* and *writing to demonstrate understanding*. Both appropriately address note-making across the curriculum in the content subject areas.

Writing to Help Understanding

Note-taking or note-making is often an underdeveloped skill, left to chance or assumed during subject area instruction. Yet, learning how to take notes while listening, reading, and viewing are valuable acquired metacognitive skills. Various formats can easily be demonstrated, reinforced through repeated modeling, and scaffolded through planned opportunities for students to practice many times over, under the guidance and encouragement of the teacher. No one method is best all the time; what may work for one person may not work well for another, and what might work in one situation, may not work in another.

How to Teach Your Students to Take Notes

Since no one way is best all the time, various formats are suggested for teaching students how to take notes. Regardless of personal preference for taking notes, teachers that have a repertoire of note-taking formats and strategies can best help their students. Two-column notes, quadrant notes, traditional and conventional outlines, and graphic organizers-semantic maps-web notes-concept maps, are each viable formats for taking notes with respect to learning content relative to context and purpose.

Two-column notes, often quickly called *Cornell notes*, when labeled as such provide little insight about what to teach and what to learn about a two-column format. Consequently, for this discussion, two-column refers to the format of the paper and four variations as provided by Walters (1990).

Two-column notes using headings. Most textbooks are formatted with **Headings** and **subheadings**, so writing the textbook page number and heading in the left column with supporting information taken from the text, placed in the right column using bulleted phrases, abbreviations, and symbols becomes a

straightforward process; however, depending on the teacher's guidance, sentences may be preferred (see Figure 1 on page 51).

Two-column notes for key vocabulary. **Bold print** and *italics* in the text typically signal key words, oftentimes considered "new" words, though new is a term relative to each learner's background. Nonetheless, the author and the publisher through the bold and italics print are indicating the centrality of such words to the text, meaning the words are relevant, crucial to the purpose for reading the text. Take vocabulary notes by writing the word in the left column, with the definition and possibly other relevant information, e.g., synonym, part of speech, and sentence using the term, or any other information that the teacher deems important to vocabulary word knowledge.

Two-column notes for questions and answers. The two-column format, naturally lends itself to questions and answers, whereby the question occupies the left column, with the answer written in the right column. It is also a suitable format for teachers to use when developing a question and answer handout (see Figure 2 on page 51).

Two-column notes changing headings into questions. Text headings and subheadings when used to form questions provide a variation for the readers to ask their own questions about the section of text that follows a heading or subheading. Then the student seeks to answer the question that may require either a literal or more complex response.

These two-column formats not only engage active study reading of content subject area texts, the notes also become useful student-generated study guides, in that the left column contains the key phrases, vocabulary words, or questions with relevant answer

Figure 1
Two-Column Format Notes Using Headings

pp. 218-221 - The Island Continent

(p.218) Smallest continent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Australia - @ 3,000,000 square miles, 4/5 size of U. S., close in size to Europe which is the second smallest continent -none that are really tall
(p.219-220) Land of few mountains	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mount Kosciusko = Australia's tallest point in the snowy mountains - much of the continent is low and flat - most of the continent is dry - outback = the interior of the continent. It is the desert and semi arid grassland.
(p.221) Australia's climate	
(p.221) Little land for farming	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Only 10% of the country, mostly in the southeast is well watered. That's where most of the Australian people live - northern Australia = tropical climate <p>-but there is more than enough land with rainfall to provide food for Australia's people and to export</p>

Figure 2
Two-Column Format Notes Question and Answers

1. How does reading help you to write?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. The things you read are sources of information. b. The things you read provide different points of view. c. Reading materials provide models (examples) for writers.
2. Does writing help reading?	<p>Yes it does, because there is an interaction b/t reading and writing. Writers must read what they write. Also by reading writers learn about the structure of selections (for example - how to create the beginning, middle, and end of a piece or how to write good descriptions).</p>

information appearing to the right. This allows the student to self-test by: (1) covering the right column; (2) then rereading the prompt, the word key words, vocabulary word, or question; and (3) then stating what is known; or (4) realizing further review is needed. The two-column note format facilitates additional review: rereading, rethinking aloud—in other words talking to oneself which some people find naturally helpful, or talking over the notes with another learner. Preferably with the two-column format, notes are taken only on one side of the paper. This written format supports the study guide process because a group of note pages can be overlapped on a table or floor to reveal the left column key points that need to be reviewed using the notes, thereby serving as a reminder as to what it is that can be reviewed through the student generated notes.

Quadrant notes are an efficient format for taking notes because the configuration, four boxes on each side of the paper, can accommodate up to eight “chunks” of information, or concepts and phrases related to eight headings or major ideas. Simply divide the notebook page into four boxes by folding the page or drawing ruler lines. The quadrants make it possible to compress, yet organize, quite a bit of information on a single sheet of paper. Depending on the information to be noted, all boxes may not be needed. However, to accommodate more information than a particular box can hold, merely readjust the bottom line to borrow a bit of space from an adjoining box. Quadrant notes may be used for textbook materials, whereby the heading or subheading is used to label the information that is placed in a particular box. This box format can be suitable for mathematics concepts. The quadrant format also is appropriate for taking notes while listening. Each significant topic addressed by a speaker is placed in a separate box. The organization of information in quadrants makes notes taken this way easy to review and amend. Some learners will appreciate this compact way of taking notes, while others may find that the format simply crowds information. Once again, familiarity with the format, the purpose and the content to be included in the notes will determine the usability of the quadrant format (see Figure 3 on page 53).

Traditional or conventional outline notes rely on main or major ideas and supporting details. The conventional format looks much like the one in Figure 4.

While an outline can be a useful way to take notes, for too long, it has been overrated as “the best way” to take notes. It can be problematic because many written materials are not *outlinable*. When that is the case, the task of outlining warrants more attention than the content to be outlined. By all means when outlining works, the conventional format or variation of it can be used.

Graphic organizers-semantic maps-web notes-concept maps are pictorial or graphic notes used to organize information. Specifically these word diagrams can be used to show a hierarchy, chronology, relationships, links, connections, and comparisons. Barron’s (1969) work with vocabulary is often believed to have given birth to word diagrams. Since then, many, many examples and variations of word diagrams have been possible. So any samples, at best, minimally suggest the range of possibilities for creating maps, webs, and graphic organizers. Graphic representations can be used to brainstorm about a topic, prior to reading or using other sources of information about subject matter. They may also be used for taking notes while reading; small versions of word maps may be embedded into either two-column or quadrant note formats to give a visual of specific information. Webs and organizers can facilitate whole class, small group, and individual review processes of content; subject-specific vocabulary; and literal, inferential, and application relationships of concepts. Learners at any age can find web - semantic - concept maps and organizers very helpful. But, once again, while pictorial representations are revered in many circles, they just may not work for all learners and circumstances.

Figure 4
Traditional Outline

- | |
|--|
| <p>I. Major Topic</p> <p> A. Subordinate topic</p> <p> 1. Supporting details</p> <p> a. examples</p> <p> b. other bits of information</p> <p> 2. Supporting details</p> <p> B. Subordinate topic</p> <p> 1. Supporting details</p> <p> a. examples</p> <p> b. other bits of information</p> <p> 2. Supporting detail</p> |
|--|

Figure 3
 Quadrant Notes
 Fuel Sources pp.32-40

<p>Energy from Fuels (pp. 32-33)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -fossil fuels from decayed plants buried millions of years -fossil fuels = hydrocarbons -hydrocarbons = molecules of carbon & hydrogen atoms -coal = most important fossil fuel & it is solid fuel 	<p>Mining Coal (pp. 34-36)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -coal taken from the earth <pre> graph TD MC[Mining Coal] --> S([Strip]) MC --> DM([Deep mining]) S --> S1["- top soil is layer removed to get coal - can damage earth"] DM --> DM1["- shafts & tunnels are dug deep into the ground to get coal"] S1 --- R["- reclamation = restoring the land - coal used to produce electricity"] DM1 --- R </pre>
<p>Drilling for Oil (pp. 37-38)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -oil = fossil fuel from remains of microscopic sea life -into hydrocarbons -oil - liquid fuel taken from the earth by drilling - oils used: for heat and to power machine & and as fuel for cars 	<p>Nuclear Fuel (pp. 38-40)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> -nuclear fuel comes from uranium: stripped mined & underground mined -uranium is found in ore or rock -small amounts of uranium are needed for the nuclear reactors which produce the nuclear energy used to produce electricity -uranium used in nuclear reactors creates wastes harmful to living things - a nonrenewable source

Teachers' Voices of Reason

Often teachers in literacy courses, bemoan the idea of deviating from their comfort zone when asked to embrace new note-taking methods. Yet, I remind them, that as the teachers below express, they too want to have a repertoire of note-taking strategies for various learners, learning needs, and preferences.

"I felt I knew how to take good notes, but I didn't know how to teach it. Now, I do!" **Adrian M.** teaches music in two elementary schools

"I wish I had been taught how to take notes, so now I'm teaching my math and language arts students." **Katrina S.** a middle school teacher

"I was even able to teach my sixth grade son how to take two column notes using headings and his grades on quizzes went from Ds and Es to Bs and As. Boy, were we both happy!" **Rubin C.** a parent and preservice teacher

Six General Note-taking Suggestions for Teachers

The following suggestions are offered as guides rather than absolutes, to facilitate teachers' practices.

1. *Teach note-taking skills in every content subject and each grade level.* They will be among the most valuable skills you teach students. Since each subject area has particularities of importance, it is appropriate for teachers to teach and guide students at each grade level, with developmentally appropriate care and attentiveness to what is significant to include in notes. When note-taking is emphasized, demonstrated, and supported by the teacher, students receive direct instructional opportunities to learn about what is important in the note-taking process for a particular content subject.
2. *Teach date-label-organize rule.* Facilitate logical use of notes, with complete **date** information inclusive of month, date, and year indicating when notes were taken, for example: 9/24/08; September 24, 2008; Sept. 24, '08; 24 September 2008. Concisely **label** notes to indicate the source of the information, for example: the title of the chapter or section, video, or Web site, inclusive of page number(s). **Organize** notes in a loose-leaf binder, though folders may be preferred. More on notebook organization will be discussed later.
3. *Help students to understand plagiarism and how to avoid it.* Taking notes requires that some of the author's words be used in the notes. When possible students should use short phrases from the text in combination with their own words. At times for clarity, it is necessary to include a long sentence fragment or a complete sentence from the text so that one's notes make sense. In those cases students should learn to use quotation marks and page numbers in parentheses to remind them they are quoting the author. Quotation marks then become the signal in notes that the author's words have been used and should that information be used in the student's work beyond personal notes, the author must be cited, in other words, given credit.
4. *Allow time-on-task for students to develop savvy.* Note-taking instruction to encourage meaningful practice, understanding, and use of student-generated notes, best occurs over time. This time-on-task guided instruction deliberately avoids the show-and-tell process of "Here are, four different methods for taking notes, now choose the one that works best for you." More often than not, students have insufficient experience to make valid choices. For the most part, a show-and-tell" instructional approach often lacks formidable guided practice to instill the sense of power to become a meaningful skill. Once learners have had repeated opportunities to generate and then apply the use of their notes and have had guided experiences with several different ways of taking notes, they are in position to exercise metacognitive choices as which to use, when.
5. *Mesh taking notes and study reading.* Two column notes, quadrant notes, outlines, and graphic organizers facilitate and support study reading.
6. *Reinforce students' reading and hands-on activities.* Learning logs and journals for reflecting and recording information become valuable vehicles for learning in the content subjects.

Writing to Demonstrate Understanding

Another outcome for content subject area reading is writing to demonstrate learning. Students can acquire multiple uses of written discourse to reveal in part what it is they have gained as a result of reading and studying textbooks, reports, portable document formats (PDFs), and hyperlink materials, as well as that gained from listening to teachers and viewing videos. Journals and learning logs facilitate opportunities to write to reflect. Student-generated research notes, diagrams, mind-maps (self portraits with explanatory word balloons and word phrases), drafts of written reports, and spontaneously written summaries are also fine enablers for students to explain individual learning.

Learning logs and journals can become teacher-guided, student-generated repositories for students to draft thoughts about their learning resulting

from reading, relating to others, and studying as a consequence of their experiences with content subject materials. Personally, I prefer the term learning log rather than journal for the content subject areas, though some may feel that use of learning log versus journal is semantic quibbling. However, as the term log implies, a log becomes a detailed record of the journey of learning.

I have used learning logs as an integral part of my teaching in courses with teachers much as they were used in my work with elementary and secondary students. A learning log for any given content subject area can be a designated section of a loose-leaf notebook or a separate notebook that can be inserted into a loose-leaf binder. With accessible technology, learning logs can be generated on laptop computers or electronic notebooks, though for some schools such an assumption of personal in-class technology is a distant reality.

Different prompts have proven helpful in that they have allowed response variations without compromising the integrity of relevance. While at times, all students may have to respond to the same prompt, more often it behooves the process to give students at least two prompts with instruction that they select one to write an extemporaneous response. They generally like the idea of choice, yet the teacher retains

control over that from which choices can be made. The following sample learning log prompts have served well to evoke students' thinking for learning logs, though teachers are encouraged to develop their own.

Probes from the teacher, as those in Figure 5, can be readily accessible to use on an overhead projector or document reader. Mount the prompts on a transparency or durable stock paper with flip strips that can be easily lifted to reveal particular prompts for a given learning log task. Students should first be asked to write the prompt they have selected followed by their response. Attentiveness to the question and the response reinforces the validity of the learner's introspection for immediate and future recall of information gleaned from a particular reading and related activities. Periodically the teacher's reminder to reread learning log entries enables students to understand the value of being self-reflective as a learner.

Writing to reflect is a cognitively healthy way for students to tell what they have learned in class, outside of class, and as a result of content reading and shared learning opportunities. Obviously learning logs can be used for this purpose, as can activities such as the variations derived from the basic KWL: What do you know? What do you want to know?

Figure 5 Learning Log Prompts

1. What did I learn today?
2. What is unclear to me?
3. What did I like, or not like: Why?
4. What did you think of this story? Why?
5. What would be important for me to include in an explanation to a friend who was home ill and not in class?
6. What do I now know because I've read or heard ___ pages in the textbook?
7. What do I know after hearing reading this story, poem, biographical sketch, informational passage, etc.?
8. List three to five things that you accomplished in class today?
9. How can I use what I learned today?
10. What can I say about the effort I used to do today's work? Why?
11. Now that you've had a chance to discuss the reading with members of your group, using specific words or vocabulary from the reading, sum-up your group's discussion.
12. What's an example of how the math, science, social studies, or history you learned can be used to do something other than schoolwork and homework?

What have you learned? (Ogle, 1986). Reflections as introspections, in other words, detailed mental self-examination of thoughts, careful thinking, thoughtful considerations, and beliefs are important good reader behaviors. Therefore, it makes sense that in the course of content subject area reading and learning instruction that students receive teacher guidance and classroom opportunities whereby writing to reflect is a valued activity.

Reporting research/writing to report. Research is methodical investigation into a subject in order to discover facts, to establish or revise a theory, or to develop a plan of action based on the facts (Encarta® World English Dictionary © 1999 Microsoft Corporation.) Thus, research may be complex as that conducted by natural scientists and social scientists, yet, it may be the inquiring searches done by school children needing to learn more about a topic. Throughout their school years, students should have numerous opportunities to conduct research via extensive focused reading, experiments, observations, field trips, documentaries, and interviews to name a few. All of these represent rich sources of research data for students' learning. Upon doing such they also need a forum and opportunities with varying formats to share their research as written reports, dramatizations, media presentations, panels, group sharing, and unlimited examples of application.

Summarizing. A summary can be written, oral, or with an illustration. The written ones may appear under several names: summary, outline of key points, abstract, and précis. Often teachers ask students to write a summary, which can be challenging exercise; yet, it is a teachable skill.

One way to begin teaching students about summarization is with a short passage of no more than four to five paragraphs. Either a high interest selection from an informational textbook, a computer PDF source, or a human interests newspaper or magazine article is suggested. Each reader should have a copy of the text. Mirroring the teacher, each student makes a semantic map using one branch or bubble for each paragraph. Initially the teacher models and guides students through this process by reading aloud the first paragraph and then rereading aloud while extracting key points to note. Of course students are following along noting what the teacher notes. This process is repeated over two or three more

paragraphs, with the teacher gradually moving the students to individually reading and noting from the last paragraph. Students are then guided to use the semantic map to recreate a few sentences, using their own and the author's words to write a short "summary" paragraph. I have found this process begins to allow students an opportunity to understand how to develop a summary and what it is, by initially doing and practicing summary writing with the safety net of the teacher's guidance. A similar process can be used whereby headings and subheadings, as a common informational textbook format, can be used to guide the semantic map creation. Students can also be guided with their summary writing efforts by asking them to first reread what they have written and then cross out the words that are really not needed to relay the message of the summary.

Summary writing can be an arduous task for those who are learning to do it, while it is a matter of fact for those who already know how to do it well. My friend and colleague Jessica readily summarizes anything, so it became important for her to understand that her students needed concrete guidance beyond the directive, "Summarize the information." Students learning at various grade levels and across content areas can benefit from teacher modeling and guidance for writing various types of summaries.

Organizing Notes Content Learning

Up to this point the emphasis has been on teaching note-taking for content subject learning throughout the grade levels and across curriculum areas so that students learn with the guidance of each content subject teacher's expert knowledge. Yet there is one last emphasis that relates to all that has been said thus far, and that is **organization**: (a) organization of materials and (b) self-organization. Students do benefit from direct instruction about keeping class materials. I suggest a card-marking period whereby students systematically learn how to chronologically order materials in a tabulated notebook while learning to be accountable for the contents. Tabulated loose-leaf notebooks make it possible for students to organize notes, handouts and worksheets; they can easily collect, remove, and reinsert papers. Notebooks might be worth 5 to 10 percent of their grade. But the grading process can be simplistically holistic, with frequent in class spot checks intended to guide students' efforts and to keep them on the

organizational task. Students can be guided to understand the purpose of keeping their notes and handouts organized as they may be used for class or small group reviews immediately following an assignment, for review of a chapter or unit, as well as for open note quizzes and tests that periodically may be among the aspects of ongoing classroom assessment. Notes organized in a binder may also be references for reconnecting new course content with previously emphasized materials that students can find by being directed or self-directed to look back to information from a previous date. Organization of notes and handouts can assist the learning processes and is worthy of teacher guidance. While it is clear that my recommendation is a three ring binder for notes, I also know some teachers prefer to have students organize with folders. When students use either notebooks or folders, with teacher guidance, they learn how to organize and keep their "stuff."

Students also benefit from direct guidance as to how to keep track of assignments, responsibilities related to progressing with and completing work, and due dates. It is never too early for students to learn to write down dates, tasks, and responsibilities. Organization is a critical life skill, and when students have multiple classroom opportunities to develop and use organizational skills, they stand the chance of organization becoming an automatic aspect of their self-monitoring repertoire.

Closing Remarks

Students writing to both support and demonstrate learning can readily be a part of teachers' practices with students. It is true that the use of informational texts in the primary grades has gained instructional popularity among teachers supporting students' learning needs. With the use of various genres: informational, narrative, biographical, journalistic styles, essays, scripts, and multitude internet formats and telecommunications, teachers will continue to seek and adapt developmentally appropriate writing processes that both enable students to sup-

port and demonstrate learning. However the writing emphasis with note-taking and note-making in this article specifically focuses on the teaching practices for the middle elementary grades, into the middle and junior high schools, and throughout the high school years. The teacher's role becomes a beacon that can significantly guide students to inculcate the values and practices of writing as a learning process. Who is better to inform, model, and guide note-taking and note-making efforts and progress of: fourth graders learning state history; sixth graders learning Spanish or German; seventh graders learning language arts, ninth graders learning algebra; tenth graders learning biology; eleventh graders learning government, and any and all other subjects? It is *each content subject area teacher expert at each of the grade levels and across the curriculum areas*. "Note-taking rules" and teaching it, can be quite helpful to students' metacognitive development. Surely competent, dedicated, and highly qualified teachers understand their charge and make every effort to facilitate these learning opportunities for their students. As teachers across grade levels and content areas promote and scaffold note-taking, note-making, and organizational practice as pertinent to students learning specific content, students develop the uniqueness of a particular subject area as well as the similarities of learning about content across subject areas.

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