

Grid notes

You can also view a video version of this guide: [Grid notes \[YouTube\]](#), and the example notes are available here: [Grid notes - online resources assignment \[Google Slides\]](#)

Grid notes is a note-taking technique focusing on critical reading and analysis. As the name suggests, you use a grid or a table to collect your notes. It's especially useful for report-writing, but can be used to compare source information for any assignment.

Grid notes help you:

- read more quickly and efficiently
- organise your notes
- critically analyse source information
- plan assignment structure
- use your own words and avoid accidental plagiarism
- save time and reduce stress

Tools needed

You only need two things:

- a collection of sources - preferably using reference management software, but a folder on your computer is also ok.
- a spreadsheet (Google Sheets or Excel), or another document or app where you can make a large table.

Process

We'll walk through the process of making grid notes to help write the introduction of this research report:

Investigating the efficacy of online academic skills resources

This research project compares different types of online resources to each other and to face-to-face instruction. The introduction of the report will include a review of relevant literature and previous studies in the topic area, so grid notes will be useful to collate this information.

Step 1: choose grid headings

Look at your task and think about the information you need from each source. This lets you focus your reading on just what you need. The first heading should be the citation for the source, so you know where the information came from. The other headings will depend on your assignment.

For this task we're reading studies that investigated the efficacy of online academic skills resources. So we need to know the types of resources, if there's a comparison between resources, and how the materials were delivered. We also need details of the participants, the measure or test used to evaluate the efficacy of the resources, and the results.

citation	type	comparison?	delivery	participants	measure	results
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Step 2: complete the grid

Go through your collection of sources and make notes on the information relating to each grid heading. Use the headings to read critically - you don't need to read each paper in full, instead focus on the information you need.

Here's the notes made for five sources:

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
1	citation	type	comparison?	delivery	participants	measure	results
2	Anderson & May, 2010	online VS blended VS f2f	Y	embedded in Communication UG module	n=103	pre-test/post-test, research assignment grade	post test: no diff for three groups research assignment: online>f2f>blended
3	Gorman & Staley, 2018	online course VS. f2f	Y	access to online tutorials OR single f2f session	n=38 (survey =28)	lit review grade	lit review grade: online>f2f
4	Held & Gil Trejo, 2016	Captivate tutorials (PPT videos)	N	Experimental group: 1 module/week (x5)	n=20	pre-test/post-test	Pre-test mean 60.5%, post-test mean 66.4% post-test > pre-test (p=0.017) mean gain = 9.22%
5	Sachs et al., 2013	video/audio/interactive (Captivate) VS text-based tutorial (HTML)	Y	Experimental	millenials	post-test plan research project survey	post-test score: interactive = static project: interactive = static survey: much preferred interactive)
6	Stiwinter, 2013	interactive tutorials (interactive Captivate videos & Prezi)	Y	Embedded in module, 5% of grade		pre-test/post-test (MCQs) citation analysis of assignment	21 point increase pre-test -> post-test Captivate > Prezi > plain video (no stats analysis) citation analysis: average 83% for tutorial alone, 93% for tutorial + f2f

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We're interested in the information only, not the author's words, so don't write sentences or paraphrase directly from the source. For example, the results section of Gorman & Staley 2018 states "There was a statistically significant (p=0.002) difference between the scores of the two groups, with the online group's scores being higher." The important information here is that scores for the online group were higher than the face-to-face group, so that's all we need to put in our notes (online > f2f).

When your grid is complete, you probably don't need to look at the sources themselves again - you'll just be using your notes from here on. This saves a lot of time, and helps you avoid accidentally plagiarising the original source.

Step 3: identify patterns

The next stage is to summarise and critically analyse the information in your notes. Try to identify patterns or make comparisons across sources. This is also called "synthesising" source information - what does it mean as a whole? Making a summary grid can be really helpful here.

For this task, we need to compare the efficacy of different types of online resources, so we'll have three new summary headings: resource type A is more effective than resource type B, A and B are equally effective, and B is more effective than A. The first comparison is online resources (A) compared to face to face classes (B), and then other comparisons between resource types made in our sources.

Go through each source in the main grid of notes and put its citation under the relevant headings - it might fit under one heading, a few headings or no headings. For example, Anderson and May 2010 found that research assignment grades were higher for students who completed the online resources than students who attended the face-to-face class, but they also found that post test scores were equivalent for the two groups, so it goes under both headings.

Here's the completed summary for our example notes:

	A	B	C	D
1		A>B	A=B	A<B
2	A: online B: f2f	Anderson & May, 2010 (research assignment) Craig & Friehs, 2013 (video vs. f2f, post-test) McClure et al., 2011 (citation analysis) Gorman & Staley, 2018 (lit review grade) Mery et al., 2014 (tutorial & video, post-test) Mery, Newby & Peng, 2012 (citation analysis)	Anderson & May, 2010 (post-test) Kratochvil, 2014 (post-test) Marineo & Shi, 2019 (assignment grade, vs blended) Nichols Hess, 2014 (post-test) Shaffer, 2011 (post-test, citation analysis) Silver & Nickel, 2007 (post-test) Zhang et al., 2007 (review - 9/10 studies)	Churkovich & Oughtred, 2002 (post-test) Lechner, 2007 (post-test, data collection 2003-4)*
3	A: interactive B: passive/static	Craig & Friehs, 2013 (video vs. static text, post-test) Stiwinter, 2013 (Captivate vs. prezi, post-test)*	Anderson & Wilson, 2009 (tutorials, post-test) Sachs et al., 2013 (tutorial vs. static text, post-test & project score)	Mestre, 2012 (static text > video) Turner, Fuchs & Todman, 2015 (complex task post-test)*
4	A: tutorial B: video	Stiwinter, 2013 (Captivate vs. video, post-test)* Stonebraker, Robertshaw & Moss, 2016 (post-test, group 2)	Mery et al., 2014 (post-test) Stonebraker, Robertshaw & Moss, 2016 (post-test, group 1) Zhang & Kozak, 2017 (test score)	Lantz et al., 2017 (confidence, slight diff)
5	A: long video B: short video		Cooper & Higgins, 2015	
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Step 4: plan broad structure

This summary grid then helps you to plan out the broad structure of the assignment. What are the key points to include?

From this summary grid, we'll have a paragraph comparing online versus face-to-face, summing up and critically analysing information in that row of the grid. Another paragraph will compare the efficacy of different types of online resources - interactive versus passive, tutorials versus videos, long versus short videos.

Step 5: use grid notes to write

You're now ready to start writing! Use your grid notes to expand your broad plan into paragraphs - you can check details in the original sources if needed, but you should largely be using your notes. Focus on synthesising points rather than presenting individual sources, and make sure to cite the sources correctly.

For example, a few of our sources found that assignment grades were higher for students using online resources compared to in-person classes. We can synthesise this information and cite all the sources together - we don't need to give this information for each study individually:

	A>B
A: online B: f2f	Anderson & May, 2010 (research assignment) Craig & Friehs, 2013 (video vs. f2f, post-test) McClure et al., 2011 (citation analysis) Gorman & Staley, 2018 (lit review grade) Mery et al., 2014 (tutorial & video, post-test) Mery, Newby & Peng, 2012 (citation analysis)

"When authentic assignments are evaluated through grades or citation analysis, online self-study resources seem to be more effective at supporting writing than face-to-face instruction (Anderson & May, 2010; Gorman & Staley, 2018; McClure et al., 2011; Mery, Newby & Peng, 2012)."

Add your own critical comments to explain and explore the information from your notes. For example: "This may be because students can access online resources whenever they need them during the writing process."

Next steps

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- [Skills Guides - note taking](#): advice on more note taking techniques and note taking in lectures
- [Academic Writing: a Practical Guide](#): Advice, guides and tutorials on all aspects of academic writing, including dedicated [report writing advice](#).
- [Writing Centre](#): 1:1 writing advice and study coaching