

Writing Permanent Notes

Daunting to many who sit down to write is the blank screen, especially when deadlines loom. Often it feels that the weeks reading, writing, and thinking vanished before its specter. But that need not be. Preparing for classes and other research can be leveraged so that deciding a topic, asking a research question, or getting a sentence on the page never requires an early moment of defeat before a virtual empty page. After all, "Every intellectual endeavour starts with a note" (Ahrens, 2017, 1), and we can write, organize, and develop these notes in such a way that we come to a final paper or research project with an overabundance of materials.¹

A permanent note is the first step in forming a slip box, which is a simple format for organizing such notes into a critical mass that generates ideas and arguments through its use. In this handout, though, permanent notes are the focus.

There are three types of notes.

Fleeting notes are made as we read with pen in hand. These may be abbreviated reminders, an exclamation mark next to a passage, an underlined sentence, a short idea written in a notebook, or can take many other forms. These are quick reminders to be returned to later. They should not get in the way of reading and understanding. Best if they can be stored in one place (call it an inbox).

Literature notes elaborate on the content of what is read. The aim here is putting ideas in your own words for the sake of understanding. These need not be lengthy or exhaustive; however, it is important to wrestle with the material and its implications.

Permanent notes bring the content of what we have read into the context of our own research interest. These notes concisely state a claim of interest then just as concisely state why that is significant, any weighty questions that may lead to, or a short criticism (perhaps drawing on other notes).

With these three types of notes in mind, below is an example of how this process looks.

¹ This handout comes from ideas and research presented in Sönke Ahrens, *How to Take Smart Notes: One Simple Technique to Boost Writing, Learning and Thinking—for Students, Academics, and Nonfiction Book Writers*. 2017.

Say I read the following passage from Pfaff's *Locked In: The True Causes of Mass Incarceration—and How to Achieve Real Reform* (2017),

“There are two primary policy justifications for punishing people for long periods: long sentences are needed to incapacitate those who pose an ongoing threat to public safety, and long sentences deter people from committing crimes, such as acts of violence, in the first place. Both arguments, despite their intuitive appeal, falter upon close examination” (pg. 190).

If I own the book, I may bracket the passage. If I borrowed it, I may put a sticky note beside it. This is a fleeting note, a reminder to return to this passage.

After finishing the chapter, I return to the note and write in my notebook,

“Pfaff (2017) notes two main reasons for long prison sentences to violent felonies, incapacitation and deterrence. These are intuitive reasons since the offender committed a violent crime and so poses a threat to public safety. Incapacitation keeps them from harming anyone else and deterrence keeps others from doing the same. Pfaff disagrees with these reasons.”

Here is my literature note: I take the idea from the key passage and put it in my own words. As you see, I also explain why these reasons have intuitive (and political) appeal.

Maybe at the end of the day or week, I return to my literature notes and some fleeting notes to craft some permanent notes. I include the literature note above as is, but add its significance, a question, and a potential criticism.

“Criticisms to these reasons are important for lowering incarceration rates in a way that maintains public safety since violent offenders form the highest number of prisoners. Does Pfaff give sufficient evidence that lessening their time served will not increase crime? His argument is correlative and speculative, not causal.”

Such a note can be used repeatedly since there are many ways mass incarceration can be studied. Joined with other notes of the same quality, a critical mass begins to form to motivate and outline future research.