

## The Slip Box

Research materials never confine themselves to one project, nor need one project be an end in itself. The goal of the slip box is to create a dynamic mass of materials: a largely unstructured, yet related, list of permanent notes (see CWR's handout, "Permanent Notes"). Instead of the research process being a grueling circle, where each new projects overshadows us, the slip box eases us into a virtuous circle. We read, compose notes, shape them into permanent notes, put them in a slip box, use the slip box for drawing paper ideas and arguments, organize the relevant notes (hopefully discovering other useful notes), sketch an outline, write, tweak the outline, and continue reading and forming notes. Many notes, even ones created for a paper, may not be used for a current project, but are ready for later discovery. The slip box is a tool for streamlining and generating research (Ahrens, 2017).

A slip box is an external scaffold for organizing notes. It is not a chaotic collection of notes, but notes grouped by relevance, which then act as fodder for generating ideas and arguments. The slip box is generative by allowing the notes to form unexpected relations. Abstracting ideas from a text into a concise form leads to their re-specification, and so the idea expands outside its original context (Loewenstein 2010). This furnishes our creativity. Placing the note (re-specification) is as important as writing it.

After crafting a permanent note from reading, the note is placed.

1. Add a few key words to the note. This will guide you on its placement. *These key words are not about storage or archival, but retrieval.* Ask yourself, 'When may I want to stumble across this note again?'

2. Peruse your slip box. The default, especially early on, is to add the new note to the back of the slip box. As the notes grow, you may want to (a) place the note behind or in front of others that you find relevant or (b) put the new note under another. This note need not match in key words or otherwise the notes around it since the goal is forming as many relevant connections as possible. Placement and key words form these connections.

The slip box is most useful when we give thought to where our notes go. We want to think with and through the slip box. Notes are valuable in their relation to other notes, not singly, so its key words and placement form the strength of this system. Breakthroughs in research happen through a "slow hunch" (Johnson 2011), as we allow our ideas to mingle, and this is optimized as we arrange our notes.

For example, suppose I wrote the following note. I am in a class on criminal justice reform and the causes of mass incarceration.

“Pfaff (2017) notes two main reasons for long prison sentences to violent felonies, incapacitation and deterrence (pg. 190). 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. 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.”

This note contains a short-hand reference, a concise statement of the idea, an explanation of its significance, and an allusion to critics, a question, and a remark. It is a condense, helpful note for many potential research projects.

Now, I turn to placement.

First, I select some key words to cast a wide net on other topics or interests that may come up. I don't need to worry about exhaustive categorization.

To this end, I add the following words to the end of the note: *Mass Incarceration, Deterrence, Incapacitation, Violent Offenders, Public Safety, Legal Reform, Prison Capacity, and Causal Arguments*. Notice how any word alone, especially after the first three or four, can put this note next to others unexpectedly.

Next is placement in the slip box.

If this were an early note, I put it in the back or bottom. If my slip box is more robust, I may query notes on criminal justice. If a note here argues about long prison sentences, I may place my new note behind or underneath that one. Or I will put it behind the last note on criminal justice.

What do we need to begin?

There are a few formats for a slip box. Simplicity and ease are paramount. One way is with a pen, index cards, and an index box holder. The permanent note is written on the index card, numbered, key words added to the bottom, then physically placed in the holder. Other ways are virtual. The best is likely [Zettelkasten](#) (which is free), though [Roam Research](#) is another.