4 Taking the point: identifying key ideas

As earlier activities have demonstrated, active reading and note taking often come hand-in-hand. In order to read effectively we often have to jot down the main ideas and key words introduced in the text. We might also note down one or two questions as we go along to assist in the ‘thinking’ part of the process. But, like reading, note taking comes in all shapes and sizes, and different kinds of notes can be useful for different purposes. Moreover, good note taking, like purposeful, active reading, involves a series of processes from highlighting key ideas in the text to constructing more complex diagrammatic representations of the main points.

By reading in an active way you have already begun to identify key ideas presented in a text and perhaps even jot them down. However, an alternative method of identifying key ideas is to use a highlighting technique. This involves actually marking important parts of the text by underlining or using a highlighter pen and thus creating a more permanent reminder of key ideas. This approach is designed to promote selectivity and encourages you to focus on the core meanings of an extract. However, before you have a go, you should take note of the following warnings:

- Highlighting involves you making judgements about what is important. It is not about capturing every detail but, rather like scanning, is about getting a general overview of the big ideas. Do not be tempted to highlight everything or nearly everything underlined than you were with nothing underlined.
- A good rule of thumb is to underline or highlight one sentence per paragraph. Paragraphs usually focus on one key point, and while they might include an illustrative example which may be useful, it is the main point that you need to identify first and foremost. Some people find it more useful, then, to add in a short note of the example in the margin next to the highlighted sentence.
- Do not see highlighting as the end of the process – an alternative to full note taking. It is merely the first step. Highlighting does not organize points into any order that makes sense to you. Nor can you use highlighted sections to reorganize ideas around themes or in answer to assignment questions.

Source: Reading and Note Taking - Preparation for Study. The Open University. 
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