

Aceso Under Glass

Science, People, and Video Games

What to write down when you're reading to learn

One of the hardest questions I've had to answer as part of [the project formerly known as epistemic spot checks](#) is: "how do I know what to write down?"

This will be kind of meandering, so here's the take home.

For shallow research:

- Determine/discover what you care about before you start reading.
- Write down anything relevant to that care.

For deep research:

- Write down anything you find interesting.
- Write down anything important to the work's key argument.
- Write down anything that's taking up mental RAM, whether it seems related or interesting or not. If you find you're doing this a lot, consider you might have a secret goal you don't know about.
- The less 1:1 the correspondence between your notes and the author's words the better. Copy/pasting requires little to no engagement, alternate theories for the explanations spread over an entire chapter require a lot.

Now back to our regularly scheduled blog post.

Writing down a thing you've read (/heard/etc) improves your memory and understanding, at the cost of disrupting the flow of reading. Having written a thing down makes that one thing easier to rediscover, at the cost of making every other thing you have or will ever write down a little harder to find. Oh, and doing the math on this tradeoff while you're reading is both really costly and requires knowing the future.

I would like to give you a simple checklist for determining when to save a piece of information. Unfortunately I never developed one. There are obvious things like "is this interesting to me (for any reason)?" and "is this key to the author's argument?", but those never got rid of the nagging feeling that I was losing information I might find useful someday, and specifically that I was doing shallow research (which implies taking the author's word for things) and not deep (which implies making my own models).

The single most helpful thing in figuring out what to write down was noticing when my reading was slowing down, which typically meant either there was a particular fact that needed to be moved from short to long term storage, or that I needed to think about something. Things in these categories need to be written down and thought about regardless of their actual importance, because their perceived importance is eating up resources, and 30 seconds writing something down to regain those resources is a good trade even if I never use that information again. If I have one piece of advice, it's "learn to recognize the subtle drag of something requiring your attention."

An obvious question is "how do I do that though?". I'm a mediocre person to answer this question because I didn't set out to learn the skill, I just noticed I was doing it. But for things in this general class, the best thing I have found to do is get yourself in a state where you are very certain you have no drag

(by doing a total brain dump), do some research, and pay attention to when drag develops.

But of course it's much better if my sense of "this is important, record it" corresponds with what is actually important. The real question here is "Important to what?" When I was doing book-based reviews, the answer at best was "the book's thesis", which as [previously discussed](#) gives the author a huge amount of power to control the narrative. But this became almost trivial when I switched the frame to answering a specific set of questions. As long as I had a very clear goal in mind, my subconscious would do most of the work.

This isn't a total solution though, because of the vast swath of territory labeled "getting oriented with what I don't know". For example right now I want to ask some specific questions about the Great Depression and what it can tell us about the upcoming economic crisis, but I don't feel I know enough. It is very hard to get oriented with patchwork papers: you typically need books with cohesive narratives, and then to find other ways to undo the authors' framing. Like a lot of things, this is solved by going meta. "I want to learn enough about the Great Depression that I have a framework to ask questions about parallels to the current crisis" was enough to let me evaluate different "Top Books about the Great Depression" lists and identify the one whose author was most in line with my goals (it was the one on [fivebooks](#), which seems to be the case much more often than chance).

I mentioned "losing flow" as a cost of note taking in my opening, but I'm not actually convinced that's a cost. Breaking flow also means breaking the author's hold on you and thinking for yourself. I've noticed a pretty linear correlation between "how much does this break flow?" and "how much does this make me think for myself and draw novel conclusions?". Copy/pasting an event that took place on a date doesn't break flow but doesn't inspire much thought. Writing down your questions about information that seems to be missing, or alternate interpretations of facts, takes a lot longer.

Which brings me to another point: for deep reading, copy pasting is almost always Doing It Wrong. Even simple paraphrasing requires more engagement than copy/pasting. Don't cargo cult this though: there's only so many ways to say simple facts, and grammar exercises don't actually teach you anything about the subject.

So there is my very unsatisfying list of how to know what to write down when you're reading to learn. I hope it helps.

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6 thoughts on “What to write down when you’re

reading to learn”



romeostevens

June 10, 2020 at 3:34 pm

Even writing down word for word is better than copy pasting IME. If it's worth saving, it's worth the moment of time. If the thing you want to save is too long for that, then paraphrasing is probably possible, so it's a self regulating system.

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Sunil

June 11, 2020 at 9:59 pm

I have found that if I draw .. while reading and make connections with all elements it holds in my mind better.



hdo

June 11, 2020 at 10:42 pm

TL;DR there were multiple false bottoms in the great depression and people who bought after the stock market crashed once thought they were safe but then lost it all; those who came out OK were the owners of real estate and

bonds

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