

### NOTETAKING WITH INDEX CARDS

There are many ways of organizing one's research notes. For *shorter projects*, taking notes in a spiral notebook as one reads may be adequate, but for a high-quality research paper in history that method is not adequate.

One alternative is an electronic system, and there are several software programs available for this task, e.g. ASKSAM, TextBase, NoteBook, the recently discontinued Hypercard for the Mac, etc. HOWEVER, the effectiveness of these programs depends on the quality of the information they administer, and how that information is organized. Thus *the user* (you!) must still learn how to select information and organize it for later retrieval.

I strongly recommend learning a system of efficient and practical note-taking on index cards BEFORE beginning to build up an electronic database. Handwritten cards are adequate for most college-level research papers, and the spatial possibilities of physical objects eases the learning process. The following is a suggestion for the organization of an index card file. [Another possibility works from a decimal system correlated to a subject outline.]

1. **BOOK (author, bibliography) cards** (3x5" or 4x6"; choose one color) These cards are:
  - begun at a library catalog [CD-rom, journal index, etc.] or while one is reading the bibliography/footnotes of another book;
  - continued in the stacks while one examines books and articles;
  - completed when one reads and excerpts the book or article.
  - a. The card is headed by the author's name: LASTNAME, Firstname -- date of publication.  
[e.g.: HOFFMANN, Peter - 1977]  
On the lines below, you should have the title, with complete bibliographic data (refer to a Manual of Style! - historians use the Chicago Manual and Turabian), and the library and call number, as well as remarks about circulation status or interlibrary loans, are also helpful.  
You may also want to include where you found the citation (e.g. the MELVYL search string), and citations of book reviews you found, or opinions of authors of other books who mention this one.  
If you have done an author search, you may also want to jot down other titles by the same author which may not be of immediate interest.
  - b. Then, when you have the book in your hands, jot down a brief summary of the table of contents or the main topic or argument, and your impression about that argument, the (scholarly or popular) character of the book, its style, etc.  
If you find some very important information in the book at this time and jot it down on the author card, I would advise you to later make a subject card which refers to the excerpt, or to copy the excerpt onto a subject card. [smaller cards force one to excerpt "properly" from the outset]
  - c. Finally, when you sit down with the book to read it carefully, list the headings of subject or keyword cards containing excerpts from this book.
2. **HIERARCHICAL Subject Cards** (4x6" or 5½x8½"; choose another color or colors)  
You write these cards while reading a book or article.  
An important decision is whether to combine excerpts from several books on one card (only advisable in cases where only a few lines of relevant information are extracted, see 3, below), or to have several cards with the same header.  
In the latter case, the author's name (or a source date) might be appended as the last item in a subject header string.  
CHOOSING PROPER HEADINGS IS VERY IMPORTANT. You should have a rough outline of your topic by this point; use it as a guideline for selecting headings.
  - a. Header can be a keyword or a hierarchical subject listing such as the Library of Congress listings (but tailored to your topic and thus much more specific at the end).
  - b. Next line contains brief bibliographic information (e.g. the header of an author card, or: Author, ShortTitle) sufficient to identify the source and find the Author card.
  - c. Excerpts and quotations, WITH PAGE NUMBERS.
3. **KEYWORD (glossary, person, event) cards** (4x6" usually sufficient; again perhaps a new color)  
These cards will be headed by the NAMES of PERSONS (followed by their vital dates), or salient EVENTS/CONCEPTS drawn from your topic area.  
They will include references to author cards, short excerpts.  
Often they will have references to multiple sources.