

DIALECTICAL NOTE-TAKING

Developed by the Center for Global Communication and Design
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Bruce Ballenger, in *The Curious Writer*, describes **dialectical reading/thinking** as “a way to shift between the CRITICAL way of thinking that you use when you read an article or book on your topic, and the CREATIVE way that you use when you try to write down your own ideas.” As you alternate between “two contrary ways of thinking -- collecting and interpreting,” Ballenger notes you are trying to answer the question all writers are faced with: “*So what?*”

To engage in **dialectical note-taking**, follow these steps:

Step 1: Format the Page

Write the citation for the text at the top of a blank page of notebook paper (or on a blank document in your word processing program of choice) in the style you'll be using in your text. This way you have all of the information for your references/sources/works cited page that you'll need.

If you're taking analog notes (with paper and pen), fold the paper in half lengthwise from top to bottom. If you're taking digital notes (with word processing software), create a 2x2 table. Next, you need to label the columns. Label the top left column cell **What the text says**; label the top right column cell **What I think about it**.

Then, start reading the text with your notes (in whatever form) out and ready.

Step 2: Collecting Quotes/Ideas

As you are reading, when you find a line or passage that you find interesting, confusing, useful, or central to the argument in the reading, **COPY** it (word-for-word, including the page number) into the LEFT column of the page.

Step 3: Interpreting the Quotes/Ideas

Immediately after copying down the information from the text, in the RIGHT column of the page, opposite the quoted passage, answer one or more of the following questions. These strategies will help you *think about* and *evaluate* the texts that you are using as sources.

- **BELIEVE** what the text says: Which ideas can I relate to? Which points seem most believable?
- **DOUBT** what the text says: what are the weaknesses in this source? What are the gaps in the information or the argument? What is NOT believable?
- **UPDATE** your information: What does this source ADD to what I already know about this subject?
- **HUNTING AND GATHERING**: What can I collect from the text that I might be able to use? What facts/details are most significant?
- **INTERPRETING**: What does the writer mean? What is the writer trying to say?
- **CONNECTING**: How does this information relate to my own experiences? How does what THIS text says relate to other texts I've read?
- **REFLECTING**: What makes this text effective or ineffective?

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Your page might look something like this:

Howes, David and Constance Classen. *Ways of Sensing: Understanding the Senses in Society*. Routledge, 2014.

What the text says	What I think about it
<p>“Particular practices of looking and listening are also shaped by cultural factors. In the modern [Western] classroom, the ability to remain still for long periods of time solely looking and listening is a prerequisite for academic success” (2-3).</p>	<p><i>Believing:</i> I saw this as a secondary school teacher in the “policies” and “expectations” of student behavior in every school where I taught. It was SO difficult to break them of this cultural expectation when I asked students to engage in critical dialogue with each other instead of staying silent and only absorbing.</p> <p><i>Doubting:</i> But not <i>all</i> classrooms “look” like this! There has been a shift happening (especially in secondary schools) to go back to thinking about the whole student. While it’s rare to see, it’s out there!</p> <p><i>Question:</i> What would happen if we encouraged student writers to NOT sit and listen during a session? What if we changed the physical/embodyed practices of tutoring?</p>
<p>“Does it matter that we can’t touch in the museum if we can supposedly learn all that is worth knowing about art through our eyes?” (5)</p>	<p>I would say YES, it DOES matter! The first time I saw a Monet, I wanted to reach out and feel the texture of the canvas, the layers of paint swathed over each other, the ripples created by the hairs of the paintbrush.</p>
<p>“Our ways of sensing affect not only how we experience and engage with our environment but also how we experience and engage with each other. This is clearly seen when we examine sensory values and practices in relationship to values and practices concerning gender, class, and ethnicity...” (6)</p>	<p>Here, I cannot help but think about the multiple ways in which I greet people depending on the company: hugs for my dearest friends and family; cheek kisses for our Spanish and Italian friends; handshakes for those I just meet; shallow bows for our Taiwanese neighbors; two-handed clasps for my yoga teachers</p>

Dialectical note-taking can also help you avoid plagiarism! As you’re reading, you’re making sense of the information you’re reading instead of simply copying and pasting information from the text to your own document. Another bonus, **dialectical note-taking** helps your own “voice” be heard in the midst of the writers you are using as evidence. As a writer who is using the work from those who came before, it’s sometimes difficult to figure out how you “fit in” to the conversation. This style of note-taking encourages you to have a dialogue between yourself (as a reader/writer) and the writers of the texts you read. It encourages you to make connections instead of simply restating what has already been said.

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At this point, you might be thinking:

- I have a note-taking strategy that works for me that I've used since _____. I'm not changing my habits now.
- I don't have TIME to dedicate to something so detailed. I have _____ and _____ and _____ to do, too!
- That's a LOT of writing!

While these are all valid thoughts, here are some counter-arguments:

- Answer these questions honestly: How effective are your notes? Do you feel like they help you compose/create when the time comes? How often can you remember what you read? If the answers are yes and often, Carry on! If the answers are no and never, why not just give this strategy a try for one text and see how it goes?
- Time is relative. Using this note-taking strategy allows you to invest more time in *thinking*, *brainstorming*, *evaluating*, and *analyzing* earlier on in the writing process because you're actively engaged in reading. The time you spend now will pay off in dividends when you're able to compose and construct your own text more efficiently and cogently. A staff member's former college track coach would call this a good example of the **5 Ps**: Prior Planning Prevents Poor Performance.
- Yes. It IS a lot of writing. However, this kind of writing also allows you to *think through* ideas and start crafting your *argument* early on. Dialectical notes can help you see the bigger picture, discover new ideas, and in the end, SAVE you a lot of time because you've already STARTED writing.