

Basics

When you have made notes from a lecture, a speech, a seminar, a book, etc., you sometimes need to write them up into a summary or an essay.

The academic context

Assuming your notes contain the relevant information, turning them into good prose is the next step. In most academic work, writing is still the most common way of proving what you know. You can make a better impression (and get a better mark) if your writing is organized and well executed.

Key features

When writing from notes, remember:

- Decide on the order in which you will present things.
- Don't add information that is not in your notes unless you know it to be true.
- Think about adding relative clauses to avoid too many simple sentences.
- Vary your sentence structure.
- Choose the correct tenses for your writing.
- Mention who said what. (*According to Walter A Smith, etc.*)
- Write out any abbreviations in full. (For an acronym, write it out in full the first time.)
- Link your ideas using suitable words or phrases.
- Notes don't usually contain articles or pronouns – remember to put them back in.
- Don't forget other words like auxiliary verbs that were left out in the note-taking process.

Challenges / difficulties

Sometimes it is hard to know what order to present information in. Also, you may not be able to include all of your notes, and it can be hard to know what to leave out. However, you must also resist the temptation to add anything unless you are sure it is true and relevant. Finally, you need to have a good command of English so that you can vary the sentence structure and make your writing appealing to the reader.

How can I develop this skill?

The best way is to practise. As you do more writing, you can focus on one or two key features each time. For example, you could pay particular attention to linking words and phrases with one piece of writing. In the next task, you might look at relative clauses (and check that your linking words and phrases are OK). In this way, you will quickly reach the required level.

Learning outcome

The main outcome will be that tutors and examiners will appreciate your work more. They will be able to focus on the content of what you write, not the way you write.

Theory to practice

- 1** Look at the notes below and complete the rewritten notes with a word or short phrase.

Itaipu hydroelectric dam (Brazil + Paraguay border)

Drawbacks

Social - displacement

Displaced 10,000 families living by river

Environmental - lost waterfalls

Guaíra Falls (natural wonder) and forest lost under water

The _____^a of the project fall into two main categories. First of all, the _____^b cost includes the displacement of 10,000 families _____^c river. Secondly, in terms of the _____^d, a forest, as well as the Guaíra Falls, _____^e natural wonder, _____^f lost underwater.

- 2** Now look at an alternative way of writing up the same notes. For the items in *italic*, two options are correct, while one is wrong. Cross out the wrong one.

One / A / Some^a major downer with / drawback of / obstacle for^b the project is the fact that 10,000 families living *along / near / in*^c the river *will be / need being / are being*^d displaced. From an environmental *point of view / perspective / appearance*^e, one of the biggest problems is the loss of *lovely / important / well-known*^f waterfalls and a forest, which will be underwater *after / until / when*^g the project has been completed.

- 3** Look at one more way of writing up the same notes. This time, there are major problems with the writing. Can you see what they are?

The Itaipu hydroelectric dam project is riddled with problems. First of all is the huge social impact. Well over 10,000 poor families with riverside residences will have to move – and where are they expected to get the money to do that? Will they be compensated? Of course not. And what about the damage to the environment that creating electricity will cause? The beautiful Guaíra Falls will be lost forever, as will many forests. The area will be destroyed completely.

Ways to get more practice

Remember that nobody becomes a great writer overnight, so focus on one feature at a time as you work on your writing. Keep a checklist (see Key features) and refer to it whenever you write something from notes.