

## Keeping Track of Research Notes

Research requires meticulous note taking. Many magazines and most book publishers require an extensive fact checking of all nonfiction (and some historical and other fact-based fiction). You must have a record of exactly where you got every bit of information, and be able to retrieve it quickly. Not only will this help fact checking, building the bibliography and possibly creating future support material for your book – it will also make it easy to retrieve information if you want to use it in a different project.

One time-honored method for storing research information is the use of index cards. Index cards are small enough to slip into your purse or pocket, easily filed in shoe boxes (or fancy index card files, depending upon your finances and office décor) and come in different colors. Some writers use colored index cards to create a hierarchical system. One color card is used to keep track of the names, authors, and pertinent information about each source [including which library you got the book from. If you are like me, you visit several libraries for each research project.] Other colors are used for the actual notes, with a different color for each heading within the topic. For example, if I pursued an article on releasing butterflies, I might have one color for the ethics of using living creatures as decorating accessories. I might have another color for the possible hazard to native populations through crossbreeding. I might have another color for the possible hazard caused by introducing non-native species into a new environment. This would make it easy to lay the cards out in correct order when I begin writing the article.

Another low-tech method of storing research information is to record notes in a small notebook. This method keeps all the notes together until you are ready to separate them, and helps prevent the loss of the one vital note that was on the note card that had been left in a library book or washed with your jacket. Writers who use this method often cut the pages down to note card size for storing in small file boxes and use highlighters to color code the notes, much like the note card method. Sources, on the other hand, usually remain in the notebook written as a list that can be easily typed up to make a bibliography.

Some writers photocopy everything they find and simply write the sourcing information on the top of the photocopy. Then they highlight the actual section they want to use. If you use this method, you can store these notes in a three-ring binder with different tabbed section for the different research topics or for different chapters of your book. Or you may want to enter the information into your computer – in a database, or series of files. I use a little program called Yeah Write that allows me to store different notes in small files all under the same tabbed section. I also use Yeah Write as a database for publishers, to create all my query letters (it has a nice simple business letter writing format), and to track submissions. You can download the shareware version of the program for free at Yeah Write <<http://www.yeahwrite.com/>> though if you want the full version (which I use) you do have to pay.

Whatever method you choose, you will probably make some little tweaks and changes to make it all your own. The key is meticulous note taking, and consistency. Eventually you will find you have built a small research library just from your own notes for projects. I have often used old project notes as a springboard for a new project slant.