Excerpting

When you really want to understand an academic text in detail, just reading it might not be enough. With an excerpt, you record the most important assertions of a text by summarizing them in your own words. This practice helps you to deeply understand a text and take note of its contradictions, ambiguities, and/or difficulties, and it makes the information from the text available for later use—ideally, if you’ve written an excerpt well, you won’t need to go back to the original. Excerpting involves paraphrasing a text in your own words. This can help you avoid so-called “patchwork paraphrases” in your final papers.

Before excerpting

• Relevancy check: Am I interested in the text? Is it important for my research question and/or central argument? Does it correspond to my level of prior knowledge? To assess these questions, look to the following: title, author, year of publication, table of contents, introduction and conclusion, bibliography, index.

• Record the bibliographical information for the source—the most common way to do this now is with a literature management program like Citavi (guides and online-courses for this program are available from the Goethe University library) or Zotero.

• Activate your prior knowledge by asking W questions (what, who, how, why, what for, where, when).

• Tip for books: decide which passages to excerpt (based on their relevance to your question/thesis). Preliminary: understand the structure of the text to make sure you don’t pull passages out of their context.

What should you excerpt?

• Essential or foundational texts from your studies;

• Texts that could become important again at a later point in time (exams, thesis);

• Passages from texts that are particularly important for your current project.

How to excerpt?

Preparation:

• Keep thorough bibliographical records:
  • Physical location and signature (library)
  • Note the author on each page (e.g., in the footnotes of your document)
  • Make a complete reference for the works-cited list
  • Throughout the excerpt, make page references (trust me, it’s a life-saver!)

This worksheet from the Goethe University Frankfurt a.M. Writing Center is available under a Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.de.
Excerpting:

- Skim the text and look up any unknown words.
- Start excerpting and approach the text
  - ... with a question or thesis in mind:
    → your excerpt should provide the answer to that question/support for the thesis
  - ... with a general interest:
    → your excerpt summarizes each passage (add one-sentence-wrap-ups of larger sections, chapters)
- You should always write excerpts in your own words. Use quotations sparingly! During the writing process, an excerpt made up of copy-and-pasted passages will be your enemy.
- Write your excerpt in full sentences. Sentence fragments or keywords are harder to decipher at a later point and might hide gaps in your understanding of the text.
- Your excerpt should at least cover:
  - the purpose and thesis of a text,
  - its most important supporting arguments, and
  - important terms, concepts, and their connections.
- Make sure that each part of your excerpt is understandable and readable—this may be time-consuming, but it saves you a lot of time and worries later.
- In the rare case of direct quotations, mark them clearly with quotation marks and page references.
- You can make additional notes in your document by placing comments, highlighting them in different colors, or, if you have one, add notes to your writing/reading journal.

Literature:
Worksheet concept: Writing Center of the European University Viadrina.