

Literacy Tips



Tips for middle school educators on various topics such as grammar, writing, reading, spelling, vocabulary, cooperative learning and more.

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Tip #70: Two Column Notes (High Five Strategy #3)

Hope you are enjoying the Middle School High Five so far. Now that your students have practiced Read Around the Text and KIM, they understand the importance of before reading activities. The focus strategy for the next two weeks is an activity called Two-Column Notes that is done during reading.

Some Background

What is the origin of two-column notes? That is hard to say because this strategy seems to have found its way into every literacy book devoted to strategic teaching. Many of us first heard of two-column notes in a class called Project C.R.I.S.S. (Creating Independence Through Student-Owned Strategies). However, you can find additional references to two-column notes in the *Write Source 2000* (pp. 362-365) and *Step Up to Writing* (9-1 to 9-21).

Materials

Two-column notes are a way for students to separate main ideas from detail notes using folded paper. It's really simple. Take a sheet of notebook paper and fold it so there is about 1/3 of the space devoted to a left-hand column and 2/3 of the paper leftover for the right-hand column. Main ideas are usually shorter in length because of their simplicity. Detail notes often require more room. Two-column notes resemble outlining but don't

have as many conventions to follow making it a simpler tool for students to use effectively. If you prefer introducing a new strategy with blackline masters, [try these forms created by Marcia Indahl at Hanshew](#).

Here is an example of two-column notes from *Step Up to Writing* on the topic of note-taking itself. The **main ideas are in green** and the **corresponding details are in purple**.

- Goals**
 - identify main ideas
 - organize information
- Purpose**
 - help students learn
 - help students study
- Used for**
 - all subject areas
 - a variety of tasks

Using the Strategy

Although we hope our students are skilled at finding main ideas, this is often troublesome for them. They need to be shown how to read one paragraph at a time and how to go back to identify the main points within it. Additionally, they need help in determining what truly is important in what they have underlined. I am sure you recognize the disease - yellow highlighter all over the text.

A good beginning step is to provide the main ideas for students in advance. This can give them a purpose for reading and they can



concentrate on finding the detail notes that support these main ideas. I especially find this useful in setting students up successfully to listen to a video. Gradually over time you can release the responsibility to them for also finding the main ideas.

Skilled note-takers know the importance of writing down ideas quickly especially if they are relying only on listening. Spend time comparing the abbreviations that students use. With our current lifestyle dependence on text-messaging, instant messaging, and email, students will already have in place a number of these abbreviations.

A good assessment of two-column notes is to use them for self-testing to prepare for a quiz or a test. Model with your own notes from the overhead projector. Show students how to cover up the detail notes and then proceed with a think-aloud demonstrating how to use the main ideas as triggers for what you know on the topic. Uncover the right-hand side and check your detail notes with what you have remembered. Take the time to model one last step: try to add on information to what you already know or apply the knowledge to other situations. If the detail notes have only been memorized, then you really don't know the information and won't be able to add on to it or connect to it. Another way to self-test using two-column notes is to cover up the main ideas and play Jeopardy with the detail notes. See if the detail notes can trigger the main idea but state it as a question.

Extensions

Turn two-column notes into Power Notes. Use #1 for all main ideas. Use #2 for all subtopics of the main idea. Use #3 for all details that help explain the subtopics. This certainly moves students closer to formal outlining of notes. Here is an example using the five themes of geography:

<http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/go/readquest/strat/pto.html>

Two-column notes can also be stretched into three-column or four-column notes. Anything you can do with two-column notes can get better with three or four column notes. Consider adding a column for questions and/or a column for personal responses.



TWO-COLUMN NOTES

Taking two-column notes based around key vocabulary terms and words is very common. Note words in bold print, words highlighted in the margins in boxes or other graphic organizers, and terms you may be unfamiliar with. Write the key term in the left hand column and the explanatory notes from the text in the right hand column.

Chapter Title: _____

Key Words & Terms	Text Notes

Taking Notes

Question and Answer Method

Use one of your content area textbooks to practice this method of finding the main ideas in a selection. Turn each main heading and sub-heading into a question in the first column. Answer the question in the second column. This is a good technique to use when studying for a test.

Turn the heading or sub-heading of each section into a question.	Write the answer here.
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	
7.	
8.	
9.	