

The Quigley/Nelson Note Card System

a simple way to organize your research for
high school and college term papers

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Introduction

I have decided to publish this research and writing guide here because I have come to the conclusion that the skills necessary to write a college-level paper aren't being learned. It was taught to me by my tenth grade teachers of World History and English, Jerry Quigley and Kate Nelson at Mira Costa High School in the early 1980s.

While most students leave high school having done some writing, often this writing experience is limited to short essays on one thing they have read, such as a two-page essay on *Lord of the Flies* and a five-paragraph essay on Poe's *The Raven*. Students often lack any experience integrating information from numerous sources into a single but lengthier text. This guide has served me well for over twenty years in doing just that. I have used it to write countless term papers, several articles and even my 100-page master's thesis. I am currently using it even for some sections of my PhD dissertation. It is optimal for assignments requiring five to 30 pages of writing.

Students writing research papers for the first time, or even for the 10th time, can be overwhelmed with problems: How do I keep track of sources? How do I keep track of which notes are from which sources? How do I weave ideas and information from numerous sources together into one text while keeping citations straight? This guide addresses these problems. And by addressing these problems, it can make the process of properly documenting and citing that much easier and thus reduce the temptation to plagiarize.

But this guide cannot replace the thought process involved in good writing. Although it will help you organize your notes so that you can concentrate on your writing and the ideas in your paper, it cannot do the writing for you or create the ideas you need. Those ideas and communication skills are, in the end, the keys to successful writing, and can only be learned through practice and training.

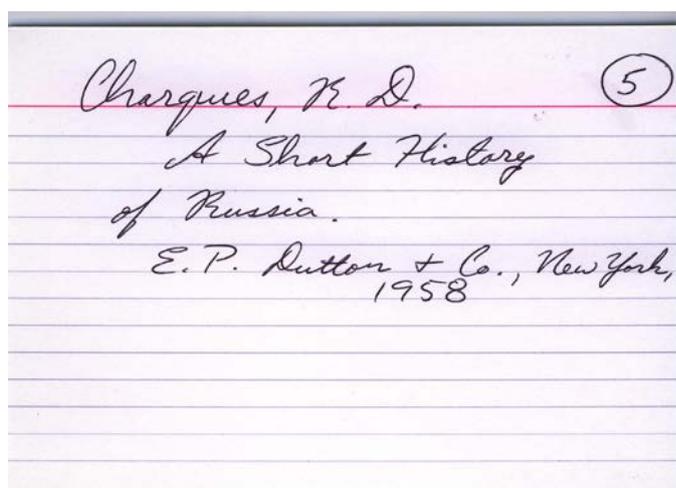
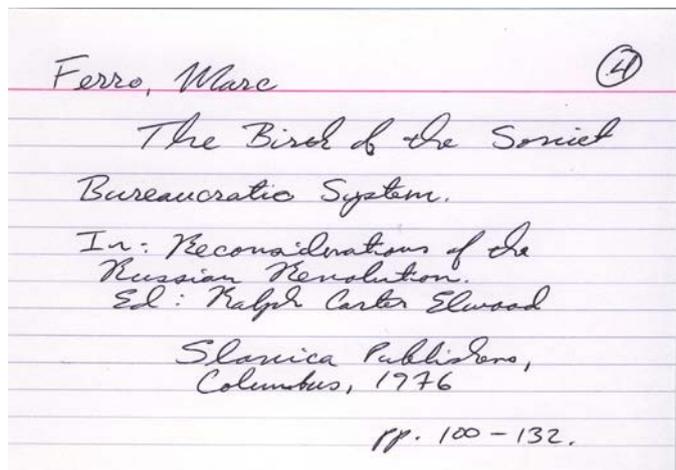
It should also be noted that this guide is not about form or formatting. If you want to know how footnotes or endnotes or title pages or any of that other formal stuff should look on the final product, please consult any of the many standard guides. Indeed, your university probably has a guide of its own or your high school teacher has probably outlined that in detail already or pointed out which guide he or she wants used.

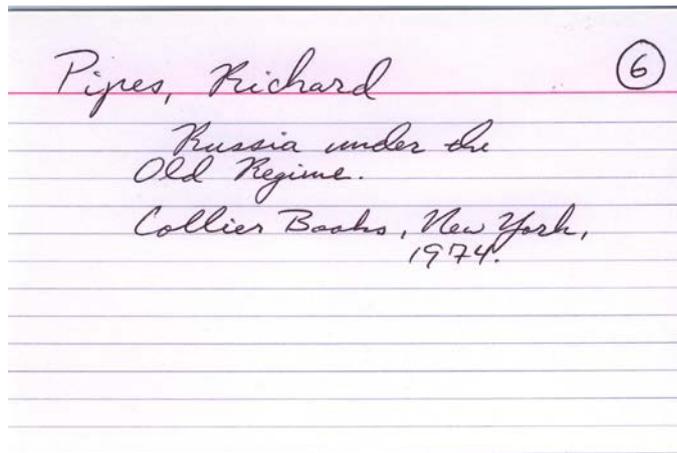
I. Cards and Organization

Before you begin your research, go out and buy at least one package of note cards. If you are in the United States, you'll probably find that the standard 3"x5" cards work best. For Germany, the DIN A6 cards work well. You might want to get them in several colors, but that isn't really necessary. I have never used color coding, but if you want to try it, go ahead.

A. Bibliography Cards

Now, always have a pen and your stack of note cards with you when you go to the library or surf for information on the web. Whenever you find a new source that you intend to use for your research, make a bibliography card for that source. In the upper right-hand corner, put a number in a circle. No two bibliography cards should have the same number. Number the first source you find "1", the second one "2", etc. Then, along the top line, write the author's name, last name first. Under that, in the body of the card, fill in all the other bibliographical information you have about that source: title, publisher, city, date of publication, etc. Here are some examples, sources number 4, 5 and 6 from a hypothetical paper on Russia:





NOTE: The first bibliography card is an article from a book, so it includes the information for finding that book as well as the page numbers of the article within the book. The other two are standard books.

The bibliography card for an online article would include the author, the URL, and probably the name of the hosting webpage, such as “University of Illinois History Department”.

B. Note Cards

Now, when taking notes, use the following procedure:

For every piece of information you write down for your research, pull out a fresh card. On that card, in the upper LEFT-hand corner, write the number of the source. That is, write the number, again in a circle, of the bibliography card of the source you are using.

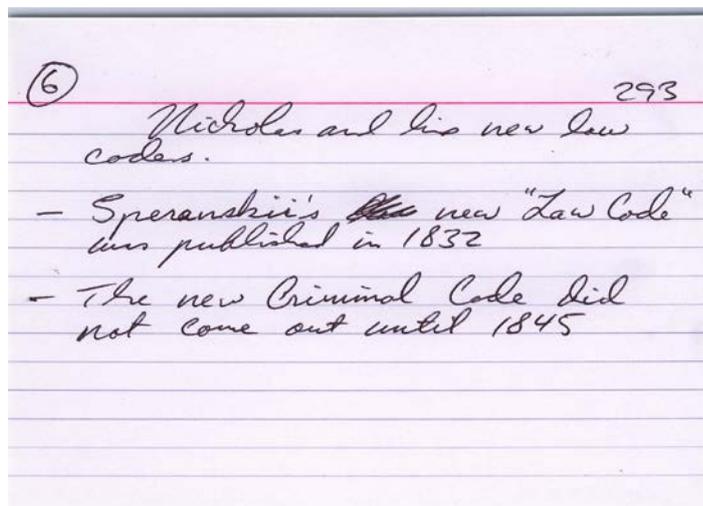
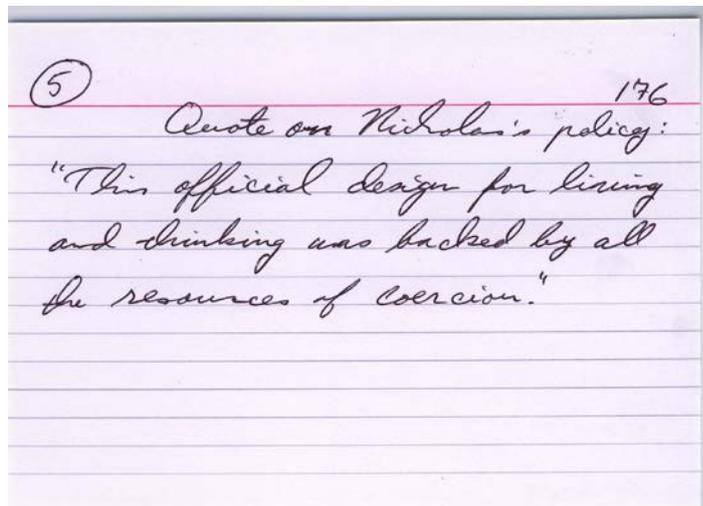
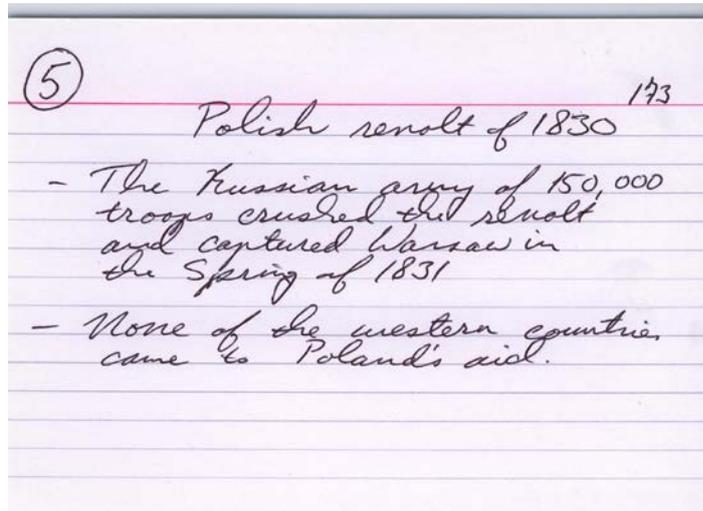
In the upper RIGHT-hand corner of the card, write the page number where you are taking the notes from.

NOTE: By putting the source number in one corner on the bibliography cards and in the other on the note cards, you make it easy to tell the two kinds of cards apart in case the stacks get mixed up. You could just as well use a color coding system, however.

On the body of the card, you take your notes. While you are reading and writing, keep the stack of cards handy. Start a new note card

- 1) every time you get on a subject that is likely to be in a different place in your final paper. In other words, if you find information on two or more subjects in one place, use separate cards for those bits of information.
- 2) every time you go onto a new page. Or if it is a simple, short idea that runs over several pages in your source, you can put the range of pages in the upper right hand corner of the card:

Here are three examples from two different sources:



While taking notes, use all the same care and common sense you would when taking notes on a normal sheet of paper:

- 1) Only copy exact quotes if you think you are likely to use them as quotes in your final paper. Put exact quotes in quotation marks so that you know later when you write your paper that it was a quote and you can cite it as such.
- 2) Write in clear language that you can still understand later, when you write the paper. Sometimes, especially on larger projects like MA theses, you will be using the notes months after taking them. You want to be able to understand what you wrote. Do not rely on your memory!
- 3) But don't get so wordy. You want your note-taking to be over as quickly and efficiently as possible. Don't bother too much with perfect spelling (unless you are noting names of people and places!) or grammar. These notes are for your eyes only.

II. Writing the Paper

A. The Outline

You should write an outline of what you want to write before you begin writing. In an ideal world, you would write the outline even before you begin to do much serious note taking, but that is rarely the case. But when you are confident that you have enough good notes to write a decent paper, and it is time to start writing, you have to finally write an outline.

NOTE: If the need to make an outline causes “writer’s block” by making the whole process just seem more cumbersome and intimidating, start with something else. Write a bit of the paper that you already have clear ideas about. If you have no clue as to where to begin, start with anything. That could mean to just start writing anything that pops into your head about the matter you are writing about, or it might mean simply taking your frustration out onto the computer screen by writing something totally irrelevant. Perhaps, “This assignment really sucks, because...” Just stick to it and keep going and you’ll eventually end up on topic. Remember to go back and delete the unsavory parts before you turn it in.

A typical outline looks a bit like a table of contents to a book, including the subheadings of the various chapters. Depending on how complex your topic and your argument are, your outline could be a detailed, three or four layered list, or a simple notation of three or four points you want to make in the order you want to make them.

NOTE: The outline for this research guide is simple and can serve as an example.

Intro

I. Cards and Organization

- A. Bibliography Cards
- B. Note Cards

II. Writing the Paper

- A. The Outline
- B. Writing
- C. The Bibliography
- D. Finishing Up

Now, once you have an outline, an easy step follows. Go through all your note cards one by one. At the top of each card, make a note of where, in the outline, that card is likely to be used. If it is likely to be used in more than one place in the paper, note all the locations. For example, if you were writing this guide and the note card in question seems to be relevant to creating an outline, you could write “II A” at the top of the card.

Once you have done that, you are almost ready to write.

B. Writing

Stack the cards in the approximate order you will need them in your writing. Or, if you want, lay the cards out in front of you or spread them out on the floor in a way that makes sense to you. Now make yourself a hot cup of tea, turn on your computer, and, with the stack of note cards within easy reach, begin to write.

Some of the paper will be writable without the note cards. Your own arguments and your introductory remarks outlining your topic and your research questions are things that probably don't depend on citing your research reading. But once you get into the meat of the paper – where researched facts and borrowed arguments come into play – you need the cards.

Here's the trick that makes this system so elegant: Every time you use the information from a card, make a footnote. It's that simple. You have the information, the source, and the page number all together in one spot. When I was writing my Master's thesis, I got into the habit of throwing cards that I had already used over my computer screen against the wall. By the time I had a chapter done, there would be a messy stack of note cards on the floor behind my desk. But I also had a perfectly documented text in my computer!

Be careful when using cards that have relevance for more than one section of your paper. When you use them the first time, don't throw them away. Sort them into your stack again in the proper location for their next use.

The advantage of this system should now be obvious. If you take your notes the traditional way, with all your notes from one source on the same sheet of paper, you will constantly have to search through your notes for the right information. You will perhaps remember a particular fact, but you will have to remember where you read it. Which book was it in? What page was that on? With this note card system, you have all the information you need to make an accurate citation, but you also have the information in separate, bite-sized chunks that you can rearrange at will. The information is now no longer grouped arbitrarily, by author, but rationally, in any order you need. But information that belongs together for solid research – the data and its source – is inseparable!

NOTE: If you want to accelerate the process of footnoting even more, you can use another trick. When making a footnote, don't bother to type the whole name of the author or book you are quoting from. Just time the source number from the note card bracketed by asterisks. Like this:

12, p. 14.

That means, source number 12, page 14.

Then, when the paper is written, you can go through all your footnotes with your writing software and use the replace function to replace the source numbers with the corresponding authors' names. Remember to use the asterisks, otherwise the replace function will not distinguish between source numbers and other numbers in your text such as page numbers, figures and dates.

Optimally, you can be writing the paper in full as you go, using up your note cards during the process. By the time you have gotten through the stack of note cards, the paper will be practically done and only require some revision. But you may find that very difficult. If you find you cannot formulate all your ideas while you are integrating the facts and figures from your note cards, then don't. You can just as well do one after the other. First, go through all the note cards and type the information into the computer, doing the footnotes as you go. If the cards are stacked in the right order, the result will be a useable skeleton for the final product. Then, when all that is done, you can go through and revise and add in the connecting thoughts and narrative that make it a readable paper. If you do it that way, however, be sure that the connection between ideas and their sources remains clear to the reader.

C. The Bibliography

Writing the bibliography is easy. Just stack the bibliography cards in alphabetical order by author. Then type them into the computer in the format required.

D. Finishing Up

The following remarks are not really part of the note card system. They are, instead, just a bit of advice from someone who has now read over 100 student papers in his fledgling academic career.¹

If you have the time at all, please read over the paper and revise it. If you can, finish the writing several days in advance and then, a day or two after you looked at it last, read it again. If there has been some time since you wrote it, grammatical mistakes, fuzzy thinking and gaps will be more obvious. You can now correct them and better writing will result.

The best thing might be to have someone else read your paper to you. This serves two purposes. First of all, it is a form of quality control. I remember from high school and college that there were things I would turn in that I would have been ashamed to show a friend or family member. If you get into the habit of showing your work to friends and family and not just your desk drawer and your distant instructor, your work may well improve. It will be a matter of pride that will likely show up in better grades. Secondly, when someone else reads your paper, it will be new to them. They will notice mistakes that you didn't. And when you hear them read it, you are more likely to hear grammatical mistakes and awkward sentences than you are when you read it to yourself.

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¹ By the time I quit college teaching in 2013, I had over 1100 graded term papers under my belt. I've read a lot of student writing and stick by these remarks.