

Effective Note Taking Skills

Why take lecture notes?

1. Taking notes aids your comprehension and retention. Researchers found that if important information was contained in notes, it had a 34 percent chance of being remembered (Howe, 1970, in Longman and Atkinson, 1999). Information not found in notes had only a five percent chance of being remembered.
2. Lecture notes should represent a concise and complete outline of the most important points and ideas, especially those considered most important by your professor.
3. Lecture notes can clarify ideas not fully understood in the text or elaborate on material that the text mentions only briefly.
4. Lecture notes provide a gauge for what is important in the textbook. Lecture notes combined with notes from textbook material are an excellent review for tests.
5. Note taking is not just something that you do as you sit in a class. To become an effective note taker, you must use strategies before, during, and after a lecture.

Before the lecture.

A frequent complaint of students about lectures is that they do not know how to tell what is important information. Because they cannot determine what is important, they attempt to write down everything the professor says. To avoid this problem, the most important thing you can do is to *read or skim the text prior to attending the lecture*. This will enable you to:

6. Get the general overview of main ideas, secondary points, and important concepts prior to the lecture. During the lecture, you will then be able to listen with understanding and determine what is relevant and irrelevant. If you know that the information is in the textbook, you can listen to the professor without taking extensive notes. You can also use your textbook during lecture, following along with the professor and adding notes in your textbook to aid in your understanding.
7. Identify unfamiliar terms and concepts. You can look up definitions prior to the lecture, which will minimize confusion when the professor uses or explains these terms during her lecture.
8. Identify material that is difficult or unclear. You will know that you need to listen particularly well and take additional notes. You can also develop questions to ask in class.

During the lecture: format and organization of notes.

The following guidelines can help you develop your own method for taking notes.

9. Begin each lecture on a new page. Consider writing on only one side of the paper. This makes for greater legibility and allows for more freedom in organizing your notes when you review them.
10. Date your lecture notes and number all pages.
11. Consider using loose-leaf notebooks for lecture notes. This allows you to easily rearrange your notes and to insert additional materials the professor gives you for a particular lecture, such as handouts, study guides, additional readings, etc. You can also easily insert notes you borrow from study partners or class mates.
12. Develop and use standard symbols, such as & (and); # (number); ? (question), !(important), *(remember this), etc. Develop and use abbreviations relevant to your class, such as s/d (supply and demand); info. (information); sys (system), cx (communication), etc.
13. Don't worry about outlining, but use indentations or leave blank spaces to distinguish between major and minor points. However, if your professor says she will make four or five points, use numbers to ensure that you have recorded all of the important information.

14. If your instructor refers to specific text pages, turn to those pages and mark the information in your text. Record in your notes the corresponding numbers of text pages.
15. Use margins for questions, comments, notes to yourself on unclear material, etc.

During the lecture: recording content

16. Record your notes based on your professor's lecture pattern.
 - a. If your professor's lecture reviews text material, write down explanations and examples that differ from the text. Listening to a concept stated in more than one way can help you understand it better.
 - b. If your professor elaborates on text material by discussing relationships and asking questions, note the questions and answers. If he doesn't give the answers, try to find them after class by reviewing your text, talking with other students or your professor, or attending labs, recitations, or Supplemental Instruction sessions.
17. Record unfamiliar vocabulary and unclear areas. If your professor discusses something you do not understand, record it as completely as you can. Then you can check with the text or at least know what questions to ask of your professor or classmates following the lecture.
18. Record diagrams, illustrations, and examples provided by your professor during the lecture that are not already in your text book. Professors usually give clues as to what is important to write down by:
 - c. previews and summaries,
 - d. visual aids,
 - e. repetition or vocal emphasis,
 - f. questions asked of the class , and
 - g. word clues: four causes of; four aspects of; in conclusion; on the other hand; etc.

After the Lecture

Students who review notes achieve more than those who do not (Kiewra, 1985, in Longman and Atkinson, 1999). Frequent reviews aid your recall of information by transferring information from short-term memory to long term memory. The more often you read or hear something, the easier it is to remember. With only one exposure to information (during lecture), most information is lost within the first 24 hours. Reviewing notes within one to two days reduces the information you will forget and thus have to relearn prior to a test.

19. Go over your notes as soon as possible after the lecture. Fill in further facts and examples while the lecture is still fresh in your mind. Clear up missing or confusing information by consulting your professor or classmate, your textbook, or attending class labs, recitations, or Supplemental Instruction sessions.
20. To aid you in understanding and remembering your lecture notes, summarize the information in your own words. You can do this with an outline or paragraph format or using a visual technique such as mapping.
21. Mapping is an efficient and helpful technique for identifying main and secondary points and to see and better understand relationships among concepts. See below for an example of mapping.

Sources:

Learning Center, University of California-Berkeley;
<http://slc.berkeley.edu/studystrategies/index.htm>
Longman and Atkinson. (1999). College Learning and Study Skills.
Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.