

Taking Good Notes in Class

Notetaking is an important skill in college that many find useful in life! Poor notetaking often translates into poor grades. Students who are ineffective at taking notes usually fall do one of the following: 1) they are not taking down enough information, so that their notes don't make any sense later and are not useful, or 2) they are trying to take down every single word the lecturer says.

Notetaking serves several purposes:

1. It provides a written record for review,
2. It forces the note taker to pay attention to the lecture, and
3. It requires the note taker to organize/condense/rephrase information, which aids understanding.

The relative difficulty of notetaking varies from course to course. Some lecturers seem disorganized or jump from topic to topic, making it difficult to take coherent notes. The lecturer may talk too fast, leading to frustration and forcing the note taker to pay more attention to writing than to listening to what is being said. Or, the lecturer may talk too softly or in a monotone voice, which makes paying attention very difficult..

Tips for taking good notes:

- Sit in the front of the classroom. You can hear and see better, you will have less distractions, and you can focus on what the lecturer is saying and interact with him/her.
- Always read assigned material before you go to class. The lecture will make more sense if you have some background knowledge, and you will be able to pick out main ideas more effectively. You will also be able to answer/ask questions about the text material.
- Try to schedule your classes during the time of day when you are most awake and alert.
- Always date your notes.
- Pay close attention to the first 10 minutes and the last 10 minutes of the class period. The first 10 minutes may be a summary of the previous class and an introduction to the lecture about to begin. The last 10 minutes may contain a summary of what was just said and/or assignments and instructions.

The Cornell Method of Notetaking

The Cornell system is widely used by college students. It incorporates all the aspects of good notetaking – listening, condensing or rephrasing, writing, analyzing, summarizing and reviewing.

Divide your paper into two columns. The left hand column should be about 1/3 of the width of the paper and the right-hand column the remaining 2/3.

In class, take your notes in the 2/3 column only and on one side of the paper only. Record main points and supporting ideas. Leave plenty of space in your notes for later additions or revisions. Use your own system of abbreviations, especially if the lecturer talks fast. Take notes in phrases rather than complete sentences and draw diagrams when appropriate.

Pay special attention to:

- information written on the board or shown on a projector
- information emphasized in both the lecture and the text
- information referred to several times in the lecture
- signal words that tell you something important is coming, such as “for example”, “in conclusion”, “in contrast”, “consequently”, “most important”, “main causes”, “several stages”, “characteristics of”, “advantages”, “disadvantages”, “cause and effect”, etc.

Revising your Notes after Class

This often forgotten step will increase your retention of the information (your ability to learn and remember) and decrease your study time later. Who wouldn't want that?

Most forgetting takes place within 24 hours of hearing. Within two weeks, we forget up to 80% of what we've heard. So, within 24 hours after class, go back over your notes:

- If there are gaps in your notes, try to fill them in by referring to your text, comparing notes with a classmate, or listening to the lecture again if you recorded it
- Write a brief summary of the lecture on the bottom of the last page of your notes
- Pull out main ideas from your notes and turn them into possible test questions. Write these questions in the 1/3 column in your notes – the Recall Column. Pull out key words, definitions, lists, formulas, dates, names, etc.
- Cover the 2/3 column of your notes with a piece of paper and see if you can answer the questions you wrote in the Recall Column.
- You have already begun to transfer the information in that day's notes from your short-term to your long-term memory! Small amounts of time in between classes are a good time to review notes.
- Each week, review the notes you've taken since the last test. This is called “interleaving,” and such spaced effort is much more effective than the same time and energy spent cramming for a test the night or two before the test!

Adapted from Shenandoah University



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