

Note-Taking Tips

The key to note taking is organization because organized notes are effective notes. Often the note-taking method that worked for you in high school does not work in college. The next sections will review:

- The note-taking process (before, during, & after class)
- Other note-taking hints
- The Modified Cornell Method (a very effective note-taking format)

The Note Taking Process

Note taking is a three-step process. To take effective notes, there are things you must do 1) before class, 2) during class, and 3) after class.

Before class:

Read assigned textbook or other supporting materials before class. Your textbook and other materials are assigned to aid your learning. Read and annotate text assignments before coming to class. If you do not, you will struggle locating important points and terms in lectures because you are not familiar with the material. In college, lecturers do not just repeat material from the assigned reading materials, they usually assume you have read the text and lecture on related ideas that you need to understand. Often they use terms mentioned in the text and will present ideas and explanations related to what appears in the text. You lose a valuable aid by not reading the text first.

Review previous lecture notes: This will “warm up” your brain. Most lectures build or follow upon what was presented in the previous lecture. So if you review your notes, you are prepared to move on and, if things are still not clear, you can ask questions before the lecture begins. Plus, in order to remember information, you need to move it from your short-term to your long-term memory, and the best way to do this is by reviewing what you need to remember on a regular basis.

During class:

Choose a Power Seat. Sit close to the front. Research shows a clear relation between where students sit in class and grades. Acoustics are not always good, and you may not hear important material if you sit in the back. If you don't hear it, it can't go in your notes. People toward the front are less distracted by people moving, talking, working, or sleeping around them.

Listen for repetitions and examples. If you study your lecturer, you will discover how this person delivers important material.

- If your instructor repeats something using the same or different words, then it is important – so put it in your notes.
- If the instructor gives examples to illustrate something, the principle being illustrated is important.

- If your instructor's examples do not make something clear to you, then ask questions and create your own examples to explain the idea, process, concept, etc.
- With research examples, you usually only need to know the barest details:
 - the researcher's last name,
 - the basic facts of the research, and
 - what the research proved.
- Pay attention to the instructor's verbal clues and personal mannerisms. These are guides to important material. Instructors give clues in many ways:
 - Sometimes they say things like "It is important to remember...."
 - They give you clues through numbers: "The five steps in the process are," "There are two kinds of family," or "The three basic causes of the revolution were."
 - Listen for verbal "summing-up" clues such as "in conclusion," "therefore," and "finally," to alert you to important material.
 - Some lecturers have favorite gestures, hand movements, and facial expressions that they use in certain situations.

Ask questions, especially if you don't understand something. There are no foolish questions. It is the instructor's job to be sure you understand, but if you don't ask questions, the instructor will not know whether you understand or not. If you don't understand, you may lose out on material that is needed for future classes or for tests.

After class:

Review your notes regularly. Studies show that, unless you review it, you will forget most lecture material within 24 hours. So, if you want to remember your material, go over it as soon as possible after the lecture. This may take 5 minutes, but in aiding recall and cutting into the amount of forgetting, it will be a worthwhile investment in your classroom success. It tells you what you know from a lecture and what you don't know. It helps set the stage for the next day's lecture and can make this new material easier to learn.

Synthesize your notes with the textbook and any other course materials. In your notes, you can write down the page numbers or other sources of information from the course readings. In your textbook or other materials, you can indicate the materials that were covered in class.

Other Note Taking Hints

Use your test. Another important clue for note taking is your first test. When the test is returned, ask where the questions came from. If items came from classroom notes, did you have the necessary information? Was the material you took down in class adequate for passing the test? What kind of material was emphasized on the test (researchers, theories, straight facts, etc.). The kind of material emphasized on the first test will be emphasized on future tests. This is the kind of material that belongs in your notebook.

Develop your own abbreviations and organizational symbols. These help you organize your notes. If you can quickly indicate common items while you write, you can better focus on the lecture. For example, a question mark in the margin can indicate something that is not clear, a star can indicate material that will probably be on the test, “rep” can show material that was repeated, and so forth. Check out the annotation links for more help.

Make a friend in each course you take. You can compare notes with this friend early in the semester. If you are both getting the same material, then you can be fairly confident that you are getting what is important. If there are major differences between your notes, there is cause for concern because one of you is probably not getting the correct material. Then it is time to check with your instructor to see if you are on track with your notes.

A friend can also help by providing notes if you miss a class. Getting notes from another person is not as good as being there, but it does prevent you from totally missing important material. And you can form a study group to prepare for tests.

Modified Cornell Note Taking Method

Most college students find that high school note-taking methods don't work for them in college-level classes. The Modified Cornell Note Taking method is extremely effective and can be adapted to meet the needs of any type of class or student.

- 1 Use large, 8 ½ x 11” sheet of narrow-ruled paper.** Large paper aids organization because you will have fewer pages of notes. This makes it easier to see how one thing relates to another.
- 2 On each new page, write the date and class in the upper right corner.** Putting dates on your papers keeps everything in order for effective study. This is especially important in courses where material learned one day is needed in order to understand what happens in the next lecture.
- 3 Put a title on your notes.** The title helps to keep notes organized, and the day's topic is often listed in your syllabus. Or, your instructor might say something like, “Today I'm going to talk about...,” and then list what the lecture topic will be. But if she doesn't do this, when you hear your professor answer the question, “What is this lecture going to be about?”—and you will hear it—write it down at the top center of your paper. Everything of importance in the lecture will need to be about that topic – if not, don't put it in your notes.
- 4 Draw a line from top to bottom of your page about one-fourth of the way from the left edge.** You can print out paper in this format here. The left-hand side is where you list the main ideas by briefly writing down the main topics covered. To the right, write down the details that explain that topic listed to the left. These supporting details include things like definitions, causes, steps in a process, important researchers, and diagrams as well as any other material you consider important.

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Leave space between items. Normally, an instructor will only be able to cover three or four main topics in a fifty-minute class. Sometimes the entire class period may focus on only one main topic. Too much material written on the left side of your page detracts from recognizing easily the main points covered.

Lecture topics are not always presented in a linear format. Many lectures move from the first point, to a second, or even a third or fourth one before coming back and filling in material on an earlier point. If you write on every line and if an instructor goes back, you have no place to put this extra material when it is given.

Another reason for leaving empty lines (white space) is that it helps the brain to visualize the individual topics and the supporting information. With the left and right margins as well as white space above and below each main idea, the entire chunk of information is framed by white.

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Indent to show levels of organization (outline format). Outlines help you organize because indenting less important material shows how it is related to what is on the line above it. If you do not indent, when you study your notes, you often will not know whether material on the second and third lines is part of the material begun on line 1 – or something different from what's on the line before. If you indent, you can see at glance how one line relates to another.

If you need help learning how to take better notes, please contact Cathleen Carosella, Reading and Study Skills Coordinator, CASA at 481-0541.