

Note Taking

Note taking, listening, and memory skills are all closely linked. If you really intend to learn what has been taught in class you need to attend, listen, take notes, and review. If you skip any of these phases you sabotage your efforts to learn.

Attendance is a must. Whenever possible, schedule classes at times you will attend and at times when you are most alert. Then go to class. Regular attendance is a matter of discipline. Most people can be where they are supposed to be, when they are supposed to be there, if it is important enough to them. Make sure class is important to you.

When you enter a learning situation intend to listen. Simply showing up but not listening (day dreaming, reading the paper, sleeping, etc.) is hardly different from skipping class. Students need to be purposeful listeners. Consider the following as a means of improving your listening skills:

- Be prepared to listen from the start of lecture. When you arrive late or are slow to engage, you may miss a lot of important information. It is often the beginning of a lecture where important new information is introduced or clarifications from the last class are offered. Go into lecture planning to concentrate.
- Engage with the speaker. Form reactions to what you hear, anticipate where the lecturer may be going, and think through what you are hearing.
- Listen and watch for key words, phrases, diagrams, or voice inflections that indicate importance or emphasis.
- Listen to discriminate between the major idea and the illustrative material and examples used to clarify.
- Do the reading before class so you can relate what you hear to what you know.
- Understand that instructors differ in their abilities to teach and present information. Do not allow the perceived shortcomings of a lecture become your excuse for not listening. Don't waste time and energy blaming the instructor; devise a plan and direct your energies towards efforts to succeed.
- Sit near the front. Choosing to sit in the back of the class may make it more difficult to pay attention. It may also reinforce your own feelings of indifference.

Now that you are listening it is important to take good notes. Note taking serves two main purposes:

- 1) The act of writing causes you to process the information and consider it a second time, and

2) Lecture notes provide you with the material you will depend on later as you begin the review process.

Because your memory is aided by actually writing the notes, taking your own notes is a far more effective study strategy than getting notes from a friend or a note-taking service. In classes where course notes are provided, use these materials as a way to preview the lecture and to listen for important points. But remember, it is important to engage in a lecture on many levels, so be sure to add to these notes in your own way.

There are probably as many different ways to conceptualize note taking as there are people taking notes. Since these notes are often central to exam preparation, you want to give your full attention to collecting them in an organized and thorough fashion. It is critical that what you record today be useful to you in the future. Despite the fact that there are so many different approaches to note taking, we can still identify the successful tips and techniques that will help you maximize your note taking ability.

- Go to lecture prepared to listen. Sit near the front, have your materials with you, be up to date with your reading, and be rested and ready to engage.
- Be on the lookout for hints to how the lecture will be organized. Maybe the professor has supplied an outline, used the board or overhead, or offered a verbal introduction.
- Expect to paraphrase the instructor.
- Use abbreviations and symbols to reduce the amount of writing you do. Start now to develop a system that is meaningful to you. Use abbreviations like "b/c" for because, "w/o" for without, "imp." for important. You might also make use of arrows, equal signs, greater and less-than signs, and the like.
- Don't worry about neatness, style, or even spelling. Keep writing. These notes are for your use and nothing else. It is far more important that they are complete than neat. As long as you can understand them, all is well.
- Listen for key words, phrases, or lists. Words such as "effects," "factors," "reasons," "steps," "uses," "causes," or "characteristics" are just a few of the words that should grab your attention. Phrases like "you need to know this," "this will be on the test," "this is an important idea," "is defined as," or "remember this" should do likewise. Also listen for words that indicate order such as "first," "next," "also," or "finally".
- Organize your notes by blocking ideas, creating outlines, using indentations, drawing diagrams and charts, and making use of margins. As time goes on, you will develop a system that is meaningful to you.
- If you get behind, write in a keyword or phrase and leave a space. Later consult with the instructor, teaching assistant, or a friend to fill in the blank.

- After the lecture, take the time to review your notes. This method will give you time to flesh-out any gaps, and the review helps imbed the information more fully in your memory.

- Later on as you begin test preparation reduce these notes further into outlines, note cards, charts, and diagrams as a means of facilitating mastery.

Once you have a complete set of notes, commit the information to memory. When you review course material, you are trying to move the information from your short-term memory to your long-term memory. Typically, a person must deal with information at least three times in order to succeed in this process. If you don't engage in timely reviews, you remember less and less of the original information. This adds extra learning time, as you will need to re-expose yourself to material before the process can begin again. After one day people typically remember about 54% of what they first heard. After 7 days the amount retained drops to 35% and after a month it drops further to 19%. This decline underscores the importance of performing daily and weekly reviews of lecture and reading notes as a means of keeping information fresh in your mind.

The following are some helpful memory hints. They are designed to facilitate your handling of the material in a variety of ways. The key to memory is to engage in timely, multiple exposures of varying types.

- Intend to remember. Take the time, as soon as reasonably possible, to begin working with the new information.

- Understand the information. It is nearly impossible to memorize material that makes no sense to you. Clear up any areas of confusion before you begin to try and commit information to memory.

- Organize the information. When possible, use charts, graphs, time-lines, maps, and outlines to lend structure to your study. Often the ability to visualize this structure will spur your memory of content. Categorizing can be a great aid in memory. Try to keep groups no larger than seven items.

- Use note cards. Put information on 3 X 5 note cards and carry them with you. Flip through them during those moments waiting for the bus, just before class starts, etc. Start out with five cards, learn them, and add two more. Keep adding two to the stack until you have learned them all.

- Use mnemonic devices. When things need to stay in a particular order, mnemonics can be very helpful. Use the first letter of each item in the series as the basis for the word in a memorable phrase. For example, some of us learned to spell arithmetic by remembering, A Rat In The House Might Eat The Ice Cream.

- Use recitation. Explain ideas to yourself in your own words. Repeat these explanations out loud. Saying them and hearing them seem to help. You might even consider taping information and playing it back on a portable tape player.

- Create visual images. When possible, systematically create visual images to associate with people, places, or events.

Note taking is part of a process. To do it well you must attend class and listen with intent. Good notes are a great start, but they are squandered if not used as a part of an overall study plan.