Taking Notes During a Classroom Lecture

Adapted from material prepared by the Learning Skills Center, Indiana University

Why is taking notes important?
Did you know that you will forget almost half of what you hear or read within an hour? One way to capture information so that you won’t forget it is to take notes. Then, new information can be reviewed and remembered for exams.

How do I take notes during a classroom lecture?

Note taking is a three step process:
1. Prepare yourself before the lecture.
2. Listen carefully during the lecture.
3. Use your notes to study after the lecture.

Before the lecture begins
- Read the textbook assignment.
- Arrive before the lecture and get a seat where you can see and hear the teacher.
- Use a loose-leaf notebook. This way you can keep your notes, handouts, maps, photocopies, and past tests in order and together.
- Keep notes from different classes in separate loose-leaf notebooks.
- Review the notes from the last lecture to refresh your memory.

During the lecture
- Listen carefully for main ideas and important details.
- Take notes in a style that makes you feel comfortable. One way to take and review notes is the Cornell system which is described later.
- Include major ideas, details and examples.
- Skip lines to show where one idea ends and a new one begins.
- Number and date each page of your notes.
- Write quickly but clearly. Scratch out mistakes.
- Use abbreviations, but only one which you will remember easily.
- Pay attention. Watch for clues that tell you how the lecture is organized and where it is going.

After the lecture
- Replay the lecture in your head. Right after the lecture, mentally repeat it. If you don’t understand something, write your question down. Ask the instructor to explain it before the next class.
- Read your notes as soon as possible after the lecture. The longer you wait, the less the notes may mean to you later.
How can I take better notes?

Here are some tips which you can turn into habits.

- **Write your notes in short sentences.** For example, write “Jean home 3PM,” instead of “Jean will be home at 3:00 PM.” Leave out unnecessary words.
- **Write clearly.** It can be hard to read bad handwriting, even if it is your own. Your notes aren’t useful if you can’t read them.
- **Watch for signal words and key phrases.** These are clues that tell you to pay special to certain ideas. They help you understand how a lecture is organized. Here are some examples of signal words and key phrases
  - *the five main causes...* This tells you to get ready for a list of five things.
  - *before, after, prior, meanwhile.* These describe a time relationship. They help you understand what came first, what came second, what came last.
  - *on the other hand.* This signals a different point of view or different way to look at the information
  - *for example, for instance.* These signal an example that will illustrate the point and make it clearer.
  - *more importantly, above all, the most significant thing.* These tell you that the idea is something very important. Write it down.
  - *in other words, in essence, briefly.* These tell you that a complex idea is about to be stated more simply.
  - *in a nutshell, in conclusion.* These signal a summary of the lecture of the points covered.

There are several other ways that the instructor will give you clues to important points. Be alert for

- points that are repeated.
- long comments on a point.
- superlatives (words such as most, least, best, worst, smallest, largest).
- changes in the speaker’s volume.
- changes in the rate at which the speaker talks.
- a list of points such as, “The three most important dates to remember are…”
- spelling words and giving directions.

**DOs and DON’Ts**

Here are some tips from the experts on what works and what doesn’t.

**DO**

- Before the lecture, look over your notes from the last class to refresh your memory.
- Sit in the front to see and hear better. Stay alert.
- Make your notes as complete as possible so that you will understand them later. Write in clear letters, not scribbles.
- Try to understand the ideas (the “big picture”) as well as the facts and details.
- Try to figure out how the lecture is organized.
- Use a large, loose-leaf binder. Keep separate loose-leaf binders for each class.
DON'T
- Don’t wait for something “important”. Begin taking notes immediately.
- Don’t’ use too many abbreviations. You might have trouble understanding them later.
- Don’t’ take lecture notes in shorthand. You still have to translate your shorthand into regular words. That wastes time.
- Don’t type your notes. Write clearly the first time. Don’t waste valuable study time trying to make the readable.

What is the best way to take notes?

There is no best way to take notes, but some ways are better than others. One good way is the Cornell Note-Taking System.

To start, prepare your note paper.
Use an 8 ½ by 11 inch piece of loose-leaf notebook paper. Draw a line down the sheet 2 ½ inches from the left-hand edge of the paper. If your paper already has a line down the left-hand margin, ignore it. The part to the right of the line is Part A and the part to the left of the line is Part B.

Here’s how to take and review your notes.

- **Step 1: Write Notes**
  In Part A, write your lecture or textbook notes. Use the good note-taking tips described on the front page.

- **Step 2: Replay and Reduce**
  The first chance you get, replay the lecture in your head. Do it while you walk to your next class, in your next study hall, or at home. Ask yourself questions. What was the teacher trying to get at? What was the main point? How does this information fit with what I already know? What did I learn? Later, reread your notes and think about the lecture.

  The **signal words** and **key phrases** that helped guide you during the lecture also will help you remember your notes. When you review your notes **reduce** each idea in them to signal words or key phrases. Write these words or phrases in Part B of your note paper. They will trigger your memory. When you study, they will help you remember the whole idea.

  Some people find it easier to remember their notes when they write **key questions** instead of key words in Part B. Which is better? Try each. Which works best for you?

- **Step 3: Recite**
  Say each fact or idea **out loud**. This is called **reciting**. It helps you remember better. Cover Part A of your note paper with a blank sheet of paper. You should only see the key words or questions in Part B. Read each key word or question out loud. What fact or idea does the key word relate to? **Recite it out loud and in your own words**. Then, check to make sure that your answer is complete and correct. If you don’t know the right answer, study your notes and recite out loud again. Recite until you get all the answers correct. Go through the whole lecture this way.
Do you feel funny reciting out loud? Research shows that it’s worth doing. Students who recite out loud remember material much better than those who just reread the same material to themselves. It is also important to use your own words for the answer. Your own words make the material mean more to you than if you memorize someone else’s words.

- **Step 4: Think and Reflect**
  Think about the information you have in your notes. This thinking process is called **reflecting**. **Reflect** by asking yourself questions about your notes. Ask yourself, ‘What are the most important ideas?’, ‘Why is this information important?’, and ‘How does this relate to what I already know?’

- **Step 5: Review**
  The word **review** means to view or look at something again. The best way to prepare for tests is to review or look at your notes often. Make this a habit. **Recite and reflect** on your notes several times a week. Short, fast reviews will help you understand and remember more than ‘cramming’ before a test.

- **Step 6: Summarize**
  Write summaries of the major topics in your notes. If you can summarize your notes in your own words, you really understand the facts and ideas in them. Review your summaries when you study for tests.