EFFECTIVE NOTE-TAKING

University-level learning is fast-paced, but with a good note-taking system and intentional strategies for listening and writing, note-taking can be an easy and effective way to get the most out of lectures and prepare for exams.

WHY DO WE TAKE NOTES?

- Notes are a valuable source of information found nowhere else. While we can read about facts and definitions in a textbook, notes are a meaningful representation of information that can’t be found anywhere else. When we take notes in lecture, we’re writing down what we thought was important: information that stood out to us; stories, ideas, or questions raised by the professor; and hints about what will be on the exam.

- Notes will include cues that trigger memory. Sometimes we'll write down a particular phrase or word, and by reading that phrase later we suddenly remember exactly what happened in that lecture, what the professor said, and how the lecture might be connected to the course or overall themes of the lesson. Cue words and phrases aren’t detailed, but will trigger memories or the idea that "this is important."

- Notes will help you learn kinaesthetically (physically). People who learn best by "doing", by using their hands, or by being active will learn the best by taking notes. We think of note-taking as a way of transferring information from the paper, up your arm, right to your head.

- Taking notes will also help you concentrate in lecture. While it’s easy for your mind to wander or to become distracted by other things happening, concentrating on listening and taking notes will ensure your mind stays on the lecture and not on what you’re going to make for dinner.

- Notes will help you to prepare for tests/exams by triggering memories from lecture, organizing the content, and connecting ideas and themes from across the whole semester. Compiling notes from across a semester will show how overall themes have emerged, allowing you to compare, contrast, and connect ideas (which is usually the focus of final exams).

CHALLENGES TO TAKING NOTES

- Lectures usually contain a lot of information, and because the professor will move along quickly, it can be difficult to know what is important and what to write down. Following along in lectures and understanding what information is important is a skill that takes time to develop and refine.

- Lecture halls can often be quite large, and with classes of hundreds of students it can be difficult and intimidating to ask questions.

- Lecture halls also contain a lot of distractions, such as students talking, doors opening and closing, and students in front of you playing games or chatting on their laptops. With all these distractions, it might be difficult to focus on the lecture and take good notes.
• Note-taking also means you’re concentrating on writing down information, rather than on the information itself. The amount of cognitive effort you’re putting into writing down notes will take away from the energy you need to learn.
• How do we reconcile these challenges? *Take concise, effective notes!*

**TYPES OF NOTES**

**Guided notes** are the professor’s notes (usually the slides they will use to present) provided to you in advance. Although not all professors will provide their slides before the lecture, you will be told where to find these notes in your first class. When provided with notes, you can print them off in advance to bring to your lecture. Having these notes will ensure you do not need to write down everything that is on the slides, but instead can focus on listening, writing down other details, and putting in more mental energy to thinking and asking questions.

**The Cornell Method** is a highly effective method of note-taking which allows you to organize your note paper in a way that will make studying far easier and efficient. This method of note-taking is highly promoted and with practice, you will find the notes very useful.

The Cornell Method will separate your notes into three sections: the notes column, the cues column, and the summarizing paragraph. An example is below:

![Image of Cornell Method diagram]

**Section 1**, the notes column, will include all your detailed information: definitions, ideas, facts, etc. These details should generally be written in point form.
**ACADEMIC**

**Section 2**, the cues column, will include key words, names, questions, and anything that will trigger memories or point out where to find particular details. The cue column is effective when studying because you can see at a glance where to find content, rather than sorting through pages of notes or details.

**Section 3**, the summary, will conclude the lecture by summarizing the main ideas. This will be written after the lecture, and will help you to see what the theme of the lecture was and what main information should be remembered. This section will be highly effectively when connecting lectures and organizing themes of the course, the main focus of many final exam questions.

**TIPS FOR USING CORNELL NOTES:**
- Focus on making notes in the lecture, only adding cues as they come to mind.
- Think of the cues column as an early form of later study notes.
- Make summaries after the full lecture.

When using these notes studying, it is most effective to **integrate** information and studying that information within a **contextual framework**. This means you need to find linkages between content and understand ideas within some sort of theme or context.

An easy way to do this is by using a **concept map** or **mind map**.

**Concept maps** are based on placing ideas in a hierarchy and finding relationships between those ideas. They will allow you to see the structure in the material, showing how many ideas go together and how to compare/contrast.

Concept maps are highly effective for **visual learners** who learn best by constructing and visualizing the material.

**CONSTRUCTING A CONCEPT MAP:**

1) Select a focus question/theme
2) Generate and rank related concepts from general to specific
3) Cluster concepts based on relatedness
4) Arrange concepts diagrammatically
5) Draw in links with lines and labels
TIPS FOR CONCEPT MAPPING:

- Maintain your hierarchy with size/colour – use particular colours or sizes to denote the level of importance (general or specific idea) or to show how different ideas connect.
- Linking is the hardest part; think carefully about the connections!
- There is no real template – you will know what template works best for you. A web? A flow chart? The type of concept map will depend on the course, on your learning style, and on the discipline (sciences, humanities, etc.).

Example 1:

This concept map about concept maps shows the progression from one point to another, allowing you to see at a glance how different points connect together and the path from the main idea (concept maps) to smaller points like events, map segments, etc.

TIPS FOR LECTURE NOTE-TAKING

Behavioural Tips:

- Rather than “attending” class, you should be “participating in” class. Many students go to class with the intention of sitting and passively taking notes, not thinking about the material or making it meaningful in any way. This mistake is what causes students to have difficulties in class or perform poorly on final exams. When going to class (and do go to every lecture and tutorial), participate in the lecture by making the content more meaningful. Think about what is being said. How does this idea fit with what was said last week? How are these ideas connected? Why don’t I agree? What
questions do I have? How is this idea connected to what I already know? Write down any questions you have, and then answer them later. By participating and thinking about the material being presented, you will be far more prepared for exams and will have to do less last-minute studying later. Cornell notes are a great way to participate in the lecture.

- If your learning style allows it, sit in the front of the lecture hall to avoid distractions. If students in front of you are talking, playing on their laptops, texting, or otherwise not paying attention, you might be distracted by them and not be participating in the lecture as you should be. Try to sit close to the front to avoid this problem. Studies also show that students who sit in the front three rows generally get better grades!
- Compare your notes with other students to see their strategies for note-taking, and also to see what information they thought was important. How do your ideas vary? What questions did they have? Work together to get a rounded perspective of the lecture, as well as any details you might have missed.
- Review notes immediately after your lecture and regularly throughout the semester to keep the information fresh, and to also show how different lectures connect to each other and fit into a theme. This will make studying for tests and exams much easier, and you will need to put less effort into remembering or connecting material.
- Remember to organize your notes after class. Whether your notes are hand-written or electronic, file them appropriately so you can find them quickly and easily when it comes time to study. If there are any gaps or concepts that need elaboration or clarification, fill in the gaps right away.

Listening Tips:

- Your intention should be to learn while in lecture. Notes are less important than you listen thoughtfully and remember what you have learned.
- Listen for introductions and conclusions in the lecture. Introductions will frame the lecture and provide some overall context to the lesson. What is coming up? What should you be listening for?
- Conclusions will summarize the information help you extract key messages. How does everything tie together? What’s next?
- Be sure you’re ready before lecture starts, and ignore the temptation to start packing up your books before the lecture is over; some of the most important information will come at the beginning and end of the lecture.
- Listen for repetition during the lecture. If your professor is repeating ideas, elaborating a lot on certain material, or emphasizing points, this is a good sign the information is important. Even if you don’t see the importance of certain ideas, your professor does, and you should seek to understand why.
Writing Tips:

- Notes should be specific, concrete, and precise. Don’t try to write down everything the professor says; this is ineffective and impossible. Instead, write down the main ideas and key words with clarity and conciseness. Use a telegraphic style: only the important words and phrases are necessary.

- Tie ideas together, and compare and contrast to find the relationships between concepts. Use a concept map or other graphic organizer (table, chart, etc.) to show these relationships.

- Some students will use symbols and abbreviations (e.g., *= important concept, ?= have a question/did not understand in lecture, w=with, w/o=without, @=at, EQN=equation, etc.); others will use different colours (e.g., green=equations, blue=examples, black=definitions, etc.)

- Date your notes. When you’re studying for an exam or midterm, things will be much easier if your notes are dated and sorted into the correct order. This will help you study, as it allows for easy reference to whatever topic you covered on a particular day. It will also let you see if you are missing a note that you may have forgotten about.

REFERENCES

