

Introduction

Note-taking is the process that involves *writing* or *recording* what you hear or read in a descriptive way. It is a comprehension and strategic learning skill critical to the development of independent learners. Therefore, most lecturers and instructors want their students to take and use notes and students often realize that they will be required to take notes of some sort. The use of selective methods to take notes provides learners with a chance to clarify thinking and make sense of their learning as they identify, synthesize and distil the most important information in text/ lecture.

1. Important Reasons to Take Notes

Being able to produce useful notes is a very important skill that will stand you in good stead throughout your time at university and in your working life. Below are some reasons why you should develop this skill.

- Notes trigger memories of lectures/readings.
- Your notes are often a source of valuable clues for what information the instructor thinks most important (i.e., what will show up on the next test).
- Notes inscribe information kinaesthetically.
- Taking notes helps you to concentrate in class.
- Notes create a resource for test preparation.
- Your notes often contain information that cannot be found elsewhere (i.e., in your textbook).

2. Common Difficulties in Taking Notes and their Solutions

Most students view notes as “recording” rather than a “method of learning”. They may also experience confusion as to the sort of notes they should take, how notes are supposed to help them to study and what to do with notes once they have been made. Other common difficulties faced by students *especially when taking notes from lectures* and some suggested solutions are listed below:

a) Slow speed of processing

If you process information slowly, you may not be able to keep up with what a lecturer is saying. Thus,

- ✓ you need to be well-prepared (concentration, study materials...) so you do not get left behind.
- ✓ Is there an outline on Blackboard? Read it before the lecture. Check that you know the meaning of any new terminology. Highlight bits that seem unclear so you can pay particular attention during the lecture.
- ✓ Prepare your papers: name of lecturer, module title, date, page number.

b) Weak working memory

If your memory is weak, you may not be able to remember the information long enough to write it all down. So,

- ✓ Record the lecture – make sure you check with the lecturer first.
- ✓ Use the outline from Blackboard to highlight main points to follow up later.

c) Slow reading speed

If you read slowly, you might not be able to produce quick and effective notes. What can you do?

- ✓ Brush up on your skim reading technique.
- ✓ Use the sub-headings.
- ✓ Read the first sentence of every paragraph.

(Also, check your “Reading Strategies” lesson)

d) Slow writing speed

If you write slowly, you might not be able to keep up. So, you have to:

- ✓ Record the lecture.
- ✓ Use abbreviations.
- ✓ Use visual formats/ symbols/ pictures instead of words.
- ✓ Use your laptop if your typing is faster.

e) Poor spelling

Poor spelling may mean that when you read your notes back, you cannot recognise new terminology since you may have made mistakes in spelling words while taking notes. In this case:

- ✓ Use the outline to identify unfamiliar words and have them ready to copy if necessary.
- ✓ Record the lecture.
- ✓ Use abbreviations and check out the spelling later.
- ✓ Work with a class mate and share notes.

3. The Process (Mechanism) of Note-Taking

Many steps occur simultaneously during the act of note-taking, all while usually under severe time pressure. Bolitho (1984, p. 91) defines note taking as a three-stage process:

Stage 1: Involves an understanding of the spoken or the written message.

Stage 2: Involves a selection of the needed ideas and writing them in forms of notes through the use of simplified languages including abbreviations and symbols.

Stage 3: Involves the reading back of notes (reviewing) and using them for a specific purpose, examination...they must be clear and empty of any ambiguity.

However, note-taking in lectures, is further complicated by the fact that people typically speak at a faster rate than which they are capable of writing or typing, making it extremely difficult to remember what the instructor said and write the associated information down before the instructor moves on to

the next topic. To provide a comparison, note-taking in lectures has been found to be as cognitively demanding as playing chess is for an expert, as both require the retrieval of knowledge, planning, and the development of solutions.

Cognitively, note-taking depends upon the working memory – the memory store responsible for both short-term storage (what you are currently thinking about) and the mental transformation of information (manipulating and modifying what you are currently thinking about). In the context of note-taking, working memory is used for both comprehension (attention and understanding of course content) and production (identifying important content and physically generating notes). Due to the limited capacity of the working memory, however, the balance between comprehension and production during note-taking make the process a dynamic one that changes from one moment to the next.

4. Guidelines for Note-Taking

- a) **Concentrate** on the lecture or on the reading material.
- b) Take notes *consistently*.
- c) Take notes *selectively*. Do NOT try to write down every word. Remember that the average lecturer speaks approximately 125-140 words per minute, and the average notetaker writes at a rate of about 25 words per minute.
- d) **Translate** ideas into your own words.
- e) **Organize** notes into some sort of logical form.
- f) *Write legibly*: Notes are useless if you cannot read them later!
- g) Don't be very concerned with spelling and grammar.
- h) *Be brief*: Write down only the major points and important information. *Abbreviate, omit and simplify* as follow:

✓ **Commonly used/ Field abbreviations**

Examples

Definition = def.	Especially = esp.	Example = eg.
That is to say = ie.	Evidence = evid.	Input = inp.
Point = pt.	Function = fun	
Mechanism = mech.	Psychology = psych	Sociology = soc.

✓ **First syllable**

Examples

Politics = pol	Democracy = dem	Liberal = lib
Capitalism = cap	Represents = rep	Contrast = con

✓ **First syllable, second letter**

Examples

Subject = subj	Conservative = cons	Individual = ind
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✓ **Eliminate final letters**

Examples

Association = assoc Achievement = ach Biological – bio

✓ **Omit vowels**

Examples

Background = bkgd Government = gov't Behaviour = bhvr

Enough = enf Important = imp

✓ **Use an apostrophe**

Examples

Government = gov't Amount = am't

✓ **Use “G” to represent “ing” endings**

Checking = ckg Establishing = estg

✓ **Leave out unimportant words**

Adjectives, adverbs, articles...

✓ **Write out full term once then substitute**

Survey-Question-Read-Recite-Review method = SQ3R

✓ **Use these common symbols or shortenings**

& or +	and
-	minus
=	equals, is the same as, results in
≠	does not equal, is not the same as, does not result in
≈	is approximately equal to, is similar to
<	is less than, is smaller than
>	is greater than, is larger than
↑	increase, rise, growth
↑↑	rapid increase
↓	decrease, fall, shrinkage
↓↓	rapid decrease
→	leads on to, produces, causes, results
×	no, not, incorrect, disadvantages
××	definitely not, disproved
>>	leads to, produces, causes
?	uncertain, possibly, unproven
✓	yes, correct, advantages

5. Practice

Task One: The following table is about some common abbreviations derived from Latin. See if you can fill in the blanks.

Abbreviation	Meaning
cf	
et al	
	Note well (something important)
i.e	
	Compare
viz	
etc	
	against

Task Two: See if you can identify a symbol to convey the meaning given. The first has been done for you. Are there any other personal symbols you usually use when you take notes?

Meaning	Symbols
doesn't lead to
therefore, thus, so
because
before
Insert (something that has been omitted)
with
without
within
at

Task Three: Here are some notes taken by a student from an encyclopedia article on the island of Malta. See if you can write the notes more briefly by, for example, using symbols and abbreviations, and by omitting unnecessary words.

Malta

Malta is comprised of three islands. They are the islands of Malta itself, and the smaller island of Gozo and Comino. The area of Malta is 95 square miles or 246 square kilometres, while Gozo is 26 square miles (67 square kilometres) and Comino is only one square mile in extent (2.7 square kilometres). As at the year 2000, the estimated population of Malta was 383,000. The capital city is Valetta. Valetta has a magnificent harbour. The Maltese have their own language which is mainly derived from Arabic but also contains many Sicilian words. The major industries are tourism and ship repair. Malta is a very important shipping centre for the Mediterranean

Task Four: Try to rewrite the following taken notes fully.

Psych ws used 4 1st tm in 15th C @ time whn mdrn wys thnkg 1stbgn 2 chng medieval tardtns.

Psych acadmc & appld disciplne invlvng scientfc stdy mentl processes bhvr. It + stdy cognitions & bhvr.