

Note Taking

Preparing to Take Notes

The best way to prepare for class is by doing your assignments before you get there. You can have the latest tablet with all of the best note taking software at your disposal and still not get the job done right. This is because, in the end, your notes are to help you recall what the most salient points of the lecture were, and if you are unprepared to glean the right information from your professor's comments, slides and impromptu scribbling on the blackboard, even the most sophisticated technology can't help you. So, make sure that you have spent sufficient time on the assignments so that you are able not only to follow the lecture, but also understand what you are going to be tested on. Tests can never be as comprehensive as the course material, so you have to also understand what material the professor is likely to use to evaluate your comprehension.

A great way to make sure you are prepared for the lecture is to get to class ten minutes early so that you can review your notes from the assignment, as well as your notes from the previous class. It's always a great idea to write down any questions you might have about the lecture for that day before hand so that you can ask questions if the professor hasn't already explained away your doubts during class. Another important thing is to turn off your wi-fi card so that you are not distracted (or distracting others) by incoming messages if you are going to use your laptop or tablet for note taking.

What to Write Down

Notes are not a transcript of what the professor says. If you are unable to discern what the main points of the lecture are, there is little reason to take notes. So, what are some cues that often indicate that something is important (or important as far as the professor is concerned):

- Whenever the professor emphasizes that something is important ("You need to know this," or "This will be on the test.");
- Whenever the professor repeats information;
- Whatever the professor writes on the board or includes in a Powerpoint slide
- Whenever you notice language that shows relationships between ideas:
 - first, second, third;
 - especially, most significant, most important;
 - however, on the other hand;
 - because, so, therefore, consequently;

Often professors will summarize the main points of the lecture at the end of the class. Make sure to write this down. In essence, it is a great synthesis of what was studied during the class. Some professors will also review what they covered during the previous lecture, and, again, this can help clarify what the professor thinks is important.

If you failed to understand something during the lecture and did not have the opportunity to ask a question during the class, make a note of it and do so afterwards.

After the Lecture

Your note taking tasks are not done when the professor leaves the classroom. This is a perfect time to review your notes and make sure that you actually understand what you wrote down. Try and make sense of your notes while the material is fresh in your mind to avoid asking yourself the next day what in the world you were thinking when you jotted down a line that seems written in a foreign language. Reviewing your notes shortly after the lecture will also help in memory retention.

Master Outline

Many students take notes while they are reading or doing assignments, as well as during lectures. A fantastic way of reviewing the material is by using your reading and lecture notes to create a master outline, which is, in essence, a single outline of the salient information taken from both your reading and lectures.

Techniques: Cornell Method and Mind Mapping

There are many techniques for taking notes, but one of the most popular is called the Cornell Method which was developed in the 1950s by Cornell University professor Walter Pauk. In this method the student divides a sheet of paper into two columns, with the right column for taking notes and the left for keywords and questions. The note taking column should be roughly twice the width of the keyword column. As the name implies, the right column is used to write down the main ideas of the lecture. Long phrases should be paraphrased. The left column is used to associated key words or questions with the notes in the right column. Ample space should be left at the end of the page (five to seven lines), which is used to write a brief summary of the notes after reviewing them. This should be done within 24 hours and helps in understanding the concepts of the lecture and in retention.

The Mind Mapping technique is a more visual method of annotating a lecture and has many advocates as well as detractors. In any case, you draw a mind map by placing the main topic in the center of the page and then connect it to other important points around it radially. Eventually the subtopics also branch out. Here are some guidelines:

1. Start in the center with an image of the topic, using at least 3 colors.
2. Use images, symbols, codes, and dimensions throughout your mind map.
3. Select key words and print using upper or lower case letters.
4. Each word/image is best alone and sitting on its own line.
5. The lines should be connected, starting from the central image. The lines become thinner as they radiate out from the center.
6. Make the lines the same length as the word/image they support.
7. Use multiple colors throughout the mind map, for visual stimulation and also for encoding or grouping.
8. Develop your own personal style of mind mapping.
9. Use emphasis and show associations in your mind map.
10. Keep the mind map clear by using radial hierarchy or outlines to embrace your branches.

Hi-tech or Pen and Paper

Today most students have access to laptops and tablets that can be exceptional note-taking tools if used properly. However, some professors are loath to have their students typing away instead of giving them their undivided attention, as though a keyboard is less efficient than pen and paper. In any case, if your professor allows you to use a laptop or a tablet, then take advantage of the opportunity. But before you do, make sure that you can use them effectively, otherwise the traditional pen and paper route is the best.

If you plan to go the hi-tech route, learn how to type! In the ancient days of yore, prior to the advent of the personal computer, students had to struggle with manual typewriters, carriage returns and less than perfect results, but they learned how to type because there were specific classes to teach you the magic of the keyboard. Sorrowfully, those days are now just a memory and many students struggle mightily with using all five fingers - on each hand! So, if you don't know how to type, take a course! There are various free, online courses that can help you (keybr.com, etc). You'll find that in a very brief time you will be much faster than your friends who are still struggling with pen and paper to get down what they think is important.

Once you've learned how to type, take advantage of the hardware and software at your disposal. You can always use a word processing application to take your notes, but why not take full advantage of what technology has to offer. There are a number of applications out there that allow you to take note and share them across your devices. Some even offer automated organization. In any case, try them out and see which best suits your needs (such as Evernote Springpad, MS OneNote, etc).

Pen and Paper

Even if your professor has not banned the use of computers during class to ensure that students are actually paying attention, there are many classes where a hi-tech approach might not be the best. This is especially the case where mathematical formulas and visual designs are used. Your fingers are just not going to be able to race across the keyboard fast enough to enter the information efficiently. So, if you're using pen and paper, do so intelligently. There are a number of note taking techniques that can be used based on the type of material being studied and on the type of learner you are.