

## Notetaking During Class

Many students experience note-taking dilemmas during classes. Note-taking is an extensive process that begins long before the class starts and ends long after the class has finished. This page discusses:

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## Why Take Notes in Class

Note taking is a skill that shows definite improvement with practice. Students are better off taking notes during class than relying solely on their listening ability because taking notes:

- keeps you active and alert.
- keeps you focused on what is being discussed in class
- provides you with a written record that you can refer to later and use for exam preparation
- benefits your learning and retention of new material

## How to Prepare for Notetaking at the Beginning of the Semester

### Review the course outline

Spend time at the beginning of the semester to become familiar with the course outline as it gives you a good idea of what is important and what your learning and your note-taking should focus on. The course outline may contain valuable information:

- the nature of the course objectives
- the main topics that will be covered
- the class schedule to be followed during the semester
- the dates of major assignments and midterms
- the grading plan
- the kinds of exams to expect

**Determine the relationship between classes and the textbook**

For each course, determine the relationship between classes and the textbook. In some courses, the text is the primary source of information with class time used to clarify and apply new concepts. In other courses, material covered in class is more important than the textbook. Knowing the importance of material covered in class helps you determine how thorough and detailed you need to make your class notes.

**Identify the kind of testing**

Early in the semester determine if you need to prepare for multiple choice, short answer or essay type exams, and if you will be examined on your ability to recall information or apply it, analyze or synthesize data, solve problems or evaluate the worth of ideas.

For example, you can make your class notes very detailed and include word-for-word definitions of terms if you know that you will be tested that way. Alternatively, you can take notes that emphasize a more general understanding of important concepts and the relationships between major theories if you know that you will be examined in that way.

Ask your instructor for a sample of questions which might be used on the exam; talk to other students who have taken the course if they have old exams they would share with you; check at the reserve desk in the library for old exams.

**Find a class buddy**

Having a friend in each class can be a lifesaver if you miss class, are unable to take notes for some reason, or have gaps in your notes because you haven't been able to get everything down quickly enough. Exchange phone numbers with a classmate so that you have a back-up source of help if you need it.

**Clarify your feelings**

Your feelings and attitudes about a course can affect your note-taking. You may take a course that you are less than enthusiastic about. If you have a negative attitude, you may not put as much effort into attending classes and taking notes in that course as you do into the ones that you feel more positively about. It is important to acknowledge your feelings, but then you need to figure out positive ways of dealing with the situation.

**Adopt a questioning attitude**

You can improve your note taking by developing a questioning attitude that keeps you alert and active in seeking answers to your questions. Creating questions also provides you with your own purpose for attending class. It is important to ask two specific questions: "What am I going to learn today in this class?" and "How does this new information or these new ideas fit into what I already know?" Determining the answers to these questions can really help focus your attention, and therefore your notes, on the really important ideas covered each day and what those ideas mean to you.

## What to Do Before Each Class

A terrific habit to develop that really benefits note taking is taking the time to prepare for each class. You are much more likely to take good notes if you are familiar with the concepts to be covered in a class and have organized your materials. Preparing for class can be accomplished in several different ways.

### **Read the assigned readings**

This is probably the best preparation to become familiar with the material to be covered in class. You will become aware of major topics and terms you may not be familiar with.

### **Review notes from previous classes**

Reviewing notes is a helpful way of connecting new material with what was covered earlier getting a sense of the "big picture" and the direction in which the class is progressing identifying questions about concepts or material that you would like your instructor to answer.

### **Discuss with a classmate**

Discussing ideas to be covered in class with a classmate or in a study group also helps you become familiar with the material and may generate questions that you would like answered in class.

### **Keep a learning journal**

A journal is also a good way of preparing for class. Writing a journal entry after each class allows you to:

- reflect on and integrate the new ideas and information presented.
- explore what these ideas mean to you personally and how they can be applied in real-life situations.
- clarify new concepts and practicum experiences and see how real-life situations fit with what you are learning in class.

## How To Take Notes During Class

Information in classes is most commonly presented in a lecture format. However, lectures can be organized or rambling; they may be interrupted by questions and discussions; they may be accompanied by illustrations, demonstrations, overheads, slides and videos. All of these situations can present note-taking challenges. This section discusses ways of handling note-taking in class, offers suggestions for note taking in general, and suggests how to improve concentration in class.

### **Determine the pattern of organization**

It is most important to determine the lecturer's patterns of organization. When you know the organizational pattern being used, you can distinguish main ideas from less important ones and see how ideas are related to each other. Listed below are some examples of common organizational patterns and the key words to listen for that are associated with each one.

- **Classification:**  
A topic is explained by dividing it into parts, divisions, or categories. Common key words or phrases are kinds, classified as, composed of, divided into, and categories.
- **Cause and effect:**  
Cause-effect pattern explains why or how something has happened. It describes what caused an event or what happened as a result of a particular event. Common key words or phrases are causes, stems from, produces, therefore, hence, leads to, for this reason, as a result, effects, explanations for, consequently, because, and brings about.
- **Chronological order and process:**  
Events or procedures are described in the order in which they occur in time or space. Key words or phrases include then, before, after, thereafter, by the time, meanwhile, at that point, first, next afterward, second, finally, steps, stages and procedures.
- **Comparison and contrast:**  
Comparison pattern show how two things or concepts are similar; a contrast pattern describes how two things or concepts are different. Key words or phrases are like, alike, resembles, likewise, similarly, also, same as, in contrast, as opposed to, instead, unlike, different, differs from, just as, but, on the other hand, however, and equally.
- **Definition:**  
An object or idea is explained by describing the general class or group to which it belongs and how the item differs from others in the same group. Key words and phrases include means, defined as, meaning, is a form of, and definition of.
- **Illustration/example:**  
An idea is explained by providing specific instances or experiences. Key words or phrases include for instance, as an illustration, to illustrate, such as, to be specific, and specifically.

### **Listen or watch for cues of important material**

During lectures be alert for the signals that instructors use to tell you that information is important. These signals or clues include:

- **direct statement:** The instructor says: "This is important."
- **repetition:** The instructor repeats ideas with emphasis.
- **excitement:** The instructor shows excitement about the material
- **writing on the blackboard or overhead:** Any terms, definitions, diagrams, dates, statistics that the instructor takes the time to write during class are generally important.

### **Note taking during discussions or questions**

Discussion either with the instructor and the whole class or in small groups can be a valuable way to learn. However, when you are busy participating in a discussion, you usually can't stop to write notes about it. So although you may

have learned a great deal in the class, you may leave without any written record of the knowledge or the insights you gained.

Solving this problem by writing down a few words about the discussion before leaving the class or as soon as possible afterwards. Then later, when you have more time, you can expand on your notes, summarize what was said, add your own point of view, and reflect on what you learned.

Questions, like discussion, can be a teaching strategy deliberately employed by instructors to facilitate learning. In this case, important information and ideas are elicited from members of the class instead of being presented by the instructor. Often, the questions asked by students in the class raise significant points. You need to remember to take notes on the important material uncovered in this way.

### **Note taking from audio-visual materials**

Audio-visual materials such as overheads, slides, films, and videos are commonly used to supplement lectures. You need to know if you should be taking notes on the information presented in these formats and when you should do it. For example, it is pretty difficult to watch a film or video in a darkened room and take notes at the same time. Also, it is challenging to attempt to take down all the information on the overhead and listen to what the instructor says.

If you are unsure about taking notes in these situations, you can ask direct questions: "Should we be making notes on this material? Will we be tested on this? What do you want us to learn from this?" Instructors may allow more time for you to take notes during and after the media presentations or making them available at out of class times. If more time is not available, then do the best you can by taking whatever notes are possible during the presentation and writing a summary afterwards.

Some instructors lecture from a set of overheads, and they expect you to write down everything printed on the overheads word for word. As this is challenging for most people, ask the instructor if copies can be made available for students. If not, pair up with a class buddy; one of you can copy the overhead material while the other takes notes on what the instructor says.

### **General note taking suggestions**

Always date notes and number each page Use abbreviations to speed up note-taking

#### **Some common ones are:**

- e.g. = for example
- psy. = psychology
- & = and
- slwkr = social worker
- def. = definition
- org. = organization

### **Use your own words and summarize**

It is helpful if you can think critically about what you hear so that you actually wrestle with the material and make it your own. It is best to use your own words when you take notes instead of trying to capture word-for-word everything the instructor says. This means listening closely and then summarizing the ideas and information.

### **Use an outline format**

An outline format uses headings, indentations and a numbering system to clarify the relationships between major and minor points. Headings are usually written in capital letters and underlined so they will stand out. Under each heading, the important points are written down right next to the margin, and the less important points are indented towards the right of the page. Numbering and lettering the points in sequence also helps us organize the information. Look at the following example of an outline:

#### **3 types of goal structures:**

1. **cooperative:** individual work together
2. **competitive:** individual attain goals at other's expense
3. **individualistic:** nobody loses or benefits

### **Support main points with detail**

Deciding on how much detail to include in your notes depends upon your purpose in learning, how you will be examined in the course, and whether or not the information is covered in the text. Taking down lots of information is also helpful when course examinations call for knowledge of details, particularly if these points are not discussed in the text.

### **Include examples and anecdotes**

Examples and anecdotes are worth including in your notes because they can help you grasp the concept, see the point of a theory or understand how an idea can be applied in a real-life situation. Because they bring abstract concepts to life, examples and anecdotes can aid your understanding and recall of factual information.

### **Leave gaps in your notes for missed material**

If you miss material, leave lots of gaps in your notes to fill in points later either from the text or from a later point in the lecture. Another strategy is to take notes only on one side of the page so that there is room to add later information that comes out of sequence. It is important to identify the main ideas and highlight them in some way. Sometimes, what is required is to take down the information as it is presented in the lecture and then re-organize and rewrite your notes afterwards.

### **Pay special attention to opening and closing remarks**

Very often instructors give important information at the beginning and the end of the class. It is important to be ready to take notes as soon as the class starts and to continue to take notes right to the end.

### **How to improve concentration**

Students occasionally have problems staying awake and alert in the classroom. When you aren't paying attention, we

don't take down many notes and the notes you do take down don't make much sense. Our concentration in class, and therefore our note-taking, may not always be perfect, but there are some things we can do to improve.

- **Sit at the front of the classroom**

Sit in the front row, if possible, where you can see and hear better and not be distracted by others in the class.

- **Have an interest in the course**

Being interested in the course material makes it easier to concentrate on what is being taught. Relating the course to your own goals can help you gain and maintain interest. If this is not possible, we can create interest by a variety of means:

- setting small specific goals
- making games out of learning the material
- getting to know the instructor

- **Keep active in class**

You can stay active in class by making notes, asking questions, and participating in discussion. When you are involved with what is taking place in class, you are not likely to drift off into your own world.

- **Avoid fatigue and hunger in class**

Avoiding fatigue and hunger helps in maintaining concentration. The better rested you are the better your ability to concentrate and the less likely you are to daydream or fall asleep. Similarly, if you are not hungry or thirsty, not too hot or too cold, then you will concentrate better. Some students find it helpful to carry a snack with them for unexpected hunger attacks.

- **Acknowledge your lack of concentration**

When you notice you are not concentrating, remind yourself you need to focus on the class.