

Strategic note-taking

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Introduction

This session will cover:

1. The purposes of note-taking
2. Tips for note-taking during lectures/audio material
3. Tips for note-taking whilst reading

Part 1

The purposes of note-taking

The purposes of note-taking

It sounds obvious, but it's useful to consider what role our notes are meant to play in your overall learning:

- Many people take notes by simply trying to write down as much information as possible, as quickly as possible.
- However, the purpose of note-taking is not to record and reproduce the original material
- If you focus on trying to record verbatim what you're reading or hearing, you're likely to feel swamped by information, and end up with notes which makes no sense after you've finished writing them.
- If you think a bit more about what tasks the notes are intended to help you with, you'll be better able to prioritise what's important, and what you actually *need* from both your notes and the source they're based on.

What do these notes need to help you do?

Note-taking can fulfil various purposes. However, it will be a much more effective process if you give some thought to these purposes in advance. Do you need you need to your notes to....

- Retain factual details about something?
- Generate material for a specific assignment?
- Get an introductory 'big picture' overview of a topic?
- Do a close reading or textual analysis of a particular source?
- Familiarise yourself with the basics?
- Deepen your understanding of something?
- Find out about potential solutions and methods?
- Get an understanding of existing research on a topic?
- Highlight things you need to remember and come back to?
- Make connections between themes/models/sources?

More mechanistic things your notes should provide you with

So, your notes should enhance your understanding of your subject, and also the ways in which your learning materials relate to the wider purposes of your course and its assessments. On a more practical level, your notes should have...

- Clear structure, e.g. sections marked with subheadings, numbers or bullet points
- Ways of highlighting crucial information, e.g. with stars/asterisks
- Some way of distinguishing your own thoughts from those of the author/lecturer, e.g. put your ideas in brackets
- Abbreviations and signs to make things more efficient, e.g. ∴ for 'therefore', 'EM' for 'early modern', 'gvt' for 'government'
- Any information you'll need for references, e.g. titles, page numbers
- Material that you can *actually make sense of* so that you have a place to start when it comes to writing your assignments

Different styles of note-taking

- You can find detailed guidance on the most common styles of note-taking [on the ASK website](#), including Cornell notes, mind-maps and SQ3R.
- However, you may find that basic linear notes are all you need – this is not an area where complexity is necessarily beneficial (for example, it is difficult to find convincing evidence that the Cornell method improves retention or grades).
- There is not really an objectively ‘correct’ method for taking notes, which is why this session is focused on strategy rather than specific models.
- You may find different types of notes are needed for different situations, or you might find that have a strong preference for one system.
- The ‘best’ note-taking model is the one that works for you, and that you know you will stick to consistently.

Part 2

Tips for note-taking during lectures

Before and during the lecture

Note-taking in lectures is not a simple, one-dimensional process. It involves absorbing, prioritising and synthesising complex information at considerable speed, which means that you have to do three different things simultaneously:

1. Listening to the content
2. Deciding what is the most important information; i.e. establishing what you actually need to put in your notes
3. Typing or writing that important information down whilst you're having to listen to the next section (this is probably the hardest part!)

How to make this more straightforward

- Just thinking about which part of the process you find the most difficult will help you get a clearer idea of what you need to work on – do you need to find quicker ways to write things down? Or minimise distractions? Something else?
- This will help you to produce notes that are actually useful, rather than notes which cease to serve any purpose once the lecture itself is over.
- It is a very good idea to familiarise yourself with the basics *before* you go to the lecture, even if no reading or prep has been assigned.
- Use cues like sections, headings, signposting between sections so that you don't get lost (n.b. these things will vary hugely from lecturer to lecturer!)
- If there's something that you don't understand, do not be shy about asking your lecturer for more information!

Improving your notes with ReCap

- If material is being ReCapped and added to Canvas, it should usually be available before the actual lecture.
- It is a very good idea to look through this in advance, even if it's just a quick run through the slides.
- ReCap gives you the opportunity to repeat and go over anything you missed the first time, and is an excellent way of addressing any gaps in both your notes and your overall knowledge.
- You can make more detailed notes when using ReCap, because you have chance to pause the recording, look things up, skip backwards and forwards etc.

Part 3

Tips for note-taking whilst reading

Note-taking whilst reading

When it comes to recording key information we wish to refer to later, we can photocopy physical texts, and copy and paste from digital ones. Why, then do we need to make notes? Well, making notes when we read has several benefits. The most obvious ones are that it helps us:

- Actively engage with the material, so we begin to process the information we're reading
- Develop our knowledge and understanding of a topic
- Identify the most important and relevant points so that we can distinguish the need to from the nice to know (and thus avoid trying to learn *everything*)

It's not just about recording the details...

Successful notetaking is an exercise in critical thinking. When you're making notes, try to record not just what the text says, but your own reaction to it.

- What do you actually need from the text you're reading?
- Is it relevant for your purpose? How and where might you use it in your own essay?
- What do you think of it? Is the point convincingly argued and well evidenced?
- Do you agree or disagree with it?
- How does it relate to other things you've read? Is there anything you don't understand or need to know more about?

Critical note-making means 'talking back' to the text, having a dialogue with it. You could annotate it with your own questions and comments in the margin or in your own notes as you go, to record your response to it.

- Your reaction does not need to be written in polished academic prose – the 'no filter' version is an excellent place to start!

The PMI strategy: a straightforward and efficient tool for critical note-taking

Example

P – 'plus'

something positive about the source

Meaningful findings, clear communication, effective methodology, large sample size, transparency about limitations, convincing argument

M – 'minus'

something negative about the source)

Limited/overstated findings, reliant on one method/data type, unsuitable method/data type, bias or conflict of interest, data manipulation

I – 'interesting'

something interesting about the source

Novel approach or method(s), findings differ from similar sources, insightful argument, innovative style/structure/presentation of data

Improving Students' Learning via Effective Learning Techniques

BY HOLEKY & AL (1913)

Controlled for learning conditions, characteristics, mats & tasks

Controlled. pupil to address differential outcomes by assessing efficacy of learning techniques, viz:

- elaborative interrogation
- self-explanation
- summarisation
- highlighting/underlines
- keyword mnemonic
- imagery
- re-reading
- practice testing
- distributed practice
- interleaved practice

Techniques were assessed for utility & graded as high, low or medium utility.

HIGH UTILITY

- practice testing
- distributed practice

MEDIUM UTILITY

- elaborative interrogation
- self-explanation
- interleaved practice

LOW UTILITY

- summarising
- highlighting
- keyword mnemonic
- re-reading
- imagery

The low utility techniques were most commonly used by students

activity, practicals, routines, music memorisation

To remember something you must learn episodes should be spaced 12-24 hours apart. intervals of 1 month. ideal for core content that needs to be retained for summative examinations or achievement tests

38 Less good for fine motor skill tasks eg. flying / controlling an airplane (!)

39 N.B. procrastination + cramming will slow the +ve effects of this stuff
 (↳ schedule is key
 ↳ micro schedule if you're pushed for time
 ↳ do 20 mins if you can)

Reference details at the top, subheadings & bullet points, page numbers in margin, my responses in brackets

Questions, comments, advice?

Ask us

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