

Note-Taking Skills

An Introduction



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Effective note-taking from lectures and readings is an essential skill for university study. Good note-taking allows a permanent record of relevant points that you can integrate with your own writing, and that can be used for exam revision. Taking reliable, accurate notes also reduces the risk of plagiarism. It helps you distinguish where your ideas came from and how you think about those ideas.

Effective note-taking requires:

- recognising the main ideas
- identifying the information relevant to your task
- having a system of note-taking that works for you
- reducing the information to note and diagram format
- where possible, putting the information in your own words
- recording the source of the information

A Few Tips About Format

Set out your notebooks so that you have a similar format every time you take notes.

- Columns that distinguish the source information and your thoughts can be helpful.
- Headings that include bibliographic reference details of the sources of information are also important.
- The use of colour to highlight major sections, main points and diagrams makes notes easy to access.

Reading Note-taking Strategies

1. Be Selective and Systematic

As you take notes from a written source, keep in mind that not all of the text will be relevant to your needs. Think about your purpose:

- Are you reading for a general understanding of a topic or concept?
- Are you reading for some specific information that may relate to the topic of an assignment?

Before you start to take notes, skim the text. Then highlight or mark the main points and any relevant information you may need to take notes from. Finally—keeping in mind your purpose for reading—read the relevant sections of the text carefully and take separate notes as you read.

2. Identify the Purpose and Function of a Text

Whether you need to make notes on a whole text or just part of it, identifying the main purpose and function of a text is invaluable for clarifying your note-taking purposes and saving time.

- Read the title and the abstract or preface (if there is one).
- Read the introduction or first paragraph.
- Skim the text to read topic headings and notice how the text is organised.
- Read graphic material and predict its purpose in the text.

Your aim is to identify potentially useful information by getting an initial overview of the text (chapter, article, pages etc.) that you are reading. Ask yourself: Will this text give me the information I require and where might it be located in the text?

3. Identify How Information is Organised

Most texts use a range of organising principles to develop ideas. Organising principles tend to sequence information into a logical hierarchy. Some organising principles might be:

- past ideas to present ideas
- the steps or stages of a process or event
- most important point to least important point

- well known ideas to least known ideas
- simple ideas to complex ideas
- general ideas to specific ideas
- the largest parts to the smallest parts of something
- problems and solutions
- causes and results

An Example:

Read the text below on Underwater Cameras and then look at how the text is presented in note form. The most important words to include in notes are the information words. These are usually nouns, adjectives and verbs .

Underwater Cameras

Regular cameras obviously will not function underwater unless specially protected. Though housings are available for waterproofing 35 mm and roll-film cameras, a few special models are amphibious -they can be used above or below the water. Most of these cameras are snapshot models, but one, Nikonos, is a true 35 mm system camera. Though lenses and film must be changed on the surface, the camera will otherwise function normally at depths down to 70 mm. Four lenses are available : two of these , which have focal lengths of 90 mm and 35 mm, will function in air and water; the other two of these, which have focal lengths of 90 mm and 35 mm, will function in air and water; the other two, the 28 and 15 mm lenses, work only under water. Lenses are also available from other manufacturers.

Sample Notes from the text 'Underwater Cameras'

Underwater Cameras

1. Regular Cameras

special housing necessary

2. Amphibious

a) snapshot models

b) Nikonos (35 mm)

Lenses

i) air & water 35 mm

90 mm

ii) only under water 28 mm

15 mm

Source: Freeman M. *The encyclopaedia of practical photography* London, Quarto Books 1994, p. 283

4. Include Your Thoughts

When taking notes for an assignment it is also helpful to record your thoughts at the time. Record your thoughts in a separate column or margin and in a different colour to the notes you took from the text. Rule up your notebook into two columns before you begin. Note down:

- Any ideas you have for your assignment as you read.
- How you think you could use this information in your assignment.

Listening Note-taking Strategies

Many of the strategies for reading note-taking also apply to listening note-taking. However, unlike reading, you can't stop a lecture and review as you listen (unless you listen to a taped lecture). Therefore preparation prior to listening can greatly improve comprehension. When you take notes:

- Have a clear purpose.
- Recognise main ideas.
- Select what is relevant. You do not need to write down everything that is said.
- Have a system for recording information that works for you.

Lecture Survival Tips

Strategies to Increase Comprehension and Improve Note-Taking

Before the Lecture	During the Lecture	After the Lecture
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revise the previous lecture or tutorial • Pre-read about the topic • Check the pronunciation of any new words or discipline-specific language in the pre-readings. • Rule up pages according to your note-taking system. This saves time in the lecture. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be on time and sit near the front • Distinguish between main points, elaboration, examples, repetition, 'waffle', restatements and new points by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening for structural cues (signpost/transition words, introduction, body and summary stages) • Looking for non verbal cues (facial expression , hand and body signals) • Looking for visual cues (copy the content of any visual aids, note references to names and sources) • Listening for phonological cues (voice change in volume, speed, emotion and emphasis) which often indicates important information. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revise lecture notes within 24 hours. Tidy up your handwriting and fill in any missing bits. • Reviewing makes remembering lectures much easier. • Write a short summary of the lecture (1 paragraph) in your own words • Attach any handouts to your lecture notes.

Use Symbols and Abbreviations

The use of symbols and abbreviations is useful for notetaking in lectures, when speed is essential. When you use symbols and abbreviations, develop a system; use commonly used or personal symbols and abbreviations. However, you also need to be familiar with the symbols or abbreviations frequently used in your particular field of study (e.g. chemical symbols or Greek alphabet). It's important to be consistent when using symbols and abbreviations so you will remember what they represent and be able to use them with ease.

Abbreviations

These can be classified into three categories:

1. Common

Many are derived from Latin.

- c.f. (confer) = compare
- i.e. (id est) = that is
- e.g (exempla grate) = for example
- NB (nota benne) =note well
- no. (numero) = number
- etc. (et cetera)= and so on

2. Discipline-Specific

In chemistry:

- Au for gold, Mg for magnesium

In the case of quantities and concepts, these are represented by Greek letters in many fields.

- A or a (alpha) B or b (beta)

3. Personal

Here you can shorten any word that is commonly used in lectures.

- diff =different
- Gov = government
- NEC = necessary

Symbols

Symbols for note-taking are as follows:

=	equals/ is equal to/ is the same as
≠	is not equal to/ is not the same as
≡	is equivalent to
∴	therefore, thus, so
+	and, more, plus
>	more than, greater than
<	less than
—	less, minus
→	gives, causes, leads to, results in/ from, is produced by
↑	rises, increases by
↓	falls, decreases by
A	proportional to
∝	not proportional to

Acronyms

Some abbreviations are so well known and widely used that they have become an Acronym—an abbreviation pronounced as a word. For example, the word 'laser' was originally an abbreviation for 'Light Amplification by Stimulation Emission of Radiation'. It now is a noun in its own right.

2. Use Concept Maps and Diagrams

You can also set down information in a concept map or diagram. This presents the information in a visual form and is unlike the traditional linear form of note-taking. Information can be added to the concept map in any sequence.

Concept maps can easily become cluttered, so use both facing pages of an open A4 note book. This will give you an A3 size page to set out your concept map and allow plenty of space for adding ideas and symbols.

- Begin in the middle of the page and add ideas on branches that radiate from the central idea or from previous branches.
- Arrows and words can be used to show links between parts of the concept map.
- Colour and symbols are important parts of concept maps, helping illustrate ideas and triggering your own thoughts.

