Strategies for Successful Note-Taking

Here are the Learning Centre’s top 12 tips for how to take effective notes during lectures and how to use your notes as a study tool outside of class time.

1. Come to class prepared to take notes – have the appropriate materials you require, be well-rested and mentally ready, and do what you need to in order to avoid distractions. **Review** previous lecture notes and **pre-read** the topic that will be covered in class.

2. **Organize** and **date** your note pages. Keep these pages in a 3 ring binder with appropriate dividers. Also, consider writing on only one side of paper so that you can spread your note pages out for comparison and/or leaving spaces between sentences to add or fill in additional information later from text, etc.

3. **Listen** for how your instructor introduces, emphasizes, shifts between, summarizes and repeats important topics and ideas. Notice transition words and phrases, pauses, and hand and eye gestures that signal new or relevant information.

4. **Match** your note taking method to the style of lecture and to the way the instructor organizes information, as well as to your own learning style(s). **Experiment** with a variety of approaches to find out what works best for you in capturing the new material.

5. **Identify and organize key points** from the lecture by writing down terms and phrases in bullets, short paragraphs or outline form as appropriate. Mind maps and drawings are great for right brain creative thinking and learning.

6. Use a system of **shorthand** and/or abbreviations for common words. Also, use **symbols** to indicate important ideas and their relationships to each other or to remind you where you may have missed something in the lecture.

7. **Engage your critical thinking** as you take notes. Look for the connections between ideas and pay attention to examples your teacher gives. How do these concepts relate to the course content as a whole and to what you will be doing practically? Add your own reflections, ideas and questions in margins to the side and/or bottom of the page.

8. **Avoid mental traps**. Do not let yourself lose focus if you disagree with something the teacher has said or you find information contradictory. Make a note to inquire on these discrepancies following the lecture. As well, if concerns outside of class enter your mind, jot them down on a separate piece of paper to deal with them at a later time.
9. **Be proactive.** Ask your teacher to provide some learning objectives at the start of class. Do not be shy about asking questions and engaging in discussions and activities. After class, summarize for the instructor what you have learned and ask for clarification about any points/topics on which you are unclear.

10. **Compare** and **discuss** your notes with another student after class to find out what you missed or misunderstood and to have the opportunity to see material from another perspective. Teach or explain what you have learned to one another.

11. Actively **edit notes** by doing something new with them rather than simply recopying them: paraphrase, summarize, and revise. Expand on difficult ideas in your notes using your textbook, online resources or your own thoughts on the topic. Write questions and answers. Create a table or graph. Make a mindmap connecting concepts or ideas. Pretend you are going to be teaching this course; how would you organize your notes to teach a group of students these concepts and ideas?

12. **Review** your notes as soon as possible – within the first 24 hours after a lecture or class is best – and regularly after editing them. Reduce your notes to key ideas and put them on flash cards, repeat the notes out loud to yourself, or explain the ideas to someone else as part of a regular review to get the information into long-term memory.