

## Note Taking

Note taking is an important part of the learning experience in college. Taking notes will help you keep track of reading material as well as the content covered by your professors in class. There is considerable overlap between taking notes from a lecture versus taking notes from a book or article, but there are also important differences. There are also differences between taking notes on different kinds of reading. For example, taking notes from a textbook may be a little different for you than taking notes on an article. Your methods of taking notes will also be somewhat influenced by your motivation to take notes. Are you taking notes to prepare yourself for a test, or are you taking notes to write a literature review? There are several examples below that describe ways in which you might take notes. However, remember that these examples, methods, and descriptions are not exclusive. The most important thing about note taking is that *your* system works for *you*! That is, when you go back to review your notes they should be structured in a way that allows you to understand and learn from them.

### Taking Notes from Lecture:

The first thing you should be aware of when taking notes is that you are likely to experience some sort of cognitive overload. Many mental processes are ongoing during note taking in a classroom: you are listening to your professor, people in the class are interacting with each other, you are trying to gather, process, and understand course content, and you are balancing between listening and writing. Some of that cognitive overload can be alleviated by coming to class prepared—completing assigned reading and reviewing notes from previous lectures for example. Doing so will also prepare you for asking questions about what you don't understand. That being said...

### Advice

1. Don't feel like you have to write down every word your professor says. Try to focus on and synthesize the most important points. This may be difficult at first, but students generally get better at it as they practice.
2. Develop some sort of shorthand for taking notes so you are not always writing down full words and phrases.
3. Use formatting and symbols when you can (such as a line indicating a relationship between points or use an outline model to structure notes).
4. Review your notes ASAP. This will give you the opportunity to begin transitioning information into your long-term memory as well as organize them and fill in any information you weren't able to write down during class.
5. Continue to engage your notes as an active learner. Instead of just reading your notes to memorize content during review, revise your notes, test yourself on content as you review, etc. Stated simply, active, frequent review helps your brain figure out what it needs to do to retrieve information.
6. Use the beginning of class the following session to ask your professor for clarification of ideas you didn't understand from the previous class.

## Taking Notes from a Reading:

One benefit of taking notes from a reading rather than a lecture is that it uses much less of your working memory. This allows you to concentrate better and make more informed choices about what to write down. Because of that, you can begin to effectively process information more quickly. One downside is that it can take more of your time. In order to read effectively you have to read actively rather than passively. Passive reading is what you do when you are reading a magazine or newspaper for entertainment or watching television. Active reading forces you to pay close attention and interact with information. The ultimate goal of active reading is to develop an academic internal dialogue. That internal dialogue is the process by which processing information occurs. *Processing* information is *learning* information, and once information is learned it is much easier to recall and use. If you don't have a good method for processing information, information is quickly forgotten and not likely readily available for recall.

## Advice

1. Concentrate on concentrating. That's right, when you sit down to read college-level reading you should think consciously about paying attention to what is in front of you. It is easy to drift off when you are reading, so pay close attention to where your mind is.
2. Process information as you go. As you are reading, pause once in a while to ask yourself if you understood what you just read. If you come across important terminology you don't know, look it up so you are familiar with it before you continue reading.
3. Annotate what you are reading. Underline key points in reading and write descriptive notes in the margins. Your annotations should help you go back and take notes on the most significant points of a reading. If you can't physically write in your reading, use post-it notes or a separate sheet of paper.
4. Keep your notes compact. As you write notes, discriminate the most important points and use shorthand and bullet points to create a concise "map" of the reading. Be sure to note specific things like names, dates, places, important concepts, etc.
5. Figure out your limits. Everyone has a point where no matter what they try, reading more will not be beneficial. Once you reach your limit, take a break or at least move on to something else until you are mentally prepared to get back to it.
6. Try to organize your notes in a way that facilitates studying. You can use headings and subheadings to show relationship between pieces of information for example. You can also look to the reading itself for clues about organization.