Effective Note-Taking

Why note-taking?

Note-taking is one of the most important skills a student can develop. Good notes can help you remember what was said in lectures and allow you to study facts and concepts well after the class ends.

It may also be useful to take notes while studying: writing down questions or thoughts that occur to you while reading allows you to connect and interact with the text and information more dynamically.\(^1\)

While gathering research, keeping clear notes can help guard against accidental plagiarism. If your notes are specific about where you got the article or citation, this will enable you to find it again within your research materials and cite it correctly. Write down the source of the work and all of the needed information (full title, author name, journal name, page numbers, date, etc.) in order to have a complete and accurate citation.

There are many different note-taking methods, and each has its benefits.

**Hand-written notes**—This is generally considered to be the best way to take notes, especially for class lectures. The physical act of writing makes for better recall of information later on, while typing out word for word what is being said in a lecture typically means the brain will have less engagement with the information.\(^2\) Many different studies have compared typed note-taking to handwritten notes, with the latter coming out on top.


*Improving Students’ Learning with Effective Learning Techniques: Promising Directions from Cognitive and Educational Psychology.* John Dunlosky et al. *Association for Psychological Science.* January 2013

*A Learning Secret: Don’t Take Notes with a Laptop*—*Scientific American*

*Taking Notes? Bring a Pen, Skip the Computer*—*The Boston Globe*

**Typed notes**—It is often faster and easier to type notes during lectures, and it allows for exact transcription of what was said or written on the board in class. Electronically formatted notes are more portable and easily carried and shared across devices, and one can quickly find needed terms or specific notes by keyword searching in the document or device.

*Evernote:* This free, highly useful app syncs across all your devices and enables document organizing and searching as well as easy sharing with classmates and colleagues.

*Google Docs/Drive:* You need a Google account to use these, which are like Word documents that aren’t locked to one computer. Google Docs are automatically backed up in the cloud, and their multi-user feature is excellent for group papers and projects.

Want the convenience of digital notes with the memory-boosting benefits of handwriting? Take handwritten notes on your tablet with a stylus, or use a scanning app on your smartphone or tablet to convert a page of handwritten notes into a PDF.
Tips and tricks for better note-studying

Using colored writing utensils, highlighting and underlining are other ways to mark what is important in one’s notes. It’s important not to overdo this, though; if everything is highlighted or underlined, this won’t help you find the important terms easily.\(^i\)

How Color-Coded Notes Make You a More Efficient Thinker—Fast Company

One popular way to take notes is the Cornell Method. It involves dividing your page into three parts and writing regular notes in one section, important bullet points in another, and a summary in the third.\(^iv\)

Notes written in the Cornell Method can be handwritten or typed.

Geek to Live: Take study-worthy lecture notes—Lifehacker

Another note-taking technique is mind mapping, or drawing out the relationships between concepts, with sub-topics branching off from main topics.\(^v\) This may be helpful for visual learners to better engage with what they’re studying. As with the other note-taking tips and styles, mind mapping can be done by hand or digitally, and there are many useful resources and software available online.

Mindmapping.com: Note-taking that literally “maps” out your ideas

It may be worthwhile to try out or mix and match different note-taking styles to see what works for you. Below are more useful guides and articles about note-taking.

Advice for Students: Taking Notes that Work—Lifehack

Back to Basics: Perfect Your Note-Taking Techniques—Lifehacker

Five Classic Ways to Boost Your Note-Taking—Lifehacker

How to Become a Masterful Note-Taker: 8 Lessons From Research—The Atlantic

How to Take Better Notes—WikiHow

Listen Actively and Take Good Notes—The McGraw Center for Teaching & Learning, Princeton University

Note Taking Tips—Chapman University (also note the other headings in the left side menu)

Tooling and Studying: Effective Reading and Note-Taking—AcadEx: MIT Center for Academic Excellence

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