

NOTE-TAKING STRATEGIES

a helpful guide from the Academic Support Center

It may seem obvious that note-taking is an important skill for any university student. Regardless of your discipline or course load, the ability to keep a record of what you read in a text and experience in a lecture is critical to your long-term academic success. Many students don't learn reliable note-taking strategies before they get to college, and other students learn strategies but don't understand how to properly apply them to the right situation. It takes time and a willingness to try several methods before you find a note-taking strategy that best meets your learning preferences and coursework, so it's not realistic to expect a single workshop or guide to solve all of your academic needs. This is an introduction to some of the most common strategies and explain where and how they can work for you.

First, consider if you are taking reading notes or lecture notes. As the name suggests, reading notes are notes taken while reading an assignment or passage. You can go back and forth at your own pace, highlight or underline key terms or ideas, and take time to better organize an idea to meet your learning needs. Reading notes help you to slow down and analyze material to provide a better summary of what you've read, and having reading notes before going into a lecture can give you an idea of how the lecture will be organized. On the other hand, lecture notes are those notes that you take based upon what happens during class. You have a limited amount of time to listen, consolidate, summarize, and record the information. The organization may depend more heavily on how the instructor presents the information and you have visual and nonverbal cues that suggest the importance of certain topics within the context of the class. Lecture notes can be difficult to structure when the class includes discussions and worked examples, so you may need to treat lecture notes as a 'first draft' that you can rewrite later as part of your review strategy.

Second, consider an organization method for your notes. Here are three that you can use with suggestions on where they would best work.

SQ3R Method

This is best used for reading notes, since the strategy requires that you go through the material and use headings as a way to structure your notes.

Steps in this method:

Survey the text - skim the material, take note of definitions, charts, diagrams, pictures, equations, and other parts of the text that jump out at you

Questions - using headings, definitions, charts, and illustrations, create questions to guide your reading

Read - go through the text based upon the questions that you created

Recite - write down the answer to the question, preferably in your own words rather than simply copying down the passage from the text, and remember that some answers are better represented with illustrations and diagrams

Review - once you've answered your questions, go back and check what you've written to see that it makes sense and communicates complete ideas

Cornell Method

This method can be used for reading notes alongside the SQ3R strategy, but provides structure for lecture notes (especially when revision after lecture is necessary).

Steps in this method:

Divide the page into three areas. A two inch margin on the left and a three inch footer on the bottom provides an area to the right where notes are written. This empty space means that you can take notes in an outline format, short sentences, lists, diagrams, or solved problems. During the lecture, use the largest space for notes. Any questions or items to be emphasized should be noted on the left margin, since these cues can help recall key information.

After class, use the left margin to create questions that summarize parts of the notes contained in the main area.

Finally, use the footer to create a summary of the ideas and concepts. The summary should be a few sentences and be in your own words; it can be used as a quick index of your work as you skim through your notes.

Dual Column Method

This method is most useful when working through processes and application-type problems common to many engineering and physics courses.

Steps in this method:

Rewrite the problem, then divide the page down the middle.

On the left side, solve the problem in discrete steps. Many students find this part tedious, but the intent of this method is to slow down your thinking and facilitate transfer, or how you can relate one situation to another based upon the underlying structure.

On the right side, write out each step in sentence format. Use good verbs that relate to your discipline. Number each step so that it corresponds to the correct process on the left.

Remember to include (and label!) diagrams that you need, and write a few sentences that correspond to the labels that you place on the diagram.

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General Tips for Taking Good Notes

- Using loose-leaf paper and a three-ring binder gives you the freedom to reorganize your notes and insert handouts from class.
- Outlines should be suggestions for structure; modify the outline to meet the needs of your notes or the course.
- Take time within 24 hours of taking lecture notes to review, clarify, and reorganize them.
- Consider typing or condensing notes into a different format or summaries as a review for exams.
- Label each page of notes with the course, date, and page number to help with organization.
- As part of a group study, take turns explaining your notes to friends and classmates. This requires you to review and summarize ideas from multiple perspectives.
- After an exam, go back to check your notes for concepts and examples that you missed. Use that information to refine your notes for the next exam.

NOTE-TAKING PREPARATION

Lecture Notes

- Review the syllabus
- Review notes from previous lectures
- Review announcements and emails from instructor regarding the day's topics
- Bring any handouts or figures posted online to reference or add to the day's notes
- Keep up with assigned reading

Reading Notes

- Preface textbook/reading assignment
- Preview summaries and chapter questions
- Survey and search for cues
- Review posted study guides and sample exams to use as an outline for notes