

Learning to learn

A seminar series on the strategies behind effective learning.

How to take notes

...and remember them

Myths about note-taking

- Note-taking is about transcribing the words coming out of a lecturer's mouth (or from their slides) onto paper or screen. *It's actually more about thinking than writing.*
- You don't need to take notes because the lecturer has provided an overview of the session. *The notes provided to you don't help you to encode the information for yourself. Working through the notes is what matters, not the information in them.*
- You should just know how to take good notes. *Good note-taking is an under-appreciated skill that few students are taught.*

Why take notes?

You should always take notes, even when the lecturer provides a set of notes.

But, before you even start taking notes, ask yourself *why* you're taking notes. The kinds of notes you take depend on the reason.

If the lecturer has provided notes they will almost certainly include information you don't understand. The purpose here isn't to capture information (unless new concepts are provided during the lecture) but to link concepts, mark up sections for later elaboration, and raise your own questions.

What is your reason for taking notes?

" WHY AM I
TAKING NOTES? "

1. Studying for an exam



2. For future reference



3. To enhance my focus



4. To generate study material



Q: Who is the...

Q: What is...

Q: How does one...

Taking notes by hand

Advantages	Disadvantages
Better cognitive processing.	Slower.
Better recall of concepts for longer periods afterwards.	Less information captured.

Taking notes with a laptop

Advantages	Disadvantages
Higher fidelity / more accurate capture of information.	More easily distracted.
You can search digital notes much more quickly and accurately.	Less cognitive processing and analysis, so possibly lower levels of understanding.

The Cornell note-taking method (2)

Notes from the lecture (or any other source) are written in the note-taking column (right hand side), usually including the main ideas and avoiding long sentence (use symbols or abbreviations instead). Relevant questions or key concepts are recorded as soon as possible in the left hand column.

When reviewing the material, the student can cover the note-taking (right) column while attempting to answer the questions/keywords in the key word or cue (left) column. The student is encouraged to reflect on the material and review the notes regularly.

Formatting your notes

Use structure and formatting options to provide additional context for later revision.

- Circle all words that *you don't understand* to make it easier to look them up later.
- Start words that you think are *key concepts*; these will need elaboration later.
- *Underline* words or short sentences (not entire paragraphs) that are interesting.

It doesn't matter so much what structure and formatting you use, so long as you mark up your notes with more context. This will be essential for later revision.

Reviewing your notes

Review your notes on the same day that you made them. Then review them regularly afterwards.

When reviewing, create links and cross-references to related concepts from previous lectures (or other modules). This will help with recall later.

If you leave the revision until just before the test, you'll find that many of your notes don't make sense and that key information is missing.

Test yourself on the content of your notes using flashcards, which also aids recall.

Taking notes when reading a book

1. Write a few bullet points at the end of the chapter where you summarise what you've read. Try to make it personal by applying it to something in your life. Note any questions you may have. When you're done the book, put it down for a week.
2. After a week go through the notes you made. Some won't make sense anymore but there will be lots you still think is important. Write the good stuff on the inside cover of the book with the page number.
3. Copy out the important excerpts by hand or take a picture to save in a note taking app. Link these concepts to others from other sources.

Tips for better note-taking

1. First of all, take notes.
2. Take complete notes.
3. Take detailed notes.
4. Look for note-taking cues.
5. Revise your notes.
6. Replay video, audio or other recorded content.
7. Take handwritten notes.

See the L2L [page on Note-taking](#) for more detailed descriptions of these tips.

Tips for taking better notes (continued)

By hand

- Use large format, ring bound notebooks with a sturdy cover.
- There's no need to have highlighters, pencils, 3 different pens, a ruler, etc. One pen is fine.

With a laptop

- Make your note-taking app full screen to avoid distractions.
- Disconnect from wifi. Now isn't the time to look things up. Develop a symbol you can use to mark up your notes with things to do during your revision.

Apps you may find useful

- Plain text editor for note-taking on a laptop.
- Or, Simplenote, Evernote, Notion...literally hundreds of options for cross-platform, multiple device needs.
- Audio recorder for spoken notes (obviously not for during lectures but great when walking or driving).

Resources

Friedman, M. (n.d.). [Notes on Note-Taking: Review of Research and Insights for Students and Instructors.](#)

Kiewra, K. (2019). [7 tips on how to take better notes.](#) The Conversation.

Mewburn, I. (2018). [The Cornell note-taking method - revisited.](#) The Thesis Whisperer.

Parrish, S. (n.d.). [The Top 3 Most Effective Ways to Take Notes While Reading.](#) Farnum Street blog.

Moving forward...

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- Weekly updates and short inputs.
- Next topic and seminar details.

Website

- Expanded version of these slides on the website with links to additional readings.

Next topic: **How to read**