

The Art of Taking Notes



Taking notes is active learning

Really? Yep. Isn't it easier to remember something you've actually done than something you've only heard about? Taking notes is *doing* something. It changes information you have only heard, into information you have worked with, processed, and organized. **The average person forgets at least half of what he or she learns within 24 hours.** Writing and re-writing will extend and cement more knowledge than just hearing. Taking good notes can help you remember information for weeks and even months afterward.

Taking notes is an art for which each person, eventually, develops his or her own style. Poor note-taking habits can later prove hard to correct so it is best to get started the right way. This page includes some guidelines for turning your notes into a valuable study aid for reviewing information presented in class.

The most important thing to know about note-taking is that it's not simply hearing then mindlessly writing: it's listening, thinking, summarizing, organizing, listing, labeling, illustrating, writing and re-writing. The more of these that you do, the higher your quiz scores will rocket. This document will give you some note-taking strategies to get you started.

The discussion below uses history notes as an example but the principles can be applied to any subject.

Be Organized

1. Write the date and the topic at the top of each page of notes—you may want to write this information at the top of several pages before the session starts so that you don't waste time doing it during the session.
2. Don't skimp on paper.
 - a. Write your notes on only one side of the paper as neatly as time will allow
 - b. Leave plenty of space in all four margins for revising or adding to your notes in case the instructor returns to a subject or a student asks a question.
3. Write a title or heading for each new topic covered in your notes.
 - a. Decide your own style to indicate a topic (bold, underline, all caps, for example)
4. Develop a method of emphasizing especially important information (underline, star, etc.)
5. Circle words that you will need to look up or ask your instructor about later.
6. Look at how the notes are organized in this "Be Organized" section. Also, look at how I've organized all the other sections. Observe that major points receive a number (this one is #6).
 - a. Sub-points receive a letter.

- i. Details under the sub-points get a Roman numeral, etc.
 - 1. See how you can annotate sub notes?
 - 2. Being organized is very important plus I'm leaving lots of extra space for adding more information later.
- b. Sub-points may include, for example, the various events in an historical era.
 - i. Down in the lowercase letters, include names or dates about an event.
 - ii. Decide on one consistent way of organizing your details.
 - iii. Don't try to squish too many notes onto one page.
 - iv. Using an outline form like this will give you plenty of room.

Be Concise

1. You don't need to write down everything because you plan to return to your notes right after the class ends and recopy them as more complete thoughts.
 - a. The second step (**recopying notes**) is an extremely important study skill that a lot of people foolishly skip.
 - b. Recopy your notes soon enough after the session ends that you can still remember some of the ideas not written on your paper.
 - c. The key component of note taking during class is that you need not write complete thoughts at all because you plan to go back and rewrite (or retype) your notes into meaningful sentences and complete ideas. Your class-time note taking should just sketch in the basics.
2. Write concisely
 - a. Leave out non-essential words



- b. Write incomplete phrases & thoughts.
Complete sentences are not necessary yet.
3. Summarize – *don't copy every word!*
 - a. Look for proper nouns, look for place names and dates
4. Keep notes brief: don't miss important images or lose what is being said because you are too involved in writing lengthy notes.

An Example to Follow

Below is a written passage on a major historical event. It doesn't matter if you are reading or listening to history, the form and concision of your note taking will be about the same.

In 75, Julius Caesar was captured by Cilician pirates, who infested the Mediterranean sea. The Romans had never sent a navy against them, because the pirates offered the Roman senators slaves, which they needed for their plantations in Italy. As a consequence, piracy was common.

In chapter 2 of his Life of Julius Caesar, the Greek author Plutarch of Chaeronea (46-c.120) describes what happened when Caesar encountered the pirates. The translation below was made by Robin Seager.

First, when the pirates demanded a ransom of twenty talents, Caesar burst out laughing. They did not know, he said, who it was that they had captured, and he volunteered to pay fifty. Then, when he had sent his followers to the various cities in order to raise the money and was left with one friend and two servants among these Cilicians, about the most bloodthirsty people in the world, he treated them so highhandedly that, whenever he wanted to sleep, he would send to them and tell them to stop talking.

For thirty-eight days, with the greatest unconcern, he joined in all their games and exercises, just as if he was their leader instead of their prisoner. He also wrote poems and speeches which he read aloud to them, and if they failed to admire his work, he would call them to their faces illiterate savages, and would often laughingly threaten to have them all hanged. They were much taken with this and attributed his freedom of speech to a kind of simplicity in his character or boyish playfulness.

However, the ransom arrived from Miletus and, as soon as he had paid it and been set free, he immediately manned some ships and set sail from the harbor of Miletus against the pirates. He found them still there, lying at anchor off the island, and he captured nearly all of them. He took their property as spoils of war and put the men themselves into the prison at Pergamon. He then went in person to [Marcus] Junius, the governor of Asia, thinking it proper that he, as praetor in charge of the province, should see to the punishment of the prisoners. Junius, however, cast longing eyes at the money, which came to a considerable sum, and kept saying that he needed time to look into the case.

Caesar paid no further attention to him. He went to Pergamon, took the pirates out of prison and crucified the lot of them, just as he had often told them he would do when he was on the island and they imagined that he was joking.

Outline Format is Easy Organization

Look at my quickly outlined notes on this passage (yours should be as brief, but will differ somewhat):

3/16 Roman History: Caesar + Cilician Pirates (Plutarch)

1. Piracy -problem Mediterranean
 - a. Senators need slaves
 - i. Staff for projects
 - b. No navy sent
2. Caesar captured
 - a. Ransom
 - i. Wanted 20 t.
 - ii. Caesar offered 50 t
 - b. Caesar sent men

3. Caesar w/pirates
 - a. 38 days
 - b. Cilicia
 - c. Behavior:
 - i. Bossed them
 - ii. Participated
 - iii. Insulted / threatened/ laughed
4. Caesar's Release
 - a. set sail ships
 - i. Miletus
 - b. Captured = same spot
 - i. Took \$
 - ii. Put in jail
 1. Pergamum
 - iii. Asked governor for help
 1. G. wanted pirates' \$
 - a. =Delay!
 - c. Caesar crucified them

***I circled place names to remind myself to go look them up on a map in my textbook so I get an idea about where these places are on a map.

Be Good at Follow-Up

The often neglected secret to taking useful class notes is follow-up. Immediately after class you still have a very good memory of what was spoken. A week later, you will be lucky to remember even a tiny portion of our session together. Good luck remembering any of it for your quiz two weeks later.

The notes you have taken in class may now consist of words, dates, lists, names, and a collection of incomplete thoughts. As soon as you can:

RECOPY YOUR NOTES.

Transform your string of rapidly scribbled words and symbols into complete sentences. Organize the notes. You may even wish to underline words or concepts by putting them into different colors as part of your organization process.

Use Technology in Your Follow-Up

During this follow-up period, it is a good idea to type your notes into a word processing program that will allow the addition of maps or other pictures that you find during your research. Take advantage of technology! You may even hyperlink your notes with helpful documents that you find online. This fun part is actually great for quiz preparation plus you can later go back and use those notes for other purposes (ex. a college research paper).



An Example to Follow

Here is my rough outline in “re-copied” form:

Julius Caesar Captured by Cilician Pirates (As recorded by Greek writer Plutarch)

1. Piracy was a problem in Mediterranean
 - a. Senators needed slaves and didn’t want to put pirates out of business
 - i. Their wealthy plantations staffed by slaves
2. Caesar is captured by bloodthirsty pirates
 - a. Pirates demanded a ransom from Caesar
 - i. They wanted 20 talents
 1. How much is a talent worth?
<http://www.forumancientcoins.com/numiswiki/view.asp?key=talent>
 - ii. Caesar laughed, offered 50 talents instead
 1. They didn’t know how ‘important’ he was
 - b. Caesar sent out messengers to collect ransom
3. Caesar is left with the pirates while his men collect money.
 - a. He was captive 38 days
 - b. Port in the region of Cilicia
 - c. Caesar’s strange behavior around the pirates:
 - i. Bossed them around
(when to be quiet)
 - ii. Participated in activities
(like he was their leader)
 - iii. Insulted / threatened/
laughed at them (they
thought he was joking)
4. Caesar’s Release
 - a. As soon as he was freed, he went and gathered his own ships
 - i. They sailed from Miletus
 - b. They hadn’t gone anywhere! He captured them still harbored at the same spot
 - i. Took all their property
 - ii. Put them in jail
 1. Pergamum
 - iii. Asked governor for help punishing the pirates
 1. Governor greedily wanted pirates’ money instead
 - a. Kept delaying (hoped Caesar would give up and go away)
 - c. Caesar crucified them himself



Additional Tips

1. Once our session begins, it is a good idea to begin taking notes immediately.
2. **There should never be a slide in our courses for which you have no notes.**
 - a. Write a brief summary or a personal observation about the material being covered on **each and every slide**.
 - b. Your instructor will have pointless ZERO slides. Ergo: make notes on each slide.
 - c. If you are slow to finish note taking, you can ask your instructor to show a slide again at the end of the session.
3. In our semester classes we cover only the most important highlights. There are never any slides that your instructor considers superfluous or unnecessary.
 - a. That means that each and every slide contains potential ‘quiz’ material.
 - b. There is no exception to this rule.
 - c. If you find that you have ‘zoned out’ for several slides, find a class buddy who will email you the missed notes.
4. Draw quick and simple illustrations if it will help make the point clearer for you.
5. **Never let your notes sit longer than 24 hours before you have re-copied, highlighted, and summarized them as needed.**

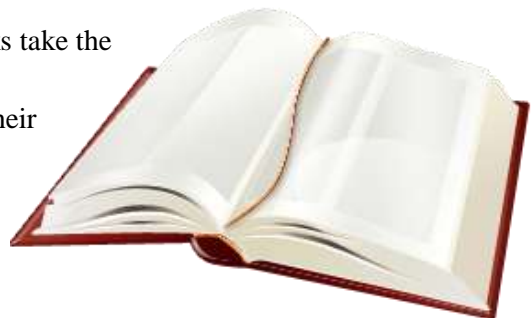
Taking Reading Notes

Rule #1 : Don't color in your book!

No, I'm not on a “save your book” campaign. In fact, writing a few little notes in the margin of your textbook can make it even more useful (and I think those little sticky flags are great for locating important parts of the passage). What you must NOT do is drag out your highlighter markers and go to town during your reading sessions. In college I could always tell which students earned A's and which did not. Students who habitually used TONS of highlighting in textbooks were often in the second group, and here's the reason:

The most important thing to know about note-taking is that it's not simply reading then writing: it's listening, thinking, summarizing, organizing, listing, labeling, illustrating, writing and re-writing. The more of these that you do, the higher your quiz scores will rocket.

Many people who “highlight” important stuff in textbooks take the information for granted and skip all of the active portions necessary for learning material. They feel they've done their job by painting important stuff yellow. Sure, use a highlighter but then go back and take notes on things you've highlighted.



Listening

Hearing is easy, listening is hard work



When you read, write or think, you progress at your own speed. But when you listen, you are like a passenger in a car. The speaker is the driver who controls the speed, brakes, and direction; you just try to keep up during the whole ride. You must discipline yourself to concentrate and follow the speaker so you'll know where you've come from and where you're going without 'zoning out.'

One can think much faster than a person can speak. During a look at a slide in class you will see illustrations, hear descriptions and read the abbreviated notes on the page. **Train yourself to stay focused during class.** Taking notes, asking questions, and thinking about how the information might appear on a game, quiz or test, are all tools to help you stay focused on what is being said.

Asking questions about the material not only keeps you engaged in the subject, but it also convinces your instructor that you are an above average student. Want to be popular with your teachers and professors? Ask lots of questions!

Listening pointers:

- Have a positive “can do” attitude about mastering the material. Your instructor assumes you little to nothing about the subject and that you can master it.
- Go above and beyond to learn always pays off by making other things easy later.
- Write questions you have about the topic during the session or, better, ask them.
- Skip bad listening habits (multi-tasking, doodling, playing Farmville, eating).
- Don't day dream—force yourself to process and write during the session.
- Don't give up when the material gets difficult – just ask more questions! Not only does this slow your instructor down to provide clarification, but you will probably understand something better once you are done with the question and answer.
- When the session is over, summarize the entire talk in one or two sentences as a final test of whether you understand what was discussed. Put this summary as a heading for your recopied notes.

