

The Art of Taking Notes[©]



Taking notes is active learning

Really? Yep. Isn't it easier to remember something you've done compared to something you've only heard about? Taking notes is *doing* something, indeed. Taking notes during a class changes information you have only heard, into information you have worked with, processed, and organized from hand to brain.

The average person forgets at least half of what he or she learns within 24 hours. Writing and re-writing will cement FAR more knowledge than just hearing information. Taking good notes can help you remember information for weeks and even months afterward even if you never read those notes again (*though you'll do even better if you do review those notes later*)!

It is common to hear a student ask, "Isn't all of this in the book already?" Do not make the mistake of passively listening to material just because you think you can find that information elsewhere "later."

First, if you don't take notes, how might you even begin to recall what information the instructor valued enough for precious class time (**PRO TIP: this is often the "stuff" that will be on the exam so don't be a dummy and fail to write it down**).

Second, why waste time "later" when the learning could happen immediately and without further ado?

Third, data collection alone is NOT the point of taking notes! If note-taking was purely about recording information so you can find it later, all your instructors would just tell you complete the class by searching the internet or looking at copies of her notes. Based on this false assumption, college should be nothing more than a decent search engine. *You have been wandering through life in a fog of error if you think taking notes is nothing more than storing information that can't be found elsewhere!*

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

Write it out!

Numerous studies now prove that taking notes on a computer by typing in the words you hear is NOT nearly so effective as a learning tool than writing with a pen or pencil (or quill, if you like fancy)! Note-taking by hand makes learning the material MUCH easier, faster, & more efficient. **DO NOT TAKE NOTES ON YOUR COMPUTER or you'll find your time has been wasted.**

Note-taking is not simply hearing then mindlessly writing!

Note taking is listening, thinking, summarizing, organizing, listing, labeling, illustrating, writing, analyzing, and re-writing. The more of these things that you do each time, the higher your quiz scores will rocket. If you hit all these goals, you could master any topic no matter how difficult! Below are some note-taking strategies. If you are already an avid note-taker, add to your menu of techniques for even better study skills.

The discussion below uses history notes as an example, but the principles can be applied to any subject, including Latin, Greek, rocket science, brain surgery, etc. **Taking notes is a powerful act of study and mastery that can't be duplicated any other way. It is a study method that will serve you well for all forms of listening and reading.**

Be Concise in Class, Complete after Class

However you take notes the first time, remember the most important thing: You don't need to write down everything exactly as it was said (or written) **because you MUST return to your notes right after the class ends and recopy them as more complete thoughts.** This second step (recopying notes) is an extremely important study skill that a lot of people foolishly skip for all sorts of silly reasons (dare I say "laziness"?). Recopy your notes soon enough after the session ends so you can still flesh out ideas not written on your paper and you can better read your sloppy handwriting.

As you hear a lecture, you need not write complete thoughts at all because you will go back and rewrite your notes into meaningful sentences and complete ideas. Your class-time note-taking should just sketch in the basics so that you can easily hear (and note) everything that is being communicated. Here are some tips for being concise the first time:

1. Write concisely
 - a. Leave out all non-essential words!
 - b. Write incomplete phrases & thoughts. Complete sentences are not necessary...yet.
2. Summarize or only include key words – *don't copy every spoken word!*
 - a. Look for proper nouns, look for place names and dates, get down important pieces of data accurately.
 - b. Use arrows, starts, or outlining to show how ideas are connected.
3. Keep notes brief: don't miss important images or lose the flow of what is being said because you are too involved in writing lengthy neat notes.

Be Organized

1. Write the date and the topic at the top of each page of notes. Add page numbers as you go. When you return to your notes to organize them or review them you'll quickly figure out which set of notes go with your reading or listening session.

2. Don't skimp on paper.
 - a. Write your notes on only one side of the paper
 - 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 that better fits into earlier notes.
3. Write a title or heading for each new topic covered in your notes. Decide your own style to indicate a new topic (bold, underline, all caps, for example)
4. When your instructor puts special emphasis on something, develop a method of emphasizing especially important information (underline, star, doodle, 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 followed by normal numerals.
 1. See how you can annotate sub notes?
 - a. Wow, one could really keep going with this system!
 - b. Notice I don't bother putting subpoints of any kind unless I have a minimum of two.
 2. Being organized is very important plus I'm leaving lots of extra space for adding more information later. Don't cramp your notes on too little paper.
 - 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.

Outline Format for Easy Organization

An Example to Follow

Here 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 the first time you hear or see it:



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.

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)

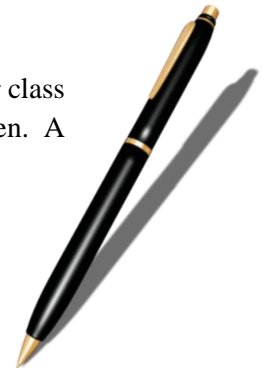
1. Piracy -problem Mediterranean
 - a. Senators need slaves
 - i. Staff for projects
 - ii. Skilled labor
 - b. No navy sent
2. Caesar captured
 - a. Ransom
 - i. Wanted 20 t.
 - ii. Caesar offered 50 t
 - b. Caesar sent men
3. Caesar w/pirates
 - a. 38 days
 - b. Cilicia
 - c. Behavior:
 - i. Bossed them
 - ii. Pirate games
 - iii. Insulted / threatened/ laughed
4. Caesar's Release
 - a. set sail ships. Miletus
 - b. Captured = same spot
 - i. Took \$
 - ii. Put in jail Pergamum
 - iii. Asked governor for help who wanted pirates' \$ = Delay!
 - c. Caesar crucified pirates, gets money back

****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 this places are on a map. I took care to spell place names properly.*

Now, Follow-Up!

The often-neglected secret to taking useful class notes is follow-up. **Immediately** after class (or as soon as humanly possible) 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 or at least rounded thoughts. Organize the notes. You may even wish to underline words or concepts by putting them into different colors as part of your organization process. Can't remember a year or name properly? Look them up. This is the act of study. In my example above, see how my main points (1-4) are the chronological highpoints of the whole event.

Why go to all this trouble? Because students who take notes and recopy them outside of class will always do much better than those who do not. Taking notes and then recopying them in an organized and analytical fashion IS HOW YOU STUDY in most topics for most exams! If you are new to academically challenging topics like the ones you'll experience in college-prep or college style classes, you may have no idea how to prepare for an exam. This is actually how it is done!

An Example to Follow for recopied notes:

Here is my rough outline in "re-copied" form. I went and found a map and even looked up other important facts to fill out my understanding of these events. You can do similar things with any subject. You'll notice I don't have to add too much to my original version but my recopied version adds some details that would otherwise be lost.

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

1. Piracy was a problem in Mediterranean during Julius Caesar's lifetime
 - a. Senators needed slaves and didn't want to put pirates out of business
 - i. Their wealthy plantations staffed by slaves
 - ii. Pirates provided this nefarious service
2. Caesar is traveling in the Aegean and 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 on his behalf as he stayed behind.
3. Caesar is left with the pirates:
 - 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 they should 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 in Pergamum
 - iii. Asked governor for help punishing the pirates/Governor greedily wanted pirates' money instead/Kept delaying (hoped Caesar would give up and go away)
 - c. Caesar crucified them himself

Additional Tips for Lukeion Online Sessions

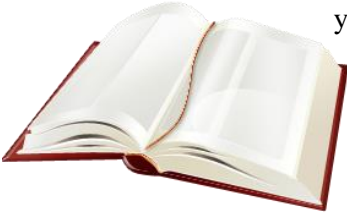
1. Once our session begins, it is a good idea to begin taking notes immediately.
2. **There should never be a slide in our courses for which you have no notes because time is precious (we don't blather on about things unless we expect you to know something about them)**
 - a. Write a summary or a personal observation about the material being covered on **each slide**.
 - b. Because we have to cover a specific amount of material in our short hour, we can't usually take time to pause for you to copy a slide.
 - c. If you are slow to finish note-taking, **go view the recording after the session ends**.
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. Each slide contains potential quiz material and certainly important big-picture-understanding-the-subject material.
 - b. There is no exception to this rule (ok, maybe we post a funny picture or two).
 - c. If you find that you have 'zoned out' for several slides, go visit the recording.
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.** Recopying notes won't take much time if you complete the chore quickly after hearing the material the first time.

Do NOT take a screen print or photo of the PowerPoint slides in class

There are several reasons. First this is a violation of copyright laws since those slides are the intellectual property of the person who created them. Second, you've just missed a HUGE opportunity to master the material in the same amount of time that you are expected to sit in class anyway. **Taking a picture or screen print does ZERO for you or your brain. It is a waste, a cheat, a useless practice. Stop doing it now.**

Take Reading Notes: 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 a reading assignment later on). What you must NOT do is use highlighter markers and go to town "marking important stuff" during your reading sessions.

In college I could always tell which students earned A's and which did not. Those who habitually used TONS of highlighting in textbooks were often in the poor grades group, and here's the reason: ***The most important thing to know about note-taking is that it's not simply copying stuff out of an assignment! It's active listening, thinking, summarizing, organizing, listing, labeling, prioritizing, illustrating, understanding, writing, and re-writing. The more of these that you do, the higher your quiz scores will rocket.***

Most people who just highlight important stuff in textbooks (rather than take notes) are taking the information for granted. Swishing a highlighter over a reading assignment a couple of times is NOT ACTIVE READING. They are skipping all the active portions necessary for learning material while feeling "busy" coloring the text. They feel they've done their job by painting important stuff yellow (or green or pink). NOTE TAKING (not coloring) helps you learn the material.

Listening

Hearing is easy, listening is hard work



When you read, write or think, you advance 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 while you just try to keep up during the ride. Discipline yourself to concentrate and follow the speaker the whole time so you'll know where you've come from and where you're going without ever "zoning out."

One can think 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. Having some game, video, or a favorite website open during class is, on the other hand, a guarantee that you plan to zone out. Focus on active listening through note-taking instead.

During any class anywhere, 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 who deserves a bit of extra effort! Want to be popular with your teachers and professors? Always ask lots of questions.

Final Listening pointers:

1. Have a positive *can-do* attitude about mastering the material. Your instructor already assumes you know little to nothing about the subject and that you **can** master it.
2. Go above and beyond to learn. This always pays off by making other things easier later.
3. Write questions you have about the topic during the session, so you can ask after class or, even better, ask them right away.
4. Skip bad listening habits (multi-tasking, doodling, playing an app., eating).
5. Don't day-dream—force yourself to process and write during the session.
6. 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 also understand something better once you are done with the question and answer. Asking good questions is a great sign of mature learning.
7. When the session is over, summarize the session in a few sentences as a test of whether you understand what was discussed. Put this summary as a heading for your recopied notes.
8. Note-taking is not dorky or dumb. Getting poor grades when you could be getting an easy “A” ***IS*** dorky and dumb. Be an active listener who always takes notes so you can spend less time studying and more time getting great scores.