

Note Taking & Listening

Taking notes in class has many benefits and sets the stage for academic success. It helps to consolidate your learning by involving multiple senses, such as hearing the instructor, seeing the information, and tapping into the tactile sense of actually recording your notes on a piece of paper. Also, being able to express your thoughts in writing – whether in your lecture notes, on tests, or on essays – is essential to success at university. Your notes make a permanent record of what you are trying to learn so they are a very valuable resource.

In order to be an effective note taker you need to be an **active listener** in your lectures. Passive listening occurs when you exert little effort and are minimally involved in the lecture – you are hearing the words but do not completely understand their meaning. When you practice active listening you focus on, attend to, and think about what is being said. You think about what the instructor is saying and you try to understand the information in your own words. In this way, you are **engaged in the learning process**.

Benefits of Active Listening

- You completely attend to what the instructor says which puts you in a better position to think about and understand the lecture material.
- While you may not have immediate comprehension, you will have a better chance of learning it later because you thought about it in class and recorded your ideas in your notes.
- You can improve your attention span by practicing to be an active listener.
- Because you are paying attention, studying for exams will be easier as you have a thorough record of the material that may not be in your textbook.
- Active listening can help to pique your interest in classes. The more involved you are the more interesting your classes will be.

Note Taking

Effective organization of your notes is as important as developing active listening skills. One of the most recommended systems of note taking is based on the **Cornell System of Note Taking**. This system provides a format for organizing the paper on which you record your notes. The acronym to remember is: **PQ5R**.

Prepare. In order to prepare for note taking, **read and review** any assigned textbook readings and review your notes from the previous class. This provides a context for understanding what will be covered in the current lecture and enhances note taking.

Question. You may have questions as a result of your readings. Attend your lecture with the intention of getting answers to these outstanding questions. This technique will aid in active listening.

Reducing. On the top of each page write your name, the date of the lecture, and the page number of your notes. This information will be important if you lend your notes to someone else or if you drop them on the floor and the pages get mixed up. Draw a vertical line about 2.5 inches from the left side of the page. This space is called the **key column**. Take notes in the larger, **notes column**. Some students like to take notes in **outline form**, others write notes in **paragraphs**, while others prefer the use of **concept maps** in which related concepts are illustrated and connected (see the books in the Academic Advising & Career Centre (AA&CC) for more detail on concept mapping). Within 24 hours of the lecture, review your notes and generate relevant questions and/or key phrases. Write these in the key column. This is the **reducing** step. After writing questions in the key column and highlighting the text in your notes, you will have a built-in study system.

| Course Name | Date |
|---|--|
| Key column: Write key terms here 2.5 inches | Notes column: Write full notes here 8 inches |

Recite and Reflect. During your regular review sessions you will be trying to learn and memorize the class material. The two steps to this process are called **reciting** and **reflecting**. Reciting means recalling (out loud, preferably) the information you want to memorize/understand. Simply cover up the notes column and ask yourself the questions you generated in the key column. When trying to really understand class material, you need to reflect upon it – think about and try to understand the material in your own words. How does this particular lecture relate to the main themes of the course? How does this material relate to material from the last lecture?

Recapitulate and Review. The **recapitulation** step involves writing short summaries of each page of your lecture notes in your own words. When you put something into your own words, it becomes more meaningful and learning is enhanced. Your **review sessions** are very important. It is during these sessions that you are trying to “over learn” the material so that it is stored in your long-term memory ready to be retrieved during exams.

Self-Assessment Exercise

| | | Yes | No |
|--|--|-----|----|
| 1. | I take notes in class, whenever the professor is lecturing. | | |
| 2. | When I am taking notes, I am able to keep up with my professor, or I ask him/her to repeat the material. | | |
| 3. | I am able to identify the main points in a lecture and to record them in my notes. | | |
| 4. | Before I write my notes, I think about what the instructor has said and then put the material in my own words. | | |
| 5. | I review my notes within 24 hours of taking them. | | |
| 6. | My notes are well organized and easy for me to review. | | |
| 7. | When sitting in class I practice active listening and I am respectful (eg., I do not talk to my friends or sleep). | | |
| 8. | During class I sit in the part of the room that is the best for me to be attentive, see overheads, etc. | | |
| 9. | I read the assigned material and review my notes before each class so that I have a context to understand the lecture. | | |
| 10. | I stay actively involved in my lectures by asking questions, relating the material to my own life, trying to understand the material in my own words, etc. | | |
| Your strengths, as a note taker and active listener, are indicated by those items to which your response was yes . If your answer to an item was no you may want to develop more effective strategies in that area of note taking and listening. | | | |