Note-taking

Note-taking is a three step process of observing, recording, and reviewing. First, an event is observed – a statement by the instructor; then that event is recorded; finally the recorded events are reviewed.

Observing

Set the stage

**Complete outside assignments**  Read the chapter prior to the lecture. Do the homework assignment. Bring unanswered questions to class. Go to class prepared with a general idea of what will be covered in lecture.

**Bring the right materials**  Being unprepared can detract from concentration.

**Sit front and center**  The closer a student is to the lecturer, the harder it is to fall asleep, there are less obstacles (bodies) that can cause distraction, and the material on the board is easier to read.

**Conduct a short pre-class review**  Arrive early and review notes from the previous class. Scan your text. Review the assigned problems.

**Accept your wandering mind**  When attention wanders; use it as an opportunity to re-focus. Every time the mind is brought back to the here and now it strengthens the observer consciousness. Eventually the ability to stay on task increases.

**Be with the instructor**  Imagine the lecture is a personal conversation between you and instructor. Pay attention to the instructor’s body language and facial expressions. Look the instructor in the eye.

**Postpone debate**  Don’t allow personal internal dialogue to drown out what the instructor is saying. Write down points of disagreement. Ponder them later or discuss them with the instructor, a tutor, or a classmate.

**Let go of judgments about lecture styles**  Instructors have different lecture styles. Don’t let attitudes get in the way of the objective – learning.

**Participate in class activities**  Ask questions. Remember, there are no dumb questions. Volunteer information. Join in class discussions.

Watch for clues

**Be alert to repetition**  When an instructor repeats a phrase or idea, note it. The instructor thinks it is important. It might be on the test. Listen for introductory, concluding and transition words and phrases like “the following three factors…,” “in conclusion…,” “the important consideration…,” “in addition to …,” and “on the other hand….” These reveal the structure of the lecture and can be used to organize your notes.

**Watch the board**  If the instructor writes something down it’s important.

**Don’t ignore obvious clues**  Instructors often tell students that certain information will be on the test. Note it.

**Notice the instructor’s interest level**  If the instructor is excited about something, it’s likely to be on an exam.

Record

The format and structure of your notes are extremely important. Several styles are listed below.

**Cornell format of note-taking:** on each page of your notes draw a vertical line, top to bottom, 1½ inches from the left edge of the paper. Write notes to the right of the line. Reserve the area to the
left of the line for key word clues and sample questions. Fill in the left-hand column when you review your notes.

Create mind maps This system can be used in conjunction with the Cornell system or alone. Mind mapping involves starting in the middle of the page instead of at the top. Write the main subject on a line in the center of the page. Record points subordinate to the main topic on lines branching out from the central subject. Each subordinate point can have its own branches. Mind maps present a picture of the whole subject and show immediately how each separate point is related to the main point.

Write notes in outline form You can use a standard Roman numeral outline or a more free-form indented outline to organize the information in a lecture.

Write notes in paragraphs When it is difficult to follow the organization of a lecture or to put information into outline form, create a series of informal paragraphs. Complete sentences are only necessary for direct quotes, definitions, and important points the instructor emphasizes.

Use key words An easy way to sort out all the extraneous material from the important points is to take notes using key words. Key words (or phrases) are those words which contain the essence of communication. They include technical terms, names, numbers, equations, and words of degree (most, least, faster, slower). Key words trigger your memory.

Copy material from the board Record all formulas, diagrams, and problems. Copy dates, numbers, names, places, and other facts.

Use a three-ring binder Three-ring binders have several advantages over other kinds of notebooks. First, the pages can be removed for easy review. Second, the binder format will easily allow you to insert handouts. Third, out of class notes can be easily inserted.

Use only one side of a piece of paper When one side of a page is used, pages can be spread out side by side for review and organization.

Use 3x5 cards As an alternative to notebook paper, use 3x5 cards to take lecture notes (copy each new concept on a separate card). Cards can then be used as flash cards.

Use a “lost” signal No matter how attentive and alert you are, sooner or later you will get lost and confused in a lecture. Note when this happens. Use a signal word or symbol which is easy to spot. Don’t wait to get clarification; ask the instructor after class (or as soon as possible), review the text, or see your tutor.

Label, number, and date all notes Record the name of the class and the date on all your notes and number the pages.

Use standard abbreviations Be consistent with your abbreviations. If you make up your own, write a key explaining them. Avoid vague abbreviations.

Use white space White space is simply that – space on the page where there is no writing. Give your eyes a break. Don’t cram everything onto the page. Later when reviewing the space can be used for clarification, questions, or added information.

Use graphic signals Brackets, parentheses, circles, and squares can be used to group information together. Stars, arrows, and underlines can be used to indicate important points.

Review

Think of reviewing as an integral part of note-taking rather than an added task. In order for information to be useful, it needs to be available for your recall.

Review within 24 hours This suggestion can save you hours. It’s critical. Short-term memory decays fact. A quick review can save that information. This review can be as short as ten minutes or less.

Edit notes During your fist review, fix words that are illegible. Write out abbreviated words that might be unclear. Check to see that notes are labeled and pages numbered.
Fill in key words in left-hand column if using the Cornell method  This task is important if you are to gain the full benefit of the method. The key words will speed the review process.

Organize your notes with graphic signals During your immediate review; add arrows, brackets, and other signals that aid the organization of your notes. Circle related concepts. Fill out diagrams. Illustrate important points.

Conduct short weekly review periods Once a week; review all your notes again. The review sessions don’t need to take a lot of time.

Use your key words as cues to recite With a blank sheet of paper, cover your notes, leaving only the key words in the margin showing. Take each key word in order and recite as much as you can about the point. Then uncover your notes and look for important points you missed.

Create “mind map” summaries Start with the main subject to be reviewed. Write down the topic in the center of a page; then, on lines branching out from the starting point, write everything you can think of concerning that subject. When you are sure you have exhausted your ability to recall, look at your original notes and fill in anything you missed.

Conduct pre-class reviews This return to the first step of observation. This process is part of setting the stage for clear observation. Link information from each lecture to the preceding lecture.