

Taking Notes: Lectures and Class Discussions

Your teachers are likely to hold you accountable for information discussed in their classes, but a lot gets said in a 50-90 minute period. Not only is it impossible to write down every word, but it can also be a challenge to focus on note-taking without losing track of the conversation: your teacher has no “pause button” that you can press while you write. How can you make taking good notes easier?

Come to class prepared

You’ll find it easier to process new information if you’ve read assigned texts (and taken notes on them, of course!), reviewed previous lecture notes, or done other prep work requested by your teacher. Reviewing notes doesn’t have to take a lot of time, if you make a habit of it.

Sit where you can focus

If you have a choice, sit in a location where you can stay focused on the lecture and class discussion. Often, the most distractions are found in the back of the classroom.

Observe visual and verbal cues

You are already skilled at filtering information. When you watch a movie, for example, you can usually distinguish between events that will be crucial to the plot and events that are minor details. Likewise, when you read a novel, you recognize that some descriptive elements are important and others are more “filler.”

During your classes, you’ll need to determine the central focus of the lecture. Use what you learned on previous days to provide context for the continuing discussion.

Try to focus on *how* your teachers present information; you may discover cues about what information they think is most important.

- Listen for repetition.
- Write down words and phrases that end up on the white-erase board.
- Observe verbal cues like “first, second, third,” “to summarize,” “the main point is,” etc.
- Watch for body language and spoken tempos that emphasize certain material or ideas.
- Take advantage of organizational patterns. For example, some teachers will begin lectures with a brief summary of where they previously left off; some will close lectures with a summary of the material covered and a view to where the next lecture will be headed.

Summarize and abbreviate

This is not the time to worry about writing complete sentences! Often a phrase or even just a word can sufficiently summarize an entire sentence without sacrificing meaning. Some kinds of words, such as articles (*a, an, the*), can often be left out without adversely affecting meaning. For example, this paragraph might be adequately summarized in your notes as, “OK to leave out some words.”

While you shouldn't use text-messaging shorthand for formal papers, your notes are a great place for it. Use or invent abbreviations for words you use often. For example,

+	=	and	i.e.	=	that is, (<i>id est</i>)
w/	=	with	etc.	=	and so on (<i>et cetera</i>)
w/o	=	without	bio	=	biology
ex.	=	example	govt	=	government
e.g.	=	for example (<i>exempli gratia</i>)	bc	=	because

Show connections between pieces of information

Your notes will be more useful if they are organized in a way that shows relationships between different pieces of information. Choose a note-taking system that allows you to show hierarchies. [The Cornell method](#), for example, reserves the left-most part of the page for key words and concepts, while using the right side of the page for details and elaborations.

Use bullet lists or numbers to organize lists and other related items. You might also draw arrows to show connections between different parts of your notes, or develop a system of symbols to highlight important information (e.g. use **asterisks** or underlined text).

Diagrams or other idea-mapping techniques can efficiently summarize large amounts of information. (If you're not sure how to diagram information effectively, look in your textbooks for examples of how it can be done.)

If you fall behind...

If you feel that you've left out something important but you're not quite sure what, leave some blank space on the page; check with the teacher or a classmate later to fill it in.

If you don't understand something, ask for clarification.

Review your notes

Check over your notes after class to make sure you understand them. Correct obvious errors; then make note of gaps, contradictions, or things that don't make sense to you so you can ask your teacher or a classmate for clarification.