

# Effective Note-Taking in Class

Do you sometimes struggle to determine what to write down during lectures? Have you ever found yourself wishing you could take better or more effective notes? Note-taking in class can be intimidating, but with a few strategic practices, anyone can take clear, effective notes. This handout will discuss the importance of note-taking, qualities of good notes, and tips for becoming a better note-taker.

## Why good notes matter

### In-class benefits

Taking good notes in class is an important part of academic success in high school and college. Actively taking notes during class can help you focus and better understand main concepts. Good note-taking will improve your active listening, comprehension of material, and retention. It will help you better remember what you hear and see.

### Post-class benefits

After class, good notes are crucial for reviewing and studying class material so that you better understand it and can prepare appropriately for tests and exams. Efficient and concise notes can save you time, energy, and confusion that often results from trying to make sense of disorganized, overwhelming, insufficient, or wordy notes. Good notes can provide a great resource for creating outlines and studying.

## How to take good notes in class

There's a lot going on during class, so you may not be able to capture every main concept perfectly, and that's okay. Part of good note-taking may include **going back to your notes after class** (ideally within a day or two) to check for clarity and fill in any missing pieces. In fact, doing so can help you better organize your thoughts and to determine what's most important. With that in mind, it's important to have good source material.

## Preparing to take good notes in class

The first step to taking good notes in class is to come to class prepared. **Here are some steps you can take to improve your note-taking before class even begins:**

- Preview your text or reading assignments prior to lecture. Previewing allows you to identify main ideas and concepts that will most likely be discussed during the lecture.
- Briefly review notes from previous class sessions to help you situate the new ideas you'll learn in this class.
- Keep organized to help you find information more easily later. Title your page with the class name and date.

- Keep separate notebook sections or notebooks for each class and keep all notes for each class together in one space, in chronological order.

## Note-taking during class

Now that you are prepared and organized, what can you do to take good notes while listening to a lecture in class? Here are some practical steps you can try to improve your in-class note-taking:

- If you are seeking conceptual information, focus on the *main points* the teacher makes, rather than copying down the entire presentation or every word the teacher says. Remember, if you review your notes after class, you can always fill in any gaps or define words or concepts you didn't catch in class.
- If you are learning factual information, transcribing most of the lecture verbatim can help with recall for short-answer test questions, but only if you study these notes within 24 hours.
- Record questions and thoughts you have or content that is confusing to you that you want to follow-up on later or ask your teacher about.
- Jot down keywords, dates, names, etc. that you can then go back and define or explain later.
- Take visually clear, concise, organized, and structured notes so that they are easy to read and make sense to you later. **See different formats of notes below for ideas.**
- If you want your notes to be concise and brief, use abbreviations and symbols. Write in bullets and phrases instead of complete sentences. This will help your mind and hand to stay fresh during class and will help you access things easier and quicker after class. It will also help you focus on the main concepts.
- Be consistent with your structure. Pick a format that works for you and stick with it so that your notes are structured the same way each day.

## Determining what's important enough to write down

You may be asking yourself how you can identify the main points of a lecture. **Here are some tips for recognizing the most important points in a lecture:**

- Introductory remarks often include summaries of overviews of main points.
- Listen for signal words/phrases like, "There are four main..." or "To sum up..." or "A major reason why..."
- Repeated words or concepts are often important.
- Non-verbal cues like pointing, gestures, or a vocal emphasis on certain words, etc. can indicate important points.
- Final remarks often provide a summary of the important points of the lecture.

## Different formats for notes

There is no right format to use when taking notes. Rather, there are many different structures and styles that can be used. What's important is that you find a method that works for you and encourages the use of good note-taking qualities and stick with it. Here are a few types of formats that you may want to experiment with:

1. **Cornell Notes:** This style includes sections for the date, essential question, topic, notes, questions, and a summary. Check out this [link](#) for more explanation.
2. **Outline:** An outline organizes the lecture by main points, allowing room for examples and details.
3. **Flowchart/concept map:** A visual representation of notes is good for content that has an order or steps involved. See more about concept mapping on our website page.
4. **Charting Method:** A way to organize notes from lectures with a substantial amount of facts through dividing key topics into columns and recording facts underneath.
5. **Sentence Method:** One of the simplest forms of note taking, helpful for disseminating which information from a lecture is important by quickly covering details and information.

## Consider...what's the best strategy for you: handwritten, digital, or both?

Taking notes in a way to fully understand all information presented conceptually and factually may differ between students. For instance, working memory, or the ability to process and manipulate information in-the-moment, is often involved in transcribing lecture notes, which is best done digitally; but there are individual differences in working memory processes that may affect which method works best for you. Research suggests that handwriting notes can help us learn and remember conceptual items better than digital notes. However, there are some pros to typing notes on a computer as well, including speed and storage. Consider these differences before deciding what is best for you.

Handwritten	Digital
Easier to create diagrams and illustrations	Faster; easier to take higher volume of notes
Sometimes better for visual learners	Easier to edit and reorganize for later studying
Provides more focus for students prone to digital distraction	Can be backed up, shared, searched, etc.
Can be better for comprehension and retention of conceptual information	Can be better for comprehension and retention of factual information

## Follow up after class

Part of good note-taking includes revisiting your notes a day or so after class. During this time, check for clarity, fill in definitions of key terms, organize, and figure out any concepts you may have missed or not fully understood in class. Figure out what may be missing and what you may need to add or even ask about.

Many times, even after taking good notes, you will need to utilize other resources in order to review, solidify, question, and follow-up with the class. Don't forget to use the resources available to you, which can only enhance your note-taking. **These resources include:**

- **Tutoring:** Make an appointment with your teacher to ask questions about concepts in class that confused you.
- **Reviewing your notes:** Write a summary of your notes in your own words, write questions about your notes, fill in areas, or chunk them into categories or sections.
- **Self-testing:** Use your notes to make a study guide and self-test to prepare for exams.

## Works consulted

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