

NOTEWORTHY NOTES ON NOTE TAKING

Self-assess. Check (✓) strategies and skills that you currently use. Star (✳) new ones to try out.

1. Active Note Taking for Understanding and Memory

- a) Better understand course material now and recall it later on exams by taking notes actively. This is not just word-for-word writing, but active, not passive, listening and thinking about information presented (e.g., anticipate what will be said next, condense information into your own words, ask questions, relate the material to what you already know).
- b) Prime your brain. Preview material to be covered before the class, especially for difficult topics. Ask interesting questions about the material, especially if the topic is not naturally interesting to you.
- c) Arrive early and review notes from last class—repetition is a memory strategy.
- d) Focus. Imagine that the lecturer is talking only to you.
- e) Think analytically and critically about information. Write comments and questions in the margin.
- f) Pay attention to your attention. Daydreaming? Worrying? Try thought stopping—say “No, not now!” to distracting thoughts (e.g., about the weekend or a conflict) and schedule time for them later (e.g., at lunch). Try to re-focus by making a physiological shift—take a quick walk, wash your face with cold water, stand up and stretch. Or, try the motivational strategy of remembering your long-term goals.
- g) Know what you don’t know. Take notes with an open mind—be willing to explore and discover!

2. Recording and Organizing Notes

- a) Use loose leaf. Write the course name, date and page number at the top of each page.
- b) Write on one side of the page. Why? When studying break notes into sections by topics. Lay out the pages for one section at a time to see how all the topics relate.
- c) Focus. Imagine that the lecturer is talking only to you.
- d) Take notes selectively. Reduce information to meaningful phrases in your own words—except, write quotes and definitions in full. Also copy all graphs, diagrams and notes presented by the lecturer.
- e) Takes notes in an outline form with a hierarchical numbering system (e.g., 1,2,3...; a, b, c...).
- f) Organize. Use indentations to visually identify and distinguish main points from subordinate points and supporting details.
- g) Clearly identify key words and important points (e.g., highlight, underline, print, mark with a star).
- h) Write down facts, details and examples that explain key points. Providing a good example on an exam can help strengthen your answer.
- j) Notice repetition—it’s a cue that the information is important.
- k) Use a consistent set of abbreviations for commonly used words (e.g., w/o = without, v = very, s/t = sometimes, → = leads to, ~ = approximately, b/c = because).
- l) For each lecture leave space at the top of the first page to create a list of abbreviations for specific words used (e.g., M = multiculturalism, G = government, H = humanism).
- m) Use different colours of ink to organize your notes (e.g., red for headings or important points).
- n) Review your notes within 24 hours after the lecture. Add missing information and comments.
- o) Re-write or type your notes to review, edit and condense information while still fresh.

In this age, which believes there is a shortcut to everything, the greatest lesson to be learned is that the most difficult way is, in the long run, the easiest. ~ Henry Miller

3. Keep Up with Fast Speakers (Ellis, 2000)

- a) Prepare for the lecture by previewing related material in the text.
- b) Focus on key words and points, use abbreviations and leave white space as needed.
- c) Missing information? Ask another student if you can compare notes or, to help each other out, exchange photocopies of your notes.
- d) Ask the lecturer to slow down or repeat information.
- e) Ask questions.

4. Build Memory Networks of Cues and Associations

- a) **Multiple Associations:** Improve recall by building memory networks. Link new information with other information using different memory pathways (e.g., meaningful, visual, auditory, emotional). The more cues and associations you make, the more routes you have for recalling the new information later. Importantly, remember to write a note about your associations.
- b) **Meaningful Associations:** Make meaningful associations by relating new material to what you already know or have experienced (e.g., other course material, paid or volunteer work, life event, travel). Can you apply or connect the information to something in your past, present or future?
- c) **Visual Associations:** Use your “mind’s eye” to create internal visual associations—for example, transform a novel into a vivid film or visualize yourself applying a technique or concept at a future job. Create concrete visual associations by making diagrams, doodle drawings, maps, and flow charts. Later remember detailed information by first recalling the visual image or structure.
- d) **Auditory Associations:** Work with your auditory memory by developing acronyms formed from the first letter of other words (e.g., AIDS, CD, UR) and then saying them out loud. For example, EACON is an acronym for the “Big Five” personality factors: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism and openness. Notice the sound and rhythm of acronyms, often the sillier the better, and any visual associations. For example, EACON sounds like ECON, short for economics. Rearranged, you have OCEAN (John, 1990)—imagine that!
- d) **Emotional Associations:** Notice and write down your emotional reactions to topics—Interested, angry, shocked, inspired? Later intentionally recall your emotional reaction to help you remember details about the topic--What was is that made you feel...?

5. Improve Recall with Regular Review

- a) Critically review, rethink and revise your notes adding your comments within 24 hours.
- b) Briefly review notes once a week, even if only for 20 minutes on a Sunday afternoon. If short on time, at least skim and keep fresh headings, key words and formulas—they are your memory cues.
- c) Skim your notes with your text as a reference to edit and correct any mistakes.
- d) Write terms, concepts and cues words (e.g., acronyms) in a recall column on the left of the page. Cover up your notes and self-test by reciting the definitions and descriptions.
- e) Alternately, write questions in the recall column. After reviewing four to seven items, self-test by answering the questions out loud.
- f) To prepare for an exam, condense your notes into a set of summary notes. Summary notes serve as a collection of memory cues (e.g., phrases, acronyms, drawings, formulas) for recalling details.

There are no uninteresting things, there are only uninterested people. ~ Gilbert K. Chesterton

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