

Note taking skills - from lectures and readings

Introduction

When you are at university, the sheer amount of information that is delivered to you can be daunting and confusing. You may even think that you have to copy down *everything* you hear or read. When you are at a face-to-face lecture it is sometimes difficult to tell what is important and what is not. Distance learning students might feel the need to copy out fact after fact from readings and textbooks. When preparing for an exam or assignment, it is tempting to produce extensive notes on page after page of A4 paper. These methods of note taking are generally time consuming and ineffective and there is an easier way!



Effective note taking should have a purpose, should be well organised, and can be a time saving skill. This information sheet outlines the basic lecture and written source note taking skills. Firstly, we will try to understand why notes are an important part of studying. Then we will learn how to take, organise and store notes. At the end of this information sheet you will find an activity that can be used to test yourself. Your tutor or the Student Support Officer can provide feedback on this activity.

When you've finished this study skills package, you should be able to:

- List the reasons why students should take notes
- Evaluate which information is useful and important and which is not
- Organise lecture or reading notes using a mind-mapping tool
- Demonstrate good note taking practice in the context of your subject area
- Understand how to effectively store and review your notes

Notes as a study tool

While most students anticipate that they will have to take notes at university, not many students take the time to discover how to take effective notes. In fact, some students even try to avoid taking notes by using tape recorders or by sharing notes with other students. Initially, these strategies may seem like a good idea, but in an academic context note taking is as important as assignment writing in that you are taking in information and then writing it back out again as a learning process (Rowntree, 1976: 112). Tape recorders and 'buddy' note-taking arrangements should only ever be used in addition to your original notes, and never as a substitute.*

The following list provides a few reasons why note taking is an important activity:

- Taking notes will help you to extend your attention span (Rowntree, 1976: 112). When reading or listening, your mind may tend to wander off. You might be inclined to think about work, money, or relationships. It is quite easy for other aspects of your life to pop into your head while you are listening to a lecture or while you are reading. Taking notes helps keep you focussed on your subject area and to the task at hand (Kesselman-Turkel and Peterson, 1982: 2).
- Taking notes will help you to remember what you have heard or read (Kesselman-Turkel and Peterson, 1982: 3). We learn more effectively when we use multiple senses and multiple activities. When note-taking we are using listening and writing skills and we are using our brain and muscles. Also, by writing down notes, you are paraphrasing the lecture or reading material into your own words and into a format that you are more likely to understand when you review the notes. And as an adult learner you are more likely to remember what you have heard or read if you take an active part in your learning. Rather than being a passive listener or reader, note taking makes you an active learner. The notes you produce are your own work and are a visible reminder of the effort you have put into the course. This in itself can be a motivational factor for your study!
- Note taking helps you to organise the ideas you are learning about (Kesselman-Turkel and Peterson, 1982: 3-6). Good notes should arrange topics into easy-to-review chunks of information that are clear and well referenced. This is important if you're using your notes to review for an examination or for as a starting point in an assignment (Rowntree, 1976: 112).

It may be tempting not to take notes and to just sit back and listen to an interesting lecture or to become engrossed in an interesting reading. The disadvantage of these strategies is that at the end of the lecture or reading you may only have a vague recollection of the

important and sometimes assessable issues. The lecture will be over with no chance to revisit the material, or the reading may have to be re-read, which is time consuming and sometimes tedious. The taking of effective notes during the lecture or while you are reading is an important academic activity that helps you to concentrate, stimulates your ability to recall, and helps you to be organised.

** Please note: Students with dyslexia and other learning disabilities may find the use of a tape recorder beneficial to learning. However, please contact the Student Support Officer for advice on how to best use a tape recorder in addition to note-taking.*



Taking notes

Now that you understand the reason for taking notes, let's learn how your note taking can become effective. This section will be broken into three parts; the first section will cover a range of general note taking tips, the next will deal with taking effective notes from reading material, and the last will deal with taking effective notes from lectures.

General tips

It is important to determine which pieces of information in a lecture or reading are important and which pieces are not. The best way to do this is to be critical when you read or listen. Ask yourself if the information you're hearing is **IMPORTANT**, **RELEVANT**, and **CREDIBLE**. In other words, does the information demonstrate a major point, does it relate to the subject matter, and is it believable or supported?

When writing down notes, try to distinguish between facts, opinions, and examples. It is important to write down relevant facts. Facts are 'true' statements that should be supported by research or evidence. It is also important to write down important, relevant, educated opinions. For example, if the lecturer is giving a lecture that compares the ideas of different theorists, it would be important to write down a summary of each theorist's opinion in your notes. Lecturers and authors use examples to help explain difficult concepts and to maintain your interest. While you might find the example interesting, it is not important to write down all the examples. You may like to write a reference to an example that was particularly interesting or as a means of reminding you to do more research in a particular area. Rather than relying on the examples that the lecturer or author provides, when reviewing your notes, try to think of your own examples.

When reading or listening, don't write out notes word for word. Notes should not be an exact copy of the lecture or reading. They should be a summary of the main ideas and should be used to help jog your memory.

Use shortcuts that you will understand and that will make the writing process quicker. Abbreviations ('eg' instead of 'for example'), symbols (= instead of 'equals'), and drawings can sometimes help you take notes more quickly.

Use font, colour and size to draw attention to important points. For example, you might like to use a different colour pen to write down facts, opinions, and examples. You might use different writing sizes to indicate main points as being separate from supporting evidence.

When making notes, print clearly where possible. If your writing is poor, use a word processor when reviewing your notes, leaving spaces for handwritten diagrams and mind maps.

Be critical of the material you are listening to or that you are reading. How does the material compare with what you have heard or read previously? Does the argument follow a logical pattern and is it clear of false argument? Do you understand all of the points and if not, where are the gaps? What questions are still unanswered for you? Why weren't these answered in the lecture/reading?



Tips for taking notes from readings

Understand what you are looking for in the reading. Are you looking to gain a general understanding or are you searching for specific information or support for an argument?

A well structured reading, should begin by outlining the main premise, argument or ideas in the first few sentences, and certainly in the first paragraph. Pick out the main premise and write it down (see activity 1). Each paragraph after that should contain evidence that the author uses to support the main premise.

If you understand the premise, don't read the examples given to support it. Never include examples in your notes. Only include the facts, avoid experiences and anecdotes where possible.

Rowntree (1976: 40-64) outlines what he calls the 'SQ3R' approach to reading and note taking from text. He suggests that students should use the following activities in order to get the most from a reading in the most efficient way.

1. Survey – flip through the chapter or book and note the layout, first and last chapters or paragraphs, look at the headings used, familiarise yourself with the reading.
2. Question – Ask questions about the way the reading is structured and think about the questions you will need to keep in mind while reading. Think about whether or not you think the book is relevant or if it's current and if it suits the purpose of your study.
3. Read – read actively but quickly, looking for the main points of the reading – don't take any notes – you might want to read through twice quickly.
4. Recall – Write down the main points of the reading and any really important facts, and opinions that help support the main points. Also record the bibliographic details.
5. Review – repeat the first three steps over and make sure you haven't missed anything. At this point you might like to finalise your notes and reread your notes or write down how the material you've just covered relates to your question or task.

Tips for taking notes from lectures

It is important that you understand why you are attending the lecture. Prepare for a lecture and think about what you are hoping to achieve. Think about the lecture topic in relation to your other methods of study and information input and think about what you would like to learn or have explained more clearly.

Remember that you cannot revisit lecture material, so you might consider using a tape recorder or buddy system to supplement your own notes. Always revisit your notes as soon as possible after taking them and never rely solely on someone else's notes.

The lecturer should summarise his or her main points at regular points during the lecture. Look out for help during the introduction where the lecturer may give a linear-type list of the topics to be covered. Also listen for breaks between topics where the lecturer might summarise the most important points they have just covered. At the end of the lecture, another summary should be provided that may help you review your notes and determine if you have missed any important information. If this is the case, be sure to approach the lecturer for clarification on any points that you did not fully understand or to help you complete your notes.

Using visual note taking tools

At the 'review' stage of the SQ3R approach, you may find mind mapping to be a useful technique. Also, this technique may be useful when taking notes in lectures. Essentially, you are creating a visual diagram that represents all of the ideas from a reading or lecture. Most importantly, you are showing how the ideas are interrelated and you are creating accessible, interesting notes. This technique is particularly useful for students with dyslexia, as it allows you to avoid re-reading notes through the creation of visual diagrams.



*An example of a mind map
See Appendix B for full sized version*

Notes can take on two main forms: linear and spray-type diagrams. There are many different techniques and you will find one that is best for you. Have a look at Appendix A and Appendix B to see an example of each.

Organising and storing your notes

As soon as it is possible, outside the lecture or away from the reading, reread your notes and re-write them if necessary into a clearer format. Here are some more tips on organising and storing your notes.

- Write your notes on large pieces of paper. A4 size is best and be sure to leave a wide margin down one side for future notes or to add comments or references to other notes or reading materials.
- Organise and file your notes in well-labelled manilla folders or in a similar system. You might like to file

your notes according to the week, topic, or assignment.

Conclusion

Note taking is an important academic task that helps you to remember what you have learnt and helps you to review materials for re-use in revision and assignments. It is important that you are critical when note taking and that you only write or draw what you will need later on, and that you record the information in a format that is easy to understand. You should look out for clues about what is important. The lecturer or author will organise his or her material in a logical way so try to utilise their organisational skills when note taking. When taking notes you might like to try different study techniques such as the SQ3R approach or you might like to use a more visual approach such as a spray diagram. And most importantly, after taking effective notes, it is important to organise and store your notes effectively. Effective note taking should reduce your study time, should increase your retention of knowledge, and should provide you with a summarised list of resources for your future projects.



If you need any further help with this topic, please contact your tutor or the Student Support Officer, or you may wish to consult the 'Note taking reading list'.

(Samantha Dhann 2001)

Note taking activities

Activity One

Use the following form to help you work through any reading, picking out the important points. You might like to photocopy this form and use it as a study tool. If you're using the SQ3R technique, use this form at the 'recall' step.

Step One: For future reference, record the bibliographic details of your reading in the boxes below.		
Name of reading	Author's name	Year and place of publication
Journal details (if any)	Page numbers read	Other bibliographic notes
Step Two: Surface read the reading and complete the following tasks. In your own words, briefly describe the main point or argument the author/s of the reading is trying to make. List three minor arguments that the author uses to support his or her main point or argument. 1. 2. 3.		Step Three: Read the reading more comprehensively and find quotes or ideas from the text that supports each argument and point that you've listed in step two.

Once you understand the main point that the author is trying to make and you understand what evidence and argument the author uses to prove that point, you will then understand the significance of the author's work. You will understand how the reading fits in with your own learning because you will be able to compare the author's ideas with those you have learnt from your tutor and the course materials. You will also be able to compare the author's work with the writing of others. This will help you to gauge if the author agrees or disagrees with other experts in the field. If you are completing an assignment, you will understand how the author's ideas support or conflict with your hypothesis.

Activity Two

Once you have completed the form in activity one, use the information on the form to create a set of linear or spray notes. There is space below for you to do this. If you're using the SQ3R technique, use this activity at the 'review' step.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for students to create linear or spray notes based on the information from activity one.

Using the form in activity one and the mind mapping technique from activity two, you should now have a thorough understanding of the argument that the author is making. These tools are also useful for future reference, for example, if you want to use the reading for an assignment or for revision purposes, but you don't want to reread the entire chapter or reading over again.

Activity Three

In the space below, use the notes you have taken to write a summary of the chapter or reading you have just studied. Try to ensure that your summary is no more than 100 words long. A good summary should be around 50 words long. This activity could be used as a substitute for activity two in the 'recall' step of the SQ3R technique.

Note taking reading list

The Kesselman-Turkel/Peterson book is available in the University of Exeter Streatham campus library. The book is guaranteed to be in the library as it is a reference book for in-library use only. The Rowntree book is available for loan from the St Luke's campus library and for in-library use only at Streatham. If you do not have Internet access, please contact your tutor for further assistance with the Internet sites.

Kesselman-Turkel, J. and Peterson, F. (1982) *Note-taking made easy*, Lincolnwood (IL): Contemporary Books.

Rowntree, Derek. (1976) *Learn how to study*, 2nd edition, London: Macdonald and Co.

<http://www.lc.unsw.edu.au/onlib/note1.html>

This web page belongs to the University of New South Wales and has two sections of useful note-taking tips for higher education students.

<http://www.byu.edu/cccl/learning/note-tak.shtml>

This web page belongs to the Brigham Young University in Utah. It clearly outlines the 'Cornell note-taking technique' and offers helpful advice for students.

http://www.cant.ac.uk/cware/LIST/organise/or_s5.htm

This web page belongs to Canterbury Christ Church University College and is extremely useful.

Note taking skills - Appendix A

An example of linear notes

These linear notes are a summarised version of this study skills session.

General tips

- Read & listen critically
 - Is it important?
 - Is it relevant?
 - Is it credible?
- Facts/Opinions/Examples
 - Note facts & opinions
 - Avoid 'their' examples
- Summarise lecture/reading – not word for word
- Use shortcuts when writing
- Change font/colour/size for important parts
- Write clearly
- Be critical
 - Compare with other knowledge
 - Look for logical flow
 - Look for gaps in argument
 - What is missing in argument or understanding

Notes as a study tool – why they help

- Part of learning process
- Extends attention span
- Remember what you have learnt
- Helps organise ideas

Use visual tools

- Linear notes
- Spray-type diagrams

Store and organise

- Use large pieces of paper with margins
- Organise – folders and filing system

Taking notes from lectures

- Prepare for the lecture
- Use tape/buddy + good note taking
- Look for organisation clues from lecturer

Taking notes from readings

- Know what you want from the reading
- Look for organisation clues from headings, sections, paragraphs
- Don't write down examples
- SQ3R Approach
 - Survey – flip through & layout
 - Question – structure and relevance
 - Read – twice through quickly
 - Recall – main points, facts & biblio. Details
 - Review – repeat steps & relate to task

Note taking skills - Appendix B

A mind map for note taking skills

