

Note Taking

It's two o'clock in the afternoon. And time for a Psychology lecture again. You enter the classroom and take a seat in your desk on the last row. Although it's difficult to see the board from the back of the room, you get an excellent view through the window to people driving in and out of the parking lot. You take a pen and paper out of your backpack and prop your feet up on the desk in front of you.

The instructor begins to lecture. Today is a review session for the exam scheduled for next class. You yawn; the heat's making you drowsy...you're awakened by the sound of voices and shuffling feet. You open your eyes and the lecture is over. You look at the paper in front of you. Not too many notes there, in fact, the pages are blank.

Can there possibly be a better way?

About college lectures

The college lecture is usually a novel experience to new Augusta Technical College students. Although in high school the function of a lecture is usually to rehash material already covered in the textbook, college lectures most often provide an extension or enhancement of text material or introduce entirely new material.

Lectures provide rich learning opportunities that can help you in a number of ways: by reinforcing key concepts and principles, demonstrating application of concepts, providing different perspectives of text materials and expanding on course topics not covered in the textbook. They also give you the opportunity to take notes that will help you with later study and review.

To get the most out of lecture time, you need to make the most of your listening, seeing, thinking and problem-solving abilities, all the while filtering out any number of irritating distractions that may be present. As such, special skills are required for getting the most out of the time you spend in lecture. The lecture experience can be confusing and frustrating if you are ill-prepared.

Tips for a better lecture note taking strategy

Before the lecture begins

Review. Looking over the course syllabus and notes from the previous class helps you determine the intended focus of the lecture and gives you some background for learning new material.

Read the material that's been assigned. Doing so will help you better understand the material discussed in class – you'll already be familiar with the concepts and vocabulary that are used.

During the lecture

Avoid distractions. If you often find yourself daydreaming out of windows, for instance, don't sit next to one.

Date your notes. It will then be easier to find notes for any particular class when you review later.

Take spacious notes. Use one side of the page only. This allows you more freedom for including additional note, for inserting textbook references and for reorganizing information later. Leave blank spaces for material you miss or are uncertain about; you can ask a classmate or the instructor to help fill them in later.

Use your own words. Research shows that we remember information better if it's phrased in our own language. Therefore, translate concepts presented in class into your own words, as if you were explaining them to someone else. Of course, you will sometimes be forced to use technical language in order to make definitions and concepts clear.

Be sensitive to the lecturer's verbal and visual cues. Phrases such as "chief outcome" and "in conclusion" signal summary topics or primary importance. Tone and pauses can also alert you to important information.

Mark examples in your notebook. Examples, pictures, graphs, problems, etc. presented in lecture are selected for specific reasons usually because they help illustrate important concepts. Often, examples or problems similar to those given in class later appear on exams, so it's always a good idea to note when these come up in lecture and review them later.

Use abbreviations and symbols. Doing so can greatly speed your note taking and thereby increase the number of notes you can take during class. If a concept or idea is difficult to explain in words, try symbolizing it using an alternative form, such as a chart or diagram. Of course, be sure that you remember what the abbreviations and symbols mean or they can't help you later.

Recognize a lecturer's pattern and follow it. A lecturer's style – how he or she presents material and ideas – usually becomes apparent early on and won't change much throughout the quarter. Knowing your instructor's lecture techniques will help alert you to the times you should be paying extra attention.

Take notes even when you are tape recording. Tape recorders encourage passivity and hence aren't a great alternative to active note taking. Even if you have a disability that requires the use of a tape recorder, always try to take notes, too. (You must receive permission from your instructor before taping any class.)

Pay attention to other's questions. Take notes during class discussions or when questions are raised; important concepts are often clarified at these times.

After the lecture ends

Review the lecture notes periodically. Research shows that you can forget up to 80% of what you learned in the first 24 hours after a lecture if you don't review it. Reviewing periodically keeps information fresh in your long-term memory and helps you integrate new information with old.

Re-organize your notes. Don't just re-write them – categorize and reclassify the information, cluster similar concepts together, look for the overriding concepts behind sample problems, compare and contrast theories, etc.

Synthesize. Look for relationships among material presented in lecture, in discussion sessions, in homework and labs, and in the text. Try to develop a general picture of the material underpinning the course instead of simply memorizing facts and equations. If you truly comprehend the course material, you'll be better able to anticipate test questions and to ask informed questions that will help fill gaps in your knowledge. The course will serve as far better preparation for the more advanced classes you'll take; it will form a sturdier building block in the foundation of your education.

(adapted from the Academic Development, [Carnegie Mellon University](#) website)