Further readings and templates

# Chapter 5: Understanding how to learn at university

## Note-taking in lectures

University is – for many individuals – likely to be the first situation where most of the time is spent sitting, listening to a lecturer and taking notes, so how good are these?

**Have a look through the qualities listed below and examine your notes from a lecture two or three weeks ago. How good are they? Are there are changes you need to make to your note taking?**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Not even slightly | Slightly | Moderately | Pretty Well | Very Well |
| I can read my notes (i.e. they are legible) |  |  |  |  |  |
| Someone else can read my notes |  |  |  |  |  |
| My notes are complete: I missed nothing important |  |  |  |  |  |
| My notes represent the key points raised in the class |  |  |  |  |  |
| My notes reflect the instructor’s emphases |  |  |  |  |  |
| The instructor’s key points are clear and understandable |  |  |  |  |  |
| The notes contain only important points with no extraneous material |  |  |  |  |  |
| I understand not only the notes but also the class content they reflect |  |  |  |  |  |
| Using only the notes, I will be able to reconstruct the essential material of the class in three months’ time |  |  |  |  |  |

If most of your answers are in the ‘slightly’ or ‘not even slightly’ columns, then maybe there are some changes you will need to make to the way you take notes. There is no one way to take notes in lectures (or seminars, or any other learning situation, really) and it will be up to you how you do so. In reality, a lot of how we take and use notes comes from our personal preferences, but the reality is that **students who take notes – and take them well – tend to outperform those who do not**. There are various reasons for this, but at a basic level, sitting passively and just listening without doing anything (physically or cognitively) is not the best thing to do when attending lectures (and can lead to temporary periods of ‘hibernation’ – otherwise known as ‘sleep’).

### Good note taking

Here are some thoughts on what makes for good note-taking:

1. **Identify the key points in a lecture:** if they are not given on PowerPoint slides, then you should write down any examples, facts and figures, and evaluations of others’ ideas given to you by your lecturer(s). They might say something like ‘ … you may want to write this down’ but you cannot guarantee that every lecturer will give you such a signal.

In addition, a lecturer might change their intonation or the speed of their delivery when giving an important point. It might be good to compare your notes to those of another student to see whether there are any examples etc. that you have missed. Finally, perhaps ask your lecturer(s) to clarify what ‘signals’ they use to indicate whether something is important or not.

2. **Paraphrasing**: put a summary of any information given to you by a lecturer into your own words if you can. You cannot paraphrase unless you understand what has been told to you, so paraphrasing is a good skill to master.

If you are an international student, paraphrasing may not come naturally to you, since it requires a good vocabulary and an ability to understand what has been said or written very quickly. But keep trying to do this.

3. **Timescale**: your notes need to be good enough for you to be able to read these in a few weeks’ time as well as tomorrow, so make sure that they are clear. Of course, you may have a technique for revision which means rewriting or summarising your own notes when the exams come around, but you will still need to be able to read your notes when you come to summarise them.

4. **Formatting your notes**: recognising the important points is one aspect of taking notes, but if it helps you to remember your notes, then perhaps format headings in a different way – use a different colour, or bold, or put a box around the key words, or … However you do it, you will need to ensure that you can remember and learn the important points you write down.

5. **Organising your notes**: it sounds silly perhaps, but make sure that you have your notes well organised, so that you can find them quickly when it comes time to revise for your exams, or to write a piece of coursework. (Don’t just have them lying around your floor!)

### Does note-taking really increase your grades?

You may have your iPad or tablet, you may take in your printed handout and you may have done some relevant reading, but there is evidence that actively taking notes during a lecture increases academic grades. An interesting article by DeZure, Kaplan and Dearman (2007) is available online at: [www.math.lsa.umich.edu/~krasny/math156\_crlt.pdf](http://www.math.lsa.umich.edu/~krasny/math156_crlt.pdf)

According to DeZure et al., ‘Students who take notes score higher on both immediate and delayed tests of recall and synthesis than students who do not take notes (Kiewra et al., 1991)’. In other words, you are more likely both to remember information you have written down and to engage with that information in ways that are likely to enable you to get a good grade. DeZure et al. go on to note, ‘Moreover, the more students record, the more they remember and the better they perform on exams (Johnstone & Su, 1994)’. It seems that examination performance is more than just about getting the revision right.

Does this research make sense? To some extent, although there are issues with determining how clear such findings are. It could be expected, for example, that those who take good quality notes are the same people who are used to learning and engaging with their notes in a way that works at university anyway – and so would be more likely to get the higher grades. However, whether the cause of the higher grades is the notes or the study behaviour, the two do seem to relate to each other, and so there is reason to expect that anyone who takes notes could do better than those who do not.

So what does and does not get recorded? Typically, information given out verbally is not recorded in as much detail as that which is written down. Conditioning through school can teach us that information given on a screen is seen as important, and the same applies where a tutor takes the time to write something down on a board. It also seems true that many important point get missed (up to 60% in some instances) and that first-year students are worse at recording important points (missing up to 90%) than their more senior counterparts.

**For reflection, you might want to ask the following questions:**

 Are you used to taking notes at lectures? Or do you sit back and listen?

 How do your lecture notes relate to those from the reading that you do?

 Is there a need for you to change what you do?

 Does your use of an iPad or other tablet make you slightly lazy when it comes to taking notes