



# Suggestions for Effective Note-making

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In our conversations with students, we often hear the following concerns about making notes:

- *I can't keep up with how fast the professor is talking, so I must be missing a lot.*
- *I don't think I'm recording the "right" information.*
- *When I go back to use my notes, they aren't very helpful.*

It's impossible to prescribe a single approach to note-making because so much depends on the purpose of these notes, your learning style, and the material. Sometimes you're trying to condense the material for later review. Other times you might want a record of your own thoughts and questions about the material that you will use in writing a paper. Many students find it helps them pay attention during class if they are listening for what they might write down. And of course different courses and books are better suited to particular styles of note-making (mapping or diagrams to draw connections and show relationships between ideas).

## Uses of Notes:

1. Staying awake and alert during your studying and classes. The process of note-making helps you do something active when you study. It's especially important to write notes using your own words. We almost always remember what we say or write in our own words better than what we read, so making notes in your own words will help you even if you never look back at your notes. Also, this activity helps you to integrate different pieces of information.
2. Keeping track of your own questions, ideas, comments. Your questions and comments are an important tool for your learning, comprehension, and retention. It's also always helpful to find ways to connect with the material you're studying; it makes learning more personally meaningful and thereby helps you to remember it. **ONE IMPORTANT CAVEAT:** Be sure to distinguish clearly your own thoughts from material taken from a text or lecture. Use quotation marks and citations for material you copy from a text.
3. Recording information for future review. This is what most students think of first and exclusively for the function of notes. Yes, notes are very important in order to keep track of important information that you need to learn for an exam, a discussion section, a paper, etc. The challenge is to distinguish what's "important." We suggest to students that they listen and read and make notes "comprehendingly" rather than "comprehensively" so that they're recording the main ideas and can summarize the critical elements of the material. So, before a lecture, it helps to check the syllabus to see what that day's lecture will be about and listen for the relevant main ideas that are offered in the lecture. Since, for almost all of us, it is impossible to do a word-for-word transcription of a lecture as someone is speaking or in a video or audio recording of it (and even if you could it would be too much information to review), one goal in

developing note-making skills is to improve your ability to identify the main and most relevant ideas.

Here are a few other note-making issues students often ask about and some brief responses. We also welcome you to come to the Bureau and talk further with us about your own questions.

**Question:** In lectures, it is hard to make notes at the same time as I am listening. What can I do if I find myself too lost during a lecture to keep up?

**Response:** Even a few minutes of preparing before a lecture can help a lot in orienting you during the lecture. Looking at the course outline, the title of the lecture, or last week's lecture notes might give you clues and a framework for listening. You might spend a few minutes before class to identify and write down new or unfamiliar terms and concepts. Even while the lecture is proceeding, it can help to keep track of what questions you have and *where* you are confused. At least you'll know what you don't know or where you got lost! Then you can ask for help afterwards.

**Question:** What about recopying my notes? Is it worth the time?

**Response:** It is probably not worth the time to recopy in a purely rote way. However, you will increase your gains if you can find things to change as you recopy. That ensures that you will have to keep thinking as you are copying. You can recopy in a way to highlight the connections between ideas: change an outline into a map. Our brains have better recall when information has been organized; a list of unrelated pieces of information is very hard to grasp. Any format that helps you to "chunk" facts or concepts and show the relationships between them will pay off. But even if you simply rephrase your notes as you recopy, you will have a better chance of remembering the material. The key is to make the task *active*.

**Question:** How do I deal with the fear that I'm missing something when I'm making notes?

**Response:** It's not possible – and usually not even useful – to have a complete transcript of every lecture. You'll be bogged down with too much material even if you succeed in recording every detail. With practice you'll get better at making choices about what you need for the task at hand. But remember to keep track of what's confusing. Notes are a great way to keep track of what to ask about or look up later.

**Question:** Is highlighting really so bad?

**Response:** Highlighting is often less effective than putting the material into your own words. Underlining or highlighting can be done very passively; your hand may be active, but your mind will wander. It also leaves you without a concise record of the material and you'll be in the position of having to review numerous pages to make sure you've read each of your highlighted sections.

## Note-making Styles/Formats:

Here are some suggestions for different note-making styles. The key is for students to find their own method that often includes a combination of formats adapted to the particular purpose at hand and the material.

- **SPLIT PAGE FORMAT:** A good format for keeping track of your own ideas. On one side of the page, you write the notes on the material of the lecture, reading, etc. Draw a line down the page and, on the other side of the page, you can write your ideas, questions, comments, notes on what you've missed and indicate for which material you might need clarification.
- **DIAGRAM FORMAT:** This format is helpful in making connections between parts of the material and is also good for providing easy, at-a-glance reference. Some students find this very helpful for math and science notes. If you are more visually oriented, you might benefit by organizing material into a graphic presentation, using circles, connecting lines, etc.
- **OUTLINE FORMAT:** Use this format for highly structured material or to impose organization on messy material. Many students are most familiar with this format from high school classes.
- **QUESTION/PROMPT FORMAT:** In this format you would pose a question about the material and then answer it. Through this format, you can locate the structure in a text and keep track of the main point. It also helps you to keep track of your own questions about the material.

*Revised January 2011*