

TAKING LECTURE NOTES

Web site: <http://extend.unb.ca/wss/notetext.htm>

The Purpose of Notes

Notes capture the ideas of your instructors' lectures, allowing you to study them after class. They do more: they help you to learn the material as you transcribe it. Although lectures may seem archaic, they remain in use because they have three powerful characteristics. First, lectures transmit information more expediently than any other form of information exchange, including the Internet. Secondly, lectures are performances; unlike televised or taped presentations, they are urgent and immediate, demanding attention and concentration. Finally, lectures require mental and physical participation. Your notes are not simply records of a lecturer's words; they are part of a process of active listening, mental processing, and manual recording--all of which stimulate the mind and reinforce memory.

General Strategies

Although students are expected to take notes well, they are rarely taught how. This is unfortunate, as note-taking is an excellent general skill--and good technique is *not* acquired automatically. Admittedly, a single technique will not work ideally for all students, but there are several general rules worth knowing.

- 1) Filter the information.** Do not copy every word; filter the lecture, noting only the expressions you will need to prompt your memory. Do not try to preserve whole sentences; concentrate on key ideas. You may go so far as to use a personal shorthand or learn a formal system. Whatever you do, be sure your system can record the essentials of a lecture--and be sure you can understand it later.
- 2) Classify the information.** You will probably be working with at least three types of information: substantive content, references, and illustrations. The substantive content of the lecture consists of concepts and factual material; this may be accompanied by references to various works which the student should consult. Usually, the concepts are illustrated with anecdotes and examples. You will record each differently: the key to grasping the main ideas of a lecture lies in *listening*, while references must be recorded briefly but precisely, and illustrations may be quickly sketched in.
- 3) Organize the information.** Finally, you should consider adopting a formal plan for your notes. Even if your own note-taking system is adequate, you may be able to improve the clarity or consistency of your notes--or you may be able to save some time.

The Cornell System

There are specific formal systems designed to make notes clearer and more useful; one popular approach is the Cornell system, which divides your page into areas for notes and for cues, and which specifies activities to be undertaken *before* and *after* as well as *during* lectures.

Phase 1: Before the Lecture

- a) Briefly review your notes and readings before class--immediately before, if you can manage it. (It is assumed that you have faithfully attended the other lectures and diligently completed your reading.)
- b) Select a loose-leaf sheet or a notebook with 8.5 by 11 inch paper. Draw a vertical line 2.5 inches from the left side of each sheet. Write the page number, date, and course number at the top of each sheet.

Course name	Date
<p>Key column: Write key terms here</p> <p>2.5 inches</p>	<p>Notes column: write full notes here</p> <p>8 inches</p>

Page prepared for Cornell System note-taking

Phase 2: During the Lecture

- a) Record notes on the right-hand side of the page. Try to capture the main points of the lecture. Do not be concerned with developing an elaborate formal outline using Roman numerals, capital letters, and the like. Indicate subtopics under main headings with numbers or simply with a dash.
- b) Write so that you will be able to read the material easily. This may mean practicing a form of printing, but in any case write clearly enough so that you do NOT have to re-write your notes. Though they will obviously look much prettier if you rewrite or type them, you will not have time to waste on appearances. Make sure they convey the necessary information the *first* time you write them.
- c) Leave sufficient space to add information or reorganize points without rewriting your notes. Try to anticipate which areas--lists of examples, for instance--will expand during the lecture.

Phase 3: After the Lecture

- a) As soon as possible after the lecture, jot down key words and phrases--"cues"--on the left side of the paper. Not only does this help you to recall the lecture, but the process of writing, of summarizing words and phrases, helps to fix the information in your mind. The attached sheet illustrates this use of the margin.
- b) Cover the right side of the notebook page so that you are looking only at the key words and phrases. Try to restate the lecture in your own words from these cues. Uncover the notes, and then check the accuracy of your recollections.
- c) Reflect on the meaning of the lecture. Can you think of examples from your experience or from your reading to illustrate the main points? In other words, can you make the material part of your own knowledge? You may find that you do not share the lecturer's conclusions, or that you have questions you wish to pursue further. At the end of your notes, jot down your comments and questions. This can be the most important part of listening to a lecture and taking notes, for it is during the course of your reflections that you are integrating new information. You are testing the information against your experience and relating it to what you already know: this makes it more relevant to you, more a part of your personal store of knowledge. Learning is more than memorization: it is a process that transforms received information into personal knowledge.
- d) Review your notes regularly. Before each class, review the previous lecture's notes. Occasionally during the term review all your lecture notes. Repeat the exercise of covering the right side of the notes to see if you can recall the content of the lecture. You will also learn a great deal by discussing the lectures with other students, and comparing the notes they have taken with your own. A regular study or discussion group will also help you to find gaps in your understanding and new ways of integrating course material.