Note Taking Workshop

Why do we take notes?

• To focus our attention and to ensure that we're synthesizing information
• To create a document we can refer back to later when writing a paper, studying for an exam or the qual, or reviewing for the next class in a sequence
• The act of writing something down also helps with memory (for some)
• To hold onto ideas we want to develop further or learn more about
• To demonstrate active listening
• To translate the spoken word into something visual, especially if charts, diagrams, pictures, arrows, etc. help you see the relationship between ideas or remember them
• To separate out the main ideas from the supporting details and “fluff.” In this way, note taking has an advantage over tape recording.

How do you know what to write down?

In lecture:

• Anything on the board or on an overhead (HW and/or exam announcements; vocabulary words and their definitions; formulas; dates, events, other chronological markers; numbered lists, etc.)
• References to the text, including page numbers
• Repeated or emphasized points
  o How do we recognize emphasis? (Number of examples, amount of time spent on something, tone of voice, questions that come at the end to make sure the point was understood)
• Key words that indicate relationships between ideas (these are the same words that good writers use to clue in their readers!)
  o First, second, third
  o As a result
  o Except
    ▪ See handout on “The Pivotal Words” for more information
• If things are moving too quickly for you to listen and take notes simultaneously, try to write down a few key nouns and verbs that will clue you in to what you missed. You can fill this in later.

• Questions you have (great for office hours), words/concepts/thinkers/texts you want to look up later, moments where you disagreed or were skeptical of the material as presented, and other to-dos. Don’t forget to actually follow up on these!

In class discussion/conference:

• Mini-lectures: Often at the beginning of class, mini-lectures can give context and valuable background information. If your professor starts class this way, take notes just as you would in a lecture course.

• Paper ideas: Sometimes, class discussion will inspire ideas for papers. Write those ideas down so you don’t lose them. If you’ve already selected a topic, you may have insights or questions that will fuel your paper. Jot those down too.

• Connections to other classes: While you’re especially likely to find connections between classes in the same department, there are also interesting contrasts between disciplines. When something that happens in one class discussion prompts you to think about another class, make a note of it. This is good stuff!

• Conclusions: It doesn’t happen in every class, but occasionally, the discussion in conference will reach a conclusion, or at least a tentative agreement. Those moments expose the “truths” your class will build upon later. Be sure you can articulate those conclusions by writing them down. Similarly, if the class makes comments that the professor agrees with or finds particularly insightful, include those in your notes.

Note taking strategies

• Supplies: You should have a dedicated notebook for each class. I recommend a small three-ring binder, since you can hole-punch handouts and stick them in sequentially. Taking notes will be more pleasant if you have a pen (one that doesn’t bleed through to the back of the page) or pencil that you like. Treat yourself to a handful of good writing instruments and try to keep them in your backpack when you’re not using them.

• Attending class: Obviously, you can’t take notes if you don’t go to class. But taking good notes requires more than just showing up. Arriving a few minutes early will allow you to select a seat where you can hear and see well and will give you a chance to scan over your
notes from the last class. Make sure you’re hydrated and fed, well rested, in good health, and otherwise ready to focus.

• Have an organizational strategy. Put the date at the top of each page. You might also want to number your pages so that you can refer to them within your notes. (For example, you can tell yourself to see page 2 for a definition of heuristic.) Find a style of note taking that comes naturally enough that you can use it consistently. Try different color pens or highlighters, abbreviations/symbols (within reason—you want this to be understandable weeks later), indenting/numbering, underlining, etc., but make sure it makes sense to you. Write neatly.

• Take a minute to process what was said before writing it down; taking notes is a process of filtering and synthesizing information. Be brief. Phrases are better than sentences. The goal is a condensed version of the class. You’re not trying to get a verbatim account of what happened in class, just the highlights.

• Put things in your own words (it’s a way of making sure you really get it). Exceptions: Formulas, definitions, and specific facts (vs. ideas or concepts).

• White space is your friend! Don’t cram so much onto a page that you can’t add anything later. Your professor might loop back around and add another example, so leave room for more development, especially around ideas that are a little harder for you. If you miss something important, leave a space and fill it in later.

• Draw pictures, graphs, ven diagrams, etc. especially if you’re a more visual learner.

• If you think you’re not writing enough down, be sure to keep the pen in your hand the entire class. Once you sit back and put your pen down, it can be easy to ignore semi-important ideas so you can enjoy the relaxed posture.

• If you think you write too much down, you might need to put your pen down from time to time in order to let yourself really listen. Remember to limit yourself to phrases and don’t try to quote your professor.

How can I get the most out of notes I’ve already written?

• You probably don’t want to take the time to rewrite or type your notes, unless this is a strategy you’re already using and you find it worth the time. It usually isn’t.

• You should, however, review your notes soon after class while things are still fresh. Add details that you remember but forgot to write down. Highlight, underline, or otherwise draw attention to the main ideas. If there are gaps in your notes, look back to the text, ask a
classmate, or visit office hours to get more information about what you missed. This is not the same as studying the material; this step just cleans things up a bit and refreshes the ideas in your mind.

• Skim your now-highlighted notes before you do associated readings or problem set for a class, at the beginning of the next class, before meeting with a tutor, or before visiting office hours.

• If you’ll be tested on the material later, write a short summary of the ideas and facts.

• If you’ll be writing a paper based on the material, pick out a few of the most interesting notes and start a new page with those ideas on the top. Let yourself free write, jot down questions, note textual references and page numbers, or otherwise play with these ideas. You’ll it much easier to select a topic and get started if you’ve done some of this pre-work ahead of time.

• Look over your notes and notice organizational strategies that you used in class that are helpful now. Abbreviation you can’t recognize? Start putting a key at the top of each page. Numbered list making things more logical? Keep it up! Realize you forgot to write anything down when class discussion got heated? Try to check in with yourself more often next time.

• Examples might also help. If your professor offers lecture notes, compare the notes you took with the handouts provided. (Lecture notes are not a reason to skip taking notes for a class—they’re a great opportunity to see if you figured out what’s most important!) You can also offer to trade notes with a friend to see what’s working and what’s not.