



Writing@CSU Writing Guide

Taking Notes

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Main Page

Note taking is an integral skill for learning college material and for writing effective papers and essay exams. Click on the links below for tips about note taking in both lectures and classroom discussions and for moving from your notes to other kinds of writing.

Please note, however, that some lectures and some learning styles don't lend themselves well to linear note-taking. If you find yourself listening to a speaker whose ideas are hard to capture in a linear outline, try making a cluster or Web.

Before the Lecture

Even before you go to class to listen to a lecture or participate in a class discussion, you need to *prepare* to take notes. Pay attention to both the logistical and thinking/reviewing skills required for effective note taking:

Logistics:

- Use a loose-leaf binder, not a spiral-bound notebook. (This way you can organize your handouts and exams with your notes.)
- Date and number each page; keep each class separate in the binder.

Thinking/Reviewing:

- Review your notes from the previous class.
- Keep up with your reading/homework so you're not lost when class starts--it's hard to take notes when you're confused.
- Prepare questions for the teacher based on your reading/homework /previous class notes.

During the Lecture

Some teachers are better lecturers than others, and after a few classes you'll know more about the lecture style of each teacher. You can accommodate different styles by keeping some simple logistical tips in mind:

- Write on one side of the paper. (Use the back for sketching graphs/charts /pictures/timelines, writing questions, summarizing, making notes to yourself later.)
- Leave lots of blank space in between concepts and whenever you don't understand something or daydream.
- Use consistent abbreviations (try eliminating vowels), symbols (like arrows, underlining, etc.), and sentence fragments.
- Don't worry about creating elaborate outlines--just keep main ideas and examples together.
- Don't worry about spelling or handwriting (as long as you can read it).

Related Information: Example

Reading public & rise of novel

- few extended prose fictions before 18th
- novel arose in 18th=extended prose fiction w/ interplay of character & plot
- Ian Watt looks to audience for upsurge
 - turn of 18th brought new class of readers, but still pretty small
 - purchasers of novels limited to 10,000
 - population was about 6 million; reading public 80,000 at end of 18th
 - education limited
 - for most, price out of reach
 - is middle-class audience w/ some \$ to spend
 - after 1740 & w/ establishment of circulating libraries (late '60s) audience expands, esp. w/ women
 - now reader & leisure
 - relationship of \$ & time...

Listening Hints During the Lecture

Taking notes is much harder than it sounds because you have to listen, process information, and write it quickly without losing the thread of the lecture. These tips can help you filter what's most important to listen to and record in your notes.

- Not everything the professor says is equally important or always relevant.
- Pay attention to clues--transition words, examples, anything written on the board, repetitions, voice inflections, teacher's interest level, gestures. Recognizing these helps you understand what the teacher feels is important (and will probably appear on the exam).
- Teachers often run out of time and cram what's most important into the last ten minutes of class.
- Stay alert--try to predict what the teacher will talk about next.

- Don't hesitate to ask questions if you don't understand or feel your concentration slipping.
- Keep an open mind--don't criticize or get so worked up you can't take notes anymore.
- Don't let the teacher's tics or mannerisms or appearance distract you.

After the Lecture

What you do after the lecture is just as important as what you do during the lecture.

- Fill in the gaps by asking classmates, the teacher, or the TA what you need clarified.
- Consider swapping notes with classmates to see what they wrote down.
- Check spelling of crucial names/terms or other important information.
- Don't recopy your notes (a waste of time because your brain goes on automatic pilot).
- Instead of recopying your notes, review them within 24 hours. (Short-term memory deteriorates quickly, and you lose 50%-80% of the material if you don't review.)
- Annotate your notes. (Mark what's important, add page numbers from textbook, etc.)
- Fill out the "Recall" column if you're using the Cornell system.
- Employ some critical thinking techniques to help the new information stick--summarize, synthesize with info from previous lectures/textbook /your life, find relationships, decide whether you agree/disagree, devise sample test questions based on the lecture, predict what the next lecture /reading will cover, etc.

The Cornell System for Note Taking

The Cornell system uses a double column format for taking notes. The lefthand column (called the Recall column) is reserved for marking main ideas and jotting down questions when you review your notes. The larger, righthand column (called the Capture column) is used for the notes themselves.

The Cornell system, useful for taking notes both in lectures and from textbooks or other print material, relies on four steps.

Step 1

The Cornell system begins with taking notes during the lecture using a simple format like this one:

main idea/keyword/name/date
--definition/explanation
--supporting details
--examples
etc.....

Leave lots of blank spaced between ideas to make your notes easier to read later and to help you locate what information goes together and what needs to stay separate.

Then begin with the next

main idea/keyword/name/date

and so on.

Step 2

The next step in the Cornell system begins after the lecture when you first start using the Recall column on the lefthand part of the page. Go through your notes and copy main ideas into the Recall column. Also write questions that prompt you to remember the accompanying details.

Step 3

In the next step of the Cornell system, you begin making the lecture material your own knowledge by covering up the Capture column of the notes and looking only at the main ideas and key words you've copied into the Recall column. Use the questions you've also jotted into the Recall column to recreate the main ideas of the lecture. Talk out loud. Become the teacher as you rehearse the information.

This step reinforces what you know and helps you see what you don't. To work most effectively, though, you should review your notes right after each lecture and again every weekend.

Step 4

The final step in the Cornell system helps you study for exams.

Place your notes in front of you, overlapping, so that all the Capture columns are covered up. All the Recall columns are right next to each other--and there's your semester right in front of you! Now go down each column to review all the main ideas from the course.

Taking Notes During Discussions

Taking notes during discussions can be harder than taking notes during lectures because discussions tend to follow their own logic rather than a pre-determined path set by a speaker. Here are some pointers toward the most effective ways to compensate for the differences:

- Be sure to distinguish in your notes among what your professor says, what information comes from the book, what a classmate has said, and your own ideas that you wrote down.
- Evaluate the comments during the discussion.

- Write down the page numbers from the text that support people's comments.
- Write down all the information that the professor notes on the board.
- Pay particular attention when the prof repeats or rephrases another student's comment.
- Don't get so caught up in the emotions of a lively (or controversial) discussion that you ignore people who disagree with you or that you forget to take notes.
- Volunteer to share your thoughts--don't sit passively.
- Answer all of the professor's questions in your head.

Using Notes to Write Papers

As you begin a paper based on class notes, here are some starting points:

- Use critical thinking techniques to reflect on the material--what is your opinion of it? What additional examples or explanations can you provide? Can you connect this material to other classes, outside reading, your own experiences?
- Be sure to distinguish in your notes among what your professor says, what information comes from the book, what a classmate has said, and your own ideas that you wrote down. This way, you can return to the source to search for more information (and credit the appropriate source).

Using Notes to Study for Exams

You might try certain tactics to use your notes in preparation for essay exams:

- Review your notes regularly, not just right before the test, using a technique like the Cornell system or by explaining your notes aloud.

- Use your notes to create sample questions to study with. If you were the teacher, how would you test this material?
- Use critical thinking techniques to reflect on the material--what is your opinion of it? What additional examples or explanations can you provide? Can you connect this material to other classes, outside reading, your own experiences?
- Synthesize the information in your notes with your other assignments in the class (like what you read in the textbook that isn't covered in the lectures).

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