The Learning Centre

Note-Taking Skills

An Introduction

Effective note-taking from lectures and readings is an essential skill for university study. Good note taking allows a permanent record for revision and a register of relevant points that you can integrate with your own writing and speaking. Good note-taking reduces the risk of plagiarism. It also helps you distinguish where your ideas came from and how you think about those ideas.

Effective note-taking requires:

- recognising the main ideas

- identifying what information is relevant to your task

- having a system of note taking that works for you

- reducing the information to note and diagram format

- where possible, putting the information in your own words

- recording the source of the information

Reading Note-taking Strategies

1. Be Selective and Systematic

As you take notes from a written source, keep in mind that not all of a text may be relevant to your needs. Think about your purpose for reading.

- Are you reading for a general understanding of a topic or concept?

- Are you reading for some specific information that may relate to the topic of an assignment?

Before you start to take notes, skim the text. Then highlight or mark the main points and any relevant information you may need to take notes from. Finally— keeping in mind your purpose for reading—read the relevant sections of the text carefully and take separate notes as you read.

A Few Tips About Format

Set out your notebooks so that you have a similar format each time you take notes.

- Columns that distinguish the source information and your thoughts can be helpful.

- Headings that include bibliographic reference details of the sources of information are also important.

- The use of colour to highlight major sections, main points and diagrams makes notes easy to access.

2. Identify the Purpose and Function of a Text

Whether you need to make notes on a whole text or just part of it, identifying the main purpose and function of a text is invaluable for clarifying your note-taking purposes and saving time.

- Read the title and the abstract or preface (if there is one)

- Read the introduction or first paragraph

- Skim the text to read topic headings and notice how the text is organised

- Read graphic material and predict its purpose in the text

Your aim is to identify potentially useful information by getting an initial overview of the text (chapter, article, pages …) that you have selected to read. Ask yourself; will this text give me the information I require and where might it be located in the text?

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3.   Identify How Information is Organised

Most texts use a range of organising principles to develop ideas. While most good writing will have a logical order, not all writers will use an organising principle. Organising principles tend to sequence information into a logical hierarchy, some of which are:

*   Past ideas to present ideas

*   The steps or stages of a process or event

*   Most important point to least important point

*   Well known ideas to least known ideas

*   Simple ideas to complex ideas

*   General ideas to specific ideas

*   The largest parts to the smallest parts of something

*   Problems and solutions

*   Causes and results

An Example:

Read the text below on 'Underwater Cameras' and then look at how the text is presented in note form. The most important words to include in notes are the information words. These are usually nouns, adjectives and verbs .

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         Underwater Cameras
Regular  cameras  obviously  will  not
function  underwater  unless  specially
protected. Though housings are available
for  waterproofing  35 mm  and  roll-film
cameras,  a  few  special  models  are
amphibious -they can be used above or
below the water. Most of these cameras
are snapshot models, but one, Nikonos,
is  a  true  35 mm  system camera. Though
lenses and film must be changed on the
surface,  the  camera  will  otherwise
function normally at depths down to 70
mm. Four lenses are available : two of
these , which have focal lengths of 90
mm and 35 mm, will function in air and
water; the other two of these, which
have focal lengths of 90 mm and 35 mm,
will  function  in  air  and  water;  the
other two, the 28 and 15 mm lenses ,
work only under water. Lenses are also
available from other manufacturers.
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Sample Notes from the text 'Underwater
               Cameras'

Underwater Cameras

1. Regular Cameras
   special housing necessary

2. Amphibious

   a)    snapshot models
   b)    Nikonos (35 mm)

   Lenses
         i) air & water        35 mm
`                               90 mm
         ii) only under water 28 mm
                               15 mm
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Source: Freeman M. The encyclopaedia of practical photography London, Quartro Books 1994, p283

4.   Include Your Thoughts

When taking notes for an assignment it is also helpful to record your thoughts at the time. Record your thoughts in a separate column or margin and in a different colour to the notes you took from the text.

*   What ideas did you have about your assignment when you read that information.

*   How do you think you could use this information in your assignment?

L i s t e n i n g   N o t e - t a k i n g   S t r a t e g i e s

Many of the strategies for reading note taking also apply to listening note taking. However, unlike reading, you can't stop a lecture and review as you listen (unless you listen to a taped lecture). Therefore preparation prior to listening can greatly improve comprehension.

•   Have a clear purpose

•   Recognise main ideas

•   Select what is relevant, you do not need to write down everything that is said

•   Have a system for recording information that works for you

Lecture Survival Tips

Strategies to Increase Comprehension and Improve Note-Taking

Before the Lecture:

•   revise the previous lecture or tutorial

•   pre-read about the topic

•   check the pronunciation of any new words or discipline-specific language in the pre-readings.

•   rule up pages according to your note-taking system. This saves time in the lecture.

During the Lecture:

•   be on time and sit near the front

•   distinguish between main points, elaboration, examples, repetition, 'waffle', restatements and new points by:

Listening for structural cues (signpost/ transition words, introduction, body and summary stages)

Looking for non verbal cues (facial expression , hand and body signals)

Looking for visual cues (copy the content of any visual aids used (e.g. OHTs), note references to names and sources)

Listening for phonological cues (voice change in volume, speed, emotion). Generally with more important information the speaker will speak slower, louder and they will direct their attention to the audience.

After The Lecture

•   revise lecture notes within 24 hours. Tidy up your handwriting and fill in any missing bits. Reviewing makes remembering lectures much easier.

•   write a short summary of the lecture (1 paragraph) in your own words

•   attach any handouts to your lecture notes.

1. Use Symbols and Abbreviations

The use of symbols and abbreviations is useful for lectures, when speed is essential. You also need to be familiar with symbols frequently used in your courses.

•   Develop a system of symbols and abbreviations; some personal, some from your courses

•   Be consistent when using symbols and abbreviations

Some examples of commonly used symbols and abbreviations are presented in the following tables.

Symbols for note-taking are as follows:

Symbol	Meaning
$=$	equals/is equal to/is the same as
$\neq$	is not equal to/is not the same as
$\equiv$	is equivalent to
$\therefore$	therefore, thus, so
$\because$	because
$+$	and, more, plus
$>$	more than, greater than
$<$	less than
$-$	less, minus
$\rightarrow$	gives, causes, leads to, results in, is given by, is produced by, results from
$\nearrow$	rises, increases by
$\searrow$	falls, decreases by
α	proportional to
$\not\alpha$	not proportional to

Abbreviations

These can be classified into three categories

1. Common Abbreviations

Many are derived from Latin.

c.f. (confer) = compare

i.e. (id est) = that is

e.g (exempla grate) = for example

NB (nota benne) =note well

no. (numero) = number

etc. (et cetera)= and so on

2. Discipline-Specific Abbreviations

In chemistry:
   Au for gold
   GM for magnesium

In the case of quantities and concepts, these are represented by Greek letters in many fields.

A or a (alpha) B or b (beta)

3. Personal Abbreviations

Here you can shorten any word that is commonly used in your lectures.

diff =different

Gov = government

NEC = necessary

Some abbreviations are so well known and widely used that they have become an Acronym - an abbreviation pronounced as a word.

For example , the word 'laser' was originally an abbreviation for 'Light Amplification by Stimulation Emission of Radiation'. It now is a noun in its own right!

2. Use Concept Maps and Diagrams

You can set down information in a concept map or diagram. This presents the information in a visual form and is unlike the traditional linear form of note taking. Information can be added to the concept map in any sequence.

Concept maps can easily become cluttered, so we recommend you use both facing pages of an open A4 note book. This will give you an A3 size page to set out your concept map and allow plenty of space for adding ideas and symbols.

- Begin in the middle of the page and add ideas on branches that radiate from the central idea or from previous branches.

- Arrows and words can be used to show links between parts of the concept map.

- Colour and symbols are important parts of concept maps, helping illustrate ideas and triggering your own thoughts.