

How can I take notes effectively?

STEP

10

'I don't like the sound of all those lists he's making – it's like taking too many notes at school; you feel you've achieved something when you haven't.'

Dodie Smith

A Reflection

Which of the following are true for you? Consider where these problems may originate.

1. I am dissatisfied with the way in which I currently take notes. Agree / Disagree
2. I find it difficult to distinguish what is and isn't important. Agree / Disagree
3. I can take notes well in my own language, but not in English. Agree / Disagree
4. When I look at my notes afterwards, they make no sense. Agree / Disagree

B Contextualization

Below are some well-taken notes from a lecture. Analyze them, then complete the table.

Topic ¹	The importance of note-taking at university	Lecturer ²	Miss Inga Structure
Relevance ³	1,500-word essay (due next week) is on 'good academic skills'	Date ⁴	25 June 2011
Summary ⁵	Main notes		
Definition of note-taking	+ ⁶ NT ⁷ is: – brief ⁸ – clear ⁸ Ss take 2 ⁶ long to wrt ⁷ notes ⁶ O ⁶ time left to write essays: 'drowned in data' ⁹		
Why is NT important?	2 v. imp ⁷ reasons for NT: Edu: 2 dvp yr ideas ⁸ Prac: 2 use 4 essays & exams ⁸		

Note	Aspect	How can this feature improve the quality of your notes?
1	Topic	For organizing your notes properly and remembering the main focus.
2	Lecturer	
3	Relevance	
4	Date	
5	Summary	
6	Symbols	
7	Abbreviations	
8	Bullets/lists	
9	Quotation	

C Analysis

What common problems are associated with note-taking?

I am dissatisfied with the way in which I currently take notes.

Note-taking can be an extremely frustrating activity. However, since you will spend a significant percentage of your academic life taking notes, it is a skill which you have to develop. As with all skills, it will not improve by itself; it is something which you have to work hard at. While this step provides guidance on strategies you can use, it is important that you develop a system which works well for you. To do this, you will need to reflect on how you learn most successfully, as this will differ from person to person.

There are three main problem areas for overseas students regarding taking notes: **content**, **language** and **usage**.

Content: I find it difficult to distinguish what is and isn't important.

First of all, let us consider what the word *notes* actually means. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines the word as a 'brief record of facts, impressions or topics'. The word 'brief' is particularly important. Problems often stem from students writing too much. In reading, this is a problem because your notes may often be as long as the text itself. In listening, if you write too much, you may always feel that you are 'behind' the lecturer, i.e., writing down the lecturer's last point when he or she has already started a new one.

When deciding whether you should note something or not, ask yourself the following questions: is it *relevant* or is it *valuable*? You need to prioritize information which is *directly* applicable to your subject area. You should also note down information which you consider to be particularly interesting or authoritative – for example, a phrase or a sentence which perfectly summarizes an idea. In short, do not be afraid to do less.

Language: I can take notes well in my own language, but not in English.

Wherever possible, it is better to take notes in English. This will:

- enable you to practise the target language, English.
- ensure there are no 'mistranslations'.
- be more time-efficient, since you will be writing the essay in English.

However, in situations where you are finding the process difficult, and you feel that using your mother tongue would be helpful, it is better to use it. Remember, the primary purpose of note-taking is to remember information, not to practise language.

Usage: When I look at my notes afterwards, they make no sense.

There is nothing more upsetting than spending a long time taking notes, and then being unable to understand them when you look at them again. It makes you feel that the whole activity is pointless, and that you have wasted your time. There may be several causes of this problem:

- you cannot read your own handwriting.
- you cannot understand your own **SHORTHAND**.
- you cannot understand the logical development of ideas.

The suggestions which follow may help minimize such problems.

What is good note-taking practice?

As noted, note-taking is a very 'personal' concept. The model suggested here may not be applicable to everyone, but the good features of these notes should be considered. A transcript of the lecture from which the notes were taken appears below.

Transcript of lecture extract

The question which must first be addressed is: what do we actually mean by note-taking? It is a term which is frequently used but commonly misunderstood. In my opinion, there are two critical factors for good note-taking. Notes should be brief and they should be clear. One of the main problems faced by students is that they spend far too much time writing their notes, meaning that they have very little – if any – time left to actually write their essay. They are drowned in data. Moving on to the actual importance of notes, I would say that there are two major benefits. Firstly, the educational: taking notes can help stimulate your thoughts and develop your ideas. And, secondly, notes have a practical use: you need to be able to recall key information to incorporate into your essays and to prepare for your exams.

Topic

The importance of note-taking at university.

Lecturer

You need to know the name of the lecturer if you want to paraphrase or quote ideas from the lecture in your own essay.

Relevance

Thinking about *why* you are listening to this lecture, or reading this particular article, is extremely important. This will help you decide what kind of knowledge you hope to gain and what notes you need to take. It will make your listening more proactive.

Date

Needed so you can clearly organize your notes – especially if lectures are in a sequence.

Summary

When you read through your notes later, a summary on the left-hand side to remind yourself of key points can be useful. Try writing this summary as questions so your notes effectively become a series of questions and answers, useful for information recall.

Symbols

Symbols are a quick, easy, dynamic way to write down information. In the example notes, + means 'good', – denotes 'leads to/causes', and 0 represents 'nothing, no'. There are a number of symbols in common usage, but you may also wish to use your own personalized system. You might consider using *textspeak* (the language used in writing text messages) – e.g., *2 use 4 essays* (= to use for essays). **However, only use textspeak in your notes.**

Abbreviations

Various abbreviations are commonly used in academic writing, such as 'e.g.', 'etc.', 'i.e.', and 're:'. Writing other shortened forms (e.g., 'wrt' and 'NT') can save time. Be sure you can remember what the full word is. Normally this will be obvious from the context – e.g., 'wrt' clearly means 'write' and 'NT' means 'note-taking'.

Bullet points/lists

It tends to be much easier to remember information when it is presented in list form. It can help you categorize and organize information.

Quotation

If you hear (or read) a short phrase or extract which is extremely powerful and summarizes an idea very clearly, you may want to write it down word for word.

D Activation

Read the following text and make notes on it. A sample set of notes is provided in the answers section on page 212. A blank note-taking form, which you should use, can be photocopied from Appendix 1, Step 10, Document 3. Do not take longer than ten minutes to do this.

As they listen, students are expected to take notes, which will allow them to retrieve information later. Lecturers may try to help this process by indicating the overall structure and purpose of the lecture in visuals and handouts. They may vary their intonation to indicate the end of one section and the start of a new one. They may use textual signalling language: macro-markers, which state how the sections of the lecture fit together or link to other parts of a course, and micro-markers such as *but, well, now, so*. As well as signalling relations in meaning, these are also used to indicate where the lecturer moves to a new idea. However, students with a low proficiency level for listening may be unable to recognize the function of intonation, or distinguish signalling language from content language. They may find it difficult to listen, read and take notes at the same time. They may fail to recognize that they should supplement information contained in visuals and handouts with interpretive and evaluative comments made by the lecturer.

Extract from Alexander, O., Argent, S. & Spencer, J. (2008). *EAP Essentials*. Reading: Garnet Education: 220.

E Application

- **Look at the notes from the last lecture/piece of reading you did.**
 - Do you understand them? If not, why not? Consider what improvements could be made.
 - Do the same for notes you wrote six months ago. Do you understand them?
- **Having used the sample notes from this chapter ...**
 - what did you like about them? How will you change your note-taking habits?
 - what did you not like about them? What will you not change?
- **Compare your notes with those of a friend or colleague who went to the same lecture, or who read the same text.**
 - Can you learn anything from her or his note-taking system?
- **Take some time after the lecture to edit your notes – an extra few minutes can have long-term benefits. Do not just put them in a file, never to be seen again.**

F Extension

- Step 12 looks at **time management** – an important crossover as note-taking consumes so much of your time as a student.
- Step 13 develops your ability to understand the **titles** of your assignments – knowledge of which will enable you to take more relevant notes.
- Step 31 analyzes the language which can be used to **report** what others have said.
- Appendix 1, Step 10, Document 3 is a photocopiable blank template form for note-taking, as outlined in part B.
- Appendix 3, Step 10 suggests more symbols and abbreviations which you might consider using when taking notes.