

“Do I need to write this down?”

How many times have you asked yourself this question in the middle of a lecture? Deciding what’s important enough to include in your notes and what’s not can be difficult and frustrating. Teachers tell you that you shouldn’t try to write down everything that’s said in class, but you don’t want to leave out important information. On top of that, it’s often hard to keep up with the pace of the lecture, and key points can slide by before you get them down. The system of note-taking that we endorse helps to eliminate these difficulties by simplifying the process to a single question: Is this likely to be on a test or exam? In other words, you write down only the concepts and ideas you feel you will be tested on, in a format that simultaneously prepares your study notes. This system is called 4R and consists of good listening skills and selective note taking skills.

Listen to This!

To be an effective note taker, you have to be a good listener. It’s tough to keep your mind from wandering during a class, but you’ll save yourself a lot of aggravation if you can stay tuned in to the lecture. First of all, you won’t miss the important stuff, so your notes should be complete. You won’t have to spend time copying a classmate’s notes to supplement your own. Second, studying for a test should be easier. When you really listen to a lesson, you’ll be surprised at how much of it you remember when you go back to review your notes. You’ll be refreshing your memory rather than looking at the material for the first time. We’ve got some tips on how to “LISTEN” to even the driest subject matter.

L – Lead

Keep yourself in the lead; prepare for your classes. *Prepare physically.* Be ready to write as soon as your professor starts talking. Often an outline of the lecture is given at the beginning of the class so you can make note of the key areas of importance. *Prepare mentally.* A few minutes spent preparing for class is time well spent. Skimming the next chapter

of your text to become acquainted with new vocabulary and ideas will make the lecture easier to follow. This will help you decide what’s important and what’s filler. A quick glance at your notes from the previous class will refresh your memory and set the stage for the present class. This review is especially helpful for students who are having difficulty.

I – Ideas

If you try to write down everything that’s said in a lecture, you end up listening word by word rather than listening for the meaning of what’s being said. Instead, try to look for the main ideas and concepts that should be included in your notes.

S – Summarize

As you listen, try to summarize the lecture into key concepts and ideas. Your professor will indicate main ideas by using phrases such as “in conclusion ...,” “four reasons for ...,” and “the characteristics of ...”. When you hear these kinds of cue words, it’s a good idea to include the information in your notes.

T – Talk

Take part in class. Even if you don’t like a particular subject, you might as well try to make the best of it. You’ve got to be there anyway, and you may find that you enjoy the class more if you take on an active role. Answering questions and offering relevant opinions can turn a class into an interesting discussion and help you resist daydreaming. When you’re having trouble grasping a particular concept, don’t be afraid to ask for clarification. If you’re afraid you’ll look stupid, look at it this way: it’s better than trying to teach yourself something you don’t understand when you’re studying for a test.

E – End

The last five minutes of the class are often a summary of the lecture. Use this time to fill in any holes in your notes rather than packing up your books

so you can be the first one out of the classroom. The conclusion is a valuable part of the lesson.

N – Notes

Take good notes. Listening effectively is the first step of note-taking, but you'll retain as little as 20% of the lectures after only 24 hours unless you review. We've got some ideas on how to keep your notes to a minimum yet make sure they contain the maximum amount of information.

First Class Notes

Before we get into the specific details of note-taking, we'd like to make a case for getting off to a good start. The first class of each course lays the foundation for the rest of the semester, so it's important to be there. Course outlines are introduced, teacher expectations detailed, and grading systems explained. This groundwork will help you tailor your style of note-taking to your instructor's teaching style. Does your instructor lecture straight from the text? If so, you may simply have to highlight key passages of your textbook. Are the lecture notes a supplement to the text? Or does the professor not use a text? If this is the case, your notes will have to be much more detailed. Whatever your professor's style of lecturing, you'll need a note-taking style of your own.

Taking Notes in Class

The method of note-taking we recommend is the 4R method. It's a simple system that will save you an enormous amount of study time because the notes you take in class are your review notes. Before you begin, divide your page into two columns by drawing a vertical line on your page about 2 1/2 inches (6 centimeters) from the left edge. Some bookstores carry 4R notepaper (also called Cornell paper) to save you the bother of drawing the lines. The 4 R's are explained below.

Recall/Summary

1. Record

Main Column

During the lecture, record in this column the most important facts and ideas presented.

2. Reduce

As soon after the lecture as possible, review your notes to see whether they make logical sense, and then summarize (reduce) the facts into key words and phrases in the recall column. Write down questions you think you may be asked on an exam. These key words will act as test questions when you study. Note areas that need clarification.

3. Recall

Cover the main column. Using only your cues and questions, see how much of the content you can recall *aloud*. Then uncover your notes to see how accurate you were. This procedure is extremely effective in transferring facts into your long-term memory. It's the same way actors learn their lines.

4. Review

If you review your notes regularly, you'll retain most of the information. Studying for an exam will then be a review process, not a learning process.

The 4R system will definitely help you study more effectively, but what if you can't keep up with your teacher? How can you best organize your notebooks?

Note-taking Tips

If you look at tests and exams as a summary of your courses and your notes as the answers to test and exam questions, you'll have an easier time pinpointing what you should include in your notes. Here are some other ideas.

1. Read/skim your text before class.

We've mentioned this briefly, but we'd like to emphasize three benefits:

When the lecture begins, you'll know which are the main areas of study and which are less important.

- a) You'll be more familiar with terminology and vocabulary.
- b) The lecture will be reinforcement; you'll be getting your first review of the topic when everyone else will be hearing it for the first time.

2. Go early, stay late.

The first five minutes of a class are usually a summary of the previous class. Getting there early and setting up before your teacher begins will allow you several minutes to go over your notes.

You'll be ready to add anything you've missed. If your instructor gives an outline of the upcoming lesson, you'll be able to jot it down.

You can count on a busy end to the class. The last five minutes are either a summary of the lesson or are packed with everything your instructor couldn't fit into the first 45 minutes. If you put away your books early, you could be missing the most important part of the lecture.

3. Sit close to the teacher.

A correlation exists between grades and where you sit in the classroom. There are exceptions to the rule, of course, but generally, the closer to the front of the room a student sits, the higher the marks he or she earns. Why?

Sitting up front makes it easier to keep your attention on the lesson, as there are fewer distractions. It's easier to hear your professor. And it seems that students who sit near the instructor work harder.

4. Don't try to take down everything.

It's impossible, and you'll only get frustrated. Focus on the main points and any examples used to illustrate them. Important ideas are indicated by

- a) time: the more time spent on an idea, the more important the idea.
- b) blackboard/presentation screen: if it's written on the board or shown on a presentation screen, it's probably important.
- c) videos, DVDs: if your teacher takes the time to show you a video on the subject, you'll know it's a significant area of study.
- d) emphasis: if the concept is repeated many times, it's another indication of key material.

- e) teacher: if your teacher looks at his or her notes carefully before making a point, it's likely to be important.
- f) summary statements: they often contain the concept in capsule form.

5. Use abbrev.

Your own set of abbreviations and symbols will save you time in class. We have a list of examples, but we emphasize that whichever you use be familiar to you. It won't do you any good to make up a whole new system and then forget what the symbols mean when you go back to study your notes.

about	@
according to	acc to
and	&
continued	contd
definition	def
department	dept
each	ea
equals	=
example	eg
first	1 st
important	NB or *
management	mgt
maximum	max
minimum	min
number	#
therefore	3 dots in triangle shape
should be	s/b
results in	→
without	w/o
versus	vs

6. Use lots of paper.

If you cram your notes together, you'll probably have a tough time deciphering them later on. Use lots of space and they'll be easier to study from. Don't squeeze diagrams or graphs into a one-inch square, and make sure you label them well so that you'll understand them when you have to study for a test.

Write on one side of the page only. This is not a waste of paper! Your notes will appear less crowded and will be easier to organize. The left (unused) side of the page can be used for integrating

notes from the text, for filling in notes that you've missed, or for making study notes.

7. Leave spaces if you can't keep up.

If your professor is a speed demon, don't panic. Get down what you can, leave spaces, and listen carefully to the rest of the lecture. Immediately after the class, fill in the missing information; you should remember most of it. If you don't, borrow a friend's notes to get what you've missed. If you repeatedly have trouble following the lesson, make an appointment with your teacher to talk about possible solutions.

8. Use a separate binder for each subject.

Everyone has his or her own preference, but most top students prefer this note-keeping system. A small three-ring binder makes handouts easy to incorporate, and it's easy to insert notes in the right place if you've missed a class. Large binders designed for six subjects fill too quickly. Furthermore, you won't lose your notes for six subjects if you lose one binder.

9. Don't rewrite.

Rewriting your notes as a method of studying is not usually recommended. Reviewing your notes aloud (rehearsing) is faster and more effective reinforcement.

10. Compare notes.

Sit down with two or three classmates, and exchange notes; you'll get a different perspective of what the most important course information is. Discussing why your peers took down certain points may help you see what should be included in your notes and what is unimportant.

Taking good notes is essential to your success. Your memory isn't reliable on its own. After only 24 hours, up to 80% of what you absorbed in a lecture is forgotten. Regular review, however, can reverse these numbers so that you retain at least 80% of the course material.

Want more information?

The Counselling Department and the Academic Success Centre are your best sources for advice and information on issues related to learning, studying, time management, and academic performance.

Workshops on learning, studying, etc., are offered regularly each semester by the Counselling Department. Please contact Student Services at Abbotsford – 604 854 4528 (B 214) or Chilliwack – 604 795 2808 (A 1318) to make an appointment.

Study Skills Tip Sheets providing information on many learning and time management topics, as well as writing and referencing, are available free to students. The complete range of Study Skills Tip Sheets is available on-line at www.ufv.ca/counselling/study/.

Other Relevant Study Skills Tip Sheets:

SQ4R: A Classic Method for Studying Texts

From: "Making your Mark"
7th Edition, Lisa Fraser
LDF Publishing Inc.