

Learning from Lectures

Introduction

Listening, sifting through information, and taking accurate, detailed lecture notes are some of the most important skills students need for learning at university. Your notes are the payoff for the time you invest in class and they provide a critical tool for exam preparation. This Study Skills Tip Sheet will discuss several skills that are important for learning from lectures - how to listen actively, how to decide what and how much to write down, and how to record that information.

Effective Listening

Listening is one of the most important, yet least recognized, skills necessary for learning from lectures. Most students don't naturally listen in the way that the lecture setting demands. To listen effectively, you must listen actively. To become an active listener, you begin by "engaging" the speaker - that is; you create an internal conversation between you and the instructor as s/he is lecturing. This includes actively anticipating and questioning what the lecturer says, and sorting or categorizing the information being presented. Engaging the speaker is easier if you sit where you can maintain good eye contact and hear clearly. If you read over your notes from the previous class and do any assigned readings BEFORE the lecture, you'll be well prepared to be an active listener.

Learning from lectures also means that you must adapt to the style of your instructors. They decide what topics the lecture will cover, as well as how quickly the information will be presented. Adapting to a monotonous or fast pace is a challenge for even the most experienced student. Getting information and advice on note taking strategies can be helpful if your skills are challenged by your instructor's particular lecturing style. The Counselling Department offers free advice; you can make an appointment by going into Student Services in Abbotsford (604-854-4528) or Chilliwack (604-795-2808).

Deciding What to Write Down

Two common dilemmas facing students in lectures are deciding what and how much to write down, and determining the best method for recording that information.

Analyze the Course Context

It's common for first-year students, who are used to the direction and structure of high school classes, to have difficulties in deciding what to write down in a lecture. At university, you're responsible for determining what's important in a lecture. To decide what's important, you need to analyze the course's learning demands. These steps can help you determine what and how much to write down in lectures.

- Consider your instructor's objectives for the course. What knowledge and skills does s/he expect you to master?
- Figure out how the information from the lectures, textbooks, and labs or seminars fit together.
- Define your role in the lecture. Are you a recorder of information; an observer of the process of how an expert thinks, analyzes, and solves problems; or some combination of both?
- Determine if tests and exams will focus on lectures, text material, or both.

It's important to be aware of this kind of information because these factors and others form the basis for the decisions you make about how much to write down in lectures, the amount of detail in which you'll study your texts, and what course material to concentrate on when preparing for exams. Where do you find this information?

The best source is your instructors. As experts in their fields, they decide what topics to present, how to organize the course, and how to evaluate your knowledge of the course content and any skills you are expected to acquire. Some instructors clearly indicate important content. When they don't, here are some suggestions to help you determine what is important:

- Sometimes information on what's important is implicit in the way the lecture is organized. Watch for verbal clues like "First . . . second . . ." which denote a series of important points, or more explicit clues like, "Note that . . ."
- Non-verbal information, such as the instructor's facial expression or tone of voice, can indicate that a topic is important.
- The amount of time the instructor spends on a topic may be another indication of its importance.
- The course outline, which is often distributed in the first class, is a valuable resource that is all too often skimmed and filed for the duration of the course. The course outline can indicate which topics will be emphasized and what the organizational structure of the course will be. Keep your course outlines in a safe place and refer to them often.
- A general rule of thumb is that if the instructor takes the trouble to write something on the board, it is important.

Be There or Beware

Although instructors vary as to the type and amount of information they provide about what's important, if you're not in class, you won't get any of it. If you borrow a classmate's notes, you could be missing important information, and the information you do get has been filtered by someone else's background knowledge, note taking skills, and attention span. Depending on friends for notes is a high-risk approach to learning from lectures.

Complete Assigned Readings

Give priority to completing assigned readings before class so that you won't be struggling to copy something that is already in your text. Doing the readings beforehand can also help you to listen more actively in class, predict the topics the lecture may cover, and indicate to you which questions or difficulties you should clarify in class.

Use a Partner

You can try working with a classmate to develop your note taking skills. After class compare notes and analyze the differences. Discuss why you recorded something and your partner didn't, and vice versa.

After a week or two, if you're still unsure whether you're getting down the important points, you can ask the instructor to give you some feedback on your notes from one lecture.

Note Taking Mechanics

Many students find that the note taking methods they used in high school can usually be adapted for most of their courses in university. To some extent the way you put your notes down on paper is a course-specific decision, and you will probably find that the type and amount of notes you take will vary considerably from course to course. If you've been dissatisfied with the way you took notes in the past, or if you're having problems with note taking in a particular class, you may want to discuss strategies and ideas with a Counsellor. Meanwhile, here are some general "dos and don'ts" to consider for all your courses:

DO . . .

- Use looseleaf paper so you can integrate handouts, lecture notes, and text notes in your course binder. Be sure to date and number pages.
- Make sure that you can read what you record. Illegible notes waste time and paper; print if your handwriting is bad and use pen except for problem-based classes. If your handwriting is really bad you may want to look into using a laptop computer for taking lecture notes. However...
- Think carefully before deciding to use a laptop for taking lecture notes. Paper is still easier, cheaper, and more versatile and portable. If you do use a laptop, be sure to keep a backup copy of your notes in several places in case it breaks down, or is lost or stolen. You'll also still likely print your notes to study from -- reading from a computer screen, particularly on a laptop, is more uncomfortable and stressful than reading from paper, and it's a lot easier to highlight and make margin notes on a hard copy.
- Carry only the day's notes with you. Keep your binders safe at home and file notes each day.
- Make it easy on your eyes and write on only one side of the page. Use the back of the page for questions, study notes, messages to yourself, and thoughts or insights which occur to you during class.

Learning from Lectures

- Leave plenty of space between topics so that you have room to edit your notes.
- Set aside a few minutes each day, as soon as possible after class, to edit your notes. Find and fill in any missing points, underline and highlight titles and important points, and summarize the main points of the lecture.

DON'T . . .

- Don't depend on someone else's notes. Your notes are particular to your skills and prior knowledge - they are unique to you.
- Don't habitually tape lectures, unless you have a special reason for doing so (i.e., you have a learning disability or are an English as a Second Language student). Taping can be helpful if your instructor goes too quickly, but it more than doubles your lecture time and can become a barrier to developing note taking skills. Be sure to ask your instructor's permission if you do decide to tape lectures.
- Don't cause or tolerate distractions. Move or tactfully ask those making noise to be quiet.
- Don't assume for any reason that going to class is unnecessary.

Want more information?

The Counselling Department is the best source for advice and information on issues related to exam preparation and other learning and study issues.

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 (E 105) 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/.

Links to Resources Elsewhere:

More information on learning from lectures can be found at these sites from Virginia Tech University at: <http://www.ucc.vt.edu/stdysk/concentr.html>

Control of the Study Environment
Remembering
Study Distractions
Note taking and In-Class Skills
Editing Lecture Notes

York University offers a comprehensive site on note taking at:
<http://www.yorku.ca/cds/lss/skillbuilding/notetaking.html>

Other Relevant Study Skills Tip Sheets:

Collaborative Group Work
Concentration
Learning from Textbooks
Managing Nervousness During Oral Presentations
Reading and the Web
A Classic Method for Studying Texts: SQ4R

With thanks to the University of Guelph
Learning Services
The Learning Commons