

Improving Note-Taking Skills

Students often say after a few semesters at UW, “I finally figured out how to take good notes!” These students also frequently say, “I wish I’d known this when I first came to college.” The tips below are meant to give you a jump in tailoring your own approach to note-taking, and come mostly from research on effective note-taking as well as tips from advanced students. Maybe the most important suggestion, though, is to think of note-taking NOT just as a “recording activity,” but rather as a method (tailored to your needs) for improving learning. Strong note-taking takes a willingness to try new strategies, practice, and flexibility for the demands of different courses.

Common Mistakes in Note-taking

- Trying to write down everything the instructors says
- Leaving no space for editing, adding, and reflecting on notes
- Failing to do the reading before class
- Re-copying notes (an efficient system should eliminate the need for re-copying)
- Stopping note-taking during class discussion (even if the instructor writes material on the board)

Student Voice: It’s probably obvious advice, but the two biggest things that helped me were showing up for class and being confident that the material was worth learning...even in classes I didn’t love.

Best Practices

- Use a three-ring binder rather than a spiral bound notebook (this gives flexibility to add, copy, or re-organize pages)
- Give a heading and date for each class period’s notes
- Take notes while you read your textbook. Incorporate these notes into your lecture notes.
- Leave generous space in the margins and at the bottom of pages for adding and summarizing points
- Quickly develop a system for abbreviation in the first few weeks of class. If your instructor has his/her own system of abbreviation, make yourself a key so you remember what abbreviations mean
- Develop a way to identify key points that the instructor hints (or directly says) are important (for example, highlighting or starring)
- Mark vocabulary words by highlighting, underlining, or bracketing/boxing
- Keep notes as concise as possible
- Be able (and ready) to change your note-taking style from course to course
- Use sticky tabs or post-its to mark important sections in your notes that you’ll need to come back to (for referencing in papers, studying for exams, memorizing information)
- Review your notes for a few minutes before class, and a few minutes after class
- Visit the instructor in the first month of class, share your note-taking and request suggestions
- Make copies of helpful tables or graphs from your textbook and tape them onto blank pages in your notes
- Consider using the “Cornell Method” (on the other side)

Student Difficulties

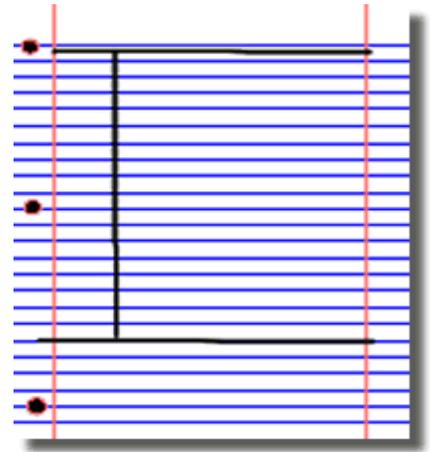
I can’t write as fast as the instructor talks. Insert blank lines in your notes whenever you miss information—and then talk with friends or the instructor to fill in missing components. Try using a laptop to take notes if you have one available to you.

I try to listen harder when I’m confused and then I stop writing. Just keep writing, even if you don’t understand something the instructor says. The more information you have in their notes, the more you will have to “work with” later when you’re processing your notes.

I can’t read my handwriting after I take notes. Read your notes out loud as you go back over them. Reading aloud helps to “trigger” memory and also aids in connecting concepts.

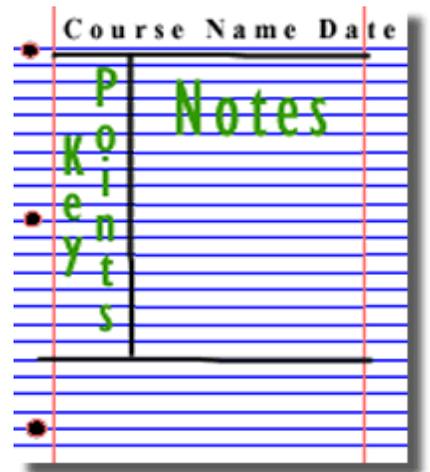
Divide the paper into three sections.

- Draw a dark horizontal line about 5 or 6 lines from the bottom. Use a heavy magic marker to draw the line so that it is clear.
- Draw a dark vertical line about 2 inches from the left side of the paper from the top to the horizontal line.
- Write course name, date, and topic at the top of each page.



Write notes.

- The large box to the right is for writing notes.
- The box to the left is for capturing key ideas, concepts, and vocabulary during your review.
- Skip a line between ideas and topics.
- Review the notes as soon as possible after class.



Summarize.

- Write a summary of the main ideas in the bottom section (during your daily or weekly review time).
- Spend most of your time studying the ideas in the left column and the summary at the bottom. These are the most important ideas and will probably include most of the information that you will be tested on.

