How to take good lecture notes

During the Lecture

1. Write down the title of the lecture, the name of the course and the date.
2. Listen carefully to the introduction (if there is one). By knowing this outline, you will be better prepared to anticipate what notes you will need to take. Decipher this outline by listening for:
   - A topic for each section.
   - Supporting points or examples for the topic.
3. Copy what's written on the whiteboard and transparencies, especially the outline. To make sure that you get everything, get in the habit of skipping words like "the" and "a" and make use of shorthand and abbreviations. Summarize your notes in your own words, not the instructor's. Remember: your goal is to understand what the professor is saying, not to try to record exactly everything he or she says.
4. Recognize main ideas by signal words that indicate something important is to follow. See the tip on signals below.
5. Jot down details or examples that support the main ideas. Take down examples and sketches which the lecturer presents. Indicate examples with "e.g." or "ex." Give special attention to details not covered in the textbook.
6. If there is a summary at the end of the lecture, pay close attention to it. You can use it to check the organization of your notes. If your notes seem disorganized, copy down the main points that are covered in the summary. It will help in revising your notes later.
7. At the end of the lecture, ask questions about points that you did not understand.

After the Lecture

1. Revise your notes as quickly as possible, preferably immediately after the lecture, since at that time you will still remember a good deal of the lecture. Also it is a good idea to reread your notes within 24 hours of the lecture.
2. During the first review period after the lecture, coordinate reading and lecture notes.
3. Review your lecture notes at least once a week. Also, review the lecture notes before the next lecture.

Tips

- Remember that taking notes is not the primary reason for attending a lecture, trying to make your notes too perfect is a pitfall.
- Collect notes for each course in one place, in a separate notebook or section of a notebook.
- Write notes on one side of the paper only. Use a pen -- pencil will smear eventually, which is bad if the final test is cumulative or if you want to save your notes.
• Use a loose-leaf notebook rather than a notebook with a permanent binding. See the pattern of a lecture by spreading out the pages.

• Use two pieces of paper, one as a draft, and one as your final notes or use the Cornell Notetaking Method to organize the revision and review of your notes.

• Enter your notes legibly because it saves time. Make them clear.

• Box assignments and suggested books so you can identify them quickly.

• Mark ideas which the lecture emphasizes with an arrow or some special symbol.

• When the teacher looks at his/her notes, pay attention to what they say next.

• Trade your "draft" notes with a classmate after each lecture. A scanner and email works great for passing these notes.

• Incorporate different colors of ink, diagrams, drawings of your own. Make your notes your notes. Take advantage of how you learn (visually, orally, or actively) and write/draw your notes according to that style.

• Watch for signal words. Your instructor is not going to send up a rocket when He/she states an important new idea or gives an example, but she will use signals to telegraph what she is doing. Every good speaker does it, and you should expect to receive these signals. For example, she may introduce an example with "for example" as done here. Other common signals:

  o "There are three reasons why...." (Here they come!)

  o "First...Second... Third...." (There they are!)

  o "And most important,...." (A main idea!)

  o "A major development...." (A main idea again!)

He/She may signal support material with:

  o "On the other hand...."

  o "On the contrary...."

  o "For example...."

  o "Similarly...."

  o "In contrast...."

  o "Also...."
He may signal conclusion or summary with:

- "Therefore...."
- "In conclusion...."
- "As a result...."
- "Finally...."
- "In summary...."
- "From this we see...."

He/She may signal very loudly with:

- "Now this is important...."
- "Remember that...."
- "The important idea is that...."
- "The basic concept here is...."

Consider splitting the page into two columns -- keep lecture notes on one side, and write questions that come up during the lecture on the other side. This will ensure that you don't forget any unclear points or questions that come up during the lecture, and will enable you to associate the answer with the relevant material when you find it later. Also, if you go to office hours, your professor will notice that you were paying attention in class, which will pay off in the long run.

Consider buying a cheap tape recorder. Take in consideration the recording range of the hardware (on the package), the length of tape and the lecture, how big the lecture hall is, and how far away you will be from the lecturer.

Remember to ask permission before taping your professor (or anyone!) Most teachers are delighted to have a student who takes that much interest in their subject. But, they still may say no (possibly because they don't want to get sued), and that you have to accept that.

Most newer micro recorders will record to internal memory in a PC-friendly audio format (like MP3, WMA, etc). You can be the class hero by transferring these to your PC and then
uploading them to your personal web page or MySpace page. Use a descriptive title when naming the files to stay organized (include date of class, professor and class subject code).

- If you have an MP3 player, see if it has a built-in microphone and recording capabilities. Most iPods don't, but many other brands do (e.g. Creative Zen Micro). Like a digital micro recorder, you can transfer files easily to your computer or a web page.

- If feasible, consider using a laptop computer (even an old one) and a note-taking program such as OneNote or BasKet or an online wiki to take outline-style notes. This doesn't work for every student or every course, but has many advantages: faster typing means more complete ideas are recorded, it will always be legible, and it is easier to edit and share your notes. It does not work so well for courses in which the notes include many pictures or diagrams, but you still may find it worthwhile. Be sure to backup your notes regularly if you do this!

- You don't have to be too much of a perfectionist with note-taking. Some people are so careful at taking notes that often they cannot finish them during the lecture, and need to get them from someone else afterwards. Or, if they make a mistake, they must throw out the entire page. This is not a very efficient or productive way to take notes!

Warnings

- Do not perform manual activities which will detract from taking notes. Do not doodle or play with your pen. These activities break eye contact and concentration. Although some people learn best while fidgeting (an active learning style), it is distracting to others. Therefore, if you learn best while doodling or tapping your foot, sit near people who do the same or who don't keep glaring in your direction.

- If you are gathering together your personal belongings when you should be listening, you're bound to miss an important point--perhaps an announcement about the next exam--or, at the least, insult the professor.