



Making the Most of Your Notes

1. Taking Notes in Lectures

Before the Lecture:

Even if it is just a quick overview, make sure you have looked at your readings (these are often available in your course materials on Blackboard). The lecture itself will then be the second time you encounter the information and so you should be able to recognise key concepts and have some understanding of the topics underlying structure, as well as how everything fits into the “bigger picture” of your paper.

During the Lecture:

Even if the lecturer gives you a handout, it is still important to take notes.

- To actively engage with the information being presented
- To help you to concentrate and to focus your thinking
- To increase your understanding of the topic
- Because the lecturer will include useful and interesting information that is not in the handout

Listen actively and pay special attention to:

- Introductory comments as these provide important information about the lecture.
- Any material emphasised by the lecturer (e.g. through repetition; change in voice tone; physical gestures; notes on board; comments such as, “this is really significant” or, “this might come up in the exam”). Mark these in your notes to indicate their importance.

You don’t need to write down everything the lecturer says and don’t worry about trying to write complete sentences. Do note key points with enough information so that your notes make sense to you when you look at them again in the future.

As you take notes, try to develop a logical framework e.g., use headings and subheadings for main and secondary points, lettering or numbering for showing sequence and priority.

After the Lecture:

If possible, it is best to review your notes the same day while the lecture is fresh in your memory.

When you review your notes, don't laboriously re-write everything neatly. Instead, read them through and question yourself about your understanding of the material. Identify any areas of confusion or where you need more information, and then refer back to your texts and handouts to clarify your understanding. (If after reviewing your notes and readings you still have questions or are unsure about material ask your tutor or lecturer for help.)

Have a look at the Student Learning Development *Note-taking from lectures* table in the Notes Supplement. You might also like to try the Cornell note taking method:

http://lsc.cornell.edu/LSC_Resources/cornellsystem.pdf

There are many variations on these themes. If the ideas so far don't appeal, try doing a YouTube search for 'note taking'. There are numerous short videos which explain different techniques. The thing they all have in common is getting you to listen actively during lectures and then revisit key questions, ideas, evidence and conclusions right after lectures. Find a technique that works for you and stick to it.

Often it's helpful to expand your lecture notes using additional information from labs, tutorials, textbooks and other sources. When expanding your notes, devise a system to differentiate between direct quotes and your own words (e.g. put in the margin quote marks or large "Q", "me" or "mine". Make sure you record the author, name of the publication, and the page number/s of all your sources, so that if you need to look up this information again later, you can.

You should also review your notes regularly. Identify key concepts and quiz yourself about them. How much can you remember?

2. Making Notes from the Readings

Course readings are a major source from which you will gather information about a particular topic. Your lecturer will have emphasised important aspects of the topic based on the same readings.

First, think about why you are making the notes. Don't just decide to read and take notes from a chapter or article without knowing what you are going to do with them.

Are the notes you are making preparation for a lecture, an assignment, revision for an exam, to explore a topic, or to gain a quick overview of the topic. The purpose will determine the depth and breadth of the information you need to take down as well as the form your notes should take.

Read and take notes in manageable chunks (what is “manageable” will be different for each person). Summarise what you have read in your own words, then read another chunk, and so on. To use your time effectively, pay attention and focus on your readings; otherwise you may end up needing to re-read material.

There are a variety of ways to note information from reading materials: writing a summary, bullet pointing important ideas, mapping out concepts, or using tables (have a look at the Student Learning Centre *Note-taking from readings* table in the Notes Supplement). Some students find it really useful to form their notes into a concept map.

Concept Maps:

To aid with engagement, understanding, and recall, many students find it helpful to arrange notes into a concept map. Creating a visual representation of a single lecture, article, book or entire course can aid learning in a number of ways:

- It stimulates your brain, gets you interested
- It gets you to process and engage actively with ideas and information
- It helps you to sift out and spot central ideas and key concepts
- It helps you to identify relationships/links between ideas and information
- It gives you an overview of the “big picture”
- It gives you a useful tool for assignment preparation and exam revision

Be creative in your maps—use colours, small drawings, and symbols such as ticks, crosses, and circles to show categories, hierarchies, connections, and relationships. Try searching YouTube for ‘concept maps’ for ideas to get you started.

Remember, the better your notes are the more useful they will be to you. During exam time if you have already created a good set of notes then you have essential material at hand and ready for exam revision.