

Note Taking Strategies

We're all doing it: lugging our laptops, tablets and notebooks from class to class, trying our best to take in every word, and putting it down on the page during each lecture we attend. But maybe the professor speaks fast, or maybe the slides are just pictures without much text. Maybe it feels like there are too many examples or maybe you feel your focus slipping in a three-hour lecture.

Note Goals

Before you jump into writing your notes, consider the purpose of your notes and what you plan to use them for. Here are some of the reasons we take notes:

- **Stay Focused and Engaged in Lectures:** You'll be more likely to understand the material in real time if you are taking it down, and it will help you avoid zoning out.
- **Identify and Capture Key Information:** Your professor emphasizes the important concepts so you can better filter out what's most essential to your assignments and exams.
- **Aid Memory and Understanding:** the act of writing or typing helps encode information in your brain, which improves recall and comprehension
- **Create a Personal Learning Resource:** You can create notes that are tailored to your learning preferences, that are useful and accessible to you when you study.
- **Efficient Studying Later:** A set of well-organized and concise notes will be easier to work with and revise when exam time comes.
- **Assess Your Learning:** Reviewing your notes can show you what you and what you don't understand so you can ask further questions or seek help early.

The goal for your notes is to **build a structured, understandable and useful study guide** that supports your studying at exam time.

Note-Taking Systems

It's best to use a style of note taking that works for you and that you can keep up with consistently. Students use a variety of note-taking systems, and each comes with their own pros and cons. The trick is to figure out what fits your needs. Some note-taking systems include:

- **Note Restructuring:** reinforce your learning by reviewing your notes **within 48 hours** (while it's still fresh). Clarify any confusing points, fill in gaps, and organize the information so that it's clear when you go to study it later. Adding summaries and using your own words helps with understanding and retention.
 - **Pros:** encourages active learning, identifies any areas you need help with early and makes your notes useable for studying later

- **Cons:** can be time consuming (if you don't stay on top of it, it can pile up), there's a risk that you just end up rewriting, which isn't as valuable as the active learning involved in restructuring
- **Cornell Notes:** Using a structured page layout for your notes that leaves room for your lecture notes, key concepts, cues and questions and space for a summary at the bottom of each page. (You can find a Cornell Notes template in our resources. This is a built-in system of organization that if used consistently, can make things easy to identify main points and reflect on your learning.
 - **Pros:** Great for quizzing and reviewing before exams
 - **Cons:** it takes time to set up and it's hard to start the system halfway through a class, it can feel very rigid for some students.
- **Mind Maps:** Organize your notes by visually organizing information around central themes using branches, keywords, images and arrows. This system helps you see relationships between concepts and encourages the big-picture thinking needed for university level assessments.
 - **Pros:** Great for those who like visual aids, allows for creativity and makes complex topics easier to understand
 - **Cons:** Mind maps can become messy, and it's tempting to include too much detail, so mind map notes take practice.
- **Two-Sided (Two Column) Notes:** Divide your page so that your lecture notes go on one side, and your textbook or reading notes go on the other. This layout makes it easier to compare and connect information from the two different sources. It can also make textbook reading and note taking more efficient, since you already have a set of notes to prompt you to look for key content.
 - **Pros:** Encourages deeper understanding by exploring how class material and readings relate, can help you see two different explanations of key material so you can better understand and remember the information
 - **Cons:** Sometimes looks cluttered, and some students feel frustrated when their columns don't perfectly match up.

Need Additional Support?

If you find note-taking challenging or want to improve your strategies, help is available. Book an appointment with a Learning Development and Success [Learning Specialist](#) or visit our [Peer Assisted Learning Centre](#) (PAL) to connect with trained peers who can share tips and techniques. Creating effective and useful notes is a skill that takes practice – with a growth mindset and the right support, you'll keep getting better.