

How to Take Effective Class Notes

Active Listening and Lecture Note Taking Skills for College Students

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Effective notetaking is an important skill that many college students have not mastered. Here are some tips for how to listen actively and take good lecture notes.

Taking excellent **lecture notes** is an essential skill. Unfortunately, high schools often do not prepare students properly for taking notes in a college classroom environment. This can be a serious disadvantage, as effective notetaking is just as important as learning how to write a term paper or take an exam.

Here are some notetaking survival tips for college students.

1) Active listening. "Passive" listening is what you do when you watch a sitcom or have a casual conversation. In contrast, active listening is when you listen carefully to make sure you understand and learn the information that is being conveyed. Here are some things you should do to listen actively.

- **Listen for the main point and major subpoints.**

Don't just write everything down. Listen carefully and make sure you understand what the *purpose* of this lecture is. As you take down notes, keep the main point in mind and make sure you understand how these notes are related.

- **Listen for an organizational structure.**

Unless the teacher is a terrible lecturer, his or her notes are probably organized into some kind of outline. Listen carefully to figure out how the ideas are organized and they will make more sense. Of course, if your professor provides an outline by writing on the board or using PowerPoint notes, take advantage of this.

- **Pay attention to organizational cues.**

Listen carefully for words and phrases that reflect the organizational structure of the lecture. Pay close attention to the introduction, as it will probably indicate how you should organize your notes. If the lecture begins with, "Today I'm going to talk about three ethnic conflicts in the Middle East," then you have a good idea of what's going to follow. Listen for "signpost" words to indicate a transition for one point to the next, such as "next" and "finally" and numerical signposts like "first" or "third."

- **Listen with your eyes.**

Speakers communicate information through nonverbal communication. Watch the professor, and be aware of how he or she uses hand gestures, eye contact, and other body language to convey points.

- **Remove distractions.**

Don't tempt yourself! Put away the Herald or the Martini, your Sudoku puzzle, your cell phone, and anything else that might be more interesting than the lecturer.

- **Practice.**

Learning to concentrate and listen actively is an endurance skill. Make yourself do it, and it will get easier over time.

2) Proper techniques for writing and lecture notes. Learning to write down all the important information in an organized way is a challenge as well. Here are some tips to help you out:

- **Write down the date and the topic of the lecture.**

This will help trigger your memory when you are studying.

- **Learn to write quickly.**

Or type quickly, if you're using a laptop. Use lots of abbreviations. Don't worry about getting down every word, especially words like "a" and "the." Don't worry about writing neatly. As long as you can understand your notes, it's neat enough.

- **Write down definitions.**

If your instructor defines a term, make sure you write it down and understand what it means.

- **Don't copy outline or PowerPoint notes word for word.**

Here's a common problem: a professor puts a PowerPoint slide up, and students are so busy writing down every word on the slide that they stop listening to the lecture. This causes them to miss information that was discussed in the lecture but not written on the slide, and it also makes active listening impossible. Instead, use the notes to help you follow along.

- **If your professor indicates that something is important, mark it.**

This is a strong clue that something may be on the test.

- **If your instructor is going too fast or is unclear, say something.**

Even the best lecturers get a little garbled sometimes. There's nothing rude about asking your professor to clarify a point.

- **Err on the side of writing down too much.**

Excess notes are probably not going to hurt you on the exam. Not writing down enough will.

3) Reviewing your notes. This is very important, but students don't do this nearly enough. Review your notes to make sure you understand all the information and to keep it fresh in your head. Here are some note reviewing tips:

- **After the class period is over, rewrite or type your notes as soon as you can.**

This can help quite a bit with retaining the information.

- **Read over your notes before each class period.**

This doesn't take very long and helps you contextualize the new information.

- **As you look over your notes, mark anything that doesn't make sense to you.**

Stop by the instructor's office hour and ask for clarification, or ask a fellow student to help you out.

- **Make friends with a studious fellow student.**

Find someone who goes to class all the time and who takes good notes, and sit down together once in awhile to compare notes with each other. Even if you listen actively and come to class all the time, you're bound to miss a point here and there, so this can help you both out.

- **Get help if necessary.**

If you're having problems, show your professor your notes and ask for some guidance. Or stop by your campus study skills center and have someone go over your notes with you.