

Taking Notes in Higher Education

Learning Objectives

1. Distinguish between note-taking and note-making.
2. Identify the main objectives of effective note-taking.
3. Apply practical guidelines to improve the quality of their notes.
4. Evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of digital versus handwritten notes.
5. Use at least two structured note-taking methods (e.g., Outline, Cornell, Mind-Mapping).
6. Reflect on their own note-taking habits and suggest improvements.

1. Introduction

Many new university students assume that lecturers will provide all the necessary material in written form, which reduces the perceived need for note-taking. However, note-taking is a fundamental academic skill that students must actively develop. For many first-year students, it is a challenging task because they are unsure **what** to write, **how** to write it, and **when** to record information.

Effective note-taking is not a passive activity; it requires attention, comprehension, and synthesis of ideas during lectures or while reading academic texts.

2. Note-Taking vs. Note-Making

It is important to distinguish between **note-taking** and **note-making**:

- **Note-taking** refers to recording information during a lecture or while reading.
- **Note-making** refers to reorganising, summarising, and refining notes after class to enhance understanding and retention.

Note-making is a deeper cognitive process that transforms raw information into meaningful knowledge.

3. Objectives of Note-Taking

The main objectives of note-taking are:

- **To absorb more information** during lectures.
- **To create a written record** for future revision.
- **To enhance learning and memory** by processing information actively.

In essence, note-taking supports comprehension, retention, and exam preparation.

4. Tools for Note-Taking

Students may use different tools for note-taking, including:

- Laptops
- Notebooks or copybooks
- Loose sheets of paper
- Pens and highlighters

The choice of tool can influence the quality of learning and retention.

5. Important Guidelines for Effective Note-Taking

To take effective notes, you should:

- Avoid writing word-for-word.
- Avoid writing full sentences unnecessarily.
- Focus on key ideas rather than copying everything.
- Review and expand notes within 24 hours to clarify meaning and fill in missing details.
- Prioritise understanding the meaning rather than merely recording words.

Students should also pay special attention when the lecturer emphasises important points (e.g., “Pay attention, this is important”), as well as to major ideas, examples, and conclusions.

Using personal abbreviations and symbols can make note-taking faster and more efficient, provided they remain clear to the student.

6. Drawbacks of Using Laptops for Note-Taking

Although laptops allow faster typing, they present several disadvantages:

- Distraction by browsing other websites.
- Multitasking, which reduces concentration.
- Focusing on writing syntax rather than processing meaning.

A study conducted at Princeton University in 2014 revealed that students who used laptops during a 15-minute lecture recorded approximately 310 words on average, whereas students who wrote by hand recorded about 173 words. While typing offers a speed advantage, excessive recording may limit deeper cognitive processing. When students focus on typing every word, they may devote more attention to syntax rather than comprehension and memory consolidation.

Thus, slower handwritten notes may promote better understanding and long-term retention.

7. Methods of Note-Taking and Note-Making

Several structured methods can improve the effectiveness of notes:

7.1 The Outline Method

Information is organised hierarchically using headings and subheadings. This method is useful for structured lectures with clear main ideas and supporting details.

7.2 The Mind-Mapping Method

This visual method uses diagrams, colours, shapes, and branches (such as trees or spiderwebs) to represent relationships between ideas. It is particularly useful for visual learners. However, it may become disorganised when dealing with large amounts of information.

7.3 The Cornell Method

The Cornell method divides the page into three sections:

1. **Cue column** (keywords, questions, main ideas)
2. **Note-taking column** (details, definitions, dates, examples)
3. **Summary section** (reflection on what has been learned)

This structure promotes both recording and reviewing information effectively.

7.4 The Capture and Create Method

This method uses two columns:

- The first column is for capturing information during the lecture.
- The second column is for creating refined notes after class.

This approach encourages active processing and transformation of information.

8. Reflection and Deep Processing

As stated by the mathematician Eric Temple Bell:

“The map is not the thing mapped; a map is useful only if it summarizes and simplifies what it represents.”

Similarly, notes should summarise and simplify information rather than reproduce it entirely. Students are encouraged to revise and reorganise their notes within 24 hours, before forgetting key explanations or misinterpreting what they initially wrote.

Effective note-taking requires:

- Careful listening
- Understanding before writing
- Writing in one's own words
- Focusing on meaning rather than symbols

9. Conclusion

Note-taking is a critical academic skill that enhances comprehension, memory, and academic performance. It is not merely a mechanical process of writing but an intellectual activity that requires analysis, synthesis, and reflection. By adopting appropriate methods and reviewing notes regularly, university students can significantly improve their learning outcomes.

Key words

- ✚ Note-taking
- ✚ Note-making
- ✚ Active learning
- ✚ Comprehension
- ✚ Retention
- ✚ Synthesis
- ✚ Cognitive processing
- ✚ Multitasking
- ✚ Distraction
- ✚ Outline method
- ✚ Mind-mapping
- ✚ Cornell method
- ✚ Capture and Create method
- ✚ Deep processing
- ✚ Revision
- ✚ Reflection