Note-Taking

1. Why Lectures?

Notes capture the essence of lectures, allowing you to study their content after class. Notes do more than this: They help you to learn the material. Lectures are performances; unlike televised or taped presentations, they progress in real time and demand immediate mental participation. Your notes are not simply records of a lecturer's words; they are part of a process of active listening, mental processing, and manual recording—all of which stimulate the mind and reinforce memory. Pre-printed course notes are both a blessing and a curse. They record the crucial material accurately and allow the student to concentrate on the lecture, but at the cost of reducing the student's role in note production. Ideally, students working with prepared course note packages should annotate, highlight, and review them rigorously.

2. General Strategies

Although students are not expected to take detailed notes in all courses, it is usually an important activity. A single technique will not work ideally well for all students or all courses, but most successful approaches involve at least three tasks:

Filtering the information
Do not copy every word; filter the lecture, noting only the expressions you will need to prompt your memory. Do not try to preserve whole sentences; concentrate on key ideas. You may go so far as to use a personal shorthand or learn a formal system. Whatever you do, be sure you can record the essentials of a lecture.

Classifying the information
Lectures include three types of information: substantive content, references, and illustrations. The substantive content of the lecture consists of concepts and factual material. This may be accompanied by references to various works. Usually, the concepts are illustrated with anecdotes and examples. You will record each type of information differently: The key to grasping the main ideas of a lecture lies in listening, while references must be recorded briefly but precisely, and illustrations may be quickly sketched in.

Organizing the information
Finally, consider adopting a formal note-taking system; even if your own is adequate, you may be able to improve the clarity your notes—and save some time.

3. Techniques: Special Systems

Three note-taking systems illustrate the range of possible approaches: the outline system,
branching, and the Cornell system. The latter includes post-lecture activities that can be combined with any system.

**a.) The outline system**

The outline note form illustrates the relative value of major points and supporting ideas the way a topic outline does. The effort of forming a coherent outline makes the material memorable. Remember these basic points:

1. A heading should *not* have only one subheading. If you have a heading "A", it cannot have only subheading "1" beneath it: There must also be a subheading "2".

2. All headings at a level should identify content of equal importance or complexity.

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**b.) Branching**

Branching is an informal, strongly visual way of expressing relationships between ideas. If you are naturally oriented toward visual representation (some would say you are right brain dominant), try *drawing* your notes. Start in the middle of the page with a key idea, draw a radiating line for each subtopic, and indicate connections between ideas with branching lines.

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**c.) The Cornell system**

**PHASE 1: BEFORE THE LECTURE**

1. Briefly review your notes and readings before class -- immediately before, if you can manage it.

2. Select a loose-leaf sheet or a notebook with 8.5-by-11-inch paper. Draw a vertical line 2 to 3 inches from the left side of each sheet. Write the page number, date, and course number at the top of each sheet (see below):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course name</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Key column:</td>
<td>Notes column:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write key terms here</td>
<td>write full notes here</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| 2.5 inches | 8 inches |
PHASE 2: DURING THE LECTURE

1. Record notes on the right-hand side of the page. Try to capture the main points of the lecture. Do not be concerned with developing an elaborate formal outline using Roman numerals, capital letters, and the like. Indicate subtopics under main headings with numbers or simply with a dash placed in front of each new point.

2. Write so that you will be able to read the material easily. This may mean practicing a form of printing, but in any case write clearly enough so that you do not have to re-write your notes. Though they will obviously look much better if you rewrite or type them, you may not have time to re-create them. Only do so if this is a crucial study activity for you! Your notes should convey the necessary information the first time you write them.

PHASE 3: AFTER THE LECTURE

1. As soon as possible after the lecture, jot down key words and phrases on the left side of the paper. Not only does this help you to recall the lecture, but the process of writing and of summarizing words and phrases helps to fix the information in your mind.

2. Cover the right side of the notebook page so that you are looking only at the key words and phrases. Try to restate the lecture in your own words from these cues. Uncover the notes, and then check the accuracy of your recollections.

3. Reflect on the lecture, using examples from your experience or from your reading to illustrate the main points; make the material part of your own knowledge. Jot down your comments and questions to help integrate the new information and relate it to what you already know.

4. Review your notes regularly. Before each class, review the previous lecture’s notes. Occasionally during the term, review all your lecture notes. Repeat the self-test exercise, discuss the lectures with other students, and compare their notes with your own. A study group will also help you to find gaps in your understanding and new ways of integrating course material with your existing knowledge.