

HOW AND WHY TO TAKE NOTES IN COLLEGE (Based upon Dartmouth College's handout on Taking Lecture Notes, 2001)

I. THERE ARE MANY REASONS FOR TAKING LECTURE NOTES.

- A. Learning to make notes effectively will help you to improve your study and work habits and to remember important information.
- B. Often, students are deceived into thinking that because they understand everything that is said in class they will therefore remember it. This is dead wrong! Write it down. The writing of important points helps you to remember them even before you have studied the material formally.
- C. As you make notes, you will develop skill in selecting important material and in discarding unimportant material.
 - 1. The secret to developing this skill is practice. Check your results constantly. Strive to improve. Notes enable you to retain important facts and data and to develop an accurate means of arranging necessary information.
- D. Making yourself take notes forces you to listen carefully and test your understanding of the material.
- E. When you are reviewing, notes provide a gauge to what is important.
- F. Personal notes are often easier to remember than the Course Outline.

II. INSTRUCTORS USUALLY GIVE CLUES TO WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO TAKE DOWN. SOME OF THE MORE COMMON CLUES ARE:

- A. Material written on the board
- B. Repetition
- C. Emphasis
 - 1. Emphasis can be judged by tone of voice and gesture.
 - 2. Emphasis can be judged by the amount of time the instructor spends on points and the number of examples he or she uses.
- D. Word signals (e.g. "There are two points of view on . . ." "The third reason is . . ." "In conclusion . . .")
- E. Summaries given at the end of class.
- F. Reviews given at the beginning of class.

III. EACH STUDENT SHOULD DEVELOP HIS OR HER OWN METHOD OF TAKING NOTES, BUT MOST STUDENTS FIND THE FOLLOWING SUGGESTIONS HELPFUL:

A. Think a minute about your material before you start making notes. Don't take notes just to be taking notes! Take notes that will be of real value to you when you look over them at a later date.

B. Make your notes brief.

1. You aren't taking dictation, but writing down the important essence of each fact or idea. Don't write down everything that you read or hear. Never use a sentence where you can use a phrase. Never use a phrase where you can use a word.

2. Use abbreviations and symbols, but be consistent.

C. Put most notes in your own words, but try not to change the meaning. However, the following should be noted exactly:

1. Formulas

2. Definitions

3. Specific facts

D. Use outline form and/or a numbering system. Indention helps you distinguish major from minor points.

E. Leave lots of white space for later additions.

1. If a speaker gets sidetracked it is often possible to go back and add further information.

2. If you miss a statement, write key words, skip a few spaces, and get the information later.

3. Leave room for coordinating your notes with the text after the lecture. (You may want to list key terms in the margin or make a summary of the contents of the page.)

F. Date your notes. Perhaps number the pages. Key your notes to the material in the Course Outline or insert your notes in the proper places in the Course Outline.

G. Shortly after making your notes, go back and rework (not redo) your notes by adding extra points and spelling out unclear items. Remember, we forget rapidly. Budget time for this vital step just as you do for the class itself.

H. Review your notes regularly. This is the only way to achieve lasting memory. Remember the rule of thumb: two hours outside of class for every hour in class.

IV. SAVING TIME ON NOTETAKING

A. Here are some hints regarding taking notes on classroom lectures that can save time for almost any student.

1. First, some students say that they plan to rewrite or type their notes later. To do so is to use a double amount of time; once to take the original notes and a second to rewrite them. The advice is simple: **DO IT RIGHT THE FIRST TIME!**

2. Second, there are some students who attempt to take notes in shorthand.

a) Though shorthand is a valuable tool for a secretary, it is almost worthless for a student doing academic work.

b) Here's why. Notes in shorthand cannot be studied in that form. They must first be transcribed. The act of transcribing notes takes an inordinate amount of time and energy but does not significantly contribute to their mastery. It is far better to have taken the notes originally in regular writing and then spend the time after that in direct study and recitation of the notes.

3. Third, consider the limitations of recording the class on audio. This precludes flexibility.

a) This statement can be better understood when seen in the light of a person who has taken his/her notes in regular writing. Immediately after taking the notes this person can study them in five minutes before the next class as s/he walks toward the next building, as s/he drinks his/her coffee, or whatever.

b) Furthermore, this student, in looking over his/her notes, may decide that the notes contain only four worthwhile ideas which s/he can highlight, relegating the rest of the lecture to obscurity. Whereas the lecture on tape has to be listened to in its entirety including the worthwhile points as well as the "garbage," handwritten notes may be studied selectively.

c) Even if you record a class, at some point you should reduce it to written notes anyway, so you might as well do so during the actual class rather than having to spend an additional hour listening to the class again and writing your notes at that time.

d) A student who takes the easy way out - recording the lecture on tape as he or she sits back doing nothing - will box himself into inflexibility.