Pro-Tips on Note Taking

Effective notetaking is an important but under-emphasized skill in university. Something that incoming students may not realize is how broadly applicable good notetaking skills are; you need them in lecture, but also during course readings and while completing assignments. Moreover, good notetaking is integral to the writing process, and it's not something to be taken for granted.

However, incoming students may not have a strong grasp on notetaking. The following tips provide a high-level overview of some of the most important things to keep in mind to improve your notetaking skills.

> Good notetaking skills are broadly applicable. Not only are they important in an academic context, but they're highly valuable in a professional setting, especially during meetings.

Tip #1: Take notes in class

It may seem obvious, but **you should take notes while in class**. Taking notes in class increases your engagement with the material and makes it easier to remember important information and questions to follow-up on. Also, some instructors may not include all the critical information you need to know on their slides, so it's very important to get into the habit of writing important things down for future reference.

> The ability to write important things down quickly is a key advantage in lectures, as well as personal and professional meetings.

Tip #2: Be concise

Having pages and pages of notes is not necessarily the most effective strategy. Students tend to fall into the trap of trying to write everything down, especially if they're using a laptop. However, by doing this, you can end up with too much information and have a difficult time trying to figure out what's important. Instead, try:

1. **Searching for key messages, themes or ideas** – This is where listening and looking for verbal cues from the presenter is helpful (i.e. repetition, stress in the voice, pauses, gestures, etc.)

2. Paraphrasing – **Putting terms, concepts and definitions in your own words** increases your engagement with the material and ultimately improves your understanding. It can also save time.

3. **Developing or learning a short-hand method** – Using shorthand increases your transcription speed and allows you to pay more attention to what the instructor is discussing.

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Tip #3: Include examples to help you remember concepts

Examples are often great memory joggers when you are trying to understand and remember a concept or theory.

Take the concept of Newtonian gravity, for instance. Many people know the story – Isaac Newton began thinking about gravity after an apple fell from the tree he was sitting under (and may or may not have hit him on the head).

Because you know this story, the apple serves as a symbol of how gravity works. The apple falls from the tree to the earth because gravity pulls it down.

Conveniently, examples like this often show up in exam questions because they give students the opportunity to demonstrate their understanding in a practical context.

When writing your lecture notes, try to record at least two or three examples provided by the instructor. That way you have a variety of examples to study from later.

Tip #4: Leave space for questions and ideas

As you're recording notes, **leave space for any questions or thoughts** you have. When these thoughts occur to you during your lecture, readings, or review sessions, make sure to jot them down.

Likewise, jot down any answers you receive while discussing these questions with your instructor, TA or classmates. A record of your questions and answers is great review material, and helpful if you need clarification in the future.

Tip #5: Make your notes work for you

Many blogs and articles on notetaking will recommend one style of note taking over another. Popular styles include the Cornell method, mind mapping and sentence style note forms, each of which is described fully in this blog post written by a WCC staff member.

You'll likely need to explore different styles or a hybrid of styles to find out what works for you. **Consider trying out several different styles in low-stakes settings**, like preparing reading notes. That way you can explore, without the anxiety of potentially missing important information during a lecture.

Furthermore, consider personalizing your notes as much or as little as you desire. Some people enjoy producing aesthetically pleasing, effective notes during lectures. Others can't, and that's okay! The emphasis of taking notes in class should be on **recording information**. You can always aestheticize your notes later, when you are synthesizing and reviewing them.

The emphasis of taking notes in class should be on recording important information, so don't worry if your lecture notes aren't visually appealing. You can always go back and re-write them later.

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Tip #6: Work with your notes

You take notes for a reason. **Your notes are a learning tool**, and your learning will improve when you use them!

In addition, university courses across the board are about synthesis - last week's material builds this week's lecture.

Reviewing and synthesizing your notes helps you follow along with this building process. Reviewing notes regularly also makes life easier as you near the end of the term when coursework becomes more hectic and you may have less time for studying.

Working with your notes can be as simple as reviewing them for 10-15 minutes after class, or as complex as re-writing and synthesizing them. So, whatever your schedule looks like, try to squeeze in a review session to make the most of your notetaking efforts.

Reviewing your notes regularly throughout the term is a form of studying. Even if you simply look at them for a few minutes a week, you will be familiarizing yourself with the material, which can help with exam preparation!

Wrapping Up

Notetaking is important, not often talked about, and highly dependent on the individual. If it's something that you struggle with, or that you simply want to work on, the university has many resources available to help!

The pro-tips discussed here include:

1. Take notes in class

2. Be concise

3. Use examples when appropriate

4. Leave space for questions (and answers)

5. Make your notes work for you

6. Work with your notes for effective retention

With these in mind, you'll be well on your way to creating useful notes! But these tips are just the start; there are plenty of other resources available to help you maximize the effectiveness of your notes. A place to start is with the Student Success Office's Learning resources and workshops.

If you need some assistance with taking notes, contact Waterloo's AccessAbility Services! In addition, AccessAbility Services can assist with setting up the accommodations you need for effective learning.

Need help with other things like assignments, essays or brainstorming? Check out the Writing and Communication Centre website, or book a virtual one-on-one appointment. We're here to help!

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