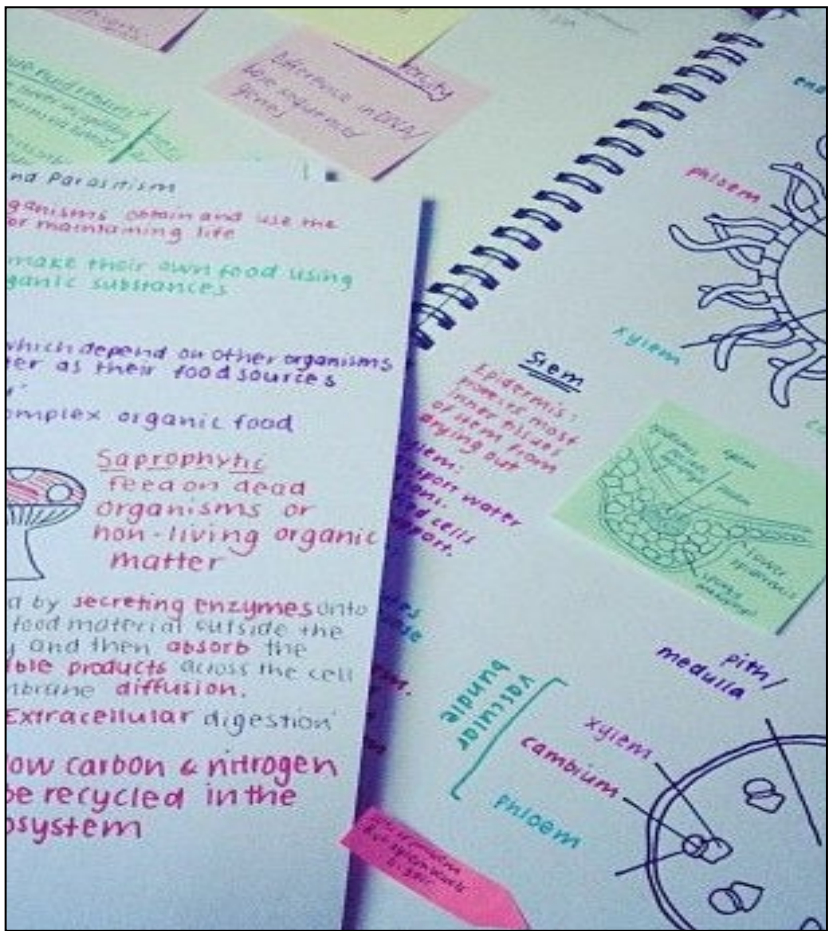


# Effective notetaking

Tips to get the most from your lectures, readings and discussions



## Why?

We need to take notes

- for revision
- exam / assignment / lab preparation
- to listen actively
- to remember interesting details

## When? Where?

We take notes

- during tutorials/lab/lectures/class
- to complete research
- when we read
- for interest

## How much to read

- keep to the question
- read books with different perspectives
- be choosy – six well-chosen books are better than 12 that all say the same thing

## What to read

Let's face it: there's a lot of material out there to read and make notes on. Where to start?

- Books by University Presses are the 'safest' for academic use
  - For example: Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press
- Read what is on the course list first
  - Use these books to find where to go next (influential people, authors, events, issues) and use these as you extend your search use bibliography / reference list
- Notice the date of publication
- Be relevant

## Grappling with academic texts

- Survey the text to see if it is relevant, then read interactively
- Look for the claim
  - The claim will be a statement about the need for the piece of writing, for example
    - ♦ Other authors have stated... however we believe...
    - ♦ There is a need to look at this issue again...
    - ♦ Our suggestion is...
- Look for navigation
  - Statements that guide you around the text (signalling phrases), for example
    - ♦ firstly, secondly, lastly
    - ♦ for now we will look at this, then later this...
    - ♦ I will be speaking about these things...

## Tips for speed reading

It's not about just getting it into your head – you need to be able to develop your own thoughts about the material.

- Read differently for different contexts or reasons.
- If you need the general idea in a hurry, read headings, sub-headings, look at diagrams / tables / pictures, etc., and read the first sentence and last of every paragraph – the 'topic sentence' and 'concluding sentence'.

## When to take notes

Many people believe that we need to take notes on everything, but this is not true, it is best to write notes on purpose for a purpose.

- Don't overdo it!
- Notes are better than highlighting – notes remind you of what you were thinking about, highlighting just shows the text you thinking about. There's no point in having half a page highlighted. At University, thinking critically about what you are reading is very important. (See our handout 'Thinking Critically')
- Don't use notes over thinking.
- Remember you'll need to use them later!
- Make them your own; don't write lecturers words down word for word.
- Think about what you are writing as you are writing.

## Different ways of taking notes

- Do what suits you but remember to take down what is important, like references.
- Use margins.
- Use a pen and book or computer program you like – this may sound odd, but if you like using them, you'll use it more.
- Sort your notes for easy access later.
- You may use something as simple as writing notes in an A4 lecture pad with perforated pages, then at the end of the session taking the notes out of the lecture pad and putting them into different sections of an A4 arch lever folder. Use what works for you.

## Taking notes in class

- Don't write down everything the speaker says.
- Good speakers use a 'scaffold' and navigation so follow that.
- Use abbreviations and don't worry if you are a poor speller, it only has to make sense to you.

## Kinds of notes

There are different ways for taking notes in different subject areas

- facts
- summaries
- paraphrases
- quotations

### Facts

- Record technical information.
- Use names, dates, words, information in minimal form.
- Use a simple list or outline format.

### Summaries

- Use the substance of a passage in condensed form.
- After reading the material carefully, write the summary without looking at what you have just read so you use your own words.
- Make sure you get the complete reference!

### Paraphrases

- A paraphrase restates the ideas in your own words but uses about the same number of words.
- Write it as *you* would have written the original.

### Quotations

- A quotation copies the material exactly.

- Double check your work – it must be an exact copy in wording, capitalisation, punctuation, and other elements. Remember to note the reference!

## Methods of note-taking

- Cornell
- Outline
- Mapping
- Charting
- Sentence

We'll now go into these in more detail.

### Cornell

Rule your paper with a 2 ½ inch margin on the left leaving a six-inch area on the right in which to make notes. During class, take down information in the six-inch area. For every significant bit of information, write a cue in the left margin. To review, cover your notes with a card, leaving the cues exposed. Say the cue out loud, and then say as much as you can of the material underneath the card. When you have said as much as you can, move the card and see if what you said matches what is written.

### Outline

Listen and then write in points in an organized pattern based on space indentation. Place major points farthest to the left. Indent each more specific point to the right. Levels of importance will be indicated by distance away from the major point. Indentation can be as simple as or as complex as labelling the indentations with Roman numerals or decimals. Markings are not necessary as space relationships will indicate the major/minor points.

#### *Outline Example*

Extrasensory perception

\_ Definition: means of perceiving without use of sense organs.

\_ three kinds

\_ telepathy: sending messages

\_ clairvoyance: forecasting the future

\_ psychokinetic: perceiving events external to situation

\_ current status

\_ no current research to support or refute

\_ few psychologists say impossible

## Mapping

This format helps you to visually track your lecture regardless of conditions. Little thinking is needed and relationships can easily be seen. It is also easy to edit your notes by adding numbers, marks, and colour coding. Review will call for you to restructure thought processes which will force you to check understanding. Review by covering lines for memory drill and relationships. Main points can be written on flash or note cards and pieced together into a table or larger structure at a later date.

## Charting

Determine the categories to be covered in lecture. Set up your paper in advance by columns headed by these categories. As you listen to the lecture, record information (words, phrases, main ideas, etc.) into the appropriate category.

## Sentence

Write every new thought, fact or topic on a separate line, numbering as you progress.

### *Sentence Example 1*

A revolution is any occurrence that affects other aspects of life, such as economic life, social life, and so forth. Therefore revolutions cause change.  
(See page 29-30 in your text about this)



*Revolution - occurrence that affects other aspects of life: e.g. econ. soci. etc. of text, pp. 29-30*

### *Sentence Example 2*

Melville did not try to represent life as it really was. The language of Ahab, Starbuck, and Ishmael, for instance, was not that of real life



*Mel didn't repr. Life as was; e.g. lang. of Ahab, etc. not real life*

### *Sentence Example 3*

At first, Freud tried conventional, physical methods of treatment such as giving baths, massages, rest cures, and similar aids. But when these failed he tried techniques of hypnosis that he had seen used by Jean-Martin Charcot. Finally, he borrowed an idea from Jean Breuer and used direct verbal communication to get an un-hypnotized patient to reveal unconscious thoughts..



Freud 1st - used phys. trtment; e.g., baths, etc. This fld. 2nd - used hypnosis (fr. Charcot) finally - used vrb. commun. (fr. Breuer) - got unhpynop, patnt to reveal uncons. thoughts

Descriptions of methods and examples taken from: California Polytechnic State University. (nd). *Note Taking System*. Student Academic Services, California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, California. Retrieved February 26, 2007, from <http://www.sas.calpoly.edu/asc/ssl/notetakingsystem.doc>

## Annotated bibliography (see also notes under “Assignment Types”)

While it may seem like a bit too much too soon, writing annotated bibliographies well is a good habit to start early, before the amount of reading and note-taking gets too much. It is also a good way of organising what you have read. When you need ‘that idea’ again you will have a better chance of finding it quickly, rather than spending a lot of time re-finding ‘that reference’.

Annotated Bibliographies have three parts:

- The reference (in the reference style your lecturer wants, or your subject’s/course’s preferred style).
- A brief summary of the text.
- An optional (but useful) critical review of the text, or at least your initial thoughts and comments. Ask yourself questions like: Do I agree or disagree with the writer? Does the writer have a bias that I need to balance by reading another point of view?

### Example 1

Altieri, M.A., & Anderson, M.K. (1986). *An Ecological Basis for the Development of Alternative Agricultural Systems for Small Farmers in the Third World*. *American Journal of Alternative Agriculture*, 1, 30-38.

Critiques Third World rural development strategies that promote large-scale agriculture based on uniform crop varieties. Describes Agroecosystem Analysis and Development, which stresses sustainability, equity, stability, and productivity. Lists examples of sustainable traditional farming systems and agroecological approaches to rural development.

### Example 2

Larkin, C. (Ed.). (1992). *The Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*. London: Guinness.

Very comprehensive reference book of 3,296 pages (more than 10,000 entries) encompassing all styles of popular music, including jazz. Primarily biographical, but does contain record label histories. Entries from 150 to 3,000 words, though some important artists have longer entries. Most artists from UK and US, though additionally many reggae, Latin, and Afro-pop artists from outside these countries. Most entries include discography.

Examples from: Lyons, K. (2005). *How to Write an Annotated Bibliography*. University of California, Santa Cruz. Retrieved February 26, 2007, from <http://library.ucsc.edu/ref/howto/annotated.html>



If you have a lot of reading to get through, it might be a good idea to invest in an index book (like an address book but with blank pages) to sort your bibliographic information, then you can come back to it quickly when needed.

When you first start, you should always learn about the referencing style for yourself. Being used to the type of notes/references you need will always be a benefit. Once you understand it for yourself, software can be helpful – but, if you rely on it to do the work instead of you, it can also cause many problems. If you decide to use referencing software, the most popular are Zotero and Mendeley (for undergraduates) and EndNote (for researchers and academics, especially when working with a large number of sources). These are all offered by the University of Newcastle as free downloads. If you find it easier not to use software, that's fine too. Certainly don't assume the software is right, and always check back over it yourself.