



Academic skills

Taking notes in lectures

WHY TAKE NOTES IN LECTURES?

The lecture and tutorial system is a traditional component of university study. It is particularly common in large undergraduate courses. In lectures, the lecturer tries to distill the most important issues in the course and present these to students in an accessible way. Generally tutorials function to support lectures, and provide a forum for students to discuss and clarify issues raised in the lecture. Note taking is an intrinsic part of the lecture and tutorial system. Notes taken in the lecture are your record of the lecture content, and they should function to be used for further note-making, study, assignment writing and exam preparation. They are also your basis for discussion starters or questions for tutorials.

Many students dislike the lecture format as they find it difficult to listen and take legible notes or type quickly at the same time. Often students find that they have missed out on important information because they can't keep up with the lecturer. Sometimes students can't hear what the lecturer is saying because other students are talking, or they are too far away from the speaker, or they have sound issues with lectures delivered online. Many lecturers are aware of the shortcomings of the lecture format. They make a lecture recording available, and provide students with support material such as copies of the lecture, focus questions, handouts, which they place on the subject's eLearning site. It is useful to utilise these support materials, as it is mostly the lecturer who sets the exam questions. You can also improve your ability to get the most out of the lecture by doing some preparation.

BE PREPARED

The major skill in note-taking is the ability to synthesise information. Probably the most accessible way of doing this is to be familiar with the designated readings before the lecture. That way, you will have at least a rough idea of the key concepts and issues to be introduced in the lecture and you will be oriented to the topic. Active preparation for note-taking in lectures can also be preparing several key questions from your recommended readings which you hope will be addressed in the lecture. This preparation for note-taking means your attention during the lecture is focussed for specific information.

If the lecturer has placed slides or notes on your subject eLearning site ahead of time, read these through and if possible print them out so you can to annotate them with extra points, ideas and questions during the lecture.

IDENTIFYING KEY WORDS AND CONCEPTS

It is impossible and even undesirable to capture every word of a lecture. Rather you should concentrate on identifying key words and concepts. The lecturer is likely to stress key words and concepts through voice, pauses, and body language cues. When someone wishes to emphasise something, it may be said slower, more carefully, or louder than other words in the sentence. Also, when a speaker has come to the end of an idea or thought, the voice usually falls. A rising voice tells the listener to expect more. Gestures such as pointing are often used to indicate which ideas or words are important. Pauses are often used by speakers for emphasis of a particular point, and they can indicate the start of another point.

ACADEMIC LITERACY

Good speakers use language organisational signposts to help their listeners. These signposts are words and phrases such as *next*, *after*, *before we go on*, *what we are going to cover*, *the four main stages are ...* Lectures are mostly structured presentations, so you can expect an introduction outlining an overview of the lecture, its organisation, and the important issues to be covered. Sometimes lecturers will also make their perspective on the subject matter clear in their lecture's introduction. A lecture's conclusion can include important insights into the position the lecturer has taken on the topic, and they can function as an evaluation of the topic. Some lectures use the conclusion to make a concise summary of the main elements of the lecture. For this reason it is particularly important to be present till the lecture is finished!

Recognising key words and concepts in a lecture is only one part of aspect of effective note-taking. You also need to recognise those key concepts in your own notes. This means you may need to use capitals, underlining, asterisks, or some other method of notation to highlight significant pieces of information.

BASIC NOTE-TAKING SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

During your course of study at university you will no doubt develop your own symbols and abbreviations. The type of abbreviations and symbols you develop will develop on your course of study and the commonly used phrases and words in your discipline. For example, education students' notes may make frequent reference to *ss* (students), *lang* (language), *mat* (materials), *dev* (development), and *soc* (social/society). When developing your own abbreviations it is worthwhile considering the different kinds of abbreviations used in formal writing. These are:

| Type of abbreviation | Example |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| the first letter of a word | m = metre |
| the first few letters of a word | vol. = volume |
| a word with several letters missing | tbsp = tablespoon |
| an acronym | LOTE = Languages Other Than English |

Some symbols you may wish to consider using are:

| Symbol | Meaning |
|--------|------------------------|
| @ | at, amount |
| > | greater than |
| + | plus, as well, with |
| ⇒ | leading to, results in |
| ∴ | therefore |
| K | one thousand |
| = | equals |
| # | number |

VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS IN NOTE-TAKING

Layout strategies of indenting, mapping, webbing and connecting lines can help you to visually represent the relationship between ideas and the relative importance of information.



INDENTING

Indenting can provide a way of representing the relative importance of information, and can be used in both paper-based and electronic note-taking. The most general information can be placed at the left of the page, while more specific information can be indented towards the right of the page.

| Indenting example | | |
|-------------------|--|-----------------------------|
| SPOKEN TEXT | “... <u>Reference</u> is a <i>cohesive resource in language</i> which allows speakers and writers to <u>introduce participants and to keep track of them</u> . Whenever a can participant is mentioned, we need to know whether the participants identity is known or not. So participants can be <u>presented</u> – as new to the text, or <u>presumed</u> – the identity be found out from somewhere else in the text ...” | |
| STUDENT'S NOTES | Reference - cohesive feature | <i>general information</i> |
| | <u>function</u> : introduce and keep track of participants in text | <i>specific information</i> |
| | 2 types: presenting (new) presuming (known) | <i>more specific</i> |

MAPPING, WEBBING + CONNECTING LINES

Mind mapping, webbing or simply using connecting lines to illustrate the relationship between ideas in your notes, are techniques which some students find useful. These techniques may also be used after lectures as a way of summarising or reshaping lecture notes into new study notes.

The one type of visual representation in note-making which should avoided is doodling. Doodling makes your work messy and is distracting both to you and to the people sitting near you.

AFTER THE LECTURE

You should make a concerted effort to review your lecture notes preferably within 24 hours of the lecture. Try to make your lecture review an active process: make a note of any information which is unclear and ask your tutor for clarification. Alternatively, seek clarification in the recommended reading material. If possible make a very brief summary of your lecture notes including key concepts and issues. If you had problems understanding the lecture, it is not very helpful to say this to your tutor in this way. Rather you need to be more precise which part of the lecture caused the problem, and this should be evident from your notes.

Note-taking is an important skill which if done well can save you time when you come to review your lecture notes for exam preparation. Poorly organised notes, which are not kept together in an electronic or physical folder, and which have no lecture titles or dates, can be very confusing as study material! Finally, when attending lectures try and aim for a good understanding of the lecture's 'big picture'. It is easier to retain and remember the details linked to overall ideas and general concepts than it is to recreate the main points from individual details.

