

Note Taking Will Make You a Better Student

Have you ever found yourself getting ready to study for a test at 10:30 p.m. the night before a test? You sit there with only the book in front of you as your only means of help. You think, “if only my professor understood how hard it is to study 6 chapters in one night. Don’t they know that this is too much material to cover in such a short period of time?” You really wanted to start studying earlier but you just did not know where to start and now you are out of time.

The key reason most students find themselves in this position is because they do not understand how to study. Students often do very little reading if any, and *they do a poor job of taking notes*. What you do before class, during class, and after class has a great deal to do with how much time you will spend studying the night before a test. How well you take notes will save you from the problems caused by last minute studying. Students who do a good job of taking notes could see a one or two letter grade improvement in most of their classes.

The benefits of note taking include:

1. Good notes give students a starting point when studying. If you think the material from 6 or 7 chapters of a book is too much to study in one night, you might be right. Often students do not know where to start when studying for a class because they wait too long before they start studying. Good notes will help you understand what material is important and what material is only secondary. Note taking provides students with direction, keeps them organized, and helps them keep up with their studies.
2. Students that learn to take notes do a better job of listening while in class. Have you ever left class without a clue of what was covered during class? It may be because you were not listening. Our mind can be a great tool or it can distract us from the things going on around us. If you do not know what a class you attended was about, it might be because you were not listening.
 - A. If you left class and you know what the lecture was about but you just do not understand the material, good note taking will help you in your study efforts. Just sitting there looking lost will only leave you lost and discouraged when you leave class. This is the main reason why students wait until the last minute to study. Students have no idea what the class is about or where to start.
3. Taking notes helps students organize the material covered and points out areas of weakness. This information provides students with the information needed to organize their study time more effectively.

Taking Good Notes

Most students fail to take notes because they have never learned how to, and they often do not know what is important and what is not important. Do not worry! Good note taking is an art that can be learned much like any skill you have learned in life. Here are some tools that will help you become a good note taker:

1. Read over the material you will go over in class each day before you go to class. Reading the material before you go to class helps you understand what the lecture is about and gives you the time to take notes during the lecture. If what you hear is new, you must first digest the material and this is the key reason for not understanding what is important and what is not. Students who do not read over the material before class end up trying to write down every word said during a lecture and soon find the task over whelming.
 - A. Just like it is not important to write down every word said in class, it is not important to read every word from the material that will be covered in class. Most students know how to read or they would not be in college; however, do you know how to read affectively. Do not try to read every word in chapter. Look for the most important point in each chapter and move on. If you do not understand something the author has brought up, then you might need to read that area in a little more detail, or write down questions that you would like to bring up during the lecture.

2. Prepare to take notes before you go to class.
 - A. Many students fail to take notes because they have never learned any real system of taking notes. One of the better systems of taking notes is the Cornell System designed by Walter Pauk of Cornell University, almost 50 years ago. This system is also known as the t-bone system because of the upside down “r” used when taking notes. We will be discussing this system in more detail as we cover the point on note taking. *See the sample t-bone note taking sheet on the last page.*

The Cornell System is designed to help you write out your notes correctly the first time, which will help you avoid rewriting your notes after each class. However, remember that there is not a prefect way for everyone to take notes, so you should use the system that helps you the most.

 - B. Come to class with all the material you need to take good notes. Things you need to bring to class are your books, pencils, and paper needed to write your notes on. Take notes on full size paper because it is too hard to develop a good system on smaller paper.

3. Here are some key points to remember once you are in class and getting ready to take notes:
 - A. Date and title each page of your notes. This will aid you in keeping your notes organized. The title should include the section of the book where the material comes from. If the professor changes topics it could be helpful for you to change pages. *Example: 7/1/2004 Taking Notes: Chapter Six*

 - B. Sit in the front of the classroom. Sitting up front helps you to avoid distractions and helps you to become a better listener.

 - C. Do not try to write down every word of the lecture, instead focus on the main points. If you have a question, do not be afraid to ask. Only write down enough information for you to remember what the lecture was about. Because you read the main points before you came to class you will be better able to understand these points when the professor goes over them. If you had any questions during your reading, now is the time to bring them up to be addressed in class.

- D. Take notes in an organized form. It is best to take notes in outline form. This will help you when it comes time to study. If you feel you may need to add more material to any section, leave a space between points. Do not be afraid of wasting paper. Instead of trying to save a few pennies you need to be gathering the information you need to help you study.
- E. Write in a legible fashion. It will not do you any good to sit down three days after you took your notes and find you cannot read your own writing.
- F. Use abbreviations when you can but make sure you use the same ones all the time. Using *b4* in place of *before* is a great idea if you know what it means. By using one set of abbreviations you become better at limiting what needs to be written in class and you are better able to understand your own notes. *Additional tips on abbreviations are provided at the end of this material.*
- G. Watch out for material the professor places on the blackboard. If your professor feels strongly enough to write something down, it must be important. If the professor feels it is important, there is a good chance you may see it again. *That means write down everything that is on the blackboard, not just what you feel is important.*
- H. Write down all assignments just as they appear on the board. It is hard to prepare for the next day if you do not understand the assignment. It is also hard to plan your schedule for the up coming day if you are missing information. If you are unsure about the assignment, ask questions.
- I. Try to keep the back of any page blank. This is a good place to put additional information on a topic covered in class, to place questions you may have, or to write down questions other students asked along with the answer that was given. However, this is a matter for the note taker to decide. This is also a good place to write down any key terms or definitions that may be important in that class.
- J. Take notes on all questions that are asked by your professor. If they find the question interesting, they might just find it interesting enough to cover it on a test.
- K. If the professor draws a graph or drawing to help illustrate a point, copy it. If you can think of a graph or drawing that will help you recall a point, draw it.
- L. If something is stressed as important by the professor, note it by a star or highlight the point.
- M. Do not stop taking notes until the class is over. Packing up early might cause you to miss some important information. You might think that you will remember to add it to your notes when you start studying; however, that does not always happen. The phrase, “out of sight out of mind,” is more likely what will happen if you fail to take a note in class.

4. What to do with your notes after class:
 - A. Students should spend at least an hour after each class going over their notes. After class is the best time because most of the material is still fresh on your mind. Go back over the material in the book, if you find something that you felt was important but was not covered in class add it to your notes. If you do not add it to your notes, at least add it to your questions for class the next day.
 - B. Begin putting the notes from each class together and use this time to review material covered in earlier classes. Each weekend allow yourself some time to review all the material you have gathered up to that point. By studying and taking notes in this fashion, students will not find themselves staying up all night the day before a test to study.

Tips to help you write faster when taking notes.

Here are some common abbreviations that might help when taking notes. Anything you learn to use can be added to the list, but remember once you add it to your list use it the same way every time. If you keep changing you will not be able to read your own notes.

w/	with	b4	before	p.	page
w/o	without	+	plus	=	equal
#	number	-	minus	^	increasing
v	decreasing	>	greater than	<	less than
ect.	and so forth	Q	question	%	percent
ff	following	2	to, too, two	vs	versus
c/o	care of	lb	pound		

Some of the information from this handout came from:

Note-Taking and In-Class Skills: <http://www.ucc.vt.edu/stdysk>

Carter, Carol, Bishop, Joyce, Kravits, Sarah L. Keys to College Studying. Prentice Hall. 2002. p. 234-249

Richard J. Frederick
Rust College
Division of Business

Use this section to write out cues you will use to help you study. This section should be left blank until after you have taken notes in class.

The cue column should be about 2 ½ inches wide.

7/1/2004 The Cornell Note-Taking System: Chapter Six

- I. In this section of the paper the students should take their notes. Remember that they are your notes and you are the person that has to be able to read them.
 - A. Sit up front
 - B. Come to class with the correct material
 - C. Don't be afraid to ask questions
 - D. Use outline format when taking notes
 - E. Copy everything off the board

- II. Leave a space if you can think of something you might want to add later.

This section should be used to summarize all the material that you have covered on this page only. Start this section 2 or 3 inches from the bottom of the page. Good note taking is an important part of making good grades