Note-taking & Studying For College

Taking notes and paying attention during class can be... difficult to say the least. And studying is the worst. Luckily, there are a few methods and tips that you can follow to help maximize your note-taking while also paying attention in class. If you find that you have trouble studying, there are a few tips near the bottom of this page too.

This page will seem very long. However, we recommend at least reading the Why do I need to take Notes?, Computer, Tablet, or Pen (Or Pencil) & Paper?, General Note-taking Tips, and How Do I Use My Notes To Study? at the very least. Then choose a note-taking method (or several) that interest you.

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Why Do I Need To Take Notes?

Note-taking is a vital part of any learning experience. Not only is note-taking a useful way for paying attention in class, but notes are a great way to study for that upcoming quiz or exam, to help write an essay, and so on. Some courses you are taking now might be a continuation of a course you took already or talking about a subject that was touched upon in a previous course. In this case, the notes you took during your last course may prove immensely useful. Notes need not only be taken during class either. If you are reading a textbook or article, you can take notes so that you don't have to re-read the chapter or article again--simply refer to your notes (which will probably be quicker to read anyway).

This skill is also used in the professional world to remind people of important dates or deadlines, meeting or project decisions, and actions that need to be taken at a later date or before the next meeting. So skillfully taking notes could prove to be vital not only for a successful college career but a professional career too.

Photo by David Travis on Unsplash

Computer, Tablet, Or Pen (Or Pencil) & Paper?
This largely depends on a few things. These include the type of course and whether or not your instructor will allow you to use a computer or tablet (both will be referred to as “device” from now on) during class, how neat your writing is, and personal preference.

The type of class is very important. If the course is in-person, face-to-face, check the syllabus to see whether or not your instructor specifies if you can use a device. Otherwise, you will want to contact your instructor and ask them if you can use a device during class. If they do allow you to use a device, follow common courtesy. Mute your device and notifications, only have the program where you are typing your notes open, and most importantly, do not get side-tracked by notifications, social media, or shopping.

If the instructor does not allow you to use a device, then you will have to write your notes down and type them up later (which is a great way to review and study). If your instructor posts the slides up before class, it might be worth it for you to print them and write notes that way (we’ll talk more about this note-taking method below).

For courses that are completely online, the choice is yours. Just make sure you find an appropriate space to view the online materials and make notes. This space should be relatively quiet, with few distractions. If you plan on taking written notes, make sure you have ample space on a hard surface to do so.

The next thing is how neat your handwriting is. Notes are only useful if they are readable when you go back to study them. If your handwriting is not the best, you may want to use a tablet or computer. If you don’t have access to either of these things, you may want to choose a note-taking method below that requires the least amount of writing. Then, after class, type up your notes and review the slides or other materials for that class. While doing this, write (or type on a different page) any questions you have or points that you want clarification on. Either email your instructor these or ask them during office hours.

The final thing is whether you are comfortable using pen and paper or a device. Note-taking using pen and paper is traditional and is commonly accepted as a way to better understand the material being learned. It’s easier to abbreviate notes, draw pictures, and so on. On the other hand, typing notes can be faster and cleaner. Your computer notes can also be saved to the cloud so they are easily accessible on any device while you are studying. The best of both worlds is a tablet. You can switch from drawing pictures and diagrams back to quickly typing notes. However, a useful way to review and study your notes might be to use both pen and paper and your computer. After class, either type up your handwritten notes (as best you can-- maybe a drawing or note-taking app will be useful) or write out your typed notes.

General Note-taking Tips

These tips apply to all note-taking methods. They are general things to help prepare you to take notes, things to keep in mind while taking notes, and what to do with notes after you’ve written them.

Note-taking Preparation
• Eat a snack before class (especially if your class goes through a mealtime). If you are snacking during class, you probably are not taking notes. Or worse, you are being noisy and distracting your classmates. If you eat a snack beforehand, you won’t be thinking about lunch instead of listening.

• Stay hydrated with water.

• Be prepared. Bring extra pen, pencil, lead, and paper. If you are using a computer or tablet, make sure it is fully charged and you bring your charger. The worst thing to happen is to run out of ink or that your device runs out of juice in the middle of class.

• Read/watch (or at least skim) the assigned materials before class. It is unlikely your instructor assigned you reading or video just for busywork. Often, these materials will either introduce a topic that will be covered next class or help to reinforce a topic that was just covered.

• If the slideshow for the next class is posted early, go through it.

• If you are taking a course that uses recorded video/audio, it may be worth it to watch the video/listen to the audio once all the way through without pausing (except if you need to go to the bathroom, answer a phone call, etc.). Then, once you’ve done that, watch/listen to it again and take notes. Don’t forget to pause the recording while you are taking notes. If you are not sure about what you just heard, rewind the recording.

• Choose a note-taking method that best suits you.

Note-taking During Class
Do NOT write everything that is being said, written on the board, or is on the slides. Paraphrase instead. Otherwise, you will get bogged down trying to transcribe every word rather than paying attention to the material or presentation.

- Write in your own words
  - Write in print instead of cursive. This can help with deciphering your notes later. Writing in print also forces you to slow down and write deliberately.

- Write the name of the course and/or the topic of the class and the date on a fresh page. Number subsequent pages. This will be useful for organizing your notes later on, especially if you use the same notebook for each course.

- Use a different notebook or section of your notebook for each course. If you are using a device, open up a new file and store that file in a folder that has the name of the course and semester year (ex, FYE101A_Fall2021). This way notes do not meld together and are easily accessible for you to review later.

- Pay attention to what is being presented on slides, written on the board, or being repeated. These are often important things (the main points, sub-points, or important details) that your instructor wants you to remember

  - Watch out for keywords and phrases such as "Importantly...", "Most useful...", "To conclude...", "A brief introduction..." and so on

- Pay attention to the way the instructor is presenting. If they move away from the podium to point at a specific word or phrase, chances are it's important for you to take note of it.

- Use Abbreviations (abbr => abbreviation, ex => example, b4 => before, etc => etcetera, H2O => water, b/c => because, pt => point and so on), symbols, and pictures. In fact, you may find that your major has plenty of commonly used abbreviations or shorthand systems and symbols to represent different ideas or phrases. If you are coming up with your own, write down your shorthand and the meaning so you can refer back to it later. You can also use the Ford Improved Shorthand Method. Simple pictures can also help with quickly getting an idea or concept down on paper without needing to think about the words to explain them.

- If you have a question, raise your hand and wait to ask or jot it down to ask later.

- Whatever note-taking method you choose, try to stick with it for at least that day and switch to a different one later.

- Do not try to color-code your notes during class-- do that later. Use a single color (other than black) and/or switch up colors for each course.

- Spelling and grammar are unimportant during class, but you can (and should!) correct them later.
Within the next 24 hours, look at your notes and organize them.
Rewrite your notes and review them (if you want to color-code or highlight your notes, you can do that too). This is particularly useful if you do not have neat handwriting or took notes using a computer or tablet.
Correct spelling and grammatical mistakes.
Jot down questions. These can be questions for review or questions that you want to ask your instructor.
If you are confused about a concept, email your instructor or visit their office hours before the next class.
For both of the above, see if reviewing the course material (if /when available) might help.

Note-taking Methods

Below we quickly describe various methods of note-taking and give a few examples. Find one that interests you or speaks to you the most. Then, try it out by taking notes of this page or notes in class. If you don't like it, move on to a different method. In some cases, you may find that a combination of note-taking methods suits your note-taking style the best. If you have difficulty seeing an image, click on it to expand it.

Outline Method
CAN101E

Date: February 22, 2022

Notetaking Methods

- Outline Method
  - Commonly used method
  - Organization
    - Org’d by main topic/points, sub-topics/points, & indentations
  - Based on importance
    - Overall class topic not indented
    - Main key points only indented once
      - Sub-points are indented more
  - Pros
    - Easy to organize
    - Useful for quick notes
    - Easy to take notes with computer
      - Can use headings to help make a table of contents
        - Helps to easily find topic/points to review later
    - See connections between main points and sub points
  - Cons
    - Can become very long/multi-paged
    - Can be confusing, particularly for handwriting
    - B/c of above, can be daunting to review later
It is useful for keeping organized notes and helping to organize classes and homework.
We need points and ideas. However, going back to review notes using the Outline Method may become tedious.
## Cornell Method

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class: CAN101E</th>
<th>Topic: Notetaking</th>
<th>Date: 02/22/2022</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Review (after class)</td>
<td>Notes (during class)</td>
<td>Cornell Method</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational or Notetaking Method?</td>
<td>More of an organizational outline than a notetaking method.</td>
<td>• Use whatever notetaking method you want in the notes section.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the other notetaking methods?</td>
<td></td>
<td>• This one is outline is a bit modified.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful for Review and simple template</td>
<td>Extra row for the course name/abbr., class topic, and date.</td>
<td>• For written notes, you can remove this row.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small space may cause issues for writing notes for class</td>
<td>Pros</td>
<td>• Useful for review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Should focus on main points and later, in the Review section, write clarifying statements or resources</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Easily pick out key points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Write questions in the Review column</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Or clarifying points/additional resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Summary allows you to write/height main points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Simple template</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Small space for notes ensure that only the important stuff is jotted down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Help to keep focused on the lecture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Great for organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Cons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Hard to use on multiple pages for written notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• A computer can extend the columns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Small space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Corrections difficult to make when writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Some notetaking methods will fit better than others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Might run out of space during the lecture if using written notes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Summary (after class)**

Just a quick round-up of the lesson goes here. The Cornell Method breaks up the page into several sections, one for Notetaking during class, another for review after class, and a third to provide a quick overview for later review after class. It’s useful for review later on because you can easily pick out key points and write questions in a very organized way. It’s a bit difficult to use on multiple pages. The small space for note taking is both good because it forces you to focus on the main points but could be problematic because it might fill up too quickly.
Mind Mapping Method

Also known as the "Mind Tree", it is one
of the more creative methods. Start with the lecture title (or key topic) in the center of the page. Then, if there is

- Pros
  - Notetaking: Mind-mapping
  - Creative
  - Easy to customize
  - Best with written notes
  - See connection of points/topics
  - Only key and sub points
  - Write details later

- Cons
  - Careful placements of bubbles
  - Can become messy quickly
  - Hard to review later
  - Hard on Computers
  - Lots of programs

Start with the lecture title (or key topic) in the center of the page. Then, if there is
ub-topics, make another bubble and connect it to the sub-topics (s) that it is about. The Mind Mapping Method is u
self for showing connections between topics and points. Keep each bubble down to 2-4 words at most. If you
end to clarify points/bugs or defaults, you can and that later.
In the example on the right, we used Google Drawing through there are plenty of other dedicated applications.
# Topic: Notetaking - Chart Method

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Pros</th>
<th>Cons</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Break page into columns based on topics. Write details about that topic in the specific column. Use a table if you are on a computer (or even a Spreadsheet) or drawing app if on a tablet.</td>
<td>Easy to organize. Easy to set up. Great for quick review of topics/points later on. Easy to make notecards to study from later. Can add extra columns for questions or points to clarify (if you have room).</td>
<td>Can be hard to read. Relations of topics/subtopics can be difficult to see. Really useful if you know the topics/subtopics beforehand. Otherwise, just guessing how many columns you will need for class.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sentence Method

Class: CAN101E
Date: 02/22/2022

Topic: Notetaking

Sentence Method

1. Usage:
   a. Great for quick and simple notes
   b. Complete thoughts for easier review later
   c. Broken up by topics, with details underneath
   d. Keep sentences small, about 5 to 7 words
   e. Each detail should be on its own line
   f. Use abbreviations and symbols where appropriate

2. Pros:
   a. Easy to take notes
   b. Easy to review later
   c. No need to decipher pictures or half-thoughts
   d. Quick way to review individual topics
   e. Easy to use on computers or for handwritten notes

3. Cons:
   a. Can get easily caught up transcribing the lecture
   b. Can be daunting to look at for later review
not getting up on paper and going.
Save that for writing your notes later.
The important thing is to keep writing.
e is that each key detail of a main point/topic is on its own line. This method is similar to creating a more detailed description.
Tell you exactly what to do and for how long, for a 3-course meal.

Flow Method
**Review**
The image is using a combination of Mindmapping, Outlining, and the Chart method. From there, its using the Sentence method.

*Mind Vomit:* writing or typing out ideas without thinking them through or putting much thought into how they connect with each other.

**Notes**

1. **The flow method has a lot of issues**
   a. It inherits all of the issues of methods being used
   b. Can be hard to review later
   c. Can be helped by using the Cornell Method.
2. Really useful for ‘going with the flow’
   a. Really adaptive to changes in lecture types
3. Kind of “mind vomit”. Whatever you are thinking at the time, it goes on the page in whatever way you want.
   a. Both useful for in-the-moment learning and terrible for review.

**Summary**
The Flow Method is a useful tool for actively learning during the class. You combine the Outline Method, Chart Method, Mind Method, and Sentence Method in any way you choose. And use doodles, diagrams, charts, and arrows. To make the most out of the Flow Method, use it with the Cornell Method and review it while the subject is still fresh in your mind. Otherwise, reviewing notes using the Flow Method may not be a great time.
Slides Method
Perhaps the easiest of the methods. If your instructor posts the slides before class, you can print them. In PowerPoint, go to File>Print. From there, you can choose the print layout. Recommended layouts are Notes, which will print the slide on the top half of the page and leave the bottom half for you to write notes (and, if the instructor typed notes in the Presenter notes area, those will be printed too), Outline, which pretty much prints the notes out similarly to the Outline Method above, and 3-slides, which will print 3-slides on one half of the page and leave space for you to write notes on the other half. Or, if you want to use your slides on a device instead, choose File>Export>Create Handouts. This will export a Word Document that you can then type on or export as a PDF and use Adobe Reader.

Recommended printing options

How to create handouts

How Do I Use My Notes to Study?

Your notes are your best resource for studying and reviewing. Not only is it faster than looking over provided materials, but it may also be the only resource you have from the lecture. Here are a few ways that you can use your notes to study:

1. Look over your notes once or twice every week
   a. This will help keep the materials fresh in your mind.
   b. Can also help make connections from previous topics to more current topics.

2. Rewrite on paper or transcribe your notes onto a device within 24-48 hours after class. Use colored pens, pencils, markers, and/or highlighters or equivalents for devices.
   a. Chances are, even if you write neatly, there might have been a few mistakes, so take this time to correct those mistakes and make cleaner notes.
   b. Can take a little extra time to refine your doodles.
iii. If you add color, it will make your notes a little more fun/interesting to look at and more enticing to read.
   1. You can group related topics by color to show connections between topics.
   iv. Great way to study your notes since you are re-reading them.
   v. Bullet Journals can be a useful tool for doing this in a creative way.
      1. You can also use bullet journals to create daily to-do lists, monthly reminders, and more.

3. Convert your notes to the Cornell Method
   a. As stated previously, the Cornell Method is a great way to organize and review your notes.
   ii. Simply add or rewrite your notes in the Notes Column, write major questions, topics, or clarifying points/definitions in the Review Column, and create a 2-4 sentence round-up where you highlight major points and details in the Summary Footer.

4. Use your notes to create index cards
   a. This will be especially easy if you used the Cornell, Outline, or Sentence Methods.
   ii. Write the topic/doodle on one side and a few key details/phrases for that topic on the other.
   iii. If you added questions to your notes, write each one on one side of its own index card. On the other side, write the answer.
   iv. Check out Quizlet.com for a digital version of this that you can share with your friends and classmates.

5. Charts and Sticky notes
   a. Great if you used the Chart Method.
      i. Also useful with the Outline Method, Sentence Method, or Mind Map.
   ii. On a whiteboard, a large piece of paper, cardboard, list your topics, just as you did with the chart method.
   iii. Write the key points or details of each topic onto individual sticky notes.
   iv. Toss the sticky notes into a bag and shake it or similarly jumble them up.
   v. Pull out sticky notes one at a time and place them under the correct topic.
   vi. Check your work against your notes.

6. Make a board game (or use an existing board game)
   a. Great for studying with friends and classmates
   ii. What you will need: A large piece of paper, a 6-sided die, and index cards
   iii. Make the board on a large piece of paper, maybe a path with a start and an endpoint (or use a board from an existing game)
      1. divide the path into individual tiles, 20-40 (depending on how long you want your game to be)
   iv. Put main points and topic titles that you want to review randomly on the tiles
      1. You do NOT have to fill each tile with topics- leave a few free tiles here and there
      2. Each topic should be on multiple tiles
      3. For each point and topic, make a set of index cards with the topic or point on the front and a question (with the answer underneath) about the topic on the other
         a. Keep these simple, with quick and direct answers to keep the game flowing: True/False, Multiple Choice, or short answer.
      4. Whenever a player lands on a topic, another player draws from that pile and reads the question. If you use an existing board game, label your index cards in a way that ID's them to a space or spaces on the board.
   v. Create a punishment pile (for incorrectly answered questions)
      1. Lose next turn
      2. move two spaces back
      3. move five spaces back
      4. etc.
   vi. Create a rewards pile (for correctly answered questions)
      1. Take another turn
      2. move forward two spaces
      3. move forward five spaces
      4. etc.
   vii. For game pieces, cut up an index card into as many pieces as there are players
      1. Label each piece in some way to make them unique (numerically, color them, simple doodles, etc.)
   viii. Who wins?
      1. Cheezy bit: Everyone who played the game because they studied 😊
      2. Option 1: whoever gets to the end of the board first
      3. Option 2: whoever has the most points. For each correctly answered, that player gets one point. Wrong answers don't do anything except draw from the punishment pile. You can add rewards and punishments that give or remove points from a player.
      4. Option 3: Combine options 1 and 2. Whoever gets to the end of the board gets an additional 10 points, second gets 5, third gets 3, etc.

If you see a theme here, that's because there is. Whichever way you study, make sure you include some sort of repetition in your studying regime. Repetition is key to studying and remembering facts and details. Repeatedly looking at your notes, rewriting them, and so on will help with memorization. Gamifying your studying session (as with the Charts and Sticky notes or the board game) will help make studying fun and relaxing rather than dull and uninteresting.

Further Reading

Below, you can find a few articles for further reading.