Know Your Note-taking Skills
A Guide for Students
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Story Time!

Let’s say you have a class with the smartest guy in school, Leo DaVinci. You know he’s smart because he always asks questions, is the first one to volunteer answers, does well on tests, and spends his free time inventing strange aircraft prototypes on the weekends. You wonder how he does it all. One day, you get an invite from another friend in your class, Ben Franklin, who wants to spend one of the last nice days in September flying kites. “But how will I make up class? I know! I’ll get someone’s notes!” And whose notes might be your best ticket to doing well on the next test? Leo’s, of course! you say. A few days later, Leo lets you borrow his notebook while he practices his painting skills. “Hope you can read my handwriting!” he says, with a smirk that could have been a smile. You giddily arrive back at your room; you can’t wait to see what this genius’ view of class must be like! Your dreams are shattered the minute you open the notebook. It’s written in some kind of gibberish. What do you do now?

The Point of Notes

What is notetaking? What purpose does it serve you? For some, it is merely a script of what the professor says in class. For others, it’s a list of vocabulary words that you copy while reading the textbook. For still others, it’s just examples of problem solving. And if the information in your notes could have been found somewhere else (like the textbook), why would you bother taking notes at all? There are a few main reasons why you usually feel compelled to take notes:

• To make and understand connections in the course material
• To record examples of the material in action (e.g.: extra problems, more problem solving, anecdotes)
• To note the emphasis which your professor places on certain areas
• To connect the big ideas of what’s going on in class
• To make sure you didn’t miss anything that was said
• To represent your own understanding of and connections within the course material

Take a look at what you’ve been “taking” as notes over the last week or so. Are your notes fulfilling a few of the bullet-points above? Are some classes’ notes better than others? Why do you think that might be? What makes the notes different? If they’re not different, why not?

Quiz Time!

I’d like you to take a minute now to put the following in order of what you think would be the least effective notes to the most effective notes. Start with the least effective notes first (more on the next page).

Summary notes given by professor
Complete transcript given by professor
Summary notes taken by student
Key words taken by student
No notes at all
Key words given by professor
Complete transcript taken by student

We’ll return to this example in a little bit. First, let’s review some basic note-taking common sense.
Note-taking Primer

In order to prepare yourself for good notes you need to be a good student yourself. Make sure you’re getting plenty of rest, eating well-balanced meals, and caught up on the material in a course – all not very easy things to do in college.

Position yourself for success in the classroom and studying environment. Turn off any distractions on your computer, sit up as straight and alertly as you can. If you’re in a smaller, one-level classroom (not a lecture center), try to sit in the front rows and near the center aisleway.

Next, develop a basic organizing system for your notes. Every day, write the subject and date at the start of your notes; include a heading if you can think of one (e.g.: Chapter 6: Mitochondria). If you’re typing or Tablet-writing your notes, make sure you have created separate folders for each class so that you’re saving your notes in obvious and easy-to-find places. Save all downloaded course material in the same place. If you’re taking notes by hand, be sure to keep a separate notebook or notebook section for each class. Use abbreviations or make up your own so that you can be efficient and save time in class – but be sure to keep a key of your abbreviations so you don’t forget what they are! These are simple steps that seem tedious now, but will make all the difference when you have boatloads of information to sort through come test time.

Finally, commit some time each day to reviewing and renewing your notes. What do I mean by renewing notes? I don’t mean simply rewriting notes. By renewing I mean going one step further and filling in your own information, creating your own teaching tools. Good notes serve to not only remind you of the important information but also to provide you with excellent, easy-to-use study guides.

What happened to Leo’s notes?

Our friend in the opening story seemed to be out of luck when he banked on being able to use Leo’s notes as a substitute for his own. But how much good can Leo’s notes be to you if you can’t read them? Not much use, if you ask me! That’s because Leo had his own notetaking organizational system that only he could read. The notes, which DaVinci wrote backwards so that they could only be read in a mirror, made absolute sense to him but was gibberish to anyone else.

No one’s notes will ever be able to substitute for your own, since your notes represent your own conception, understanding, and processing of class materials. It’s a good idea to compare notes with classmates, or to listen to the lectures again in case you missed something, but you can’t rely only on those other sources.

A study at Oxford University in 2000 found that Key words taken by the student was the most effective form of note-taking, and word-for-word written by the professor was the least effective. Compare these answers to your own from the list above:

Least effective: No notes at all (I know you all got that one right!)
Complete transcript given by professor
Complete transcript taken by student
Summary notes given by professor
Summary notes taken by student
Key words given by professor

Most effective: Key words taken by student
How did you do? Are you surprised to learn that you have the power to be an excellent note-taker?

Consider this: **It’s the thought that counts! (Your thoughts, that is!)**

**Practical Note-taking**
When’s a good time to renew your notes? When you’re reading before class, when you’re reading after class, when you’re preparing to write an essay, and when you need to work out something that’s been confusing you. Here are some ways you can learn to take better notes.

**Color-Coding**
If your class studies different themes, different time periods, or emphasizes the learning of vocabulary words, consider color-coding certain words within your notebook. If dates are important, highlight all dates in yellow. Choose different colors for different themes, like blue for bones of the body, green for parts of a plant. Keep a color key for yourself so that you don’t forget how you organized yourself!

**Mind maps**
These are also called “concept mapping” or clustering. They also can look like flow charts. You start with one main idea and branch off into others. Consider this:

![Mind map diagram]

Isn’t that a lot easier to study from than a few paragraphs in a textbook?
Know Your Note-taking Skills

Graphic organizers (charts)
Like mind-maps, but can help you sort a lot of information very quickly. Consider this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Solids</th>
<th>Liquids</th>
<th>Gases</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shape</strong></td>
<td>Fixed</td>
<td>Assumes shape of part of container</td>
<td>Assumes whole container’s shape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Molecular behavior</strong></td>
<td>Rigid- locked into place</td>
<td>Can move / slide past each other</td>
<td>Can move past each other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Compression of molecules</strong></td>
<td>Not easily compressible</td>
<td>Not easily compressible</td>
<td>Compressible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Space between molecules</strong></td>
<td>Little space</td>
<td>Little space</td>
<td>Lots of free space</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Just looking at this basic chart (from Purdue University), what can you infer about the vibration of molecules in solids, liquids, and gases? What kind of molecular arrangements might you expect to find in each – and why? Make the connections.

The Cornell Note-taking Method
I want to be sure to mention to you one more way to take notes so that you can easily turn them into reviewing material. The Cornell Note-taking Method, developed at Cornell University, separates your note-taking page into three distinct parts: the main area of notes, a sidebar (“cue column” for main ideas / key words, and a summary space.

![Cornell Note-taking Method Diagram]

Take your notes as you would normally in the “note-taking area.” Remember to keep them labeled and dated as any other kinds of notes. After class, review your notes and put key words, phrases, or new vocabulary in the “cue column.” This will make it easier for you to find information as you continue to review it every day. Then, take a minute to write up a quick summary in your own words about what that page of notes covers. Just a few minutes every day can help you to process the information and incorporate a system to easily find material.
Thank You
Thanks for “listening”! I hope you will consider using some of these methods. Try to incorporate one into one of your classes so that you get familiar with it – try a course like ARW, POC, or Humanities, which aren’t courses that typically have lots of charts to use but for which charts are especially useful. As I always say, if it works for you, great! If it doesn’t work for you, no need to stay obligated – try something else. Meet with your first-year or academic advisor for further discussion.

Google any of the main terms from this “lecture” to find downloadable templates or different real-life examples of using these methods.