

Taking Notes for Studying

Taking notes for different purposes is one of the key skills you will use during your studies at university. The purpose of taking notes is to help you study better; to learn and engage with your subject by capturing the 'key points' instead of writing everything down! Good notes, for example, require good listening skills when taken during a seminar, reading or revision – these offer clarification and allow you to review your ideas for assignments or exams. They also will aid deeper understanding of your subject and retention of any information noted. Remember there is no right or wrong way to taking notes, choose a method which is preferable to you. This Guide will offer several solutions and tips below.

The Golden Rules of note taking

The key is to develop a note taking system which allows you to do the "3 Rs":

1. Read (understanding your subject)
2. Reflect (understanding, developing and linking your read notes)
3. Review (analysis, evaluation and synthesis of your notes)

General tips for taking any notes

- How will you take your notes: recording, hand, typing?
- Note the keywords, ideas, theories, diagrams and tables
- Write your notes in an organised, logical, chronological and structured style
- Reference your notes as you go along
- Avoid plagiarism and 'write in your own words' – paraphrase and summarise
- Develop links and cross-referencing in, and between, your notes
- For any note taking use different colours, fonts, pictures, paper, cue cards etc.
- Try different note taking techniques, symbols and abbreviations

Note taking during seminars

- Have you prepared any notes before the seminar or completed any online content: these will act as a good start
- Only note 'what is new to you' – what is relevant and essential
- Note and contextualise important dates, e.g. historical events
- Clearly note people's names and their ideas – develop links and associations
- Note any theories – its purpose and meaning
- Understand any terminology and definitions
- Note any quotations, critique, arguments, debate and evaluations: this helps to develop deeper-understanding of your subject. Do you have any questions?
- Record the use of any image, table, theorem, e-information, diagram – note how, what, where and why it was used
- Note any sources or references used

Note taking while reading and literature review

- What are you reading: e.g. journal article, book, newspaper, government paper?
- Know and understand the purpose and what you are looking for in the reading – an overview, a specific point, evidence to support an argument
- Take notes using a logical and structured style
- Begin by outlining the main point, premise, argument, theory or idea: make subsequent paragraphs using titles and subheadings
- Look for key ideas and follow visual cues
- Analyse and question why you are taking the notes
- Think about how much details do you need to read and the depth of the notes
- Look for answers to questions you need to address
- Look for links and connections between the readings: do the authors dis/agree? Are there patterns, events, theories etc. you can comment on?
- Make brief, clear and precise notes
- Define relationships between main points – how do they connect and why
- Leave spaces for additional notes, thoughts, questions and ideas
- Read your notes at the end
- Close with a summary for easier reference in the future

Note taking for exams

- Refer to the syllabus and tutor's tips!
- Read any past exam papers to familiarise yourself with the style and format
- Plan your time management – note the dates for the exams which can help to prioritise the order of the note taking for exams to help aid your long-term memory
- Understand your learning and revision style, e.g. visual and mind-maps but working alone early in the morning.
- Compartmentalise and approach one subject or topic at a time
- Have separate notes for each subject
- Keep notes logical and structured – try different methods
- Question the purpose of the notes for deeper understanding
- Note the essential points – you cannot remember everything!
- Keep notes short, simple and memorable – don't write for the sake of writing!
- Note the key ideas and words
- Link, connect, cross-reference your notes
- Review your notes regularly
- Have breaks to avoid boredom and procrastination
- Have study dates with your friends
- Go to bed early before the night of the exam!

Note taking techniques

There are several techniques you can use for effective note taking. Remember it does not have to be snazzy or fancy. One caution, if you are happy using one technique and it works for you then maybe stick with this! Below are a few techniques and hyperlinked templates.

Linear notes:

- Makes notes in lists or phrases
- Structured and logical
- Key/buzz words and phrases
- Headings and indented sub-headings
- Underlining, highlighting and colouring key points

Mind-mapping:

- To see how the relationships between ideas link and develop
- Take a large sheet of paper and draw a bubble containing the main idea. Draw subsequent branches with bubbles to contain one or two keywords. Draw subtopic bubbles around this layer which expands the key words. You can use colours, pictures, symbols etc. to create a map but keep it simple.
- Effective method for deep-learning, engagement and understanding
- Clearer links between the main subject and subsidiary notes
- Easier recalling and reviewing for revision
- Easy to edit and expand

Cornell method (or 2-6-2 method):

- Note taking to promote critical analytical thinking and writing
- Being critically reflective in your summaries and key thoughts – why has the information been included. It makes you question why you have made particular notes and significant key notes: how and why these will be used in your study.
- The Cornell template design consists of the right column for note taking; the left column is for the reflective, critical and analytical thinking of those notes (i.e. questions and keywords/ideas). The final box is to be completed after class to summarise the main points into one paragraph.

[The information funnel method:](#)

- This is good for note taking for active reading (critically processing and understanding the information you are reading)
- It produces three layers for note taking:
 - i. Full chapter text – here you are getting an overview of the chapter
 - ii. Chapter summary – read the chapter again and review the main ideas succinctly (the idea to read the chapter in 10-25% of the time)
 - iii. Keyword list – list the keywords and essential points, e.g. names, dates, theory (the idea to read the chapter in 2.5-5% of the time). This section is good for testing yourself for exam preparation.

Note taking software

There are several note taking software applications you can use which offer different options. Here are a few to help get you started:

- [Evernote](#)
- Inspiration
- Scrivener
- Foxit
- Dragon
- Rite & Cite
- MindGenius
- [iMindMap](#)

Note taking symbols and abbreviations

As part of your note taking you may want to use a form of shorthand to help speed up the note taking. Within this you can incorporate symbols and abbreviations but remember to be consistent. For example, different symbols and abbreviations could be:

Symbol		Abbreviation	
*	Important	Cf.	compare
//	New paragraph	e.g.	example
∴	Therefore	Info.	Information
?	Question or Q	Excl.	Exclude

Storing your notes

- Loose-leaf in A4 – file per subject?
- Use a numerical code system
- Concertina files or folders
- E-folders or software
- A spiral notebook
- Card index system
- Memory pens

References for further reading

Buzan, B. and Buzan, T. (1999) *The Mind Map Book*. London: BBC Publications.

Rowntree, D. (1976) *Learn How to Study*. 2nd edn. London: MacDonald and Co. (see pp. 40-64 about the SQ3R method for reading and note taking).