Effective Note-Taking

One reason many students find it hard to keep up with new learned material (lectures, readings etc.), is that they try to write down everything in their notes.

However effective note taking should:

1. Be purposeful: the note-taker is constantly making a conscious decision on what to note down, why and how to organize it.
2. Be used: you shouldn't just take notes and put them away until the exam night, but actually do something with them.

In this guide, we will share with you how notes can be a useful learning and studying tool, what good notes look like, activating your note-taking and effective note-taking strategies.

Why Take Notes?

Note-taking can be useful as a learning tool and as a studying tool.

For using notes to learn: actively engage with new information by deciding what information to note-down, why, and how to organize it effectively for later use. This way you're not just noting everything you hear or read, but actively making choices and decisions about your notes.

For using notes to study: use them to practice retrieval (remembering) of your lecture or reading's content by writing summaries under test conditions, ensure you have a section for reflection on your notes, make connections between what you're learning and prior knowledge, pose questions, and find gaps in understanding.

What Good Notes Look Like?

1. They are summaries of the content of the material at hand (lecture, reading, video)
2. They are written in your own words
3. They are organized hierarchically (main ideas, sub-ideas, and important details)
4. They include a section for reflection, and connecting the new learned material to previous knowledge and experience.

Note Taking Strategies

There are several popular note-taking strategies, and since different people learn differently, there's no one size fits all when it comes to note-taking, use the method that works best for you.

The 3-step approach

This method helps you focus and understand what you're reading, paragraph by paragraph (or slide by slide, if you are completing an online module) before writing down anything, go one step at a time:

Step 1: read the paragraph or slide, focusing on understanding the material—don't write anything down yet.

Step 2: take notes (paraphrase the main idea, jot down any questions)

Step 3: highlight or colour-code the most important information (e.g., key terms or concepts). Highlight no more than 20% of the text.
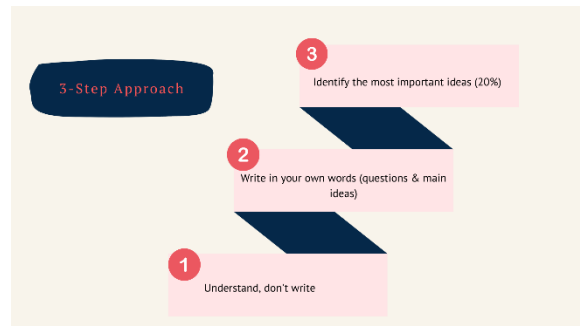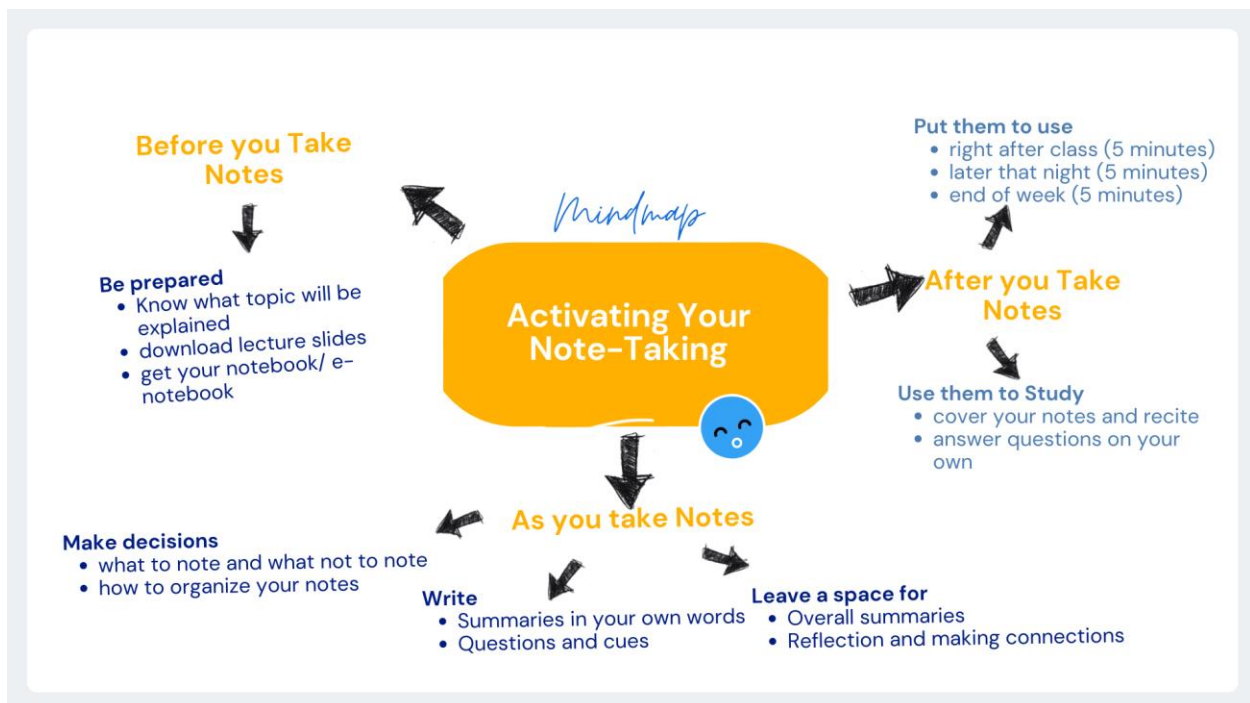

Mind maps

Mind mapping can be an effective note-taking tool, and is an especially effective way to connect topics within a chapter or even from the whole course. It is an active note-taking and organizing technique as it involves making a decision about what concepts to include, how to show relationships and connections between concepts and how to present the information in the most meaningful way.

Use mind maps to learn: by adding the newly learned concepts in your lecture or reading to previously learned experience.

Use mind maps to study: by constantly modifying, updating and adding to your mind map to create a coherent visual representation of your course.

The below mind map is a summary of how to activate your note-taking by doing simple steps (before, while and after you take notes).


Download Activating your Note-taking mind map here

The Cornell Method

The Cornell Method is a system for taking, organizing and reviewing notes.

The strength of this method is the page layout, that allows you to not only take notes, but also create questions and cues related to these notes as well as an end of class summary section. (see the image below).

To make your own Cornell Notes, start by dividing your page into a two column table. The first column to the left should be smaller, around (7 cm wide) and this will be dedicated for cue words and questions. While the second column should be wider as it will include the notes you take down. On the top of the table leave space for writing information about the content you are summarizing (Course, Date, Lecture title/Reading title) and at the bottom leave a space for writing your summary. Download Cornell Template Here
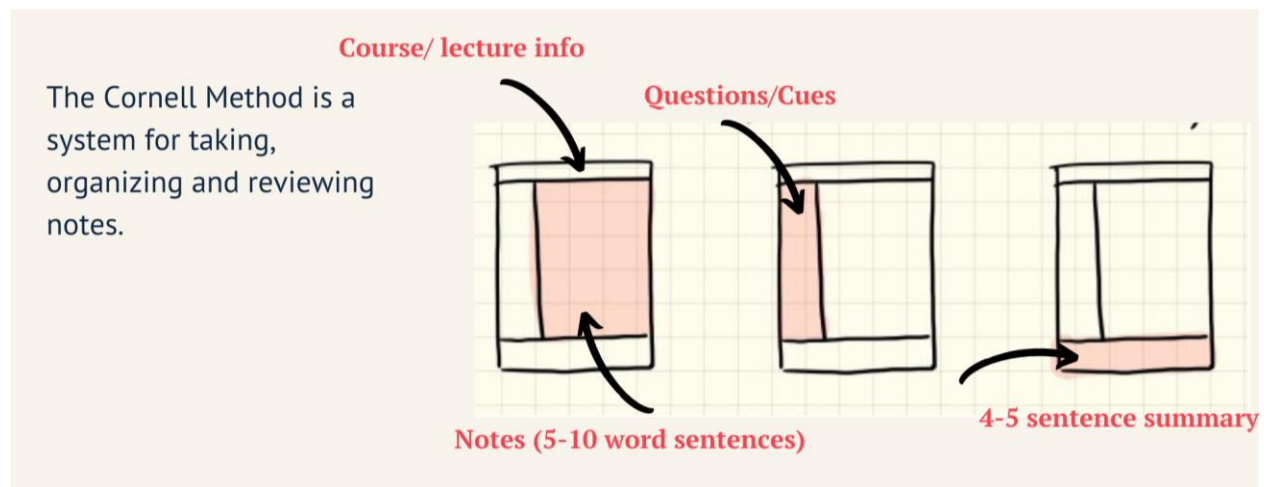
How to use the Cornell Method?

First Record: During the lecture use the note-taking column to take notes using short sentences (use meaningful abbreviations when possible).

Second Questions: Right after the session, formulate questions based on the notes you have taken, write these questions in the left column. Writing questions helps you clarify meanings, reveal relationships, and strengthen memory.

Third Recite: Cover the note-taking column with a sheet of paper. Then, looking at the questions or cue-words in the question and cue column only, say aloud, in your own words, the facts, or ideas indicated by the cue-words. This step is a bonus step, which makes your note-taking process also a studying technique.

Fourth Reflect: Reflect on the material by asking yourself questions, for example:

- Why is this topic or this information important?
- How can I apply them?
- How do they relate to what I already know (experience or information)?

- How can I use this information in the future?

Finally Review: within 1-2 days of the lecture, make sure to review the notes in the light of all the previous notes you've taken in this course. This step helps you a lot while trying to retrieve the information in the future.

The SQ4R Method

Use the SQ4R method to improve your ability to understand, retain, and concentrate on what you read, it's a note taking technique that is more suitable for reading.

The SQ4R is an acronym for Survey, Question, and the 4 Rs are (Reading, Recording, Reciting, Reviewing).

Step 1: Survey

Skim to get a preview of the text you are about to read. How is it organized? What does it cover? Use elements like headings, visuals, key terms, summaries, and introductory sections (e.g., title, objectives) to help you.

Step 2: Question

Try turning headings and subheadings into questions before reading the paragraphs that follow. Reading with a question in mind makes the process more active, supporting memory and concentration. It also helps you to identify the most important, relevant information.

Step 3: Read and record

Read section by section, seeking the answer to each question; focus on the main idea and the supporting information as it pertains to the question. Take notes as you go, in point form and in your own words.

Step 4: Recite

Cover up the text and see if you can answer the heading/subheading questions to check your understanding before moving on.

Step 5: Review

Take a break, then check your understanding again (i.e., repeat the process under Recite). This will further improve your memory of what you've read.

Making your notes matter

Many students take good notes, but never check them until right before their exams. While having good notes at hand can be very useful while preparing for your exams, leaving the notes to pile up over the semester is not going to help you reap the fruits of your work.

The purpose of taking notes should be understanding and remembering information covered over the whole course. While taking good notes is the first step, engaging with your notes or actually using them is what makes them really effective.

When to engage with your notes?

Step 1: Right after-class summary

Before you leave the class, or as soon as possible after class, take a few minutes to answer this question in writing:

"What is the most significant thing I learned today?" Write it out in **4-6 sentences, using your own words**. This will help you consolidate what you have learned during the lecture.

Step 2: Later on the same day

Later on the same day, before going to bed, spend 5 minutes to go through class summary and review your notes.

Step 3: Weekly summary

When you've taken in all the week's information (i.e., attended all classes, tutorials, and labs; completed readings and notes), **summarize the information from that week's topic or unit**.

- What did you cover this week?

- How is it connected to other information in the course?

- How can you best organize it?

Take note of **areas of challenge** or confusion and **get help** as needed.

Summarizing requires you to **select**, **organize**, and **integrate** information; doing so will improve both your understanding and memory. Possible summary formats include a 1-page study sheet, or a mind map.

The note-taking method you choose depends on context and purpose. Overall, taking good notes involves paraphrasing, consolidating, and/or summarizing information.

Step 4: Plan multiple engagements

The more you engage with your notes the more you will be achieving its main aim (learn deeply & retain information). A simple way to plan note-review sessions is to take 15 minutes per day to review lecture notes. This will take discipline, but it's a very powerful method to retrieve information and deepen understanding.

Let's say you have 2 lectures per week for the same module, and during each lecture you take notes, create after-class summaries (step1), and review the notes later that day for 5 minutes (step2). To increase your engagements with the notes you can do the following:

1. On lecture day 2 (revise lecture notes for Lectures 1 and 2) for 5 minutes each
2. On lecture day 3 (revise lecture notes for Lectures 1, 2, and 3) for 5 minutes each

3. On lecture day 4 (revise lecture notes 2, 3, and 4) as by this point, you would have acquired deep understanding of lecture note 1 and would no longer need to revise it.

Taking 15 minutes to revise the lecture notes and 2 previous lecture notes, will help you:

1. Move the learning from 'familiar' to 'working knowledge'
2. Retain information
3. Increased your engagement with your notes from 1 to 5 times

To learn more about Effective Note-Taking – check out our self-paced online module (Effective Reading and Note Taking), for more information about Academic Success Skills please enroll in our self-paced course Academic Success on the E-learning: Engineering, ICS, Energy Engineering, Arts & Design - Enroll here BAEPS, MMC, law, Arts & Humanities - Enroll here Dentistry, Pharmacy, and Nursing- Enroll here, or visit our Academic Success Skills Page.

Related topics and Templates: Effectively Reading Difficult Texts (Study Guide)- Active Note-Taking Checklist- Active Reading Checklist

Additional Resources Effective Reading BUE Guide