Note-Taking Tips

Taking good notes will make it easier for you to review texts, lectures, class discussions, and other assignments, especially when it comes time to work on a project, paper, or presentation. Not only does note-taking save time and energy, but it can also help you absorb information. This handout focuses on the note-taking process, from preparation to review.

Preparation

In-Class vs. Independent

- If you’ll be taking notes in class, make sure to look at the syllabus and the text for that day to get a sense of which topics the class will cover.
- If you’ll be taking notes on an independent assignment (this could be anything from reading an article to watching a movie), think about what themes and ideas you’d like to focus on.

Longhand vs. Digital

- Writing notes longhand can be time-consuming, but it means you’ll be selective about what you choose to write down. Writing by hand also encourages deeper engagement with a text than typing does.
- Taking notes on a computer is a useful way to gather information rather quickly. In a lecture setting where students need to retain lots of factual information, typing may be more effective than using pen and paper. Taking digital notes also makes it easier to edit and regroup information later on.

Note-Taking Styles

Below are four different note-taking styles. You may find one that works best for you, or you may choose to switch between several styles depending on the class or assignment.

- Outline: Perhaps the most common form of note-taking, the outline relies on main topics, subtopics, and details in order to group ideas. See how to take outline notes here.
• Mapping: This type of note-taking allows you to record concepts spatially and doesn’t rely on a linear format. You can draw branches between a main topic, subtopics, details, quotes, or other supporting facts. See how to map notes here.

• Cornell: This style divides the page into a note-taking section, a cue column (where notes are condensed into brief main ideas or questions), and a summary section. See how to take Cornell notes here.

• Charting: Charting relies on columns (and sometimes rows) to group notes by topic. Charting or mapping may be preferable to an outline if a lecture or text tends to skip around between topics. See how to chart notes here.
Review

If possible, set aside a few minutes to re-read your notes after class. Do you need to consult a professor, classmate, text, or other resource in order to fill in any gaps? Are there linkages you can draw between these notes and other assignments that you might want to jot down while they’re fresh in your mind?

Master Notes
After you’ve taken notes, the next step is to figure out how to make them accessible for future use. One way of doing this is to consolidate the notes you’ve taken into a master document. Your master document could be anything from a handwritten journal to a set of Google Drive folders, as long as your notes are in a place where you can easily retrieve them.