

THE FINE (OR NOT SO FINE) ART OF EFFECTIVE NOTE TAKING

A key skill for school success involves the ability to take effective class notes. Teachers expect that their words will be recorded and that students will use these notes for test preparation, homework completion, essays and other assignments. In reality, note taking is quite difficult for many students who face challenges caused by inattention, learning disabilities, fine motor disabilities, writing skill deficits and/or distractibility. The following are some quick tips for adding value to the note taking process by making sure that key ideas, details and formulas presented by your teachers during class are being recorded in a way that will be useful at test time.

- Make sure you come to class prepared to take notes. Bring your writing instruments and your notebook or binder. Preferably, your notebook system will dedicate one binder or spiral notebook (with pocket folders) to each class. My personal preference is the use of three- ring binders. Binders allow handouts to be dated, hole- punched and easily inserted. Additionally, categories can be set up using section dividers in each binder. Some categories you might want to include are: class notes, assignments, homework, textbook notes, graded work. Every three-ring binder should ideally have its own plastic hole- punch that snaps right into the binder rings. This way you can date the handout, hole-punch and insert immediately.
- Start a new page for each day of class. Put the date at the top of the page. Write on the front of each page only, leaving the back free for adding notes you may have missed, or questions you might have about the lesson.
- There are various systems for taking notes, including outlining, mapping and the Cornell system. A quick search on Google will give you detailed information on these techniques. Briefly, the popular Cornell system involves leaving a 2-inch margin on the left hand side of the paper and a 2- inch margin on the bottom. Notes are then taken during class in the center of the paper. The left margin is reserved for main ideas, key words and questions, and the bottom margin for summary of the key topics and main ideas.

Another suggestion for those who learn visually or spatially and may have

difficulty with a linear note taking system is to use a mapping technique. This structure involves writing the main theme/topic in the center of the page and drawing a circle around it. Themes, concepts, and details should be connected to the central idea in the middle. Finding a system that works well for you and meets your learning needs is the key to success here.

- Don't try to record every word. Pay attention to cues from the teacher about what information is important and what you may be tested on and write down only the major ideas. Formulas and definitions should always be written down exactly. It is helpful to flag important information with a highlighter, star or some other symbol of your choice. Also flag any material you don't understand and check in with your teacher for clarification. When it comes time to study, use these "flags" to focus your efforts.
- Leave space between notes for adding information you may have missed whether through momentary inattention or a bathroom break.
- Develop a system of word abbreviations. All you "texters" are probably already skilled at abbreviating many words. Use this system consistently with your notes as well.
- Write legibly as you can given the time constraints. Reread your notes after class and fix any words that aren't clear to you. Review and edit your notes within 24 hours of class. Use color to highlight important points. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to ask them at the beginning of the next class.
- Have a study buddy. This should be a reliable student who is willing to share their class notes. Review their notes regularly. Make certain to get the notes from any missed classes.

Taking notes forces you to listen and helps you remember the information even before you begin to study. However, just because you understand the material in class doesn't mean you'll remember it. Reviewing your notes will help reinforce your knowledge. Remember that teachers sometimes give information in class that isn't found in the textbook. This information may very well appear on a test or quiz. If it is emphasized in class, emphasize it while studying.

Here's an interesting fact to ponder. Without review, 47% of what a person learns is forgotten within twenty minutes and 62% is forgotten after the first day. Whatever note taking system you choose, remember that reviewing these notes regularly is the key to successful retention.

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