

IN THE CLASSROOM

LISTENING AND TAKING NOTES

Some Nonsense About Lectures

You will be sure to hear that you can get more out of a lecture if you don't take notes. This could be true if you took an examination right after the lecture. You don't - you take one weeks or months later, and you can forget a lot by then. You can't review the lecture without good notes.

You may hear that you should take notes only on the main points of a lecture. This just doesn't work. Noting a point after you have decided that it is important interferes with your listening to the next point. On the other hand, don't think you must record every word the lecturer says - rather, be alert to take down the facts and ideas which form the step-by-step development of the topic.

You may hear that you should reflect upon the lecturer's ideas as they are being presented. This is highly impractical. When you emerge from your reflections on point one, you are apt to hear the lecturer say, "and point number four is...". This does not mean that you should take notes unthinkingly, like a tape recorder. But extended reflection should come later, assisted by complete notes taken during the lecture.

You may hear that you should convert the lecturer's words into your own. This also is seldom possible in a fast-moving lecture. Formulating concepts in your own words should come later, in your study time.

You may hear that you should take notes in formal outline - 1,A,1,a, etc. The outline form does have some advantages in organising the material, but it has disadvantages too. By the time you decide whether a point is major or minor the lecturer may be paragraphs ahead of you. Also, until you have the complete pattern of the lecture, you cannot always be sure that you are making accurate decisions on the co-ordination and sub-ordination of topics, sub-topics, and supporting materials.

Students who take few notes, or none at all, are seldom short on excuses. They complain that the instructor is a poor lecturer, that his material is poorly organised and hard to follow, that he isn't saying anything important enough to take notes on, or that he is only repeating what is in the textbook. Or they argue that note-taking distracts them from listening. Yet these are the very students who consistently find themselves at the bottom of the class. They fail for two reasons. Since they do not feel that anything important is being said, they do not listen attentively. And since they do not take notes, they do not have the lecturer's ideas and information as a basis for further study. A good lecture either expands material in the text by giving more details and fuller explanations, or it supplements the text by covering different material or taking a different point of view.

The First Step - Good Listening

To get the most out of a lecture, you must listen actively. Good listening requires alertness, and the key to remaining alert in class is preparation. A good rule is to review the last reading assignment and your notes on the preceding lecture, before going to class. Also, spend a few minutes speculating on what points today's lecture may cover.

- 1. In class, assume a position of physical alertness.** A slouch is not conducive to good note-taking. Also, many students pay closer attention if they sit near the lecturer; this is especially important for those with visual or hearing difficulties.
- 2. Be mentally alert.** Concentrate on the lecturer; don't follow the crack in the ceiling with your eyes or count stitches while knitting - in fact, don't knit. Become so involved with the lecture that you are aware of virtually nothing else.
- 3. Maintain a proper mental attitude.** Try to learn all you can; even "dull" subjects become interesting once you are involved. It helps to realise that the lecturer is saving you hours of hard work by organising the salient points of the course for you. The more you learn in class, the easier it will be to complete your assignment and the better you will understand it.
- 4. Do not be distracted by the speaker's mannerisms, his method of delivery, or the quality of his voice.** Concentrate on what he says, not on oddities of delivery or platform behaviour. Dr. Ralph W. Gerard, Professor of Neurophysiology in the Mental Health Research Institute at the University of Michigan, tells a memorable story on this point:

I remember a college course in Chemistry in which the lecturer spoke in a monotone and would have earned a low grade in elocution; he was, nonetheless, a superb teacher and gave a clear, logical, organised presentation of the guiding ideas. In a particular lecture he told how the great German chemist, Emil Fischer, had proved the monocyclic structure of a group of sugars and so put modern organic chemistry on its feet. At the end of the hour two of us walked blindly from the room as from a magnificent concert, smack into some obstruction in the hall. We simply didn't see it. One can, indeed, become as immersed in an aesthetic experience based on the beauty of intellectual processes as in one based on the beauty of sensory experience.

- 5. Listen with your mind, not your emotions.** If the speaker uses a word you don't like, or makes a point contrary to your beliefs, don't stop listening - you'll only be defeating yourself. Rehearsing devastating rebuttals to hurl at him prevents you from hearing additional, perhaps qualifying comments. Jot down questions and specific points of disagreement so you won't forget them; then go on listening. If they still seem significant after the lecture, raise them during the discussion period. Listening with your mind, or registering what you hear, does not mean that you must accept everything you hear. To find yourself occasionally in opposition is a good thing, since it means that you are thinking about what you hear and relating it to what you already know.

- 6. When it is appropriate to do so, raise questions in class.** Some lecturers follow a tight schedule which leaves no time for questions; others do not. You can soon tell. When time allows, most instructors welcome sincere questions, though they are quick to recognise those that are ill-considered or intended to impress. A good question helps you relate new knowledge to other ideas and fix it in your mind. Don't be afraid of being laughed at. Even if you ask a question that has already been answered, or one which is obvious or even silly, the worst that can happen to you is a sharp reply and a moment's embarrassment.

To ask useful questions, note points not clear to you as you read your assignment. Discuss these with your classmates, and if the answers still don't come clear, raise questions in class. Be sure to follow the class discussion closely so that your question will be pertinent. Finally, stop speaking when you have made your point; time is at a premium.

In some courses, large lecture meetings are supplemented by smaller discussion groups. These allow you to ask questions on both lectures and reading. Don't miss this chance.

The Second Step - Orderliness

The following techniques of note-taking have proved successful for students. Here are twenty general suggestions which will help you take better notes. Added up, these mean: ***be alert, be orderly, be systematic, and don't let things slide.***

- 1. Attend lectures faithfully.** The lecture system is the backbone of many courses, and a complete set of notes is usually crucial.
- 2. Keep notes for each course in one place,** in a separate notebook or section of a notebook.
- 3. Take notes on one side of the page only.** Often it is a great help to spread out the pages and **see** the pattern of the lecture.
- 4. Use a loose-leaf notebook, or a file folder** for your notes rather than a notebook with a fixed binding.
- 5. Record the name and number of the course,** the date, and the lecturer's name on the first sheet for each lecture. This is a safeguard against loss or mix-up of notes.
- 6. Use large sheets of paper** to give yourself room to indent and to see the pattern of your notes. The standard size for a large notebook is A4.
- 7. Do not doodle or knit.** Any manual activity of this kind inhibits note-taking, interferes with concentration, and breaks eye-contact with the lecturer, whose gestures and facial expressions give important clues for understanding and remembering.
- 8. Make your notes complete and clear enough so that they will have meaning** for you weeks and months later. You need not write in full

sentences, however, since note-taking is a process of selection, condensation, and compression.

- 9. Write legibly.** Later when you review, legible handwriting will let you concentrate on ideas and facts rather than on deciphering your notes. It also saves the time it would otherwise take to put scrawled notes into typewritten form. Copying notes is not a form of review but merely a mechanical process, wasteful of time.
- 10. Leave blanks for words, phrases, or ideas you think may have been missed by you.** Directly after the lecture, ask the instructor or a fellow student to help you fill the gaps.
- 11. Develop your own system of enumeration and indentation.** Don't indent so far that you are crowded into a small area at the right-hand side of the page.
- 12. Develop abbreviations of common words and recurring terms.** This will give you more time both to listen and to write.
- 13. Use a symbol** (such as an asterisk, arrow, or underline) to mark ideas the lecturer emphasises.
- 14. Mark off assignments that are mixed in with the lecture.** Similarly note and mark off any books or other references the lecturer mentions - these will be valuable guides to further reading.
- 15. Separate your own thoughts from the lecturer's.** It is an excellent practice to jot down questions, your own examples, ideas and references; but make sure you bracket or otherwise label these as yours, not his.
- 16. Be alert for clues.** Often an instructor will say, "You'll see this later", or "This is important", or "This is a common pitfall". Following such clues, note important statements and put an asterisk or other symbol in the margin. Watch for enumerations - e.g. "The four steps in the process are as follows". Watch for words such as "finally", "therefore", which may warn that an important point is about to be presented. Listen for other transitional words, phrases, or sentences which may signal the end of one main idea and the beginning of another.
- 17. Always record the lecturer's examples.** They often clarify abstract ideas. Indicate the fact that they are examples, e.g. **EX**.
- 18. Pay as close attention to the end of a lecture as to the beginning.** Lecturers do not always pace themselves accurately, and may cram half the content into the last five or ten minutes. Record such packed finales as rapidly as you can, and if necessary, stay in your seat for a few extra minutes to write down as much as you can remember.
- 19. Record additional ideas of your own** immediately after the lecture.
- 20. Review your notes after the lecture,** and improve the organisation if necessary.

Like any technique, listening and note-taking improve with practice. If you really try, you will be able to keep up with the fastest lecturer.

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