Taking effective notes in lectures and tutorials is an essential skill for university study. Good note-taking allows a permanent record of key information that you can integrate with your own writing, and use for exam revision. Taking reliable, accurate notes also reduces the risk of plagiarising. It helps you distinguish where your ideas came from and how and what you think about those ideas.

Six good reasons to take notes

- Notes are a useful record of key information, and the sources of that information.
- Notes inscribe information kinesthetically and help you remember what you heard.
- Taking notes helps you to concentrate and listen effectively.
- Selecting what to note down increases your understanding.
- Notes create a resource for exam preparation.
- Notes taken in classes often contain information that can’t be found elsewhere.

Taking notes vs listening: which is more important?

You’ll get most out of lectures if you do both, but don’t focus on getting everything down to the extent that you miss what the lecturer is saying—remember that actively listening and thinking are what is important.

Lecture slides are usually an outline of the lecture content. They guide your listening and help you identify the key topics
and concepts. Take note of what appears on them, but don’t confine your note-taking to simply copying it. The information is usually very limited compared to what the lecturer says, so it’s more effective to listen to the lecture and take notes from that. Most lecturers make their slides available before class, so print them out and take additional notes in the lecture.

**Before the Lecture: Be prepared**

Preparation before the lecture provides the background knowledge you need to be an effective listener and an effective student.

- Know what the lecture will be about. Check the course outline for weekly topics.
- Do any required pre-reading.
- If lecture slides are available before class, download them.
- Review notes from previous lectures.
- Set up notebooks/Documents for note-taking.
- Arrive on time and sit near the front - in order to take good notes, you need to hear and see clearly.

**Getting Started: Tips About Formatting**

To take notes effectively, you need to have a note-taking system that works for you. Having well organised notes will make them easier to understand and study from.

Develop a system and stick to it. Set out your notes so that you have a consistent, familiar format each time.

- At the start of semester, decide whether you will handwrite or type your notes.
- If you handwrite, have one notebook for each course, or a large divided notebook for everything.
- Make sure your notes are clearly labelled. Before each lecture or tute, write the date, topic and lecture/week number at the top of each page. Number each page.
- Using a two-column page layout helps distinguish between lecture information and your thoughts. Rule up each page into two columns: the column on the right should use about two-thirds of the page - this is where you take notes. The column on the left is a space for questions and extra notes that can be added later (if you are left-handed, make the left-hand column the note-taking area).
- If you’re using a laptop, document templates using the same principles can be useful to prepare. For more tips, see the section on Notetaking with Electronic Devices.

**During the Lecture: Strategies for effective note-taking**

**Concentrate and pay attention**

Arrive prepared to actively listen and learn, and to think critically. Analysing and questioning the information helps you to focus and understand what you hear.

**Don’t try to write down everything being said**

Be selective—you don’t have to transcribe the entire lecture. Effective listening note-taking involves recognising key concepts and identifying and selecting what is relevant. Listen for the overall argument and note the main points and key information.
How can I recognise what is important?

Distinguish between main points, elaboration, examples, ‘waffle’ and new points by listening for:

- introductory remarks. Lectures often begin with a useful overview of the key ideas or themes of a particular topic. This helps you grasp the ‘big picture’.
- verbal ‘signposts’ that indicate something important is about to be said. Lecturers often signal key information with phrases like: “There are four main aspects”, “This is important…” or “To sum up”.
- repetition. Important points will often be repeated, especially in introductions and conclusions.
- phonological cues (voice emphasis, change in volume, speed, emotion and emphasis) often indicate important information.
- final remarks. Most lectures conclude with a summary, a restatement of the main ideas and an indication of how the topic connects with upcoming material.

Look for:

- non verbal cues (facial expressions, hand and body signals) that indicate something important is being said.
- visual cues (note what is on the visuals, note references to names and sources)

After the Lecture

To get the most out of your notes it’s important to review and re-engage actively with them several times.

Review your notes while the lecture is fresh in your mind. Reviewing helps you remember what was said, builds up your understanding, and helps identify gaps in your knowledge.

To review:

- Read through your notes. Make sure they are clear and legible. Clean them up - fix spelling errors, expand on abbreviations, tidy up handwriting (if necessary).
- Fill in missing words or information and add anything extra that you may have thought of since the lecture.
- Code your notes - use colour and symbols to mark structure and emphasis, highlight major sections, main points and diagrams. Use different colours to emphasise main points, classify different topics and link concepts or information.
- Explain and clarify diagrams by writing a simple version of their meaning.
- Identify anything that needs further clarification.

Label and file your notes along with any lecture handouts.

Tips for re-engaging with notes

- Try “chunking” similar pieces of information into categories that you can remember more easily.
- Transcribe key concepts in your own words.
- Add your own questions to the notes to help you recall the key ideas.
- Write a brief overall summary of the notes.
- Reflect on the learning process itself—what do you find confusing? How did you solve problems or clarify your understanding?

See next: Techniques and Tips for Listening Note Taking