

7 tips on how to take better notes

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¹ In a graduate-level educational psychology course at Florida State University, my professor didn't allow students to take notes. He reasoned that taking notes prevented students from reflecting on the lesson.

² Yet, the professor also thought students needed a good set of notes to review later for exams. So he provided students with complete notes following each lesson. Most students appreciated this arrangement. I, however, did not. I was a **copious** note taker who believed in the value of recording one's own notes.

³ So instead of obeying the professor's note-taking ban, I sat in the back of the classroom and took notes secretly, scribbling **feverishly** on a small notepad whenever the professor looked away – until I was eventually caught pen-handed and had to fib about writing a letter to a friend back home. This episode prompted me to study note taking – something I've done for the **past four decades**. My objective has been to determine the value of note taking and how to best take notes. Here are seven note-taking tips.



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1. Do take notes

⁴ Students who **take notes** during a lesson achieve more than those who listen to the lesson without note taking. This is because the act of note taking staves off boredom and focuses attention on lesson ideas more than listening without taking notes.

⁵ The primary value of note taking, though, is more in the product than the process, more in the reviewing than the recording. Students who record and then review notes almost always **achieve more** than students who record but do not review notes.

2. Take complete notes

⁶ The more notes students record the higher their achievement. But many students are incomplete note takers, usually recording just one-third of important lesson ideas in notes.

⁷ Incomplete note taking is perhaps due to human limitations. Lecture rates fall between 120 to 180 words per minute, but most people can only write or type a fraction of those words per minute.

3. Take detailed notes

⁸ Students are actually fairly successful noting a lesson's main ideas. They falter when noting a lesson's vital details. Suppose, for instance, an instructor says:

“Short-term memory has a limited capacity (level 1). Its capacity is just seven items (level 2). Capacity can be increased by chunking information into smaller bits (level 3). For example, a 10-digit phone number can be chunked into three smaller bits, 560-642-1894, and easily held in short-term memory (level 4).”

⁹ In one study that examined missing details, students noted about 80% of a lesson's main ideas (level 1) but progressively fewer subordinate details: 60% of level 2 ideas, 35% of level 3 ideas, and just 11% of level 4 ideas. Students especially omit examples from notes even though examples can be crucial to understanding lesson ideas. One study showed that students recorded just 13% of lesson examples.

4. Look for note-taking cues

¹⁰ Students should be on the look out for lecture cues that signal idea importance or organization and enhance note taking.

¹¹ Importance cues can be verbal, such as when an instructor says, “Note this” or “This is really critical.” Sometimes, it is not what is said but how it is said. For instance, an instructor may say an important point louder or softer than less important points, repeat the point or pause afterward for effect.

¹² There are also nonverbal signals, such as pointing, clapping, or a piercing glance that cue students to important ideas.

¹³ Organizational cues involve statements that reveal the lesson's organization, such as “Let's next discuss the atom's three parts” or “Let's address two limitations of string theory.” Paying attention to organizational cues can add 45% more details to students' notes.

5. Revise your notes

¹⁴ Note taking has long been considered a 2-R process: record and review.

¹⁵ Recent research has shown a third R-step: revision, which occurs between record and review.

¹⁶ Revision should be done soon after a lecture or even during a lecture when the instructor pauses. During revision, students should try to use existing notes to prompt the recall and addition of missing lesson ideas.

¹⁷ A student in a psychology class might have noted that “short-term memory has a limited capacity.” During revision, that note might help the student recall this related detail: “short-term memory holds just seven items.” That additional lesson idea is then added to notes during revision.

6. Replay lectures

¹⁸ Students should take advantage of lessons posted online by viewing them more than once to maximize note taking. That’s because when students view a lesson multiple times, they record more complete notes and raise achievement. In one study, students viewing a lesson once recorded about 38% of lesson details in notes. Those who viewed the lesson twice or three times recorded about 53% and 60% of lesson details, respectively. A fourth group viewed the lesson a single time but they could pause, rewind, and fast-forward the lesson as they pleased, and recorded about 65% of lesson details.

¹⁹ In classes where lessons are not posted online, students can ask permission to record lessons with their smartphones so that additional viewings are possible.

7. Take handwritten notes

²⁰ There are two reasons students should take notes longhand instead of on laptops. First, research has shown that students who use laptops in class spend considerable time multitasking, leading to curtailed note taking and lower achievement. The multitasking students reported checking mail (81%), surfing the web (43%), playing games (25%) and using laptops for other non-class purposes (35%). In all, students spend more than half a typical class period using laptops for things that have nothing to do with the class. The same study found that laptop use also distracted nearby students.

²¹ Second, research has shown that laptop notes are inferior to longhand notes. Laptop notes are more verbatim than longhand notes, and verbatim note taking has been associated with shallow, non-meaningful learning. In addition, laptop note takers fail to note vital graphic information, such as graphs, charts and illustrations, which longhand note takers easily record in notes. Because longhand notes are qualitatively better than laptop notes, reviewing them leads to higher achievement than reviewing laptop notes.

Guess my professor was right

²² Turns out that my educational psychology professor was largely on the mark in forbidding note

taking and providing complete notes for students to study. After all, the primary value of note taking comes in the review of notes, and students tend to record sketchy notes.

²³ The problem is, in my experience, most instructors do not make complete notes available to students, and students are left with their own incomplete and ineffective notes to review. Hopefully, my research and this article help students record more effective notes on their own.

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