

NOTETAKING IN LECTURES

How do your lecture notes look at the end of the week? Are they scattered between several A4 notepads, full of half-finished sentences and shorthand that even you don't understand? Have you ever found yourself wishing you could take better or more effective notes? Note-taking in class can be challenging, but with a few strategic practices, anyone can take clear, effective notes. This lesson discusses the importance of notetaking and how to maximise your note-taking efficiency, and takes a closer look at the Cornell note-taking system.

Why do we take notes in lectures?

Good note taking **records** the useful information which helps you to increase your understanding of the area you are studying. It helps to develop **memory skills** and **writing skills** and will even help you to prepare for **exams**.

Active Listening

The key to effective note-taking is active listening. The aim of note-taking while in lectures is not to take down every word that the lecturer is saying – rather, try to make a note of the main points and jot down your own thoughts and questions as they occur to you. Of course, there are some very simple steps which will help you to do exactly this:

1. Have the required reading completed before the lecture. Having the preparatory reading done will make it easier for you to engage with the lecture content and provide you with a framework for making opinions and comparisons.
2. Quickly review previous lecture notes to refresh your memory of the subject matter. If lectures are linked as a series on the same theme/topic, you should also review your notes from the previous lectures in the series.
3. Familiarise yourself with any technical jargon/specific definitions in advance of the lecture.

TOP TIP

Active listening requires you to be fully present! As the lecturer is speaking, focus on the main points and ask yourself how you can apply the information to various issues. Ask yourself, for example, 'Do I agree?', 'Is that always true? Or even, simply, 'Why?'

Know the lecturer's style

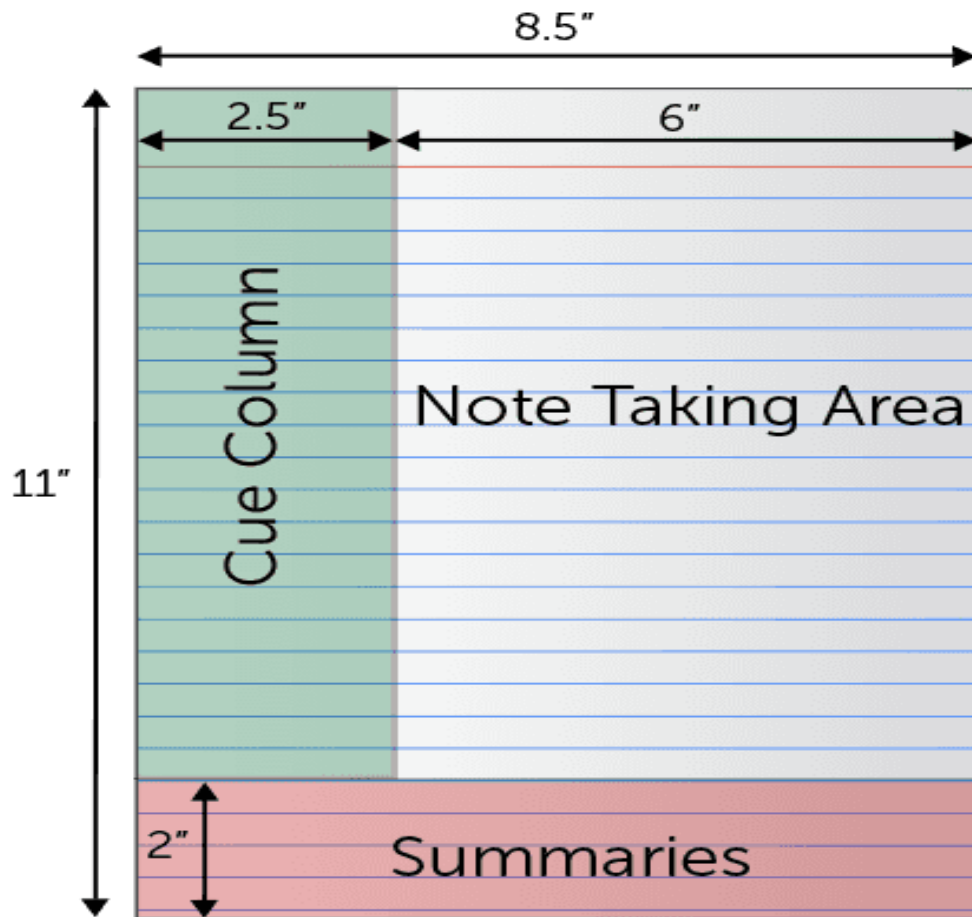
Identify your lecturer's unique style of delivery. Many lecturers follow a format similar to that seen in well-structured assignments: they will have an introduction, a main section and a conclusion to their lectures. Reflect this in your own notes.

Look also at the lecturer's body language and tone of voice throughout the lecture. When they introduce a particularly important theme or topic, for example, they will often become more animated. Listen also for repetition within a single lecture or a series of lectures: if the same theme comes up time and again, then this is a clear indicator that this may well be important for future assignments and exams. You should also listen out for phrases such as, 'A major reason why...', or 'Of particular significance is...'

We all learn differently: Some of us are visual learners, others benefit from aural or tactile learning methods. Therefore, there is no 'right' note-taking format and what's important is that you find a method that works for you, encourages good note-taking practices and stick with it. One such note-taking method is the Cornell system, and it works according to the following principles:

The 6 Rs of Note-taking

1. **Record** - During the lecture, record the information in the note-making section. You can use a shorthand system if you wish - but make sure you can understand it afterwards! Symbols and abbreviations can also be used.
Mark your own thoughts in a different colour.
2. **Reduce** - Within 24 hours of your lecture review your notes. Highlight important headings, terminology or key people/dates. Now use the **Cue Column** to reduce your notes to key words, phrases or questions.
3. **Recite** - Cover the note-taking area and using only the Cue words recite out loud what the lecture was about.
4. **Reflect** - Think about what you have just learnt. Link key themes and topics, this will help develop critical thinking skills.
5. **Review** - Spend time each week going back over the notes. Use the Cue words to help pull the information into your mind.
6. **Recapitulate** - In the **Summary** section, use your own words to summarise the main points you want to remember. This practice helps to strengthen your memory and is a great way to review notes just before an exam.



Using the Cornell Note-Taking system

Before each lecture:

Prepare for the lecture: Read your previous lecture notes and ensure you have completed any required readings. On the top of each page, note the date, module code and title, lecturer's name and lecture topic.

During each lecture:

Make comprehensive notes. Use the right-hand (larger) of the two columns to take notes throughout the lecture. Make these notes comprehensive, but as concise as possible, summarising the most important concepts in your own words rather than taking down everything the lecturer says word-for-word. This will help you to think deeply and critically about the topic being discussed. Feel free to use any shorthand system you like – just ensure you can read it yourself after class! Leave the 'cue' column empty at this point.

🔍 TOP TIP

If any questions or thoughts concerning the topic come to mind during the lecture, jot them down in a different colour – you can then return to and research them at a later date.

Active listening is a very important element of note-taking in lectures. Listen carefully for the lecturer's use of phrases such as '*alternatively*', '*another school of thought argues that...*' or, simply, '*however...*'. This affords you the opportunity to research alternative approaches to upcoming assignments around that particular topic. If you have any thoughts or questions regarding these alternative approaches, again see the [Top Tip](#) box above. Listen out for any **repetition of themes or concepts**: This indicates that they are particularly important and will, therefore, be useful in either an upcoming assignment or exam.

Remember also to note the **body language and tone** of the person delivering the class. Lecturers tend to get more animated when they speak of topics that are of a particular interest to them, and you can identify the importance of various concepts and themes simply by becoming familiar with their delivery style and then noting when they deviate from it.

Whether you choose a short or longhand method, try to limit what you write to include only the most important points of the lecture.

Within 24 hours of the lecture...

The timing of this next step is vital. Within 24 hours of the lecture, read through the notes you have taken and extract the key words, terms and phrases from the notes you gathered while in the lecture. Then, write these terms into the column on the left-hand side of the page: the 'Cue' column. The idea is that these words serve as 'triggers' or 'cues' to jog your memory as you try to recall the main points of the lecture.

Completing this step helps your memory and recall skills: you have already written these notes during the lecture, you have to read them again in order to extract the key words, you also need to think critically in order to decide what these key words will be and all the while, you are building up your knowledge around and familiarity with this topic.

Next...recite!

Deliver your own lecture! Cover the right-hand side of the page (where the original lecture notes are) and, using only the 'cue' words you have written in the left column, deliver the lecture as fully as you can and in your own words - do this aloud, to a real or imagined audience. By speaking the information out loud, you are forced to organise the information logically and to make fast connections - and doing both of these increases the likelihood of your retaining that material in your long-term memory.

TOP TIP

Use as many of your senses and faculties as you can when making notes, writing essays or revising for exams. Read it, speak it, see it, hear it, think about it!

Reflect

Practice 'self-questioning' after you have delivered your own mini-lecture. Take some time to reflect on the material using this technique, which is known to help students to more effectively focus on and interact with the material. This leads to the formation of stronger connections which, in turn, makes the information much more easily understood and more easily retrievable when needed.

TOP TIP

Examples of questions you might ask yourself include: 'Is this always the case?' 'Why might have that course of action seemed logical at that time? Would it still be true today?' and "Why was X considered in this case and not Y?'. You might also ask 'Why is this so significant?', 'How can I apply this in another way' or 'How does this information tie into what I already know and how can I go beyond that?'

Review

Read over your notes each week, even for ten minutes. Use the 'cue' column as your guide, to keep you focused on the topic in question. Over time, you will find that you need to refer to these 'cue' words less and less often, as you become increasingly familiar with the material. Your long-term memory will go from strength to strength.

Recapitulate:

This final step should be done within one week of the original lecture. Use the 'Summary' section at the end of the page to write a very brief synopsis – 2 or 3 sentences – of the lecture material contained on that page. Write this in your own words, just enough so that you can refer quickly to it when you are revising or looking for information you can use in your assignment. This is done within 1 week of the original lecture taking place.

TOP TIP

Make sure you factor reading time into your timetable if you are using one: Just allowing ten minutes daily to review your weekly lecture notes will help your memory and recall skills hugely!

Finally, whether you choose to make and store your notes in hard copy or digitally, remember that organising your notes and other essential material in folders is essential. Make sure you use a system that allows you to pull out the information you require quickly and easily.