

Note-Taking in Lectures

Lectures might take a number of forms, including the traditional one-hour presentation in a lecture hall, a recording of such an event or purpose-made videos in shorter formats. They may be accompanied by copies of the slides or handouts. What these forms share is a focus on content-rich delivery of information and explanation from the lecturer to the students. But what purpose does note-taking have, when there is so often a digital record of the lecture in some form?

The Role of Note-taking in Lectures

You might find yourself caught between the extremes of feeling you have to copy everything down in case you miss something, and feeling you don't need to take any notes as it's all recorded anyway. The truth is somewhere in the middle. Notes aren't just a passive record of lecture content, they help you actively select and process that learning in your own terms so you retain and understand it better. You might think of your notes as your own running commentary on a lecture, rather than just a record of it. Lectures are only the starting point for your learning, so you will be expanding your notes with reading from other sources anyway.

Active note-making involves making decisions each time you make a note, about:

- what to note (or not)
- how much detail you need to capture
- how best to record it so it will make sense later
- what purpose you might put it to
- how it links with other notes
- Whether you need to record the content or your own response to it

You will be actively making these decisions throughout the lecture. This means it's much more likely that you will end up with a set of notes which is concise, useful and aids your understanding both now and in the future.

Purposes for Taking Notes in lectures

There might be a number of reasons to make notes in a lecture, even if it's recorded:

- **To record information if it's not otherwise preserved in print or digitally.** You don't need a record of everything though, so you can still be selective.
- **To absorb and make sense of information at the time.** You may never need to refer back to these notes again, but making them helps you process your understanding.

- **To select, structure and get an overview of information.** Building a framework of a topic using the structure of the lecture can help you to integrate and consolidate information into a coherent whole and align it with your current understanding
- **To help make it memorable.** The notes you make also leave visual clues which will trigger your memory of the lecture and your insights.
- **To extract or highlight certain information for later use.** You might want to draw on content from lectures for particular purposes such as assignments or revision, and you might note this at the time.
- **To note things to follow up for future reference.** Lectures are a starting point for your learning. You may still have questions or areas you're not sure of, or aspects you want to research in more depth, and you can leave notes to yourself to do so.
- **To note your own response.** Whether you are summarising something in your own words or symbols, adding in your own explanation or jotting down whether something strikes you as interesting or important, you are noting your own reactions as well as the lecture content, to make the learning your own.
- **To help you concentrate and focus on your purpose.** Whatever your purpose, it helps to try and stay aware of why you are making a particular note so you concentrate, choose the most appropriate strategy and don't start to 'zone out' and copy things down passively.

You might be taking notes for a number of different purposes during a lecture, so need to actively reflect in the moment whenever you write something down what purpose it services, and therefore how to make notes appropriately.

Before the lecture

You might find it helpful to access and look at any lecture materials beforehand, to inform your note-taking. These might include slides, handouts and information about the lecture's aims in the module handbook or VLE. Looking at these before the lecture will help you start to develop a 'mental map' of the topic covered so you can organise your notes into a coherent understanding rather than a list of isolated points. It will also give you a sense of what you do and don't need to copy down while listening to or watching the lecture itself.

Decide on your note-taking strategy. You might want to stick with one tried and tested method that works for you, or experiment with different approaches to see what else works and keep your mind fresh. Whether you choose handwritten notes on paper or typed notes digitally depends on what kind of note you want to make and how you want to store it. You might be tempted to take digital notes if you can type faster than handwrite, but this isn't necessarily an advantage. It can reduce the need to be selective which is a key part of active learning in lectures, and leave you with passively copied notes which you don't know what to do with and haven't learned much by making. Not being able to make notes of everything is actually an advantage!

During the lecture

Remember that you don't need to copy everything down, but do make sure you are being active, selecting what, how and why you make a note, so it aids your processing as well as keeping a record of your understanding of key knowledge. Your decisions will be guided by a mix of:

- Clues from the lecturer
- Your own current understanding and learning priorities
- Your purposes for the notes in future

Clues from the lecturer

One way to decide what to note down is to listen for cues in the way the lecturer is talking and vary what you note and how accordingly. Types of statement in lectures include:

- Overview – what information you're going to be given
- Signpost – how this information fits with the rest of the course, give an outline of the lecture structure
- Highlight – this information is important (or not)
- Explain – aid your understanding of a concept
- Talk through – detail of stages/process/aspects/argument
- Model – apply a way to approach a problem or process
- Argue – present one viewpoint over another
- Illustrate – an example or case study
- Fact – a detailed piece of information
- Recommendation – where else you might find this or related information
- Summarise – summing up the lecture or a section of it
- Rest or Digress – a pause to help you pace yourself
- Instruction / housekeeping – do this! Note this!

Your current needs

The next way to decide what to note down in a lecture is to consider how it helps your learning at the time. Active note-making plays such a useful role in keeping your learning active, engaging more deeply with the content and processing it yourself that it is a good learning strategy in itself. This is why some people refer to it as making notes, not taking notes.

- Note-making requires you to decide what to note or not, and this in itself keeps your learning active
- Note-making helps you prioritise and emphasise the information on your own terms, in the context of what you already know or what you're interested in
- Making notes requires you to rework the content creatively either in your own words or in other visual forms, and this helps you to process it as part of your own understanding
- You can also note down your own questions, to ask the lecturer or look up later.

- You can begin to make your own connections between pieces of information, as well as the overall structure provided by the lecturer, which means you're integrating it into your own understanding
- You can leave notes to self about your reactions, thoughts or impressions

Your future purposes

Finally, note-making is guided by what you'll be using them for later:

For Writing:

- Introductory background (useful for intros)
- Sources and readings to follow up (useful to start your literature search or identify key readings)
- Questions to pursue (might make useful points in an assignment, things to look up to broaden your thinking)
- Possible avenues to explore (might be interesting topics in an assignment or for a dissertation)

For Revising:

- Core concepts, key facts
- Overview of a topic to help plan revision
- Examples of application, case studies to illustrate
- Explanations of processes, approaches, theories etc

Not all of these types of statement need to be noted down; you might just want to listen or make a mental note. Sometimes you might want to copy something down exactly (but is it already recorded in some form?), annotate a handout or slide with your own comments, capture a shorthand summary in your own words, bullet points or symbols, connect information with other knowledge from earlier or just listen and make sure you are following an explanation, with a brief summary at the end or a note to read up on this later. You might also want to write down your own observations and questions for the lecturer.

If a lecture is recorded via ReCap, or has been created as a video as part of Flexible Learning, you can pause to think more deeply about what you're hearing and what kind of note you need to make (but don't let the ease of this tempt you to make more detailed notes than you need).

How to make notes

You have a range of note-making strategies and techniques at your disposal. Experiment with them to find an approach that suits you:

- **Your overall strategy:** linear (bullet points) or non-linear (mindmaps etc), textual or visual

- **How to indicate structure, connections between topics and significant points:** use of page layout, headings, numbering, colour, highlighting, underlining and annotations such as *, connecting arrows and lines, etc
- **How to capture content and level of detail:** verbatim (copying out words, diagrams etc) or summarising in your own words or visual aids, developing your own shorthand and abbreviations
- **How to distinguish the lecturer's content from your own annotation, summary and commentary on it**

You might wish to look at our overview of different note-making strategies and experiment with a few different approaches.

After the lecture

Review your notes soon after the lecture, within 24 hours. Revisiting a topic at intervals has been shown to enhance your retention and understanding of new learning, so just going over them later that day or the next day will help. You can also take the opportunity to

- clarify anything that might not make sense to you later, while your meaning is still fresh
- amend anything that's incorrect, partial or garbled
- Fill out the overall structure of the lecture to connect the information into a coherent narrative
- compare your notes with a friend to see what you have each taken from the lecture
- think about how this lecture fits in with others on the module or elsewhere on your course
- start to follow up on any notes to yourself about questions or further detail you want to read up on.

It's useful to 'futureproof' your notes, but there's no need to make a perfect copy each time, as long as it makes sense to you.

You can also return to the recording after the lecture or after your first watching to revisit parts that weren't clear or which you missed in your notes. If your notes were purposeful, you won't need to watch the whole thing again, just the parts indicated in your notes.

Whether you are using paper or digital modes, you will then need to consider how you will store your notes so that they are organised well in the relevant modules alongside any other relevant resources such as slides or handouts and notes from further reading, and so you can find them again easily when needed.

For more guidance on your learning, book a 1-2-1 tutorial with one of our Writing Development Centre tutors or visit our website for more activities and resources <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/library/resources-and-study-support/writing-development-centre/>

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