HOW TO TAKE NOTES FROM A LECTURE OR READING

The following is a list of top tips for effective note-taking that will enhance your learning abilities and improve your success. Finding the right balance of writing enough but not too much can be a challenge, but it is the key to taking effective notes. You may have the most trouble with #5 but with time you can improve your note-taking skills. All ideas are compiled either from Cornell University or Dartmouth University Academic Skills Centers.

1. **Don't use your laptop.** Take notes by hand. Although taking notes on your laptop is convenient, a study conducted at Princeton University & UCLA, has shown that note takers actually retain information better when they take notes by hand. This is due to the fact that laptop users tend to transcribe what they hear without really processing what's being said. Longhand note-takers, on the other hand, can't write fast enough to copy each word verbatim, so they are forced to engage with the material more in order to pick out the most important and relevant information.

2. **Go to class prepared.**
   a. Use a **three-ring binder** instead of a spiral or bound book. Pages can be easily removed for reviewing. Handouts can be inserted into your notes for cross-referencing. You can insert your own out-of-class notes in the correct order.
   b. Bring highlighters to class. Instructors will frequently make comments like, “This is an important concept.” Or, “Make sure you understand this.” These are direct clues that this will more than likely be on an exam. Highlighting these notes will help remind you later that this is definitely something you need to know.
   c. Read assigned material and previous class notes before class. Make notations about material or concepts you don't understand. Look up vocabulary words that are unfamiliar to you. You will have a better understanding about what the instructor is lecturing about and that will allow you to better decipher the more important points of the lecture.

3. **Improve your listening skills.**
   a. Approaching lectures with a positive attitude allows one to be open-minded and enables you to get the most out of the information presented.
   b. Make a conscious effort to pay attention. “Without concentration there is no focus, and without focus there is no learning.”
   c. Adapt to whatever direction a lecture takes. When a lecture takes an unexpected detour, say a student asks a question you aren’t particularly interested in, students have a tendency to “zone out.” Before you know it, the lecture got back on track five minutes ago, and you missed crucial information that should have been noted.
   d. Students sometimes have a difficult time knowing what to write down during a lecture. Knowing some specific content items they should look for will help them. As they get more proficient at their note-taking, which will happen over time, it will be easier for them to weed out what is important and what is not.
   e. Don’t be afraid to ask questions. When you come across something you don't understand, don’t just jot it down and tell yourself that you’ll worry about it later -- ask the teacher/lecturer for clarification.

4. **Develop a note-taking method that works for you.**
   Fine-tune the structure and organization of your notes to increase your note-taking speed and comprehension later.
   a. Notes for each lecture or chapter should start on a new page. The sequence of material is important.
   b. Leave blank spaces. This allows you to add comments or note questions later.
   c. Date your lecture notes and number all pages.
   d. Make your notes informational, but brief. Notes should include all main ideas and enough subordinate points to clarify understanding.
   e. Put most notes in your own words. However, the following should be noted exactly – definitions, specific facts, etc.
f. Note all unfamiliar vocabulary or concepts you don’t understand. This reminds you to look them up later.
g. Not everyone processes information the same way, so it is important for you to develop methods and strategies that work the best for you.
h. Note your lecturer’s chief pattern. He or she may be summarizing the text and highlighting important points, or trying to draw relationships between new and previous understandings. He or she may expect you to get the textbook material on your own while he or she discusses related outside material.
   i. If he or she is highlighting the text, take down his or her explanations and examples. Seeing a concept stated in more than one way can help you understand it.
   ii. If he or she draws relationships and asks questions, note the questions and answers. If he or she doesn’t give the answers, try to find them after class.
i. Don’t worry about outlining but use indentions to distinguish between major and minor points. Numbers and letters may be added later if you wish. However, if the lecturer says he or she makes four or five points, list four or five causes, etc., be sure to use numbers as a check on having taken them all down.
j. Note down unfamiliar vocabulary and unclear areas in the lecture. If the lecturer discusses something you don’t understand, take it down as best and as completely as you can. Then you can check with the text or at least know what questions to ask if getting help from someone else. If your instructor knows just what you don’t understand, he or she is in a position to help you.
k. If you should miss something completely, leave a blank space and get it later.
l. Use margins for questions, comments, notes to yourself on unclear material, etc.
m. Develop a code system of note-marking to indicate questions, comments, important points, due dates of assignments, etc. This helps separate extraneous material from the body of notes and also helps point out areas that are unclear. Margins are excellent places for coded notations. Some suggested codes are:
   i. ? – Not clear
   ii. ! – Important
   iii. C – Student’s comment
   iv. * – Assignment or task
n. Attempt to differentiate fact from opinion.
o. Marginal notes facilitate speedy location of specific items.

5. Pay close attention to content.
Knowing what and how much to write down is sometimes difficult. Rely on some of the following tips for what to include in your notes.

a. Write down important People, Events, Documents, Laws, Ideas, Groups, SCOTUS Cases. Explain why they are significant, what caused it, and what lead up to it. Include details, facts, or explanations that expand or explain the main points that are mentioned. Don’t forget examples. Also information that ties together or explains important themes are important as well.
b. Big ideas: what main ideas are reflected in the introduction, conclusion, and section titles? Be sure to record all relevant details of the big ideas in the text as you read the entire piece.
c. Follow visual cues: main ideas will often be bolded, italicized, bulleted, set in different font sizes, color, and/or spacing. Additionally, illustrations, figures, tables, charts, diagrams, and the corresponding captions elaborate on key ideas. Use these to determine the significance of concepts, and to take notes accordingly.
d. Write down individual words or key phrases that are most relevant to the topic at hand -- things like names, concepts, and definitions -- only the most important details should make the cut. Eliminate all the filler words and secondary details.
e. Look for visual cues in the textbook itself -- things like bold or italicized words and the use of color or bullet points are often used to highlight significant points.
f. Read over chapter headings and subheadings. Most textbooks are broken into more easily digestible sections that are often topped with headings. Looking at the headings and subheadings can give you a sense of what you should record. Also cue into keywords as you are reading.
g. Read “review questions” at the end of the chapter or section. Review questions are given to ensure that students have taken away “big picture” or essential concepts from a selection of text. Reading these review questions ahead of time can help focus your attention to the most important aspects of a chapter.

h. Emphasis: Emphasis can be judged by tone of voice and gesture. Emphasis can be judged by the amount of time the instructor spends on points and the number of examples he or she uses.

i. Word signals (e.g. “There are two points of view on…” “The third reason is…” “In conclusion…”). Pay attention to verbal cues.

j. Lists of things that are discussed.

k. What’s repeated: concepts, formulas, facts, and processes mentioned more than once in the piece are likely significant.

l. Material written down, including drawings or charts, or emphasized during class by the instructor.

m. Information that is repeated or spelled out.

6. **Review and edit your notes.**

Review and edit your notes. It is extremely important to review your notes within 24 hours.

a. Clear up illegibilities in writing, check for errors, fill in further facts and examples while the lecture is still fresh in your mind. At this point you should clear up misunderstandings or fill in missing information by consulting the lecturer, classmates, the texts, or additional readings.
   
   i. Edit for words and phrases that are illegible or don’t make sense
   
   ii. Write out abbreviated words that might be unclear later.
   
   iii. Fill in key words and questions.
   
   iv. Note anything you don’t understand by underlining or highlighting to remind you to ask the instructor.
   
   v. Edit with a different colored pen to distinguish between what you wrote in class and what you filled in later.
   
   vi. Compare your notes with the textbook reading and fill in important details in the blank spaces you left.

b. Taking the time to review and edit one’s notes as soon as possible after a class will reap tremendous rewards later when it comes time to study for an exam. Merely reading notes without thinking about them or revising them does not necessarily aid in retention. A more helpful practice is to manipulate the material by reorganizing it and putting it into your own words. For a well-organized lecture, an outline can suffice, but in the case of material where important ideas and relationships are scattered throughout, there is a technique called mapping which can be very useful in restructuring and putting together the relevant points. The use of this technique forces you to critically evaluate material in terms of main ideas, secondary points, and details, and to structure this content in an organized and coherent fashion. Relationships must be observed and established, irrelevant material may be excluded. This can be one of the most efficient means of immediate review for optimal retention.
WEEKLY CHAPTER NOTES

You will hand in Cornell notes on each and every chapter in the text. Specific due dates will be marked on the reading calendar, however you should plan on reading 1 chapter per week throughout the year. These notes are due when the bell rings to begin the period on the indicated day. Be warned that a consistent inability to keep up with the reading and hand in these notes as assigned will seriously damages your ability to be successful in this class.

What you should do to complete this process . . .

1. **Preview** the entire chapter before beginning to read. Pay particular attention to **pictures, graphs, maps**—the size of these on the page is an indication of their significance. You should also read any **captions, sidebars or text insets** in the chapter.

2. You are encouraged to **read an entire section in one sitting** with a pencil and sticky notes in your hand—putting sticky notes in the margin of the book near terms that you don’t know, vocabulary words that need defining, important people or facts.

3. Having read the section, you should go back and **enter the cues** (terms, facts, and people) into the left-hand column of the Cornell note sheet. Then you should **supply notes and explanations** in the larger column on the right.

4. Having read, then taken notes on what you consider significant or what you need to have explained in further depth in class, **write a 4-5 sentence summary of the section**.

5. Having done this thoroughly, you should then **move on to the next section**.

6. Students should **staple all of their chapter notes together in order** so that they can be scored easily and accurately.

7. Once you have completed all notes, **review your notes prior to class, adding any questions** that you may still have.

**Cornell Note Structure**

| Page Layout & Setup | 8.5”x11” paper  
PAPERCLIP OR STAPLED  
Pages are numbered |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All general information is clearly labeled and in the correct place at the top of the notes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| • Name  
• Date  
• Unit/Period #  
• Chapter #/Title |
| Follows Cornell format to divide paper |
| • Sheet of paper is divided into two parts, one side for cues (terms, people, questions, etc.) and one side for information |
| • Cues take up 1/3 of paper on the left |
| • Notes and Details take up 2/3 of paper in outline format on the right |
| • Please be aware that excessively large margins, or any move to “stretch” notes will result in loss of points. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Legibility</th>
<th>Handwritten</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Neat and completely legible</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Notes that are sloppy or scribbled may lose points</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I will not accept as chapter reading notes any typed, downloaded, or photocopied material</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Your reading notes must be written in your own words in such a way that I know they are original to you.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Notes</th>
<th>Instructions for notes per section</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Any attempts to copy directly from the book will be considered plagiarism and you will receive a zero for the assignment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Copying notes from someone else will also be considered plagiarism and will result in a zero for both parties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Notes demonstrate careful selection of key details from the section</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All notes are selectively and accurately paraphrased</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Key words have been highlighted and/or underlined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Notes are color-coded according to guidelines (see sample note layout)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Notes have been edited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Revisions/additions are made in a different colors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**You do not need to write notes on everything you see.** Instead, ask yourself the following questions as you take your notes.

1. Do the notes you are taking fit the thesis or main ideas of the chapter?
2. Is the fact, person, or event you are reading about noteworthy?
3. How can I summarize this in a way that makes sense to me?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cues &amp; Questions</th>
<th>Cues includes the definition and significance of any of the following:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Historical Dates/Time Periods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Historical Events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Historical Figures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Key Terms</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Maps</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Graphic Organizers</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Pictures/Cartoons</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Standards</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Questions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Write down any questions that you still have regarding the content of the chapter. These will be addressed during class. These questions should NOT be written during your note taking. They should be written after note taking but before the next class period in order to be a useful reflection technique.

As you write your questions, consider the following:

- What was confusing? What questions do you still have?
- What S.P.I.C.E. elements are discussed in this chapter?
- What questions can you glean from the textbook? Consider the following textbook sections: "Historical Thinking Skills", "Connecting Themes", "Key Concepts", and "Testing Practice"

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter Section Reflection/Summary</th>
<th>Short reflection at the end of your notes. Summary reflection should be at 4-5 sentences and it should connect to your learning. Include connections to the chapter thesis and each of the main ideas. You may also analyze the chapter content for the following elements: S.P.I.C.E. (Social, Political, Interaction, Cultural, Economic)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
**Cues:** Identifying terms, people, and key events, describing maps, drawing out graphic organizers, and questions go here. These cues should appear wherever you see them, with corresponding information recorded on the right. Note: You are not required to add all of these cue types per page.

**Notes:** In the largest section the page, students will take handwritten objective notes based on the reading assigned. Summarize from the pages assigned. Include important details but avoid writing every word, minor details, or ideas that are too general. These should be bulleted using a format similar to an outline. Letters and numbers are not required. Note: The graphic below provides three supporting facts as an example. You may have as many bulleted notes as necessary.

**Term:** What is this term? What does it mean? Why is it important?

**Person:** Who is this person? Why are they significant?

**Event:** What is this key event? Why is it important?

**Map:** What does it show? Why is it important? Be sure to consider the caption below the map.

**Law:** What does this law state? Why is it important?

**Primary Source** (picture, cartoon, etc.): What does it show? Why is it important? Be sure to consider the caption below the source.

Be sure to correlate the spacing of your cues with the corresponding info on your outline. You do not want terms for one section placed next to the outline info for a different section.

**Questions:** Questions may be placed in the cue column next to the section that they correspond to, or you may place them at the end of the section or chapter. Choose or create a minimum of four guided questions.

**AP Connecting Concepts** (large red ink in gray box, use red box)

A. Chapter Thesis
   - At the beginning of the entire Cornell Notes assignment, create a complete thesis statement that addresses the entire assignment NOT just a portion of it.
   - Supporting fact/detail/examples (if needed)
   - Supporting fact/detail/example (if needed)
   - Supporting fact/detail/example (if needed)

**Skip a line**

**Section #, Big Section Title** (large, underlined font in red, use red ink or highlight in pink)

A. Section Thesis/Main Idea Statement:
   - Supporting fact/detail/examples
   - Supporting fact/detail/example
   - Supporting fact/detail/example

**Skip a line**

**Section #, Small Section Heading** (large font shown in blue ink, use blue ink or highlight in blue)

A. Main Idea Statement
   - Supporting fact/detail/examples
   - Supporting fact/detail/example
   - Supporting fact/detail/example

**Skip a line**

**First Sub-Section Heading** (regular font shown in blue and underlined, use blue or another color of ink and underline)

A. Main Idea Statement
   - Supporting fact/detail/examples
   - Supporting fact/detail/example
   - Supporting fact/detail/example

**Skip a line**
for the chapter. Answer these guided questions in here.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Second Sub-Section Heading (regular font shown in blue ink and underlined, use blue or another color of ink and underline)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Main Idea Statement</td>
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<td>o Supporting fact/detail/examples</td>
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<td>o Supporting fact/detail/example</td>
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<tr>
<td>o Supporting fact/detail/example</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** Continue chapter notes** in this pattern. Please also include the following segments as they appear in your reading:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>America in the World (blue box, text underlined in red, use purple)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. Main Idea Statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Questions w/answers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Summary: |

Note: You do not need to write notes on everything you see. Instead, ask yourself the following questions as you take your notes.

1. Do the notes you are taking fit the thesis or main ideas of the chapter?
2. Is the fact, person, or event you are reading about noteworthy?
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