

# Note perfect! Taking notes in classes and lectures

Kenny Lynch

## Have phone, will capture...

Teachers of A level students should be helping to prepare students for higher education and for the style of learning they will experience there, as much as preparing them for A levels. Year 12 and 13 students often attend lectures as part of their course (including local GA branch lectures) so might already need note-taking skills. Note-taking can also be done while watching a lecture online (e.g. TED talk) so could be set as part of a homework/extension task while in school to aid current studies.

In a modern technological world, with access to all sorts of technology for recording events, it seems obvious that the most effective way of recording a lecture or teaching session is to use a tablet or phone to record it in audio or video, right? Well it depends on what you want out of it. I am a strong believer that geography students should leave courses with really good note-taking skills because of their experience on field trips. However, as a lecturer of evening classes, I once taught part-time students, a remarkable number of whom had audio-typing skills – which meant that I was regularly faced with a barrage of Dictaphones. It sometimes felt a bit like a press-briefing! The resulting essays often included direct quotations of what I said in lectures! While these examples demonstrated excellent precision in the capture of precisely what I said, they did not always capture the meaning and the context of what I said or promote learning. So, how can we

build students' skills of note-taking to maximise learning? In this article I am going to propose three principles for better note-taking.

## Active note-taking

One of the concerns I have about the lecture format of teaching is that it can be very passive, with the students quietly basking in the glory of the 'sage on the stage'. Advocates of a more active style of learning would rather see the lecturer or teacher step to the side to point out features, trends and processes, encouraging students to take note of the key learning points, as they act as more of a 'guide on the side'. The same can be true of almost all learning events, whether they are fieldwork visits, watching a film, listening to the radio, or reading.

The first principle to work by is to adopt an *active* approach to note-taking, interrogating the content of the class or other learning event to identify the main points and *not* all of the word-by-word details. This requires focusing on trying to understand the concepts and the theories – the meaning and significance – rather than capture all the facts for recall, though some of these may be important. Understanding is best achieved through interaction with the teacher and the ideas the teacher is teaching about. Details can be looked up later in textbooks or online. This means that note-taking should involve students trying to put the ideas in their own words rather than yours.

*In this article Kenny outlines three principles that students can follow to improve their note taking skills.*

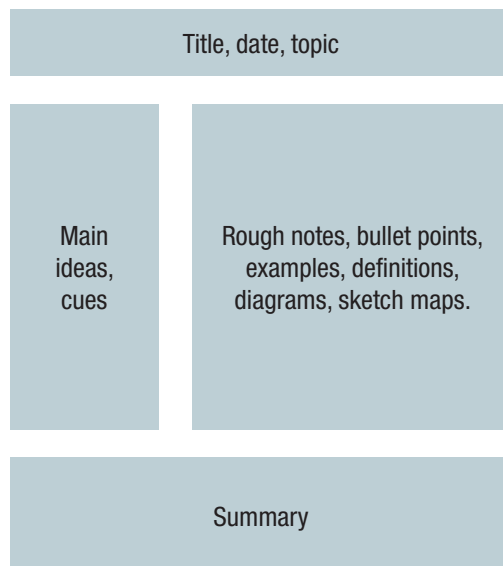


**Figure 1:** Taking notes should be an active process. **Photo:** © Kenny Lynch

## How to...

There are several approaches to capturing the key ideas from a learning event. The second principle is for students to empower their note-taking by developing a template that is consistent so they can find the material in a range of learning settings. There are a number of examples of this. Figure 2 illustrates a Cornell template, which can be quickly created on a sheet of paper or refill pad by drawing wide rugby posts on their side (following the white lines in Figure 2). Ask your students to try this – the next time they attend a class ask them to set out the template, fill in the title information and then use the Rough Notes section to take cryptic, bullet-pointed notes on every page. As soon as they can after the learning event is complete, write the main ideas or cues into the left-hand sidebar in their own words. Once that is complete, they should write a narrative summary, again in their own words, in the box at the bottom. To promote learning, ask them to do some reading to ensure their main ideas use terminology in the textbooks, and maybe link to the textbooks. The Cornell template can be used for any kind of learning event.

**Figure 2:** Cornell note-taking format



## Finessing

In order to finesse this approach, the third principle is for students to adapt the process of note-taking to suit their approach to learning. There are a number of variations to the Cornell template and there are alternatives to this one. Some educational researchers have tested the Cornell template and found it is a good method, but not necessarily the best – it depends a lot on what students want out of their notes and how well they are taken.

### References

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- Pieronek, F. (1994) 'Using maps to teach note taking and outlining for report writing'. *Social Studies*, 85, 4, pp. 165-69
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If Cornell doesn't work for some of your students, encourage them to look for an alternative, for example the SQ3R method – they can do a websearch for this – to support the three principles I have suggested.

Finally, here are some suggestions you can make to help students improve the quality of their notes:

1. Before the lesson do a little reading of the textbook(s) so that you have some knowledge of the topic with which to help you make sense of the content.
2. Write your rough notes on alternative lines and read up on the subject after the learning event, so you can add in details. You could insert the additional materials in a different colour.
3. Use coloured or highlighter pens to emphasise particular things. This may be for theories, concepts, geographical processes, examples and case studies.
4. Develop your own set of abbreviations for words that you use regularly, such as those depicted in Figure 3.
5. After the class:
  - a. go back to the textbooks to clarify, add additional concepts, examples, technical terminology and fill in any gaps in your understanding
  - b. gather the notes pages you have for a particular theme and use them to draw a spider diagram or mindmap.

It is a technological world, so students may also want to consider using device apps or programmes to support their note taking, for example MS OneNote or EverNote for note-taking or Mindmeister or Mindmap for mind maps (there are lots of alternatives!). My bonus principle is to develop the technique with analogue technology before moving to digital technology. Students have to learn how to use the tools before they pick up new ones. | **TG**

↑	increase	govt.	government
↓	decrease, declines	>	greater than
=>	leads to, or causes	<	less than
NB.	important note	B4.	Before
=	Equals, equal to	#	number
≡	Equivalent	btwn	between
△	change	yrs	years
w.	with	sth.	something
w/o.	without	s.o.	someone

**Figure 3:** Examples of abbreviations

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