

Why Take Notes?

Your Research-Based Guide To Taking Notes Effectively — Chapter One. About a 12-minute read.

Charles was in fifth grade when he came home in a bad mood.

"Mom, aren't you friends with Mike's mom? Can you talk to her?" he said with a scowl. I asked him what the matter was. "Mike always keeps borrowing my notebooks. He doesn't write his own notes. He copies from me. But I need to review my notes because we might have a test the next day." I assured him I would have a talk with her.

Then, Nikki, his sister in the sixth grade, breezed in and went straight to her favorite video game. I called out to her, "Young lady, shouldn't you be doing your homework?" "No homework today, Mom," she dismissively said. I took her notebooks from her schoolbag, opened them one by one, and stared at empty pages where her notes for the day should have been. "Didn't you have lessons today? Where are your notes?" She nonchalantly answered, "No worries. I'll copy from Alyssa's notebook tomorrow."

Growing up, all of us have been there. Writing notes in class is probably what most of us associate with our school days. It's not an exaggeration to say that we probably spent 80% of our time in class – not counting physical education and music – writing what the teacher dictates or writes on the blackboard.

And it's a tedious task. I remember shaking my hand and stretching my cramped fingers after hours of relentless scribbling. At the time, it seemed a senseless, mechanical task that elementary school teachers made us do. In high school and college, the teachers left note-taking pretty much to their students' volition. At first, it felt like being set free, but later we

discover it's much like a catch-22. Lazy to take notes? That's OK. You'll pay for it when you get a failing grade on your tests. To pass, you need to pay attention in class and take notes.

In the chapters following, you will discover five of the most popular and productive note-taking methods. These are the outline, mind mapping, sentence, charting, and Cornell methods. They are only a few of the many techniques students can use to take notes to help them get better grades. Each chapter focuses on one of the methods and systematically provides a definition and description for it. It will walk you through the instructions for performing the method and identifies the situations where it is best applied. Examples of each method will give you a practical feel for it. Finally, there is an exercise and summary before we segue to the next chapter.

We are particularly elated to include the final chapter in this book. Other references on note-taking methods focus only on the processes of recording information. More than merely synthesizing techniques in note-taking, it is a discourse of how both students and lecturers may cooperate to improve knowledge transfer, based on empirical research on note-taking. We practitioners may have instinctively developed a sense of how to deliver a lecture in a way that encourages our students to take quality notes, but this comes only after decades of lecturing. The time and opportunity for students to learn these methods are even more transient. This chapter encapsulates the most effective insights and instructions that both students and teachers can immediately put into practice.

Ultimately, the goal of note-taking mastery is to enhance learning – better grades are only a happy by-product. Therefore, we precede the discussion of note-taking with a chapter that explores our learning styles and strategies. You will likely find this chapter useful in gaining insights into the different ways we capture, process, and organize information. By acquiring an understanding of how we learn, we acquire the ability to identify obstacles to our learning and how we may eliminate these obstacles to improve the way we learn.

While the topics in this book appear geared more toward classroom application, the techniques you will encounter here are useful in our daily personal and work activities. We take notes during office meetings, client conferences, professional training sessions, and

seminars. We write in our journals or diaries, make grocery lists, and take notes on anything of interest, from recipes to golf tips to investments. We constantly learn and expand our knowledge, and for every new thing we learn, we realize untold present and future benefits from noting it down.

It is my pleasure to share with you the insights and experiences I have gained as a lifetime student and teacher. I completed courses in engineering, finance, business administration, and law – widely divergent fields of study that helped me understand and employ different types of learning styles. I had also taught for four decades in these fields, where I came to appreciate the subtleties of conveying information to students and trainees from the academe to the workplace. As an honor student, I have also been fortunate to discover the manner and approach to learning success and find joy in sharing them with others and you.

Before we embark on this journey together, let us remember that note-taking is not an end in itself. Oftentimes, it is the beginning of something bigger and better than anything we could have anticipated. Tony Kushner is an American award-winning author, playwright, and screenwriter. He is a Pulitzer Prize recipient and has twice won the Tony Award for his body of work. Prolific writers like Kushner are worthy of our admiration and praise. They also make us wonder how they could produce a string of excellent works while most of us cannot even come up with one. Kushner hints at his secret in this quote:

"One of the things I love about my job as a playwright or as a screenwriter is that I get to do a lot of research and a lot of thinking and taking a lot of notes before I turn it in." – Tony Kushner

As this quote suggests, taking notes can be instrumental in our success. Taking quality notes will go a long way towards ensuring it. The chapters we are about to journey through will doubtless equip us with the tools to become quality note-takers.

Let us turn the page and begin.

Why Take Notes?

And so, my dear brownies, don't forget to bring a tickler with you wherever we go. It will be your most important tool; mark my words.

As a grade-three girl scout, I hung onto every word of our troop leader as we prepared for our camping trip. That was the first time I heard the word "tickler." The image of a feather gently stroking the underside of a foot quickly came to mind. Our troop leader probably got the impression that her words flew over our heads, so she clarified: "Tickler. It's a small notebook you can handily carry around." Aha, so that's it...

In the 50 years since then, the tickler habit stuck with me for no other reason than its innate usefulness. To this day, I always keep a little notepad in a purse or pocket, with a short-stubbed pencil inserted into its spine. Through the years, many things went into my ticklers. You could usually tell my pursuits of the moment based on the notes I jotted down. Homework to be done. Projects to complete. Appointments to keep. Grocery items to grab. PTA meetings to attend. Stocks to recommend. Legal articles to memorize. Requirements to fulfill for Canadian residency. Items to record hurriedly to "tickle" the memory and spur recollection at a later time.

Early on, I discovered that some of the notes I wrote down were more useful than others. The length was unimportant; some single-word notes proved very useful. Other notes, although supported by contextual data, were later incomprehensible to me. For instance:

"Alistair DL, 5191994, CHDL"

Feeling secure that I had preserved the data, I quickly pushed it out of my mind to attend to more pressing matters. I only happened to revisit it six weeks later when I rifled through my tickler. Who was Alistair? Was this a date? And what is the four-letter code? A year passed before I drove through an infrequently traversed street and glanced at a shop sign. Of course, Alistair Distinction Lamps, contact number 519-1994, chandelier. I was supposed to call them to canvass the price of their chandelier. But for all the information it contained, the note meant nothing to me when I saw it, preventing me from using it to my advantage.

The Importance Of Note-Taking

We may not have realized it at the time, but effective note-taking has many important uses¹:

It Aids Our Memory

We take notes to remember things. Ever wonder why we studied the multiplication table over several grade levels in elementary? It's because of the "spacing effect." To make lessons stick in our minds, we need to revisit them several times to remember them in the long term. By keeping notes, we can more frequently review the ideas and information we want to remember well into the future.

It Helps Us Learn And Understand Better

When we first encounter ideas through listening or reading, we rarely truly understand them. Listening and visually scanning words are passive processes. Understanding requires actively mulling over what was heard or read; often, we refer to this as "digesting" the information. When we write down what we hear or read, such as in a classroom setting, then we engage in an active process. Taking notes involves thinking about the ideas encountered, choosing the words to write, and assembling your own statements, phrases, or diagrams. Notes are the concepts we formulate and assimilate for ourselves.

It Keeps Us Awake

While I was a student, I thought that short catnaps during long, boring lectures would escape the attention of the teacher who stood on the platform in front of the class. When I became a teacher, I discovered how wildly erroneous that presumption had been. Standing elevated above the students' eye level, I could see every half-closed eyelid and nodding head, even the occasional drool. I also noticed that those who kept awake were actively scrolling away at their notes, while their soporific classmates seemed frozen and inanimate.

When we take notes, not only do we write, but we also think. This mental-physical activity keeps our brain alert and our hands and eyes constantly moving, preventing us from being lulled to sleep by the lecture. Students cannot always have a lively teacher, but they do

have to earn their grades by learning the lesson. Taking notes is the best activity they could do while seated for hours.

It Provides A Repository And Documentation Of Our Thinking

In 1977, I was one of the first high school students to earn a government scholarship for a computer programming course. Computers then were large, clunky machines that filled an entire room. We encoded our programs in punch cards (i.e., cards with holes punched into them) which we fed to a large machine called a card reader. We then waited for 30 minutes while the central processing unit, another large machine, ran our program and processed the data that we included. We then get a large piece of paper containing the results from the printer, another large machine. We had no keyboards, screens, monitors, or speakers. All the information was in electronic binary digits, so if not for the printout, we had no record at all that any data had been processed.

Much like the computer's electronic pulses, our thoughts are abstract and perishable, therefore prone to disappear over time. Notes are the "printouts" of our thinking process. When we take notes, we give our thoughts a physical form that is tangible and permanent. As we learn and add new things to this collection, we reconcile what we know now with what we knew then. Notes are the records of our thoughts that we may accumulate and revisit again and again.

It Serves As A Good Resource For Our Writing

Notes do not exist only for us to collect thoughts with; they also provide us with fresh ideas when we write. Notes enable us to interpret, synthesize, and create our own concepts. They become the wellspring from which we compose our contribution to the written knowledge pool. Some students are naturally good at note-taking, while others struggle before finding their own style. Note-taking is a personal activity; no two students have the same notes. It is likely that many students simply do not get to realize the need to develop good note-taking skills and thereby miss this golden opportunity.

The Usefulness Of Note-Taking

Does note-taking produce tangible results, like better academic performance and higher grades? Academic research appears to back up this hypothesis. Here are but a few of them.

Note-taking among secondary students significantly correlates with students' academic performance, and the effect is magnified when note-taking is combined with good study habits. Note-taking has a higher magnitude of contribution than study habits².

The same phenomenon among university students learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Jordan. Strategic note-taking significantly improves EFL learners' academic performance and is a strong predictor of the learners' academic performance³.

Note-taking improves students' recall of instructional material and understanding of its content. It also assists students in preparing for examinations. Note-taking improves students' overall grades⁴.

But of course, good classroom performance and higher grades are only the external manifestations of internal mental processes. The decline in students' ability to take notes effectively is influenced by the educational system's lack of emphasis on critical thinking development and the formation of fundamental learning habits, including listening, reading, and writing.

Shortcomings Of Our Educational System

The Education System Does Not Encourage Critical Thinking

Ruggiero described critical thinking as "the art of thinking about thinking"⁵ with the intent to improve our thinking. People who have mastered the art of critical thinking can embrace and take charge of their own learning. Students who are critical thinkers approach their lessons in "a more thoughtful and effective manner, ask more challenging questions, and participate in the learning process more intensely"⁶.

Thinking is done consciously or subconsciously. It is "searching for answers while reaching for meaning"⁷. When we learn to think critically, we not only absorb stimuli from our environment, but we endow them with our interpretation of their significance. Critical thinking is a sense-making process. Unfortunately, while educators and politicians have stressed for the past 50 years the importance of providing students with critical thinking skills, little has been done to achieve this. Seventy-five percent of employers in the United States claim that the students they hire after 12 or more years of formal education cannot think critically and solve problems⁸.

The Education System Does Not Promote Good Writing

There is a difference between teaching students how to do something and encouraging them to do something well. The former is technical; the latter is motivational. Mastering the technical becomes a habit we could perform mechanically, but gaining the right motivation enables us to perform the activity skillfully and optimally.

Teachers must not only teach students critical thinking skills in the classroom. They must also provide them opportunities to put these skills to use. Most importantly, teachers must also inspire them to continue practicing those skills independently when they leave the classroom⁹.

Pre-Lecture Preparation

If you anticipate taking notes during a scheduled event, such as a lecture, you will have a more rewarding note-taking experience if you prepare beforehand. This means equipping yourself with enough paper and a pen that will not run out of ink. Or, you should fully charge your laptop or other electronic device and prepare a power bank in case the lecture goes over time.

More important than the material preparations are the mental preparations for the event. Read on the topic ahead of time. Critical thinking that yields good notes requires understanding the basic knowledge on which the lecture is built. If possible, ask in advance for a lecture outline or topics on which the speaker will expound. These will help you

understand the context of the lecture and allow you to formulate incisive questions to ask the speaker. It helps to get a notion of the lecturer's style beforehand. You will be better able to organize your notes according to his presentation.

Action Steps

As you go through this book, you'll see "Action Steps" at the end of each chapter. These are practical suggestions aimed at realizing some concrete benefit out of our discussion. For this first chapter, try this simple "action plan."

1. Get yourself a "tickler." It could be any small notebook with a writing instrument such as a small pencil or pen. Those who prefer an e-notepad may use the note app on their cellphones. If you are like me, you might not have used this app before or even realized it existed.
2. As you go through your day, be conscious of your thoughts during those "passive" activities, such as commuting to school or work or waiting for your ride. Maybe you recall something while watching a movie or show.
3. Pen and tickler (or electronic device) in hand, quickly write down what you have been thinking. It could be in a shorthand mode with which you are comfortable. For instance: "Supper tonight – steak and potatoes." Or, "Call Mom. I haven't called her in a month. It's her birthday tomorrow." Or some such thing that crosses your mind.
4. Don't stick with sentences or phrases. Doodle if you are so inclined. Write down the things that strike you, which you normally commit to memory and then forget anyway. Watching *Peaky Blinders* Season 1 on Netflix, I was struck by Thomas Shelby's whisper, "In the Bleak Midwinter," which reminded me of a beloved Christmas carol. I made a mental note of it, then quickly forgot it. Luckily, a choir sang the song in Season 3. I jumped, "That's it!" and wrote it down on a napkin. Good thing I did not throw it away by mistake. When my sons asked for suggestions for their choir's Christmas repertoire, I gave them the napkin. Their rendition on Christmas Eve Mass was heavenly!
5. Every so often, go through the notes on the tickler or device. A physical notebook may get old and battered, but keep using the same tickler until the pages are full and you need a new one. Through the years, I have found great joy and comfort in going through those personal notes, not to mention functionality. I hope you will likewise be pleasantly surprised!

Moving On

Jotting down notes as a formal school or work activity or merely recalling grocery items for the home is something we will likely do all our lives. We should therefore adopt the right habits for note-taking to serve our purposes. The next chapter will give us a bird's eye view of different note-taking methods we will find useful for different needs and learning styles associated with our choice of methods.

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