

Evaluating Your Pre-class Note-Taking Process

Activity A

- Directions: How effectively do you prepare for taking notes? For each statement, evaluate yourself by circling **A** for “always”, **F** for “frequently”, or **N** for “seldom or never”.
- Scoring: If you circled **A** for all eight statements, your pre-class note-taking processes are in decent shape. If you circled **N** for more than four statements, you think you could improve your skills. If you circled **F** for more than four statements, your skills may need just a little polishing.

Activity A: Evaluating Your Pre-class Note-Taking Process

1. Before class, I read or skim the textbook pages that relate to the lecture topic. **A F N**
 2. I make note of questions that occur to me as I read or skim relevant material. **A F N**
 3. I familiarize myself with important terms. **A F N**
 4. I complete readings and written assignments when they are due. **A F N**
 5. I review my notes from the previous section. **A F N**
 6. I come to class on time with all the materials I need. **A F N**
 7. I take a seat near the front, away from distractions. **A F N**
 8. I assume my responsibilities as student and recognize those of the instructor. **A F N**
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Pre-class Strategies

1. **Before class, read or skim any material that corresponds to the lecture.**

The best way to prepare for note taking is to read the text assignment before class. Much of the material presented in college lectures will be new to you. By reading the text assignment before the lecture, you build up some background about the topic. If you have some idea what the lecture is about, it will be easier for you to understand that presentation and take good notes. Reading before the lecture also will give you the opportunity to become familiar with the main ideas that will be presented. You'll find it easier to identify main ideas and to organize your notes as the professor delivers the lecture. Finally, you'll be somewhat familiar with key terms and names after reading the text. This will help you keep up with the lecturer and avoid making content errors in your notes. If you have difficulty understanding the lecture or taking notes, try reading your text assignment before the next lecture. You may be pleasantly surprised by the difference in your performance.

Some students, however, prefer to read the text assignments after the lecture instead of before it. They find that after they listen to the lecture, they understand the text better. Therefore, they have developed a pattern of going to the lecture, listening and taking notes, and then reading the chapter. Although this strategy may help them gain a better understanding of their text material, it doesn't provide the background information that they need in order to understand the content and organization of lecture.

If you are still convinced that you can't understand the text without benefit of the lecture, why not compromise. Try previewing the text before the lecture. Read the title, introduction, headings, and summary. Look at the bold-faced terms and any names or dates that stand out as you glance at the pages. Most importantly, capture the main ideas and try to get a general idea of how the chapter is organized. Remember, you get only one chance to listen to the lecture, but you can read the text as many times as you want.

Originally found at: <http://www.utexas.edu/student/utlc/makinggrade/preclassnotes.html>

2. Make note of questions that occur to you as you read.

Cultivate interest in the topic of lecture by formulating a few questions in advance. Then, during lecture listen for answers to your questions. If the lecture does not provide the answers, you can pose the questions to your instructor during or after class.

3. Familiarize yourself with important terms.

Knowing the vocabulary of the lecture will help you understand the subject matter and prepare you to take notes. You can also decide before lecture on abbreviations you want to use for long or hard-to-spell terms—“HRE” for Holy Roman Empire, “sczo” for schizophrenia, “meta” for metaphorical, for example.

4. Complete readings and written assignments when they are due.

If an instructor bases part of a lecture on previously assigned work, you will be better able to follow the presentation if you are up to date on your assignments.

5. Intend to listen and to take good notes.

It's a good idea to arrive to class a little early so that you can set out your materials and develop a mind-set toward effective listening. (You may even want to silently challenge yourself to take good notes or even take a brisk walk before lecture begins to clear the cobwebs.) Take a seat near the front, away from the windows and away from students who might distract you. Be sure you have a clear view of the instructor. Some students feel safer “hiding” in the back or to the side. However, taking a front seat allows you to see better what is written on the board or displayed on the overhead screen, helps you stay connected with the instructor, and keeps you alert. While you're waiting for the lecture to begin, review your notes from the previous session. The current lecture will often build on ideas from earlier classes.

6. Assume your responsibilities as student, and recognize those of the instructor.

As a student, you are expected to perform certain duties:

- Attend class regularly.
- Prepare by reading about the lecture topic before class.
- Take part in class discussion and group work with peers.
- Give you full attention during lectures.
- Take complete notes, including main ideas and details, as well as notes on multimedia presentations by the instructor.
- Complete assignments on time and to the best of your ability.
- Meet periodically with the instructor to discuss your progress.

Instructors are expected to:

- Attend class regularly.
- Inform students of the course requirements.
- Provide instruction and guidance in the course content.
- Offer a variety of instructional activities to address students' different learning styles and goals.
- Provide grades, feedback, and guidance on students' work and participation.

Activity B: Evaluating Your In-class Note-Taking Process

1. I listen carefully to the instructor.	A F N
2. If my mind wanders during a lecture, I'm able to refocus my attention on the instructor.	A F N
3. I listen not just for facts but for ideas and connections between ideas.	A F N
4. Rather than prejudge the material or the instructor and tune out, I encourage myself to stay focused on the lecture.	A F N
5. I concentrate my attention on the instructor, picking up both verbal and nonverbal clues.	A F N
6. When I get lost or confused during a lecture, I continue to make an effort to Reconnect with the instructor's train of thought.	A F N
7. I avoid letting my own thoughts or feelings interfere with my ability to listen.	A F N
8. I ask questions when I don't understand something.	A F N
9. As I take notes, I make an effort to distinguish the speaker's main ideas from secondary ideas and details.	A F N
10. I make my notes accurate by including detailed information and examples that support broad ideas.	A F N
11. My notes are organized to show the speaker's logic and reasoning. For example, I record cause and effect relationships, conclusions, contrasts, and summaries.	A F N
12. My notes include vocabulary words and phrases that are characteristic of the course topic.	A F N
13. When appropriate I use diagrams, graphs, and other visual ways of recording information.	A F N
14. I take notes quickly and neatly enough to record all the facts that I consider important and to make them easy to review.	A F N

In-Class Strategies

Hearing and listening are not the same. Hearing is often passive and automatic, while listening requires active involvement. Listening is a concentrated mental effort to take in and process information you hear. To listen effectively, follow these tips:

1. Concentrate

Make a conscious decision to listen and focus on the topic by not letting your thoughts wander. Then hold t your decision. Concentrating is especially important if the subject matter is difficult or dry, if the instructor talks too slowly or gives a disorganized lecture, or if you have personal matters on your mind. If you find your mind wandering, try a technique called **shadowing**. When you notice your mind drifting, return your attention to the instructor. In your mind, repeat or *shadow* the instructor's last sentence or two until you're focused on the lecture again.

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2. **Focus on what's important.**

Listen for main ideas, connections between ideas, and important details. Listen for answers to these questions related to the topic: Who? What? Where? Why? How?

3. **Don't ignore other bits of important information.**

Until you develop more sophisticated note-taking skills, you may want to rely on some of the following tips for what to include in your notes.

- Include details, facts, or explanations that expand or explain the main points that are mentioned.
- Include definitions, word for word, especially if your professor repeats them several times.
- Include enumerations or lists of things that are discussed.
- Include examples. You don't need to note all of the details for each example, but you do need to know to which general topic each example relates. (Don't forget to indicate *how* the example relates to the topic being discussed.)
- Include anything that is written on the chalkboard or on a transparency.
- Include anything that is repeated or spelled out.
- Include drawings, charts, or problems that are written on the board.

Sometimes instructors will “go off on a tangent,” and students often complain about not knowing whether to include that information in their notes. If you're unsure, get it in your notes. Then, place a box around that section of your notes and write “T” off to the side. Later you can decide if that section is worth studying.

4. **Have a positive attitude.**

A positive attitude toward your courses means assuming that the material is worth learning and not prejudging the material or the instructor. Convincing yourself in advance that organic chemistry is tedious or impossible to understand serves no purpose. Indeed, such judgments are self-defeating. Rather than tuning out, encourage yourself with positive messages such as: *Learning as much as I can from this lecture will help me understand the subject.*

5. **Look and listen.**

Focus your attention on the instructor. With the first class, start noting your instructor's mannerisms: facial expressions, hand gestures, and body language signal important information. You have to be a keen observer. In addition to watching the lecturer, listen for signals of important information. Often these will give you clues

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as to what instructors think is important—and what they will probably include on an exam. If an instructor repeats the same point, suddenly slows in speaking, changes her tone of voice, or pauses deliberately to allow you time to write, the instructor is sending you a message. “This point is important.”

Signal words and phrases also convey important information, but of a directional and relational sort. While these words do not express ideas, facts, and details, they often define the relationships (cause and effect, comparison/contrast, etc.) between ideas, facts, and details.

6. **Be a flexible note taker.**

One of the hallmarks of a good note taker is the ability to adjust to the organizational pattern of lecture. Just as writers use patterns to structure and organize the material they are writing about, speakers also use pattern to structure a lecture. For example, an instructor may use the inductive pattern—that is, identify a number of incidents and then draw a conclusion from them. The following are some of the more commonly used patterns of lecture:

- General to specific (deductive)
- Specific to general (inductive)
- Simple listing
- Chronological
- Classification
- Cause and effect
- Comparison/contrast
- Thesis-example
- Problem/solution

7. **Stay connected.**

At times you won't grasp an instructor's point, or the pace of lecture will be too fast for you to process all the information. Don't give up. Stay focused, and try to reconnect with the speaker's train of thought. Keep track of ideas and details that seem important to you. Later, you can seek clarification from your textbook. Even if you pick up only 20 percent of what the instructor is trying to communicate, that's still 20 percent more than you'll get if you tune out.

8. **Keep your mind focused**

Avoid letting your mind get stuck on one point. If your instructor makes a statement to which you passionately object, don't let your thoughts or feelings cause you to stop listening. Instead, make a note to discuss the point with another student or the instructor, and keep focusing your attention on the lecture.

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Along the same lines, don't get bogged down. If you miss something, leave a blank space and continue taking notes. If you have trouble spelling a word, spell it as best you can, but don't obsess on it. Once the lecture is over, you can revise your notes.

General Formatting Tips

1. **Use 8-1/2 by 11 inch paper and a large 3-ring loose-leaf notebook for each class.**

The large-sized paper provides ample room for developing meaningful notes, recording examples, and drawing diagrams. Using a 3-ring loose-leaf notebook allows you to insert handouts in topical and chronological order.

2. **Take notes on one side of the page.**

Taking notes on one side on the page leaves room on the facing page for making revisions, adding relevant information from the textbook, drawing concept maps, writing your own reflections, etc.

3. **Always date your notes.**

4. **Draw a line approximately two inches from the left margin.**

By leaving a two-inch margin on the left side of the page, you will be able to add recall words or phrase-like questions that are related to the main ideas and that will facilitate later rehearsal.

5. **Write your notes in phrase form rather than in sentence form.**

It's almost impossible to write word for word what your instructor is saying. While you are busy writing one sentence, you may miss other important points. Instead, condense the instructor's words into meaningful phrases that can be notes more quickly. It takes a little practice to learn to translate what the instructor has just said into phrases to write down, but you'll get the hand of it in no time.

6. **Use writing shortcuts.**

Use abbreviations and symbols to facilitate quick note taking.

Write numerals instead of spelling out numbers.

Compare these two samples. What words were omitted in the second sample? What abbreviations and symbols were used?

(ex.) The wagons traveled more than five hundred miles before finally arriving in Oregon on October 12.

Wagons traveled 500+ miles---→ Oreg. 10/12

Evaluating Your After-class Note-Taking Process

Activity C

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|---|---------|
| 1. I review my notes immediately after each lecture or within 24 hours after class. | A O R N |
| 2. I write key words or phrase-like questions in the margins of my notes. | A O R N |
| 3. I review my notes every week. | A O R N |
| 4. I use my notes for self-testing. | A O R N |
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After-class Strategies

The greatest amount of forgetting occurs directly after finishing a learning task. According to certain studies on memory, **without review**, approximately 47% of what a person has just learned is forgotten in the first twenty minutes—62% after the first day. In light of this fact, it would be wise to consolidate and review your lecture notes immediately after class or during your first free moment as a way of enhancing recall.

REVIEWING AND REHEARSING

First, read over and edit your notes. Then, determine the main ideas of each section and label them in the recall column—use key words or phrase-like questions. Actually, what you write in the margins depends on what you decide will be most helpful. You may want to use marginal notes to highlight important concepts, definitions, and examples; or to indicate specific questions that might help you on a test. Use abbreviations and numerical clues to save space. For example, “? Apartheid” can stand for “What is the definition of *apartheid*?” “Effects C. War (5)?” could stand for “What were the five effects of the Civil War?” Make sure you don’t write the answers in the margin under questions because you’ll want to use the material in the margins to test yourself later. Experiment to learn what works best for you. Use the margin in different ways to accommodate the subject matter of different courses.

Finally, cover the right-hand column, where you have taken notes. Use the labels in the recall column as cues and quiz yourself. In your own words and out loud, recite the main ideas and all of the details that relate to the cues you’ve written. Check for accuracy and circle any question in the recall column that you missed.

Also, don’t forget to set aside time for periodic review. Schedule a weekly review period that’s right for you, and stick to it. You’ll find that reviewing material cumulatively reduces time needed to study for tests.

Note Taking Tips for Math

- ✓ Write down the “title” of the lesson. If you don’t know, ask the professor.
- ✓ Write down the math problem and each step in the solution using math symbols. Next to each step write down “in your own words” exactly what you are doing.
- ✓ Write down a “question mark” next to anything you don’t understand. Ask the professor to explain the parts where you have written your “question marks”. Don’t just “let it go” thinking you’ll figure it out later on your own. Many times, it doesn’t happen.
- ✓ When you get home, before you start your homework, highlight in color the titles you have written in your notes. The highlighted information will help to give you the “big picture” of what you are doing.
- ✓ Remember, do all the homework problems, not just some of them!

Reading Your Textbooks

Did you ever find yourself reading a chapter in a textbook and not being able to remember what you read? There is a sure way to remedy this. It's called *label in the margin*.

- You should begin by **surveying** what you are about to read. Look at the major heading, the charts and pictures, read the summary, study the review questions. In addition, search your memory for anything you already know about what your assigned reading. The more you know about what you're reading, the easier it will be to process it into your long-term memory.
- **Read only one paragraph at a time**, and before you begin to read that paragraph look for a reason to read the paragraph. Use clues such as the heading or topic sentence. **Do not mark as you read.**
- When you finish the paragraph, put yourself in the position of your professor. What test question will you ask from that paragraph? Actually **write that question in the margin of your textbook.**
- **Now mark the answer to the question** by underlining, numbering, boxing, circling, etc.
- Want to make sure you always do well on pop quizzes and cut down on study time for major tests? Put this information in your long-term memory now by **covering the text and asking yourself the question written in the margin.**
- **Recite the answer in your own words.**
- You are now ready to read the next paragraph.

It may take you long to read a chapter this way, but there are definite advantages.

- You can read it a bit at a time—a page here and a page there—taking advantage of short periods of time you usually waste or didn't have time for a while chapter.
- You never have to re-read the chapter.
- You know the test questions in advance.
- You have a systematic way to study you textbook.

SQ3R – A READING/STUDY SYSTEM

SURVEY – gather the information necessary to focus and formulate goals.

1. Read the title – help you mind prepare to receive the subject at hand.
2. Read the introduction and/or summary – orient yourself to how this chapter fits the author’s purposes, and focus on the author’s statement of most important points.
3. Notice each boldface heading and subheading – organize your mind before you begin to read – build a structure for the thoughts and details to come.
4. Notice any graphics – charts, maps, diagrams, etc. are there to make a point – don’t miss them.
5. Notice reading aids – italics, bold face print, chapter objective, end-of-chapter questions are all included to help you sort, comprehend, and remember.

QUESTION – help your mind engage and concentrate.

One section at a time, turn the boldface heading into as many questions as you think will be answered in that section. The better the questions, the better your comprehension is likely to be. You may always add further questions as you proceed. When your mind is actively searching for answers to questions it becomes engaged in learning.

READ – fill in the information around the mental structures you’ve been building.

Read each section (one at a time) with your questions in mind. Look for the answers, and notice if you need to make up some new questions.

RECITE – retain your mind to concentrate and learn as it reads.

After each section – stop, recall your questions, and see if you can answer them from memory. If not, look back again (as often as necessary) but don’t go on to the next section until you can recite.

REVIEW – refine your mental organization and begin building memory.

Once you’ve finished the entire chapter using the preceding steps, go back over all of the questions from all the headings. See if you can still answer them. If not, look back and refresh your memory, then continue.

SKIMMING AND SCANNING SCIENTIFIL MATERIAL

Skimming involves searching for the main ideas by reading the first and last paragraphs, noting other organizational cues, such as summaries, used by the author.

Scanning involves running your eyes down the page looking for specific facts or key words and phrases.

- A preliminary skimming for the main ideas by using the author's organization cues (Topic headings, italics, summaries, etc.) is a vital preliminary step to more intensive reading and maximum retention. It will provide a logical framework in which to fit the details.
- A preliminary scanning of the chapters will alert you to the new terms and concepts and their sequence. When you locate a new term, try to find its definition. If you are not able to figure out the meaning, then look it up in the glossary or dictionary. (Note: usually new terms are defined as they are introduced in science texts. If your text does not have a glossary, it is a good idea to keep a glossary of your own in the front page of the book. Record the terms and their definition or the page number where the definition is located. This is an excellent aid to refer to when you are reviewing for an examination, as it provides a convenient outline of the course).
- Scanning is useful in locating statements, definitions, formulas, etc. which you must remember completely and precisely. Scan to find the exact and complete statement of a chemical law, the formula of a particular compound in chemistry, or the stages of cell division. Also, scan the charts and figures, for they usually summarize in graphic form the major ideas and facts of the chapter.

HOW TO READ ESSAYS YOU MUST ANALYZE

1. Take a pencil in your hand.
2. Read the essay over once, quickly, looking for the main idea, for what the essay is about in general, and for what the author seems to be saying. Don't get bogged down in details. (If you come to an unfamiliar word, circle it but go on reading).
3. Check the meaning of unfamiliar words. If they seem to be key words, i.e., if the author uses them more than once, scribble a brief definition at the bottom of the page or at the end of the essay.
4. Now re-read more slowly and carefully, this time making a conscious attempt to begin to isolate the single most important generalization the author makes: his thesis. Follow his line of thought; try to get some sense of structure. The thesis determines the structure, so the structure, once you begin to sense it, can lead you to the thesis. What is the main point the author is making: Where is it? Remember, examples or "for instances" are not main points.

The thesis is the generalization the author is attempting to prove valid. Your job, then is to ask yourself, "What is the author trying to prove"?

Another way of identifying the thesis is to ask yourself, "What is the unifying principle of this essay?" or "What idea does everything in this essay talk about?" or "Under what single main statement could all the subdivisions fit"?

If the author has stated his thesis fully and clearly, and all in one place, your job is easier. The thesis is apt to be stated somewhere in the last few paragraphs, in which case the preceding paragraphs gradually lead up to it, or else somewhere right after the introduction, in which case the balance of the essay justifies the statement and refers back to it. Sometimes, however the author never states the entire thesis in so many words; he gives it to you a piece at a time. Never mind. You can put it together later.

5. When you think you have grasped the main point, the whole essay goes to prove, underline it and write thesis in the margin. If you find you have several possible theses, don't panic; they all fit together somehow. One or more will probably turn out to be supporting the thesis rather than part of it.

Now re-read for structure. You are looking for the main divisions of the essay. There will (probably) be an introduction: draw a line clear across the page after the introduction and write into the margin. Now tackle the body of the essay. You are already pretty sure what the main idea is. What are the main points the author makes in leading up to his thesis, or in justifying it?

You will find in a longer essay that you are now dealing with groups of paragraphs, all having to do with the same subdivision of the main subject. Draw lines between the main groups and give the groups labels.

Occasionally, you will find a paragraph that doesn't seem to accomplish much. Some paragraphs, for instance, are purely illustrative: the "for example" type of paragraph. Some are just comments or impressions by the author. The "that reminds me" type. A third very common type is the transitional paragraph, which just takes you rather gracefully from one point to another. When you come across a paragraph like one of these, label it in the margin.

6. Within each structural subdivision find out what points the author is making. In other words, identify the topic sentence of each important paragraph, which just takes you rather gracefully from one point to another. When you come across a paragraph like one of these, label it in the margin.
7. You now have the skeleton of the author's argument and should be able to follow his reasoning. If you are still having trouble, try scribbling a word or two in the margins and summing up the paragraphs as if you were annotating a textbook. In the essay about the English 1 final, for instance, you might write "Mark up textbooks" in the margin after one paragraph, and "but not too much" after the next. You can also underline key transitional or structural words or phrases like "but", "however", "moreover", "on the other hand", "nevertheless".
8. Now write out, at the beginning or end of the essay, a thesis statement for the essay. Remember, the thesis was his guiding PURPOSE. What audience did he have in mind? What assumptions did he make i.e., what did he take for granted his audience already knew, or already believe, or both? Is his audience hostile or friendly?
9. Finally, and very important, consider two other questions: WHY did the author write this, and for WHOM? What audience did he have in mind? What assumptions did he make, i.e., what did he take for granted his audience already knew, or already believed, or both? Is his audience hostile or friendly?
10. If you know you are to be examined on the rhetorical techniques the author uses, now is the point to go on a deliberate hunt for them after you have thoroughly understood the essay.

WRITING PAPERS: A General Formula

Students too often put off a written assignment, considering it a chore too formidable to approach until the last minute. As a result, grades inevitable suffer. Writing is not a talent reserved for a select few, it is a skill that can be learned. Planning and organization are its essentials. With a knowledge of these, the student can through effort and practice improve his writing ability. Suggested assignments, essay tests, and term papers.

1. INTRODUCTION – OPENING PARAGRAPH

- a. Begin with a general statement.
- b. Narrow it down to the controlling idea (for thesis statement).

2. BODY – THREE DEVELOPING PARAGRAPHS

In each paragraph:

- a. Use transitions (repetition of key words and ideas) to connect paragraphs together.
- b. Develop the topic sentence with details, definitions, illustrations, comparisons, and contrasts.
- c. Conclude the paragraph with a summary of the main idea.

3. CONCLUSION – FINISHING PARAGRAPH

- a. Restate the thesis.
- b. End with a general statement finalizing the discussion.

Academic Writing: Some General Advice

The Topic: Miscellaneous observations on a topic are not enough to make an accomplished academic essay. An essay should have an argument. It should answer a question or a few related questions (see Thesis, below). It should try to prove something --- develop a single “thesis” or a short set of closely related points --- by reasoning and providing evidence, especially examples and citations from any particular text or sources your argument involves.

Thesis: When --- as is usually the case --- an assigned topic does not provide you with a ready-made thesis, your first effort should be to formulate the question(s) you will try to answer in your essay as clearly as possible. Next, develop a provisional thesis or hypothesis by reading, thinking and jotting down notes. Don’t become prematurely committed to this first answer. Pursue it, but test it even to the point of consciously asking yourself what might be said against it --- and be ready to revise or qualify it as your work progresses. (Sometimes, giving your writing a “working title” can help with this part of your writing.)

Organization: There are many ways in which any particular argument may be well presented, but an essay’s organization --- how it begins, develops, and ends --- should be designed to present your argument clearly and persuasively. (The order in which you discovered the parts of your argument is seldom an effective order for presenting it to a reader.)

Writing Resources: The writing center at SMCM provides free individual tutoring and group teaching to help undergraduates develop their writing skills. It is a teaching facility, not an editing service where trained tutors work with you to improve your capacity to plan, organize, write, and revise academic papers. Tutors can teach these skills using assignments in any subject.

Essay-Writing Tips

- Start early-even before you think you are ready to write-as a means to explore and discover what you know about your topic.
- Don’t try to write your essay from beginning to end; write what seems most ready to be written and fit it all together later.
- Keep your overall purpose and organization-usually in the form of an outline-in mind, revising it as needed.
- Revise extensively-put the essay aside for a few days, and return to it more objectively for revision.
- Once your essay is well-organized, revise your sentences, paying particular attention to transitions-ensuring your reader will be able to follow the sequences of ideas.
- Check your diction (exactness and aptness of words) and economy (the fewest words without loss of clear expression and full thought).

