

ON HELPING HISTORY STUDENTS
LEARN HOW TO TAKE GOOD NOTES IN CLASS

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One of the greatest frustrations in teaching history is to present what one knows is a brilliant lecture and discover that all too few students remember anything about it at exam time. This problem reminds one that nobody is born knowing how to take good notes; if students don't learn how along the way, large numbers of them arrive in college unable to keep up with lectures because they lack this important skill. Some solve the problem by using tape recorders, either transcribing the tapes or listening to them again and again. But a number of college professors are reluctant to allow such taping, and many students do not have the money to enter the electronic age.

Having to face large numbers of new freshmen admitted to public colleges, we offer to colleagues in colleges and high schools this uncopyrighted handout as an example of how one might help such students find their way. This one has already helped a large number of survey students do better on exams.

NOTE-TAKING SUGGESTIONS

To take clear, understandable, and useful notes you need to master a few basics. Once you are able to use them in your note-taking, you will avoid a lot of frustration and confusion, and find your college experience easier and more enjoyable.

First, keep in mind this warning: Remembering what your notes mean several weeks after you take them may be difficult. You can make that much easier by using a system--either one that you invent or the one that is offered here.

Second, remember that successful note-taking depends on one major factor, without which no system can work: YOU MUST PAY CLOSE ATTENTION TO EACH LECTURE WHILE IT IS BEING DELIVERED, IN ORDER TO DECIDE HOW TO TREAT THE MATERIAL. You must be able to answer these basic questions:

Is the material so complex and significant that you need to write down every word?

Can the material be easily and briefly paraphrased?

Can you safely omit some of it?

In any case, you can record what you need by using a well organized system. The system must be logical to help you remember key points weeks later, and it must allow you to write quickly enough to keep up. Here are the key elements:

1. OMIT ARTICLES (a, an, the) unless they are absolutely necessary for clarity. Usually they are not necessary and you can save a lot of time.

2. DEVELOP SYMBOLS to show the degree of emphasis the instructor gives to various points in the lecture. For example, you might wish to:

underline significant topics or information, or

*star very important topics, or

**use more and more stars in the margin; stars are quicker than underlining.

If you have several lines to emphasize, use a bracket-- [--in the margin, and perhaps stars as well.

This is a major reason to learn how to listen carefully. Listen for emphasis on significant points. Some clues to the instructor's emphasis are:

- a. Change in voice--listen for more or less volume.
- b. Change in pace--slowing down for emphasis.
- c. Repetition, either in the same words or in other words.

Another useful symbol is = to convey the idea that one thing, person, or event is similar to another. You can use + and - for "more than" and "less than."

3. When you study your notes later, they will be much clearer and easier to use if you take them in OUTLINE FORM according to the main points of the lecture. An ideal outline is like this:

- I.
 - A.
 - B.
 - 1.
 2.
 - a.
 - b.
- II. --and so on.

If the pace of the lecture is slow enough you can put in all the numbers and letters while you are taking notes. But that is terribly time consuming, which is why it is easier simply to indent when you come to a new major point, and mark it with a dash - or some other symbol. You can number major points later.

4. To find the outline of the lecture, LISTEN FOR CLUES as to how the instructor has topics arranged. Listen for such phrases as: "several factors" (which tells you that several points are coming up), "examples include" (which means illustrations of a particular point), "the main reason was," and so on. If you hear "the second reason" (or factor, etc.), and you don't have a first one, ask a question, either right then if the instructor permits such questions, or after class. If, later, you don't think that you have all the significant points, make an appointment to show the instructor what you do have and ask if you have missed something.

One way your outline might look is this:

- 3 fctrs (factors) contr (contribute) to [causing] WWI (World War I)
- imp (imperialism) in sev (several) pts (parts) of globe
- nat (nationalism) exc (excessive), cul chauv (cultural chauvinism)
- milit (militarism) = (caused, meant) fear, poten (potential) for ov-reac (over-reaction) to crisis

There would be examples of each, either after each factor or perhaps at the end of all three.

5. You can save time in THE MECHANICS OF WRITING. For instance:

- a. Watch the size of your writing; many of us tend to write larger letters and words as we hurry. Train yourself to stick to the smallest writing that will be legible to you weeks later.
- b. Unless your longhand is hard to read, use it instead of printing. For one thing, longhand is quicker; also, you can insert printed words for emphasis, and they will be the first things you see on each page later.
- c. Use a ball point pen; it moves more easily and quickly than a fountain pen or many pencils; soft pencil blurs easily and is hard to read later.

6. LEAVE SPACE at the top, bottom, and on one margin of each page. Then you will have space to put in later comments, or add material that you missed. When you know that you have missed something, leave space where it belongs. But the margins will save you trouble when you find something that you didn't know you missed, or when you need to add points from conferences with the instructor.

7. If you need TO EMPHASIZE the relationship of two or more key words, ideas, events, people, etc., USE A SIMPLE DEVICE such as an arrow, thus:

↪ Extreme nationalism, imperialism, militarism and entangling alliances have been cited by historians as playing significant roles in causing World War I. But these factors alone cannot be understood without considering the abilities, personal ambitions, and mental aberrations of national leaders

8. Most crucial of all is developing A SYSTEM OF ABBREVIATIONS for saving time while taking notes.

- a. Decide which abbreviations could be confusing and write out such words. "Aust" could mean either Austria or Australia; context might prevent confusion, but (as in United Nations affairs) it might not. "Meso" could be either Mesopotamia or Mesolithic; if you are certain of your context, say, Ancient History versus Archeology, it is usable.
- b. Some names are easily abbreviated: FDR, TR (for the two Roosevelts), Mao is still unique, CKS (Chiang Kai-shek), GW (George Washington) and so on. Write out enough to avoid ambiguity.
- c. Nations work the same way: US (United States), Eng or GB (England or Great Britain), Ger and WGER (German, West Germany), GR (Greece, Greek), Ch and PRC (China, People's Republic of China), and VN (Vietnam). But use S Am for South America; SA could also be South Africa, which should be S Af.
- d. Use capital letters to avoid confusion. Examples:
FR (France) or fr (from)
LUX (Luxor, Luxemburg) or lux (luxury)

Rep (republic) or rep (representative)
Tr (treaty) or tr (trade)
Phil (Philadelphia) or phil (philosophy)
In all cases, watch context.

e. Omit vowels when a word can be identified by its consonants, perhaps even sounding right; leave as much off a word as will leave it with a clear meaning:

cd (could) and shd (should)
gov (governor, govern) and govt (government)
fr (from) and frz (freeze, as in nuclear)
pol (political)
auto (automatic) and autoc (autocrat, autocracy)
mon (monarchy or monopoly, depending on context)

Here, finally, is an example of note taking; first a transcribed portion of a lecture on the origins of the Cold War; second, sample notes on that lecture.

SAMPLE LECTURE

At the end of World War II the United States and the Soviet Union resembled two giants in a room full of pygmies. They exceeded all other countries in military, industrial, and political power; exceeded most others in sheer size and population; and the rest of the world consisted mostly of countries either shattered by the war--Germany, Japan, Italy, France, and even Great Britain--or countries not yet developed industrially. For instance, Canada in 1945 had some 10 million people huddled along the U.S. border and its vast arctic region was still unexploited. Brazil, India, and many others had barely begun their development. China was not only battered by a dozen years of war and half a century of disorder, but was in the grip of a new civil war between Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang and Chairman Mao's communists. Most of Africa was still European colonies.

When Americans and Russians looked around, they saw each other--and for various reasons they saw each other as threats.

SAMPLE NOTES

End WW2 US & USSR 2 giants in rm of pygmies; + all othrs mil, indust, pol power; most in size, pop. Rest of wrld shattd by war -- Ger, Jap, It, Fr, even GB -- or begin ind grth. Cnda 10 mil on US brdr, nil in arctic. Braz, Ind beg dev. China battd by war, disorder; in cvl war, CKS-KMT v Mao comm. Af mostly Eur col.

US, USSR lookd, saw ea othr, & as threats. Why:

Note: the last few words of the lecture excerpt are a hint that the next part of the lecture will be on why the two saw each other as threats; students should be ready for a list of reasons.

Finally, here are a few comments to increase the usefulness of the suggestions.

First, students who took the suggestions seriously improved their performance considerably at exam time, but these students tended to be more capable or better prepared anyway. The problem is to reach the weaker students. We have found it helpful to pause during lectures to inquire--and demand

answers--"I just pointed out four factors in . . . whatever; what were they?" Or, we may pause and inquire about the significance of these factors as a device to remind but also get on with the topic. We do this more often at the beginning of a term than later. But this may still leave some weaker students "at sea."

Second, after the first quiz--placed early in the term to identify weak students--we review as many weak students' notes as we have time for, or as will come in for such a review. In such sessions we can use the printed suggestions to show them how they could have done better. Some have a particularly hard time inventing abbreviations other than those we suggest.

Third, we suggest that if students must outline parts of the textbooks in order to master them they use this technique. We suggest that they do this after class lectures in order to see how the books reinforce lectures.

Fourth, this set of suggestions has caused us to look anew at our own lectures, asking if they are really well enough organized for students to follow them with some ease. Obviously, not every topic can be organized with such total precision, but we have given ourselves directions for giving cues: where to pause, when to emphasize something with a given tone of voice, and to pause periodically to ask if anyone has missed something important or if anything is unclear.

Finally, we urge students to make outlines of topics that will be dealt with in essay questions at exam time, pulling together textbooks and lectures and then showing us the outlines that we may see if they contain all that is significant.