

LECTURE NOTES

The Mental Process of Note-taking

GOOD NOTE-TAKING CAN BE LEARNED

The mechanic of taking notes is important and should be learned (See Handout - Cornell Method of Note-taking). This paper, however, will plunge directly into the mental processes involved in taking notes.

Listening and thinking are the keys to good notes, as well as to good conversation. A lecture is a kind of conversation a kind in which only one person has a chance to talk. In a real conversation, you would ask questions. This questioning is a creative act that requires unceasing attention on the part of the listener.

The lecturer tries to anticipate the questions that will arise in the minds of listeners and takes up the answers to those unspoken questions as they arise. Only strict attention will enable the listener to be aware of questions in his or her own mind and recognize their answers as they come. These will be important in your notes.

A LECTURE IS LIKE A BOOK

A lecture has essentially the same structure as a chapter in a book. The name of the chapter tells you the subject of the whole chapter. The subject of a lecture will be directly given or suggested. Get it down. Ideally, a lecturer, like a book chapter starts a new subject at the beginning and rounds to a finish at the end.

Subject matter organized in this way is the easiest to handle, but sometimes the subject runs to more than one period. When it does, the lecturer will start the second day by summarizing what has gone before to get you back into the discussion. You will then continue your notes as though they were on one long chapter.

STRONG SIGNALS OF MAJOR POINTS

In each chapter there may be four, eight, or a dozen or more major subheadings in bold type. These are the names of the important ideas essential to the explanation of the point of the chapter. The author thinks each point is important enough to indicate it in special type. The major points as they come up in a lecture are not indicated by bold type, but rather are marked by strong signals from the lecturer.

What are some of the signals that indicate major points? Some are simple and direct. For example, "Now we will consider the second problem," They are simple statements announcing a new point. Others may be in the form of a question, "Now what is the cause of this difficulty?" Less obvious is the signal indicated by a pause or a tone of voice. There is a kind of finality in the tone and delivery of a thought that is ending a sequence of ideas. Then the speaker may pause, glance about the audience as if to pull it together and start again. This pause may be only to give the speaker time to collect his or her thoughts and decide how to start again, but it is a signal of a thought completed and a shift to the new idea.

These signals indicate the need for notes. Some lecturers make it easier than others to see the organization of their subject matter. Professors sometimes begin first-year courses with an outline of the lecture on the blackboard. Main ideas and sub-topics are listed, and the teacher lectures from this outline. Students can copy it and fill in additional statements as the teacher talks. Soon the teacher stops putting anything on the board, expecting the students to have discovered the lecture form and method.

If your instructor does not employ some such teaching device, learn to recognize the signals for important changes in thought and the lesser statements about each important thought. You can do it. It is a rare lecturer who pours out a lecture of important facts, all of which must be written down; but the more compact it is, the clearer the signals and outline are likely to be.

Key Sentences

Learn to listen for key sentences. They may be introductory sentences, transition sentences, and concluding sentences. In the introductory sentence, the new idea is named outright for you. Here are two introductory sentences:

1. "Language, of course, is one of the major problems in making films in India." This is pretty clearly an introduction to a discussion of that problem and how it is being solved.
2. "The high birth rate is an important cause of death." In this, you are alerted to find out why; and the answer will probably follow. Listen for this kind of announcement-making sentence. Get it in your notes.

The transition sentence warns that the author is about to present another important idea. You are led from the idea just given to the one to be considered next. Here we two transition sentences:

1. "This is not always true. In the early days . . ."
2. "The reason for this success is not difficult to understand."

In each of these sentences, it is apparent the speaker has finished one point and is leading you into the next.

In the concluding sentence, there is a kind of summarizing finality that cannot be mistaken if you are paying attention. Here are two sentences that signal, "I am drawing to a close. Watch for my final opinion in the matter."

1. "All things considered, the outlook is not unpromising."
2. "My suggestions are . . ."

Here again you have a signal that something should go into your notes. Study a chapter in a textbook and observe these three kinds of signal sentences. Soon you will be able to recognize them in lectures and use them as guides to taking notes.

SUPPORTING POINTS

The statement of a major point in a lecture will be followed by a series of supporting points. These will be an important part of your notes. Supporting ideas are usually signaled clearly in one way or another. Sometimes, the signal is as obvious as this, "There are four reasons for believing this to be true," "Here are some of the causes," "The results were..."

Key Words

Other signals that can guide you in listening and taking notes are perhaps less direct than those just mentioned but are just as simple once you realize the significance of certain words that may appear as signals. Alert yourself to them. Some of them are:

now	
then	∏ signal time relationships
next	

above all	
least important	∏ signal importance
chief	

yet	∏ may signal doubt
but	∏ clues a change from what has just been expressed

for instance	
to illustrate	∏ clue says, "What follows shows what I mean by what I just said."
for example	

moreover	
in addition	
once more	
thus	∏ says get ready for the end, which may be a last argument or a generalizing conclusion
finally	
all in all	
consequently	

The first essentials to taking notes are, of course, listening and thinking. Once you have learned to listen well, the key sentence indicating major shifts and the signal words will act as little electric shocks that say, "Here it is! Get ready to write!" When they do, listen to the point and put it down in your own words as simply and briefly as possible. Outline form is good because the form itself indicates relationship and emphasis.

How much should you write? Just enough to get the point pinned down. Enough to help recall the complete idea later in the day. Maybe a signal word will do it; maybe you'll need a whole sentence. In any case, reduce the idea to the simplest terms that will recall the point made. If the instructor wants you to use his or her words, the instructor will slow down. If he or she puts them on the board, be sure to get them.

AFTER THE LECTURE

What you do with your notes after a lecture is as important as taking them. First, read them over within a few hours of the lecture. Fix up the jumbled sentences and scribbled words so they will mean something to you a week later. Fill in things you can remember and didn't have time to write.

The sooner you do it, the more you will remember and the better the corrections and additions will be. The longer you wait, the more you forget and the less you will accomplish. If you don't do anything to them and try to use them a week later, you may find them useless. Fix them at the first opportunity. Ten or twenty minutes will do.

In the beginning, it is a good idea to get two or three classmates together, each armed with the notes on the lecture that he or she has reviewed and revised. You will all profit by comparing your notes. You will see how someone will say in a few words what you spent a half page on. You can pick up points you may have missed. It would be fine if one of you should happen to be an experienced note-taker, but three beginners can learn from each other as well.

Test-wise students study the mannerisms of the lecturer. Some lecturers decorate their points with interesting and important background material. After one examination, you can judge how much background material is likely to appear on a test. Some instructors commonly include it; some don't.

Others unconsciously dwell lovingly on points they enjoy and feel highly significant. Star these points in your notes. They are likely to show up on tests. If the lecturer slows down for a definitional kind of statement, get it word for word and memorize it. This pays off. If in a discussion of a debatable issue, he or she says, "in my opinion," or makes some comment indicating a personal attitude or belief, underline or star that point in your notes. In other words, study the lecturer as well as the lecture. You will soon see his or her reaching and testing pattern.

Taking notes is hard work, but it can be learned. Success lies in listening much, writing some, and thoughtfully reworking your notes while they are fresh.

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