LEARNING FROM LECTURES

The ability to listen and take accurate notes in class is one of the most important skills needed for learning at college. Your notes are the payoff for the time you invest in class and provide an important tool for exam preparation. This FAST FACTS will discuss several skills that are important for learning from lectures - how to listen actively, how to decide what and how much to write down and how to record that information.

BEFORE CLASS

Complete Assigned Readings

Give priority to completing assigned readings before class so that you won't be struggling to copy something that is already in your text. Doing the readings beforehand can also help you to listen more actively in class and predict the topics the lecture may cover, and can give an advanced indication of any difficulties which you can then clarify in the lecture. Do not expect the instructor to lecture over text. Many times this does not happen. In some courses it is better to preread text, take lecture notes and then thoroughly read the assignment. For a more thorough discussion of this skill, see the FAST FACTS, "Learning From Textbooks."

DURING CLASS

Effective Listening

Listening is one of the most important yet least recognized skills necessary for learning from lectures. Most students don't naturally listen in the way that the lecture situation requires. To listen effectively, you must "engage" the speaker - that is, create an internal conversation between you and the instructor as he/she is lecturing. This includes actively anticipating and questioning what the lecturer says and sorting or categorizing the information being presented. Engaging the speaker is easier if you sit where you can see and hear clearly. If you read over previous notes briefly before class and complete any assigned readings, you'll be well prepared to be an effective listener.

Learning from lectures also means that you must adapt to the style of the instructor. He/she decides what topics the lecture will cover, as well as how quickly information is presented. Adapting to a fast or monotonous pace is a challenge for even the most experienced student. Getting information and advice on notetaking strategies can be helpful if your skills are challenged by your instructor's particular lecturing style. The peer tutors in the Learning Center can offer program-specific advice, and you may find one who's had the same instructor. Two common dilemmas facing students in lectures are deciding what and how much to write down, and determining the best method for recording that information.
Deciding What to Write Down

It is common for first year students who are used to the direction and structure of high school classes to have difficulties in deciding what to write down in a lecture. At college, you're responsible for piecing together information about your instructor's objectives for the course, how the lectures and textbook fit together, what you are expected to do with the lecture material, and how you will be evaluated. It's important to be aware of this kind of information because these factors and others form the basis for the decisions you make about how much to write down in lectures, the amount of detail in which you'll study your texts, and what course material to concentrate on when preparing for exams. Where do you find this information?

The best source is the instructor. As an expert in the field, he/she decides what topics to present, how to organize the course, and how to evaluate your knowledge of the course content and any skills you are expected to acquire. Some instructors may clearly indicate important content. Sometimes information on what's important is implicit in the way the lecture is organized. Watch for verbal clues like "First . . . second . . ." which denote a series of important points or more explicit clues like, "note that . . .". A general rule of thumb is that if the instructor takes the trouble to write something on the board, it is important. Do not limit notetaking to this alone. Elaborate. Include main ideas and details.

Even though instructors vary as to how much information they provide, if you're not in class, you won't get any of it. If you borrow a classmate's notes you could be missing important information, and the information you get has been filtered by your classmate's experience and listening and notetaking skills. Non-verbal information, such as the instructor's facial expression or tone of voice, can indicate that a topic is important. The amount of time the instructor spends on a topic may be another indication of its importance. The course outline, which is often distributed in the first class, is a valuable resource that is all too often skimmed and filed for the duration of the course. The course outline can indicate which topics will be emphasized and what the organizational structure of the course will be. Keep your course outlines in a safe place and refer to them often.

Use a Partner

You can try working with a classmate to develop your notetaking skills. After class compare notes and analyze the differences. Discuss why you recorded something and your partner didn't, and vice versa. After several weeks, if you are still unsure whether you're getting down the important points, you can ask the instructor to give you some feedback on your notes from one lecture.
Notetaking Mechanics

Many students find that the notetaking methods they used in high school can usually be adapted for most of their courses in college. To some extent the way you put your notes down on paper is a course-specific decision, and you will probably find that the type and amount of notes you take will vary considerably from course to course. If you’ve been dissatisfied with the way you took notes in the past, or if you’re having problems with notetaking in a particular class, you may want to consult the staff professionals in the Learning Center. Meanwhile, here are some general guidelines to consider for all your courses:

DO . . .

- Date and number pages.
- Make sure that you can read what you record. Illegible notes waste time and paper; print if your handwriting is bad and use pen except for problem-centered classes.
- Use loose-leaf paper so you can integrate handouts, lecture notes and text notes in your course binder.
- Carry only the day’s notes with you. Keep your binders safe at home and file notes each day.
- Make it easy on your eyes and write on only one side of the page. Use the back for questions, study notes, messages to yourself, and thoughts or insights which occur to you during class.
- Leave plenty of space between topics.
- Set aside a few minutes each day, as soon as possible after class, to edit your notes. Find and fill in any missing points, underline and highlight titles and important points, and summarize the main point of the lecture in a few sentences.

DON'T . . .

- Don't depend on someone else's notes. Your notes are particular to your skills and prior knowledge - they are unique to you.
- Don't habitually tape lectures, unless you have a special reason for doing so (i.e., learning disabled, English as a Second Language student). Taping can be helpful if your instructor goes too quickly, but it more than doubles your lecture time and can become a barrier to developing notetaking skills. Be sure to ask you instructor's permission if you do decide to tape lectures.
- Don't cause or tolerate distractions. Move or tactfully ask those making noise to be quiet.
- Don't assume for any reason that going to class is unnecessary.

NEED MORE INFORMATION?

The Learning Center is one of the best sources on campus for advice and information on learning and study related issues. The Center is staffed by a group of peer tutors from a variety of disciplines, and appointments are available with staff professionals for assistance in learning and writing skills.

LEARNING CENTER, 659-3725

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