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How to succeed@taking notes

This leaflet introduces you to strategies to improve your note taking. It suggests (and gives examples of) two different styles of notes you may want to use in lectures, then talks about how to take notes from other sources.

Remember that you can get lots of study tips and resources from succeed@solent on myCourse.



Why is it important to take good notes?

In higher education we learn from many different sources: textbooks, lectures, papers, handouts, formal and informal discussions. Integrating the information from all of these sources is a major problem for most people. Acquiring the skill to integrate this diverse range of material is probably one of the most important things you need to do in order to maximise the effectiveness of your studies.

Taking good notes during lectures is particularly important. With most other sources of information you can go back and check the original material; lectures on the other hand are transitory and once the lecture is over all that remains is your memory and your notes.

The best style of notes

There is no single "best" style of taking notes in a lecture. The "best method" is the one that works for you. However, the method that works well in one lecture may not be as effective in another. Factors that influence the effectiveness of note-taking vary with each student, but may include: the lecture topic, the nature of hand-outs (if given), the nature of any visual material presented, the design of the lecture theatre, and the style of the lecturer.

Types of information

The one thing that all lectures do have in common is that they are intended to transmit information. When analysed, this falls into three categories:

- | | |
|-------------------|---|
| Facts | All lectures contain factual material given verbally or on board or screen. |
| Concepts | Most lectures contain an element of conceptual integration of the material which may, in fact, be the most important part of the lecture. Many lecturers concentrate on concepts, on the premise that knowledge of the bare facts can be gained from books. |
| References | Sources of further relevant material may also be given. |

Noting both facts and references is straightforward - they can be written down as they are presented, often in the same form. However, concepts require rather more of the student; they require a degree of *analysis* and *interpretation* of the material which is generally difficult to describe adequately in narrative form, especially if there are complex relationships involved.

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What we need then is a form of note-taking that allows for the insertion of information at any point without destroying the continuity or logic of the work already produced.

Diagrammatic notes

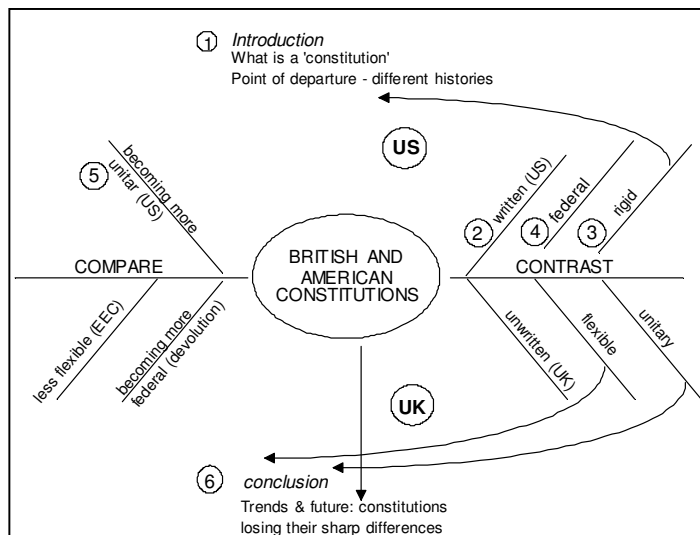
Tony Buzan, in his book *Use Your Head* (BBC Publications, 1974) puts forward a model for note-taking that is based on the use of *diagrammatic* rather than linear notes. These "pattern" notes begin in the centre of the page and branch outwards in all directions rather like a road map. Adding a new topic is like adding a major road, with reference and other material branching off to form side roads. Links between sections can be made with dotted lines or arrows rather like proposed roads or by-passes.

Pattern notes can also be beneficial in planning essays, as their open-ended nature allows you to develop various models of your topic without having to scrap one version in favour of another.

Example of diagrammatic note taking

Based on an example in: *Study Skills* (Williams, K. 1989)

"Compare and Contrast the British and American Constitutions"



Advantages of diagrammatic note-taking

- It allows the structuring of complex relationships.
- It is open-ended - new material can be inserted at any point.
- The links between important points can be shown
- Its visual nature aids recall

Conventional/Linear notes

For those who prefer to stick with linear notes, a little re-organisation to the layout of your notebook may well prove beneficial:

1. Use loose-leaf note-books so that you can incorporate additional relevant material later.
2. Learn to recognise anecdotal material - you rarely need to record any of this.
3. Make use of the planned structure of the lecture to help you set out your notes.
4. Develop a consistent style:
 - Use headings, sub-headings, bullet points and indentations to identify and separate the various components of the lecture.
 - Use abbreviations / stars / dashes / underlining / colour etc. to emphasize main points and connections
 - Develop your own shorthand for recurring themes, technical terms, formulae etc.
 - Diagrams are good visual keys, even if you don't use "pattern notes" generally.
 - References and notes on further reading should be grouped or sidelined to give them more prominence. They were given for a reason, so follow them up.
 - Cross-reference lecture notes to course-work or private study.
 - File your notes carefully and consistently. If you are not sure of the best location, either photocopy and file in two or more locations, or, more economically, insert a reference sheet to identify the location of the complete set of notes.

5. Standardise your page layout. This will help you to identify the type of material you are dealing with.

WHATEVER FORM OF NOTES YOU TAKE THE OVERRIDING QUESTION SHOULD BE:

WILL I UNDERSTAND THESE IN SEVERAL MONTHS' TIME?

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Example of linear note taking

Subject:	Speaker:	Date:
Main points	Supporting arguments	References & further reading
Questions		My own ideas

Divide the page into relevant sections -- Landscape orientation may be more appropriate

Taking notes from other sources

Books, magazines, newspapers etc.

- Scan or read the article first, then take notes.
- Be selective! Don't copy word for word unless you need a specific quote. Consider what information you need and record it in your own words.
- Photocopying from books may seem easy and time saving but is not an effective way of taking notes. If you've not read it you've not learnt it.
- If your notes on a topic are long and detailed make a revision sheet containing the basic facts, while it is still fresh in your mind.

Television and Radio

- More difficult than you might imagine. Television programmes are particularly difficult as you need to take your eyes off what is happening in order to write your notes.
 - Record or video the programme if possible. (If you weren't able to record it you might be able to obtain a copy from another source, e.g. the Library)

Take only outline notes on the first viewing. Use the index counter to mark sections of interest and return to them later to expand or fill in gaps.

Computer Based Material

- Beware of downloading information from CD Rom and On-Line Databases and thinking you've got the information you need. It might be in there somewhere, but then again it might not.
 - Download then edit as appropriate. Record the FULL file name and disk reference number on your notes for your own use. You may need to refer to your source again and 8-character filenames tend to become somewhat cryptic as your disk fills up.

Referencing

Remember to include reference to the source of your research material in your notes. It will aid quick retrieval if you need to refer to the material again and you will certainly have to cite your source if you refer to it in your essay.

Additional reading

Buzan, T., 1974. *Use Your Head*. BBC Publications. ISBN 0 563 10790 1

Williams, K., 1989. *Study Skills*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd. ISBN 0 333 48778 8