Taking Lecture Notes

Accurate notes will be helpful when you need to review material for an exam. In addition to helping you merely remember the contents of a lecture, your note taking strategy can help you grapple with the material and more fully understand a historical topic, event, or question. Thus, you should consider note taking as an interactive process rather than just a secretarial skill. So, even if you had a photographic memory you would still turn to your notes as part of the analytic process.

Current research supports these ideas and also shows that final results on exams and papers can be improved if certain methods for taking notes are employed. This guide will help you with:

- Methods and practices of taking notes.
- Ways to use your notes in studying for exams and papers.

Before class:

Read the text before class. This allows you to develop an overview of the main ideas, secondary points, and definitions for important concepts.

Identify familiar and unfamiliar terms. Look up terms before class. Be prepared to listen for explanations during the lecture. Ask the professor to explain unclear ideas.

Note portions of the reading that are unclear. Listen for an explanation during the lecture. Before class, develop questions to ask.

During class:

Sit near the front. There are fewer distractions and it is easier to hear, see and understand the material.

Date and number every page, assignment and handout. This will help when you begin studying for an exam or preparing notes for an essay.

Do not try to write everything down. Make notes brief. The more time you devote to writing, the less attention you can give to understanding the main points and identifying the outline and argument of the lecture. Never use a sentence when you
can use a phrase or a phrase when you can use a word. Use abbreviations and symbols whenever possible.

Be aware of the outline of the lecture. Most lectures are based on a simple outline. Listen for key phrases and words that identify what that structure is and recognize where you are in the outline at any given time.

Begin notes for each lecture on a new page. This allows for more freedom in organization, for instance, so that you can put the notes on a subject from the lecture with the notes on the same subject from the reading.

Generally, use your own words, rather than simply quoting the words of the lecturer. Formulas, definitions, rules and specific facts should be copied exactly.

Develop a code system of note-taking to indicate questions, comments, important points, due dates of assignments, etc. This helps separate extraneous material from the body of notes (for instance ‘!’ for important ideas, a ‘?’ for questions, or [bracket personal comments]). You might even develop your own symbols for commonly used words or ideas (for instance, ‘Δ’ for change, or ‘C’ for century).

Watch for clues from the instructor. If the instructor writes something on the board or overhead, it is likely important. If the instructor repeats a point during the lecture, make sure to note it. Dramatic voice changes and long, intentional pauses usually indicate emphasis as well.

After class:

Review your notes as soon as possible after the lecture. This dramatically improves retention.

Merge notes from the lecture and readings. Keep notes from the lecture with notes from the readings on the same topic. Look for gaps in your understanding in each and identify where they complement or contradict each other. Ask your instructor if you still do not understand a point.

Highlight key words, phrases, or concepts. This helps you reduce the amount of reading you have to do when studying. Use margins for questions, comments, notes to yourself on unclear material, etc. Color coding is often helpful for organizing material.

Recite by covering over the main body of notes and use only the key words in the margin to recall everything you can about the lecture. State the facts and ideas of the lecture as much as you can in your own words.

Reflect on the content of your notes. Consider especially how these notes relate to other things you have learned.