

TIPS FOR BETTER CLASS NOTES

There are only two hard-and-fast rules for taking notes in class: 1) Find a method that works for you, and 2) Do it! But discovering a note-taking style that suits you can be a tricky thing. Where to begin?

Right here. By following the suggestions on these pages, you'll be on your way to creating class notes that will be a valuable tool for your success as a student.

1. Don't try to write down every word.

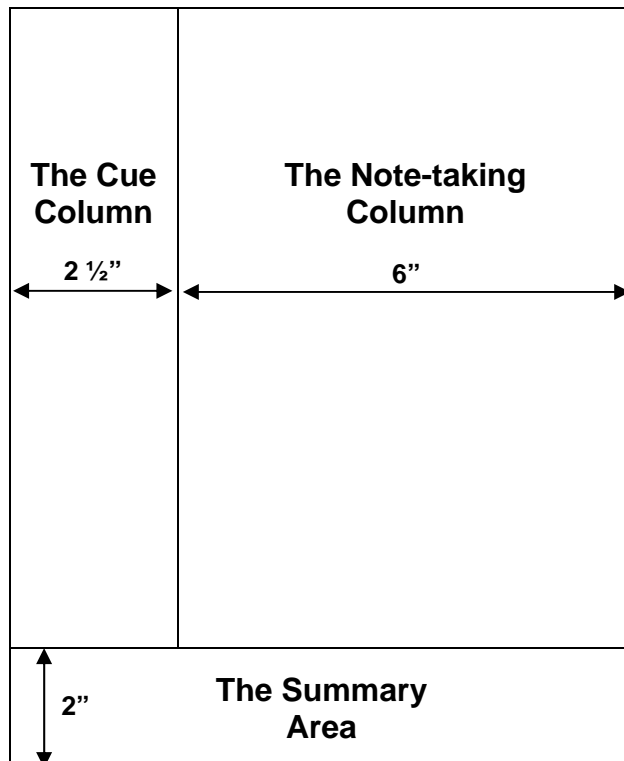
- Focus on main ideas and key words. (You're not taking dictation or transcribing a speech.)
- Instructors tell stories and give examples in order to explain more significant points. Summarize these illustrations in a few words or merely write a brief title to jog your memory.
- Paragraphs aren't necessary.
- Bulleted lists and outlines allow for quick note taking.

2. Leave extra space.

- "Double-space" your notes and use the blank lines for later additions and corrections.
- Leave wide margins to allow for future notes, text book page references, study questions, personal reflections, original ideas – in short, set aside room to interact with your notes.
- Some people find success using the Cornell method of taking notes.

The Cornell Note-taking System

Begin by dividing your notebook page like this (or purchase Cornell-formatted notebooks):



You use the different areas of the page in the following ways:

- **The Note-taking Column** is where you write the actual lecture notes. Use whatever format works best for you. (Short, simple sentences and phrases are recommended.)
- **The Cue Column** is designed to help with your review process. After class, as you read the information in the Note-taking Column, use this space to write “cue words” that describe the main points covered in your notes. This can take the form of vocabulary words, names of formulas, important people, etc. Questions also provide helpful cues, so use this area to jot down potential test questions that might arise from the Note-taking Column. Additionally, this column serves as a place to cross-reference other relevant material, such as related textbook page numbers, names of handouts given in class, or parallels to other subjects (including art, music, theater, and current events.)

Later, as you review your class notes, you can simply cover the Note-taking Column with a piece of paper and use the Cue Column to test yourself. Think of it as flash cards built into your notebook.

- **The Summary Area** will contain a brief description of the content on that page. As you review your notes, think of a few sentences that capture the heart of what is being covered. By doing this, you will become actively involved with your notes – thinking and evaluating, rather than passively reading. Then, as you review your notes, reading the Summary Areas on each page will provide you with a helpful overview of all your notes, providing you with the ever-important “Big Picture.”

3. **Make your notes legible.**

- Pay attention to your handwriting. Can you read it? Can you read it without wasting time?
- Print if necessary.
- Write large enough to re-read with tired eyes.
- Unless you’re doing math, pens are preferable to pencils. Ink tends to be easier to read – but beware of smudgy pens.

4. **Maintain organized notes.**

- Keep all notes for a single class in the same notebook.
- Consider using a loose-leaf notebook with subject dividers instead of spiral notebooks. This way, you can insert handouts or photocopies of a classmate’s notes.
- Write the date of the lecture at the beginning of each day’s notes. (This provides easy reference when reviewing or discussing material with others.)

5. **Use abbreviations and symbols.**

- Develop a habit of using simple shorthand to replace longer (or frequently-used) words and phrases.
- These abbreviations and symbols don’t have to make sense to anybody else, but be sure **you** understand them when you review your notes after the lecture is over! Rely mostly on standard abbreviations. Be consistent on how they’re used in all your note-taking for every class. It can be helpful to keep a running list of abbreviations in the front of your notebook, so you can reference them if you get confused later on.

- Draw from different fields as you abbreviate. In addition to traditional grammatical abbreviations, common shorthand symbols can be found in math, medicine, and the arts. Some examples:

e.g. = “for example”	hx = “history”
i.e. = “that is”	ca. = “approximately” or “about”
w/ = “with”	POTUS = “President of the United States”
∴ = “therefore”	
≠ = “not equal to” or “not the same as”	
- When standard abbreviations don’t exist, create your own. You can save time and preserve your mental focus for listening by using simple substitutions. For example, write “L.” in place “Abraham Lincoln” during a lecture on the Civil War.

6. Clean up your notes after class.

- Don’t worry about the final product as you’re taking notes; keep energy directed toward writing down accurate and relevant information.
- As soon after lecture as possible, review your notes and make needed additions, corrections, or notations. To assist with this, be sure to do the following:
 1. Leave enough blank space around the text to make necessary edits.
 2. Skip large amounts of space if you know you’ve missed a point. Fill it in later, but don’t let this omission distract you from being attentive in class.
 3. Make a note or symbol on the page to indicate when you were confused and feel your notes are less trustworthy. Follow up on this and get the right information.
- By preparing for anticipated revisions, you can keep legible, organized notes without wasting time rewriting or typing them.

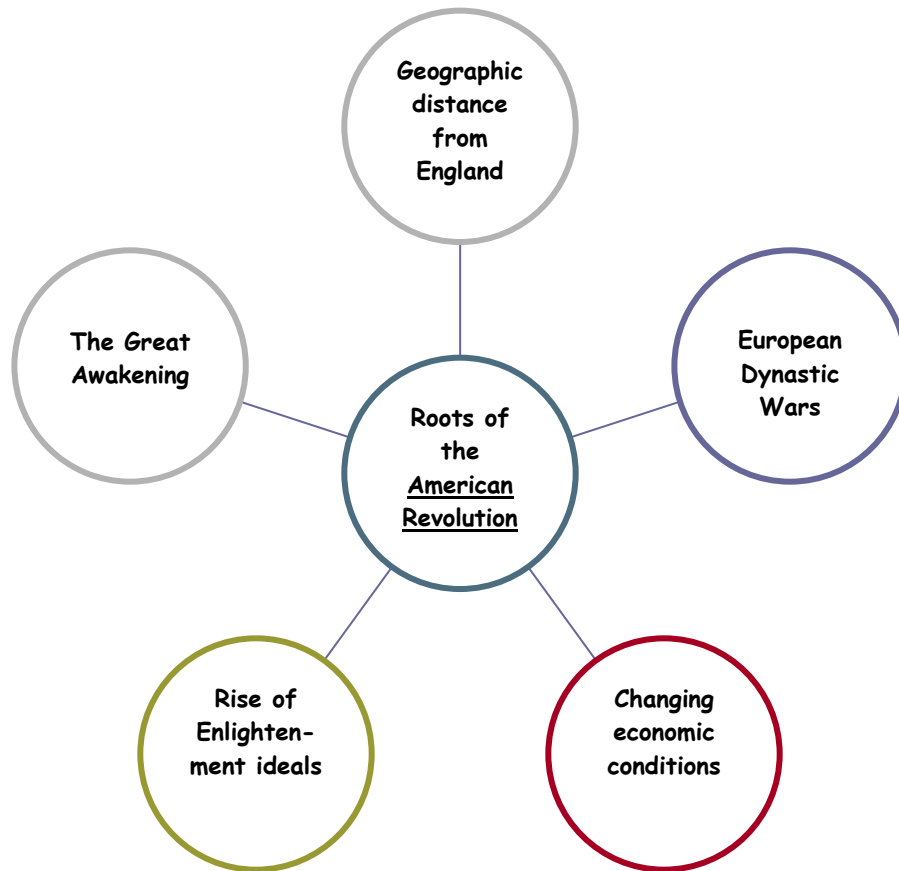
7. Cross-reference your class notes with your textbook, handouts, films, etc.

- In the margins, write page numbers, book titles, handout numbers, or notes about anything else related to that section of your notes. (Don’t neglect references to current events, history, science, and the arts.) *This will require keeping your notes handy when you’re not in class.*
- Pay special attention to details that recur in each source. If, for example, your class notes contain the same five major points that are outlined in a chart found in your textbook, consider this an important clue that you may see this information on a test.
- Also, pay special attention to any information that is different in each source. If you’re confused, ask for clarification (your instructor will be impressed). Differences of opinion provide great fodder for essay questions.
- Cross referencing is a simple task that’s often overlooked, but it can provide a much richer understanding to the subject. It also helps to make sense out of large amounts of material and to see key relationships. As an added bonus, this process saves you time when reviewing for tests.

8. Think outside the box.

- Notes don’t have to be in traditional paragraph or outline form.
- Doodles and drawings can be valuable tools for some students.
- A number of people are helped by taking notes in the form of charts, graphs, “mind maps,” or other formats that don’t rely so heavily on text. These can be especially effective “memory joggers” for visual learners.

Example of a Mind Map



9. Compare your notes with a trusted classmate.

- On the first day of class, scout out other students who seem focused in class. Get to know them and ask if you can sit down and review your notes together. Don't be bashful – most likely, you will both benefit from the experience.
- If you're absent from class, ask someone if you can copy his or her notes. Better yet, ask more than one student. (And don't forget to ask your instructor what you've missed!)

10. Review your notes regularly.

- As soon as possible after class, look over the notes you've taken. Research indicates that people recall more when they review immediately after the event they want to remember.
- Reading and reciting *aloud* can increase the amount of information that is retained.
- Arrive for class in time to review notes before the day's lecture.
- Don't wait until the night before a test to look at your notes. Brains absorb more information during shorter, frequent reviews than during a single, marathon session.

11. Turn notes into study aids.

- Create flash cards to review while you wait in lines, sit in traffic, or ride the bus.
- Write important items on sticky notes and post them on mirrors, on your refrigerator, etc.
- Recite lists and definitions into a tape recorder and play it back frequently.

- Devise new methods that work for you. Get ideas from classmates and instructors. Be creative!