

# Note-taking

Taking good notes will help you remember what you've read and heard. It benefits both learning and studying:

- **Your learning** is more effective because taking notes helps you to actively engage with the information by making decisions about what to write down and why, as well as how to organize the information.
- **Your studying** is more efficient and effective when it is based on a strong foundation of understanding, built over the course of the semester. Good notes are critical for this foundation.

Taking good notes is a skill; practice will help you learn to do it well.

## Active note-taking

Many students find it hard to keep up with lectures and readings because they try to write down everything the professor says, or every point in the textbook. Here are some ways to make sure your note-taking is effective.

Like reading, **effective note-taking is an active process**. The way you take notes will vary, depending on

- your **purpose** (e.g., getting the gist of it vs. learning it well)
- how much you already know about the topic
- the **difficulty/density** of the subject matter.

Your notes don't have to be perfect and include everything; they just have to help you understand and remember the course content. That's why it's important to make note-taking an active process. You learn more when it's an **intentional and purposeful** activity, and when you **do something with** the notes you take.

## What do good notes look like?

- They **summarize** course material clearly and concisely.
- They are **written in your own words**, with precise definitions or formulae also included.
- They **organize** information **hierarchically**, distinguishing between main points, secondary information, and finer details.
- They help you see the **relationships and connections** between ideas.

Having a hard time finding the main idea?

- Textbooks often identify key concepts and new terms by putting them in headings, subheadings, bold font, or chapter summaries or learning objectives. Preview the chapter by focusing on these clues.
- Try the [3-step approach](#) to reading and note-taking.

# How should I take my notes?

What's the right way to take notes? By hand? Highlighting? Should I rewrite my notes?

## To highlight or not to highlight

Highlighting is one way to actively engage with a text when it involves deciding which points are important. However, most studies have shown [no benefit of highlighting](#) over simply reading the text, often because students highlight too much or highlight without thinking.

See the [3-step approach](#) for tips on highlighting.

## By computer or by hand?

You may have heard that [taking notes by hand is better for learning](#). Studies suggest that **students who take notes on laptops perform worse on tests than students who take notes by hand** (even after laptop-related distractions were accounted for). Taking notes by computer encourages students to transcribe lectures verbatim rather than thinking about, processing, and putting the information in their own words—that is, **engaging actively** with the lecture.

Ultimately, taking notes online or on paper is up to you because what's important is **what you are doing when you're taking notes, not how you're writing them**. You can ensure you are actively engaged by

- keeping a running conversation going in your head between you and the author as you read a text
- asking questions and making comments
- making connections to what you already know, to other classes, or to other content within the same class
- keeping the big picture in mind as you learn new details
- summarizing information (e.g., in a list, a short paragraph, a mind map).

## Strategies and formats

The note-taking method you choose depends on context and purpose. Overall, taking good notes involves paraphrasing, consolidating, and/or summarizing information.

### 3-step approach

This method helps you focus and understand what you're reading. Paragraph by paragraph (or slide by slide, if you are completing an online module), go one step at a time:

1. **read** the paragraph or slide, focusing on understanding the material—don't write anything down yet
2. **take notes** (paraphrase the main idea, jot down any questions)
3. **highlight** or colour-code the most important information (e.g., key terms or concepts). Highlight no more than 20% of the text.

## Annotation

If your professor provides the slides before class, **download them in advance** and **annotate them during lecture**. This approach frees up mental space for you to listen and understand the material. You can focus on what the lecturer adds to the information presented on the slides.

## Consolidate as you go

When the content of the readings and lectures overlaps significantly, consolidate your notes as you go. **Use what you learn** from the second source (readings or lecture) **to add to your notes** from the first (lecture or readings). Use a different colour to distinguish the source of the information.

## Cornell method

This is a note-taking system with a pre-organized layout: a large note-taking space, with a cue column (questions, formulae, keywords) to the left and a summary row (at-a-glance summary, 4-6 sentences) along the bottom of the page. Selecting and organizing information for this system ensures active processing, increasing your understanding and recall. It also helps you produce useful study notes.

## Concept summary

A concept summary helps you organize fundamental, general ideas in math and science courses. Creating one helps to clarify your understanding and improve your memory for the information. First, identify a key idea. Then, use categories to organize the material (e.g., key formulae, definitions, units, symbols, conventions, simple examples, relevant knowns and unknowns, etc.).

See [here for an example](#).

## Mind maps

Making a mind map involves selecting and organizing information in a visual, hierarchical format. To do so, you need to make choices about what to include, how to show relationships and connections, and how best to present information. You can use a mind map to represent the content of a lecture or textbook chapter, or a whole course.

## Making your notes matter

Taking good notes in lectures and from weekly readings is **just the beginning**. Remember that your goal is to learn the course content. Make sure you **understand and remember the information** by **engaging with your notes** over the course of the semester.

## After-class summary



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As soon as possible after class, take five minutes to answer the question, “What did we do in class today?” Write it out in **4-6 sentences, using your own words**. This will help consolidate the information while it’s fresh in your mind and act as a memory jog when you look back to study.

## Weekly summary

When you’ve taken in all the week’s information (i.e., attended all classes, tutorials, and labs; completed readings and notes), **summarize the information from that week’s topic or unit**.

- What did you cover this week?
- How is it connected to other information in the course?
- How can you best organize it?

Take note of **areas of challenge** or confusion and **get help** as needed.

Summarizing requires you to **select, organize, and integrate** information; doing so will improve both your understanding and memory. Possible summary formats include a 1-page study sheet, a mind map, or a concept summary.