

# HOW TO TAKE NOTES FROM CLASSES

There are three important steps to help you get the most out of your classes.

## Before-class preparation

- Anticipate what information you might need from this class to do your work. There are two major questions to consider:
  1. Will you need to discuss core concepts in an essay?
  2. Will you need to refer to lots of details (formulas, terminology, etc.) for a test?
- If you can access the lecture slides in advance, preview the material: mark things of interest and concern to you, so you can focus and ask questions when they come up.
- If you find a course to be especially challenging, if you'll be quizzed or if you're expected to participate, read your course materials. You might be able to use the SQ4R technique for this: please see the "Effective Reading" handout.
- In certain circumstances, you might only need to survey and question the texts before lecture, saving more in-depth reading (the 4Rs) for later, so that your professor's lecture can guide your deeper understanding.
- Because of the human tendency to forget information over time, it's often best to do this preparation step relatively close to the lecture.

## During class

- Sit near the lecturer to avoid distractions.
- Studies show that students generally perform better when they take notes by hand instead of on a laptop: bring enough paper and a backup pen or pencil! If this is not feasible for you or for your course, be sure to spend time after class in digesting and summarizing your typed notes.
- You might find it beneficial to develop your own shorthand symbols for your notes; if you do, be sure to keep track of them.
- Active listening means sorting through the lecture information in order to record only the important points. To help with this sorting, listen for verbal cues. Many professors explain what they intend to teach at the beginning of the lecture: write this down. Throughout the lecture, their voice inflections and key vocabulary often signal what is important.
- Watch for visual clues, paying close attention to materials written on the board, and how the professor uses any slides, handouts or other material to emphasize points.
- The Cornell Method involves flagging key information, points of uncertainty, and details to memorize in a highly visible and systematic way. You can develop your own techniques to mark or record questions to ask later, words or phrases you don't understand, and material you probably want to find easily when you prepare for your projects and tests.
- If you capture verbatim quotes, use quotation marks to avoid accidental plagiarism when you're writing essays, papers and reports.
- If you have permission and a need to audio-record the lecture, it can be helpful to keep track of the points that you might want to play back later to fill in any gaps. Listening to the whole lecture again might take more time than it's worth: these timing annotations can let you zero in on the parts that you need.

### After-class summary

- For the same reason that it is helpful to prepare for a lecture fairly soon beforehand, it is useful to create a personalized digest of your notes soon afterwards.
- Finish any associated readings, or check your texts for any gaps in knowledge or questions you might have. As needed, consult classmates, the TA or lecturer for answers and clarification as soon as possible.
- Especially if you will be tested on this information, create personalized study guides for later. This short guide should suit your preferences and the course requirements in briefly summarizing information that is new and important to you.
- This study guide can take many forms: labelled diagrams or maps, flash cards of terms and definitions, compare-and-contrast tables, lists of equations and applications, and so on. These will facilitate studying later so that you won't need to re-read all your notes except when you need further clarification.
- To stay familiar with the material, periodically return to these short study guides through active review: test your ability to recall and define terms, apply your knowledge, annotate diagrams, etc. Keep all of your notes, summaries, handouts and other materials for a course in one place.

**How do you want to take notes for your classes? You can use the remaining space here to write down your ideas for each one.**



#### ***Want to know more?***

The Centre for Learning Strategy Support has resources, workshops, events and appointments to support you.

→ look us up online at [learningstrategy.utoronto.ca](https://learningstrategy.utoronto.ca)

→ email us at [clss@utoronto.ca](mailto:clss@utoronto.ca)

→ or give us a call at **416.978.7970**

<sup>1</sup>Pam A. Mueller and Daniel M. Oppenheimer, "The Pen Is Mightier Than the Keyboard: Advantages of Longhand Over Laptop Note Taking," *Psychological Science* 25, no. 6 (2014): 1159-68.