

# Taking volunteer notes

Are you an effective note taker? Do you prepare for lectures? Do you regularly attend class and take detailed notes? If you said YES, you have what it takes to be a volunteer note taker.

## Important advice for volunteer note takers

As a volunteer note taker, you must remember that your notes are no longer just for you. Students who use your volunteer notes may be unable take notes or may need to miss class for disability-related reasons. Here is some important advice to keep in mind:

1. **Remember your reader.** Everyone processes information differently. Your notes need to make sense to someone else, *sometimes months later*. Before uploading, ensure your notes are detailed, organized, and legible. Readers should not have to decipher your notes.
2. **When in doubt, write it down.** In some instances, your notes will be the only record a student has of lecture. Ensure that you accurately and fully represent lecture material, as well as assignment or test instructions, discussions, and other course-related information. At the top of the page, include the date, course code, professor's name, lecture title, and remember to add page numbers.
3. **Be clear and consistent.** Visual cues, such as drawing a box around definitions or adding an asterisk to important points, are great ways to improve the efficacy of your notes. Aim to be consistent with your visual cues to avoid causing confusion.
4. **Strive to be objective and accurate.** Volunteer notes should correctly record course material. Do not add your own point of view or commentary. Ensure that you have spelled key terms and names correctly.
5. **Remember, students are relying on you!** Upload your notes as soon as possible and within 48 hours of class. If you need to miss class, upload a classmate's notes, if possible. *Do not upload notes without your classmate's consent.*

## Taking excellent notes: a how-to guide

Strengthening your notetaking abilities not only helps students who rely on volunteer notes, it also benefits you by enhancing your learning. Use the tips below to take excellent notes.

## Before class

Excellent notes start with preparation. Fully preparing for class will help you identify and organize important information during lecture. Here are our top preparation tips:

- **Consult your course syllabus.** Use the course description, learning outcomes (if available), and weekly theme to clearly identify the aims of the course and focus of your next class. Reflect on how the weekly theme relates to the course.
- **Complete your assigned reading(s).** Identify new terms, concepts, or approaches. Pay extra attention to emphasized material, like bolded terms, diagrams, or images, as well as key takeaways outlined in chapter summaries.
- **Answer some practice problems or study questions.** Practicing new material before class will help you get the most out of lecture.
- **Preview slides.** If lecture slides are available beforehand, go over them. Get a sense of the lecture's overall organization and content. If there is an "Overview" or "Agenda" slide near the beginning of the presentation, use it to identify the sections of the lecture. Title slides and headers will give you a sense of lecture's main points. Consider downloading or printing the slides so that you can take your notes on the same document.
- **Ask questions.** Take time to jot down some questions you anticipate the lecture will answer. This will help you be an active and engaged listener.
- **Anticipate key words and prepare abbreviations.** For example, if the weekly theme is "postmodernism," plan to write "pomo." Only abbreviate a few key words you will write repeatedly. Abbreviations save time, but too many abbreviations can cause confusion.
- **Review the previous lecture.** Go over your notes from last class. This will help refresh your memory and get you warmed up for class.
- **Prepare your document.** Record the following information at the top of your notes: date, course code, professor's name, lecture title, and a legend for your abbreviations.

## During class

Now that you are prepared for class, it is time to take notes. Use the following tips during class to optimize your note taking.

- **Use a recommended note taking method.** The Cornell Method and Outlining Method will help you create organized, easy-to-follow notes. [Learn more about the Cornell Method.](#)
- **Be an active listener.** Attend lecture well rested and ready to pay attention. Remove distractions and turn off notifications. If your focus drifts, adopt an alert posture.

- **Identify gaps.** If you missed material or are confused by something, make a note and move on. For recorded lectures, jot down the time code. For live or synchronous lectures, write “add” or “?”. Fill in these gaps later by asking for clarification during the question period, sharing notes with classmates, consulting readings, or posing questions during office hours.
- **Leave white space.** This will make your notes easier to follow. It also leaves space for you and the students using your notes to add information after class.
- **Pay close attention to emphasis.** Emphasized material is usually important. Your professor may create emphasis through repetition (restating or returning to an idea), visual cues (using bold fonts or headings), body language (pointing), and changes in tone (speaking loudly or slowly). Place an asterisk next to emphasized or key material.
- **Use signposting to your advantage.** Signposting consists of phrases that help you navigate the lecture (e.g., “Today’s lecture will focus on...”, “Let’s apply this to a case study...” “Here is another illustrative example...”, “Next week we will discuss...”). Signposting helps you identify the lecture’s central objectives. It also helps you identify how supporting information, examples, or sub-arguments relate to these central objectives.
- **Represent relationships.** For instance, if your professor introduces a five-step process, present this information as a numbered list. If the lecture compares and contrasts two different approaches, consider presenting them in a table, side-by-side for quick reference.
- **Take note of reading references.** If your professor connects the lecture with the readings, be sure to document this in the notes, as this is likely key material.
- **Use consistent visual organizers.** You might underline key terms, draw a box around definitions, and put an asterisk next to important points. Consider writing main points flush with the left-hand margin and indenting sub-points.
- **Trim down your notes → trim notes.** Aim to capture as much information as possible, but avoid transcribing full sentences. Cut down on wordiness by using bullet points and key word abbreviations (remember to include a legend!). Consider using common abbreviations and symbols (example = e.g., and=&, increase=↑). [See this abbreviation guide](#).
- **Take notes on discussion.** Be sure to identify student contributions your professor reiterates or emphasizes.
- **Record course-related information.** Take note of important information, such as details about the test or exam format, assignment instructions or extensions, etc.

## After class

Your notes are almost ready to share. Set aside some time after class to finalize and organize your notes. Added bonus: actively reviewing your notes as you finalize them for upload will help you solidify what you learned in class.

- **Fill in.** Take note of important information you were unable to record during class. Be sure to fill in the missed material you marked with “add”, “?”, or the timecode.
- **Verify.** Ensure your notes are accurate and check spelling on important names or terms.
- **Organize.** Ensure pages are in order and numbered with total pages (e.g., 1 of 4 or 1/4)
- **Upload.** Make your notes accessible online as soon as possible, within 48 hours of class. You can [find out more information about the Volunteer Note-Taking Program on our website.](#)

## Special thanks

Volunteer notes exist because of the generosity of students like you! Thank you for participating in this program and for making it possible.

This handout provides general information about strategies and processes related to using volunteer notes and are subject to change as Accessibility Services makes improvements to better serve students. For the most updated information on all of our policies and processes, please visit our website: [accessibility.utoronto.ca](https://accessibility.utoronto.ca).