Note Taking

You’ve heard it for years from your high school teachers, from your parents, and now from your college professors. They all echo that constant nagging command: “You need to take notes during class!” And, even after this repetitive attack on the senses, many students (and hopefully you are not one of them) still refuse to even think of putting pen or pencil to paper during the daily lecture. Unfortunately, these same students often struggle during test time and end up with a less-than-favorable grade in the class. Has this happened to you? Could taking notes actually help you become more successful in college?

Before I bore you with yet another lecture on why note taking is important, I need to ask you a question. Why take notes? Why even bother purchasing a spiral for your classes? And, while we are on this shopping spree (or lack thereof), why bother purchasing the textbook? Why even bother with college? I know I’ve strayed a bit here from my main point, but you can see how one may lead to another. In order to save you from being too overwhelmed at this point (you’re welcome), we will just talk about note taking here. I’ll save the rest of these topics for your Strategies instructor.

Believe it or not, we care about your academic success. While there are still some students who feel that college instructors are simply out to play a childish game of “Gotcha!” with your grade point average, it’s just not true. In fact, many people become professors for the sole reason of helping someone else along in their academic journey. And, lucky you, I am here to help you with note taking. When you take notes in class, you become an active participant in that class. Your participation demonstrates that you are serious about your education, and your instructors will appreciate this more than you know. Also, when you take notes, it provides a clear method of study for any pop quiz or exam. Instead of forcing yourself to remember every single detail (which is nearly impossible in some classes), the notes do all of the “thinking” for you. Notes, in any form, will help you recall important information when necessary. Sure, the textbook can provide you with some valuable material too. But, how many of you have an instructor who does not lecture directly from the book? How many of you have an instructor who likes to “tell stories” in class rather than present a straight lecture? Certainly by now you have noticed that every instructor teaches in their own way. Your job is to identify their style, figure out what information is important, and make sure that information is in your notes. Now, while no one note taking “style” is better than another, I want to share a few tips with you here:

• **Concentration is key!** Do you arrive to class tired? Are you hungry? Are you thinking about the weekend rather than the task at hand? (Do I sound like your parents?) These are all distractions that can easily bring your grade down to an unrecoverable level. Remember, we want you to pass the class. But, we cannot just give you a grade; you earn it! Try to arrive every day with a new energy and enthusiasm to learn. I realize this may be difficult for an 8:00 a.m. class on Monday morning, but you can do this! Focus on the class. Focus on the instructor. Be ready to learn!

• **Read the chapter first.** Many instructors will list the daily lecture topic in their syllabus. So, read the assigned chapter ahead of time so you know what might be important for your notes. Here’s a pro tip: Do you know how your professor prepares for class? They read the book just like you. They prepare their lecture notes around the main points in the book just as you would. There really is no secret here. So, if you want to impress your instructor, read the chapter ahead of the lecture.

• **When in doubt, write it down!** Unfortunately, many students do not take notes because they bet that certain information will not be on the test. Believe me, there is nothing worse than asking your instructor “will this be on the test?”. This sends the message that you are only interested if there is something to gain. This is your education. It is an investment in your future. Do you really want to start out by simply doing the bare minimum? I doubt it. So, when you suspect that something is important, write it
down. Don’t wait for the instructor to tell you. Your professors spend hours preparing their presentations for you. So, in a way, everything is important.

- **Use abbreviations.** You will never be able to copy down everything your instructor says. I know some instructors who talk so fast that Nascar should call them (hey-oh…well, I tried). Instead of trying to capture everything, develop your own set of abbreviations to use. Create a brief “key” on the top of your page that explains your abbreviations to you (remember you will need this later) and use these shortcuts as you take notes. For example, if the topic for the day is the Renaissance, you might use “Ren” as an abbreviation. Remember, these are your notes, so you can use whatever you wish here as long as it makes sense to you.

- **Know your instructor.** As I mentioned earlier, every instructor is different. Early in the semester, get to know how they teach. Get to know when they repeat important points. Get to know when their voice slows down when they say something important. The more you can identify an instructor's manner, you are more likely to “capture” the material needed for any quiz or exam.