Strategies for Taking Good Notes

In General:

- Sit up front so you can see and hear better.
- Pay attention and listen carefully for qualifying words (sometimes, usually, rarely, etc.)
- Ask questions for clarity.
- Write quickly but neatly.

How to Write:

- Use shorthand ('Fe' for iron, '=' for equals, '@' for at, etc.) and abbreviations. You should develop your own set of abbreviations to help you write as quickly as possible.
- There is no need to write EVERY word a professor says. Condense and summarize information, and write in your own words whenever possible.
- Signal important items by drawing circles or boxes around critical info.
- Consider color-coding with highlighters or colored pens (use a different color for different topics). If you don’t have time to color code as you go, just highlight your notes after the lecture is over.
- Leave some white space for later additions. Skip lines. Also leave space between main ideas to keep notes organized.

What to write:

- Definitely copy:
  * Anything written on the board or presented in a slideshow.
  * Any info that is repeated or emphasized.
  * Comments that the class makes and the professor agrees with
  * All terms and definitions.
  * New words and ideas.
- If the instructor refers to the text, mark the page number in your notes to refer to later.
- When you cannot keep up with the speaker, jot down key nouns and verbs so that you get the main idea but can still ask questions to fill in gaps later.

Additionally:

- Ask questions if permitted; if not, jot down questions in your notebook.
- Soon after the presentation, review your notes, rewrite skimpy or incomplete parts, and fill in gaps you remember but didn't record. The sooner you can fill in those gaps, the more likely you’ll be able to fill them in accurately.
Note Taking Forms

1: Cornell Method

Divide your paper into three sections as the figure to the right shows. Label those sections “Keywords,” “Notes,” and “Summary.” As you listen to class lectures, take full notes in the “Notes” section (remember to condense and abbreviate rather than trying to write down every word the teacher says). In the “Keywords” section, jot down the specific terms you need to remember. After the lecture, take a moment to summarize the main ideas your teacher just covered in the “Summary” section. Writing notes in this form ensures that you remain thorough in paying attention to small details (keywords) as well as major themes (summary) all while taking traditional notes in the main section of your paper.

2: Basic Outline Form

Instead of just writing notes in paragraph form, try coming up with an outlining system. As you listen to class lectures, begin taking notes by writing the first main term or idea flush with the left margin. Every piece of content that relates to that first main term should then be written on the lines beneath it and indented under about ½ an inch. You can use bullets or letters to separate each sub-point listed under the original main point as the figure to the right illustrates. When a new main topic is introduced, repeat the process by starting a new line and writing the main term flush with the left margin. Writing notes in this form ensures that you are keeping your content organized so it is easier to find the specific information you need later on to study.