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NOTE-TAKING STRATEGIES

What are you doing when you take notes in a class? You are making judgments about what is important.

One of the most fundamental skills to learn and master in school is taking notes. Note-taking skills also are useful on the job for recording meetings or seminars. Note-taking involves making a permanent, written record of main points and supporting details for later reference. Although note-taking most commonly is used to record oral presentations, note-taking strategies may also be used to record notes from written sources.

The skill of taking notes is probably most challenging for auditory learners and kinesthetic learners because of the manner in which they receive and process information. However, all students, regardless of learning style, may benefit from the learning strategies discussed in this handout. (If you don't know what your learning style is, stop by Ranken's Student Success Center for a quick assessment.)

Strategies for Better Note-taking

- Note-taking is easiest if you come to class prepared. **Preview and read the book or other material** and review your notes from the previous class(es). You need to have a context for what you're hearing in class. These activities will give you that context.
- Judging importance of the information presented during class is hard! If you're trying to listen, write and judge, you've tripled the complexity. Listen actively, and if possible, think before you write, but don't get behind.
- As you are taking notes, be open-minded about points with which you disagree. Don't let arguing interfere with your note-taking.
- Raise questions if appropriate.
- Take and keep notes in a large notebook. The only merit to a small notebook is ease of carrying, which is not your main objective. A large notebook allows you to adequately indent and to use an outline form.
- Leave a few spaces blank as you move from one point to the next so that you can fill in additional points later if necessary. Your objective is to take helpful notes, not to save paper.
- Do not try to take down everything that the lecturer says. It is not only impossible but is also unnecessary because not everything is of equal importance. Spend more time listening, and attempt to take down the main points. If you are writing as fast as you can, you cannot be listening attentively. There may be some times, however, when it is more important to write than to think.

- Make your original notes legible enough for your own reading, but use abbreviations of your own invention when possible. Because copying notes is so time consuming, it is not recommended unless you learn best by the read/write method. The effort required to copy notes can be better spent in rereading them and thinking about them.
- Copy down everything on the board. Did you ever stop to think that every blackboard scribble may be a clue to an exam item? At first, you may not be able to integrate what is on the board into your lecture notes, but if you copy it, it may serve as a useful clue for you later.
- Sit as close to the front of the class as possible; there are fewer distractions, and it is easier to hear, see, and respond to and note important material.
- Get assignments and suggestions precisely. Ask questions if you're not sure. Many academics recommend a **modified Cornell method of note-taking**:
 - Divide your paper into columns: one-third of the page on the right, and two-thirds on the left. Use only the left-hand portion for in-class notes. You can create sheets for this process by ruling your pages beforehand or by buying paper printed in this way.
 - The right-hand portion is for use outside of class when you review your notes within 24 hours of the class (that 24-hour rule is important) and when you prepare for exams so that you may add details that may be missing. These additional details may come from your text, your recollection of a lecture, or even your own observations and analysis.

Electronic Note-taking

An increasing number of students are opting to take notes electronically using a laptop, tablet, smart phone, or other device. This method can be beneficial, as many students can type more quickly than they can write, and the resulting text is typically much more legible. Additional benefits include the conservation of paper and ease of organization. Some students use general word processors, such as Microsoft Word or Notepad, while others use dedicated software such as OneNote. Regardless of the hardware or software, there are some things to keep in mind when considering electronic note-taking:

- **Check the instructor's policy for electronic devices.** Some instructors strictly forbid computers and cell phones even for note-taking purposes. It is best to respect this policy and return to traditional note-taking methods for such a course.
- **Stay on task.** Refrain from checking email, browsing the web, or any other activity that is not directly related to your note-taking task. Such activities can not only decrease your chances of success, but they may also get you into trouble. Turn off your wireless capabilities if necessary.
- **Develop a system of organization.** Your notes are useless to you if you cannot find them. Be consistent in your labeling of folders and documents. Consider online servers, such as Google Docs or Office Online, if you wish to be able to access your notes remotely.
- **Carry a back up.** Batteries die. Computers fail. And some materials, such as diagrams and sketches, are best captured by hand. Carry traditional notebooks, pens, and pencils just in case.

For further assistance with your note-taking skills, visit the Student Success Center.

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