



Office of Learning Resources

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It All Starts with Listening: Notemaking from lectures

Making notes from lectures can be a challenging academic task. Some students attempt to transcribe a lecturer's every word. Other students fail to take even the most rudimentary notes, leaving themselves with little or no record of the intellectual proceedings. In either situation, learners could improve their lecture notes by focusing more attention on listening skills.

Notemaking all starts with listening. If you are not listening, you are not fully engaged intellectually, and your notes will reflect that. There is a tangible difference between listening and hearing. Listening is active by nature, while hearing is passive. Prepare to listen actively. Before class, ask yourself, "What do I want to learn about _____?" If you don't understand something in the readings, remind yourself to listen for the topic in question, or wait for an opportune time during the lecture to ask your question. The more actively you listen, the more involved you'll be.

It's a good idea to use abbreviations and to delete articles and prepositions in order to save time. You need to be thinking about what you are writing down. The more passive you are in your listening, the more you become a scribe instead of a student. (Besides, the job market has been soft on scribes since about the Middle Ages.)

Another point to remember is that the speed of thought moves faster than the speed of speech; the average East Coast lecturer talks about 150 words per minute while the average thinker zips along in his or her cogitations at about 400 words per minute (Pauk). You can see how easy it is for your mind to wander. But this can be harnessed to your advantage. Instead of allowing yourself to float off on pleasant thoughts of the upcoming weekend, use this time gap between speech and thought to concentrate. Make quick summaries and highlights, or comment in your notes about what has been said. This type of notemaking activity can lead to paper topics and research questions.

Don't overreact to what the speaker says and tune out. The clash of ideas and testing of notions is the critical function of higher education. If you find yourself in disagreement, jot down the argument and keep listening. Don't let emotionally loaded words or phrases distract you. Follow the speaker's argument and jot down a potential rebuttal. Whatever you do, do not tune out. There is much to learn from those with whom you disagree.

Don't tolerate or create distractions. Side-talking during lecture is a waste of tuition money, obstructs the intellectual process, and leads to missing points. It is impossible to analyze and evaluate what is being said when you are not focused on the proceedings.

Leave space in your notes. As you review your notes within 12 to 24 hours of taking them, you will need this space to make additions or clarifications.

Make an appointment with a Learning Instructor for assistance refining your ability to listen well and take good notes.

Reference: How to Study in College by Walter Pauk