Focus on Notemaking

Why make notes

There are no rules for making notes. However, during your course you will spend a great deal of time and effort taking notes. Why are you taking notes? If you don't know then you can't be selective, a very important part of note making. If you’re not sure, read on.

Purpose

Making good notes is invaluable to you because they form a vital part of the information you need for your course.

- They create order as you go through your course.
- They record your progress through lectures and texts and serve you when doing assignments and revision etc.
- They are an extension of your memory and evidence of hard work which is good for morale.

The text

- Always make a note of the author, title, publisher, date and page numbers before you begin reading. If it's an article, note the journal title.
- Read texts in an active way. What is it about? What do I need to remember? Be selective, note exactly what you need and no more.
- Use A4 paper. Number the pages as you go.
- If the text book is your own, consider how many notes you actually need to make. Highlighting, underlining etc. can help you to focus on the structure of the book and line of argument. Only highlight what you can remember. Be realistic! The lecture and the text book are complementary.

The lecture

- First of all, be there.
- Sit with a friend. You can fill in gaps and check information immediately after the lecture while it is still fresh in your minds.
- Sit in the middle of the lecture room towards the front where you can see the visual aids. Here you won't be distracted by other students and you will feel closely involved.
• As before, note the date, lecturer's name and course title.
• Listen attentively.
• Look at words on the blackboard or overhead projector. Take a critical interest. Be discriminating and selective. Use key concepts, principles and facts as the focus of your notes.
• Personalise your notes with your own words, phrases and comments. This will help you understand the topic under consideration. Edit any handouts you may have been given by adding notes in the margins.

How to make notes
Using different note making techniques can help to improve the overall effectiveness of your notes.

Linear notes
Most students write notes in linear form.

• These notes follow the programme order of the lecture or the structure of the book and include all stages of the argument. Students use a.b.c., A.B.C., i. ii. iii., etc. to mark a pathway through the argument. These notes are always useful and safe if you are not confident.
• However, uniformity in making notes means that you are missing out on the very effective visual side of your thinking.

Diagrammatic notes… or patterned notes
• Use keywords as their focus and enable you to get away from the linear form. Making a diagram does demand time but it's worth it. You need to find your own way of making and developing diagrams. These diagrams enable you to use both verbal and visual memory and interpretation.
• Inject colour, humour even, as well as different images and sizes. A note-making system that uses these approaches makes your notes more memorable to you.
• Start in the middle of the page and let associations radiate outwards.

Content and storage
Note making is not dictation. Don’t copy; it's a barrier to learning. Don’t do it just because everyone else is doing it. You make notes because you recognise a need for the information you are hearing or reading.

• Note making is more a strategy than a skill. It's a range of different activities.
• The common factor is that you are writing for yourself alone.
• Avoid uniformity, use different colour, size and shape to achieve the best outcome for you. Experiment with layout.
• Write notes in your own words, this will help you to understand them.
• Making notes is an idiosyncratic activity, that's why other people's notes are generally not a lot of use to you.

Content
• Reduce any information to about third of the original. Notes should be the absolute core of what you have heard or read. They should be brief, accurate and summarise the text, lecture or seminar.
• Keep them presentable for use later on.
• Attribute your notes where necessary, this is very important in the academic world.
Review

- Review your notes soon after they are made.
- Note any potential references as you analyse each section.
- Highlight important items so they stand out.
- List any questions you may have and see your lecturer for answers.
- Act on omissions while they are still fresh in your mind.

Storage

- Your notes should always be readily available. They are not made to be put away and gather dust. They are an integral part of your course and should be in regular use.
- Develop a single storage system, for example: use ring binders and A4 sheets of paper. Notes, can then be added and removed easily.
- Take care of your notes and keep them safe. Use post-it notes to summarise vital information and display them on your desk, wall, computer etc.

Signs symbols and abbreviations

You may find these signs, symbols and abbreviations useful and timesaving when making notes. You might also develop your own 'shorthand' e.g. DMU (De Montfort University) or mgt (management). It doesn’t matter if other people can't follow your notes, provided you can.

∴ therefore

= equals, is the same as

∵ because

≠ does not equal

=> implies, it follows that

⇔ is equivalent to

> greater than

≈ approximately

< less than

c. or ca. circa, e.g. c.1800

cf. compare this with...

c.t. contrast

e.g. for example

et al. and others, usually with lists & authors
et seq. and those, or the one, following
(usually used with references to pages, to indicate that a number of consecutive pages are relevant)

f. or ff. those following, (like et seq. above)
(or instead of the word folios when books are numbered by folio and not page)

ibid. in the same place; (consecutive references to the same book will not quote the author etc. again if the title is immediately preceding)

i.e. that is, meaning, more precisely

loc. cit. in the place previously cited or mentioned

n.b./N.B. make a note of, remember

op. cit. in the work or book previously cited
(but not the item immediately above in the list)

p,pp page(s)

supra above: see the earlier parts of the text

infra below: see the later parts of the text

sic. thus; this is usually used to indicate that you know there was a mistake in the text being quoted

viz. namely, that is to say; often introducing a more precise explanation