Note Taking

Lecturing is only one mode of teaching, and for a variety of reasons including the relatively short attention span of many people, it is often not the best. However, it remains the most important mode of college teaching, so if students are to be successful in college they must learn how to get the most out of lectures. The lecture method of teaching is teacher dominated, is information-laden, and allows for large amounts of material to be covered quickly.

Some students try to get down everything the professor says — they are in a way like stenographers. However, full notebooks of notes create a false sense of security. In reality, indiscriminate note taking wastes a lot of time because it leaves all the learning until later. A lecture is a sophisticated intellectual encounter that requires learning and understanding, not just note taking. It is not enough to say, "I'll write everything down and worry about what is important later." This prevents one from becoming an active listener.

Even though the lecture format is not the most effective teaching method, there are things that students can do to make it work more effectively for them.

Before the Lecture: Reading and Warming Up

1. Do the Assigned Reading. If you have not done the reading assignment before the lecture, then you cannot possibly expect to get much out of the lecture. The lecturer prepares his or her remarks assuming that the students have read the material. By reading the material beforehand, one becomes a more active listener. The lecture will come alive because it will answer questions one had while doing the assigned reading.

2. Warm Up for Class. Look over the things you have highlighted in your reading, and look over the notes you have made in your recall column on your notes from the previous class period.

During the Lecture: Taking the Right Kind of Notes

1. Identify the Main Ideas. Good lecturers organize their lecture around several key points. Effective note taking is identifying and writing down these important ideas. It is good to supplement these key ideas, but the main focus of note taking should be on key points. As you listen to a lecture keep two things in mind: general material (main idea) and specific information (supporting details). Most lecturers have a way of expressing key ideas — change their tone of voice or repeat themselves, some give main ideas by asking questions that generate discussion. And always ask yourself "What does my instructor want me to know at the end of today's session?" Don't fall into the trap of trying to get every thing written down. Become an active listener identifying main ideas and looking for connections.

2. Leave Space for a Recall Column. Leave about 21/2 inches on the left side of each page (recall column) and record the notes taken in class to the right of the line. The recall

column remains blank while you are taking notes, but one uses it to note main ideas and important details as one sifts through his/her notes. These become powerful study devices for reviewing for exams. This method of taking notes is commonly referred to as the "Cornell System of Note Taking."

After the Lecture: Filling in the Recall Column, Reciting, and Reviewing

1. Highlight the main ideas. As soon as possible following the lecture, take 5 or 10 minutes to review your notes and select key words or phrases that will identify main ideas. Highlight the main ideas and write them in the recall column of your notes.

2. Use the Recall Column to Recite Your Notes. Cover the more detailed notes on the right, and use only your notes in the recall column to recite out loud a brief summary of what you understood from the class. You might also want to ask your instructor to take a look at your recall column to see if you are doing a good job of identifying main points.

3. Review the Previous Day's Notes Before the Next Class Session. As you are waiting for class to begin, review quickly the notes from the previous session. This will put you in tune with the lecture, which is about to begin and will also prompt you to ask questions about those things which are not clear to you.

This three step process is powerful because you are encountering the same material in three ways: (1) active listening and writing, (2) reading and summarizing in the recall column, and (3) saying aloud what you understand from class. Recitation is a particularly effective guard against forgetting. The very act of verbalizing concepts gives your memory sufficient time to grasp them. Having a good memory really means having an organized method of capturing and recalling whatever our mind encounters, and recitation bolsters this practice.

In order for this system to work, it is important to do the recall and recitation as soon after class as possible, but never delay it more than one day because you will have forgotten too much material.

Another helpful hint is to compare your notes with a friend in the same class. Discuss your notes with this friend — why you thought something was a main idea, etc.

This material was summarized from: Gardner and Jewler, *Your College Experience: Strategies for Success*.