Effective Listening and Note-Taking

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**Introduction**

Second only to effectively managing one’s time, being able to follow lectures is the most important critical study skill that a student can have. When you look at the profiles of successful students, there is a common thread tying them together—these are students who have the ability to take comprehensive notes in virtually all classes regardless of who the instructor might be or what the subject matter is. These are students who are not sidetracked by the fact that an instructor may be softspoken, or speak with an accent, or seem somewhat distant from the students in the classroom. They understand that far more than the written material, what the instructor chooses to emphasize—and not emphasize—while in the classroom has a direct bearing on the objectives and requirements of the course along with teacher expectations. The reality is that no two teachers, and no two lecturers, are ever the same even though the course readings and requirements may be identical. With that in mind, it is the purpose of this particular presentation to present a format for taking effective lecture notes or, better still, being effective in following and understanding what the lecturer is trying to get across, knowing how to determine what is important as opposed to what is not important or is of lesser importance.

In a word, this presentation focuses upon listening skills—skills that determine who is going to make it in an academic environment fairly easily and who is going to have a difficult time. One must begin with an understanding of just what a lecture represents—“a dialogue between you and the speaker” (Sotiriou, p. 161). As with any dialogue, or flow of communication, there are several exchanges that have to take place if the communication is to be effective. First, you must be present to hear what is being said. For students, this basically translates as being present for your classes. You can be the world’s greatest listener and you may be the fastest note-taker on the planet, but none of this will do you any good if your attendance is spotty and you are not present in class to know what is being said or what is going on. Right along with that, you want to be close to the speaker. In the classroom, this means getting a seat near the front of the classroom. Not only will you be able to hear better what is being said, but you will be able to see what is going on—and seeing, here, means more than following what is put on the blackboard. It also means being able to follow what is being said, as much as possible, with your eyes. You must understand that the oral communication dynamic is far different from sitting at home or in a library to read a book or article.

The average reading speed is 250 words per minute, and you have time to stop and reread passages that are difficult at your own leisure. The average lecturer speaks at 125 words per minute, and this presents an entirely new world for the listener. There are lecturers who speak faster, and there are those who speak slower. There are those who are loud and emphatic in contrast to those who are so softspoken that people sitting the back of the classroom have difficulty hearing what is being said. You have lecturers whose voices rise and fall, adding tone and color to what is being said. By the same token, there are lecturers who speak in a monotone, so that if you are not careful it is entirely likely that your mind will drift away from what is being said, you will find yourself daydreaming, the next thing you know the lecture is concluded and you have not taken a single note of what may have been the most important lecture of the entire semester for that particular course! There are 13 specific points that I want to make in regards to taking effective classroom notes:

**Maintain a written record.**

Set down a written record for each of your classes. This is very important for studies have shown that forgetting begins almost immediately. Within two weeks you will forget 80 percent or more of what you have heard. In four weeks, you will be fortunate if 5 percent remains! (Langan, p. 41). What these facts say is so important that it must be repeated: to guard against the inevitability of forgetting, you have to write down much of the information being presented in class. Then, review your notes later so that you understand and remember the ideas that were discussed. The more complete your notes are when you review, the more likely you are to master the information. Students often wonder how many notes should they take and whether or not certain terms, facts or information are significant enough to write down. The rule of thumb to follow is this—When in doubt, write it down. You have to remember that writing too much, instead of too little, may mean the difference between passing and failing a course or between a high grade and a lower one.

**Sit Where You'll Be Seen.**

There is a saying common among teachers and it goes something like this: the farther in back of the class that a student sits, the lower that student’s grade. Now whether or not you agree with that statement is of little importance. What is important and has to be considered is the thinking that prompted the observation. What it says is that students who sit in the back of the classroom, starting on that first day of classes, those students who sit near the door, typically represent the students who will have a difficult time following lectures, whose minds are not so much on the class as it is getting through the day, who will present the most problems in terms of attendance. Unfortunately, with ten years of experience in the classroom, I have seen that statement proven true more often than not. Sitting in the back of the class brings its own set of problems, not the least being the fact that the teacher can very easily go an entire semester and not know your face or name when it comes time for grading—and believe me, you do not want to have a teacher guessing who you might be when it comes time to assign a grade for your work that semester!

The point here is that you want to sit where the teacher will always see you, and where you can see the blackboard easily and clearly (this is especially true if you happen to wear glasses or contact lenses!). If the class is media-intensive, where the instructor uses films and videotapes, then it is all the more important to get a seat near the front and establish it for the semester. Sitting in front also means that you are much more likely to stay focused in that classroom (you are not nearly as likely to fall asleep in the front row, or to daydream!). When you sit in back of the class, you may be signaling your attitude about the class or school itself—worried that you might be called upon (which is common to all students) or that you don’t really want to be in the class (which is an issue in and of itself).

**Try to Do Advance Reading.**

Doing well in school, getting good grades on your exams, papers and in your classes, going to on to graduate and do well in your professional career, are all part of having a clearly defined and well-managed lifestyle. This refers back to the 9-Step TMP and integrating that type of effective time management into your life choices and decision making. For this third step in effective listening and note-taking, we are dealing with what on the surface appears to be the obvious—that good note-takers are people who read the material in advance; that is, the students who take the best notes have done the assigned reading and, accordingly, have little trouble following the lecture or understanding any new ideas discussed in class that spring from the reading. Their notes are more organized and easier to follow because they have a general grasp of the topic being discussed in class.

***I always like to say that you have two types of students: students who come to view and students who come to review.*** That first type of student, the one who comes to view, is the one most likely to get into trouble. This is the student for whom everything happening or being discussed in the classroom is brand-new. This student is there, essentially, to “view” what is going on, often for the first time. That second type of student, the one who comes to “review,” has done some reading in advance of the lecture, has had a chance to go over notes from previous class meetings, and finds the lecture an opportunity to review some of the material that was read earlier, perhaps some material that was difficult to understand but now, with the lecture, the light bulb has come on and there is illumination where before there may have been just a hazy understanding of what was meant or implied. Needless to say, it is the student who comes into the classroom to “review” that most often gets the most out of the class, including the best grades. Doing reading in advance allows you to prepare questions for the instructor based upon the reading and the lecture itself, questions that the instructor can appreciate and elaborate on. To be able to do this, and do it on a consistent basis, means setting aside the time to read in advance and prepare effective reading notes.

**Make Systematic Notes.**

When taking notes, you want to do so in an organized, systematic fashion. There is no “magic” to the student who takes good notes, the student who, at the end of the semester, is in a position to review effectively and efficiently for examinations and papers based upon the strength of their notes. They have developed a note-taking system, and have learned to stay with it. Here are eight steps towards effective, efficient note-taking that you can use:

* Use full-sized A4 paper. Do not use a small note tablet. You will be using the margin space provided by the full-sized paper. In addition, on a single page of full-sized paper you will often see ideas or groups of related ideas that might not be so easily seen when spread over several small pages;
* Keep all the notes from each course together in a separate section of a notebook. Use either a looseleaf binder with separate sections, or a large spiral notebook that has several sections. The looseleaf binder, however, allows you to insert course handouts and related materials;
* Date each day’s notes and try to title the notes for each lecture;
* Take notes on one side of the page only, leaving space at the top and on the left-hand margin. Using only one side eliminates the bother, when you are studying, of having to flip pages over and then flip then back to follow the development of an idea or discussion. Leaving wide margins gives you space to add to your notes later, should you so desire;
* Write legibly. When you prepare for a test you want to spend the time studying—not trying to decipher your own handwriting;
* To save time when note-taking, abbreviate recurring terms. Place a key for these abbreviate terms in the top margin of your notes. For example, in a biology class **ch** could stand for chromosome; in a sociology class **o c** could stand for operant conditioning . When the lecture is over, you may want to go back and fill in the words you have abbreviated (again, for easier reading when preparing for examinations).

In addition, abbreviate the following common words by using the symbols shown :

+ = and def = definition w/ = with eg = for example ex = example info = information 1,2,3 = one, two, three, etc. MI = Main Idea

You should also make note that you can often omit words like a , and , and the when taking notes.

* I always tell my students when handing them the course syllabus that one of the very first actions they should take is to highlight all of the examination dates listed in the document. Not only that, but they should transfer those exam dates to a pocket calendar, appointment book or diary that they refer to. They should do the same with due dates for major assignments, especially presentations and papers. Nothing can be more distressing for a student than to walk into class and see everyone ready for an examination but themselves, or to see people turning in papers and they left theirs at home or forgot this was the due date for the project!

**Use an Outline for Your Notes.**

Try to write down your notes in the following outline form. Start main points at the margin. Indent secondary ideas and supporting details. Further indent material that is subordinate to those secondary points.

Main points are listed at the margin.

Secondary points and supporting details are indented.

Material that is subordinate to secondary points is indented further.

Still another organizational aid: when the speaker shifts from one idea to another, show this shift in concern by skipping a line or two, leaving a clearly visible space.

*Retrieved from http://www.csun.edu/~hcpas003/effective.html*